Is it, indeed, even possible? Is it, in fact, conceivable that Browning himself ignored them or did not have them in mind in writing the poem? Surely, it is not.

**W. David Shaw**

The Victorians valued Browning as a poet of doctrine, whereas modern critics, even when sympathetic to Browning's art, are usually suspicious of his "philosophy." They praise Browning for his psychology and style and try to discount his ideas. But if the Browning Society was often a cause of embarrassment to the poet, there is no question that Browning would have been even more alarmed by the misplaced emphasis of the "New Critics."

A Victorian like Arthur Symons may have exaggerated the importance of ideas in poetry when he praised Browning's characters for their power to think. But when such a perceptive scholar as Robert Langbaum tries to read Browning as an English Mallarmé, asserting that his "ideas" are "not to mean but to be evoked," we feel that the fashionable doctrine of "pseudo-statements"—as well as the tendency to glorify a poetry of implication at the expense of a poetry of explicit statement—has betrayed the critic into the opposite extreme. We may find Professor Langbaum's Browning more congenial than the Victorians; but one of the functions of a liberal education is that it enables us, in Matthew Arnold's phrase, "to see the object as in itself it really is." We cannot be content to revaluate Browning merely from the point of view of our own time.

Browning the dramatist-philosopher, the poet of "Fra Lippo Lippi," is confronted by a difficult problem—one we must first understand if we are to appreciate the triumph of this poem. It is important to remember that Browning the thinker, the Victorian philosopher of art, religion and morality, believes in his ideas, and is eager to persuade his readers. But there is also Browning the psychologist, the dramatist manqué, who had found his genius in the monologue convention, and who knew that "doctrine" without "art" meant dullness. As an artist-philosopher, his object is to combine the two roles.

To this end Browning makes Fra Lippo's rhetoric alternate between ingratiation with his auditors and forms of philosophic speculation.

---

1Arthur Symons, "Is Browning Dramatic?" *Browning Society Papers* (London, 1885), VII, 6: "Shakespeare makes his characters live; Browning makes his characters think."

The monk’s refusal to speak Latin, which he identifies with his opponents (“They with their Latin”), is a counterpart of Browning’s own stylistic strategy. The poet has a philosophic proposition to communicate, but he cannot deliver it “in Latin.” “Latin” is a metaphor for the Prior’s pretentious vocabulary of “spiritual” motivation: “Give us no more of body than shows soul!” Like purely conceptual language, it is devoid of the rich tonalities which contribute to the full, complex appeal of Fra Lippo’s speech. By themselves, Browning’s ideas, like the Prior’s “Latin,” will convince no one. But just as Fra Lippo’s frank confidences and worldly tone enable him to procure the goodwill of the officers, so his subtle ingratiating manifests Browning’s own persuasive powers over the reader, and enables the poet to include all the philosophy that the drama will sustain.

Despite the irony, Browning makes the “doctrine” dramatically convincing. Fra Lippo confronts what is for philosophy the eternal problem of the relation between spirit and substance. Browning is often called a Platonic idealist, but it is significant that Fra Lippo rejects the solution advanced by Neo-Platonism and by its artistic spokesman, Botticelli, that spirit and substance, though coexistent, are not comparable. He refuses to see the world simply as the expression of a spiritual state: “life’s too big to pass for a dream.” On the contrary, Fra Lippo at times appears to be embracing the opposite thesis, that spirit is less real than matter: “The value and significance of flesh, / I can’t unlearn ten minutes afterwards.” Despite the unequal emphasis, however, Browning’s Fra Lippo seems constantly to be moving beyond the polarity of style represented by Quattrocento art and by the historical Filippo Lippi himself. In Fra Lippo’s resolve to “add [the] soul” to his transcription of the “flesh,” Browning is clearly anticipating the evolution of an equal relation, a union of substance and spirit, as it appears both in the classical style of Italian painting and in the doctrines of philosophic “realism,” which confronts an analogy of the problem in its own sphere.

But to understand how Browning makes these ideas compelling to the reader, just as Fra Lippo’s intimate confidences ingratiate him with the officers, we must see how the polarity of flesh and spirit inevitably issues in a polarity of attitudes and styles.

The monk keeps executing a kind of glissade in modulating from one attitude to another. From the bluster of the sensualist we pass to the morbidly introspective world, so rarefied and ethereal, of the saintly Fra Angelico. The spectacle of the monk “at [his] saints” recalls the “endless cloisters and eternal aisles” of “Pictor Ignotus”—a sepulchral domain of unreality and death. But from this shadowy
realm of spirits and dreams, Fra Lippo's cultivation of all pleasures and all pains, so nostalgically evoked in "A laugh, a cry, the business of the world," irresistibly lures us. The swimming spirits, spicy like the night air, surge to a climax of sensuous intensity: "And my whole soul revolves, the cup runs over." From this pungent inversion of Old Testament language, Fra Lippo dramatically descends to the level of mocking sermons and homely parables: "The only good of grass is to make chaff." The rhetorical questions of the pedestrian fable give way to the didactic jog-trot of his ploddingly anaphoric sermon:

You tell too many lies and hurt yourself;  
You don't like what you only like too much,  
You do like what, if given you at your word,  
You find abundantly detestable.

The monk parodies the Prior's ridiculous hypocrisy in the very language of his opponent's windy and dogmatic manner. From this caustic satire Fra Lippo mounts to a sonorous pronouncement: "I always see the garden and God there / A-making man's wife." This solemn utterance, so general and impersonal, yet so wonderfully intimate, too, is just the kind of truth that would be perfectly accessible to the monk. Fra Lippo is probably the most genuinely religious sensualist in English literature. His vision of God creating Eve rises instinctively, and releases that incorruptible and childlike impulse to glorify God and His creation—that passion for spontaneous worship which Browning has so brilliantly dramatized in earlier sections of the poem.

A moment later, as this lofty rhetoric breaks down, Fra Lippo confides in the officers: "You understand me: I'm a beast, I know." Throughout the poem, Browning is constantly creating a keener sense of character in order to support and generate new ideas. Fra Lippo steps aside for a moment to marvel at "The shape of things, their colors, lights and shades," then speculatively prods his auditors: "Do you feel thankful, ay or no?" or "What's it all about?" His outspoken exclamations: "Oh, oh, / It makes me mad," alternates with the most oracular solemnities: "Interpret God to all of you!"

Fra Lippo's irrepressible appreciation is a form of gratitude, of voracious hunger for new experience, almost as pronounced in Browning as in Henry James, and the closest secular equivalent in the monk (as in his creator) to the traditional religious motive of glorification. The monk's almost poignant sense of the identity of individual phenomena—"A laugh, a cry, the business of the world," "this fair town's face ... / The mountain round it and the sky above"—composes a veritable paean of thanksgiving, and is indissolubly linked
with that conception of the world which was called Realism in the Middle Ages.

Like every primitive sensibility, Fra Lippo is instinctively a “realist.” He posits a *universalia ante rem*, a “meaning” behind the “world” (“To find its meaning is my meat and drink”), and in his crusade for the supreme value of the single thing he projects every object as “an entity . . . [upon] the heavens.” “God made it all!” Whereas the sensual monk is orthodox in his theology, the ascetic Prior, with his pretensions to sainthood, stands convicted, if not of heretical nominalism, at least of a radical perversion of the realist philosophy. In order to discharge their pious “rage” the Prior and his disciples have “scratched and prodded” Fra Lippo’s picture of the pagan “slaves.” Their holy concepts, like the Spanish monk’s idea of the Trinity, have hardened into mere externalisms. Like nominalists who reject the universals, these pious “fools” have failed to penetrate the surface. Because their “simplistic” theology is rooted in a defective formalism, it is not, ironically, the ascetic Prior or his followers but the high-spirited “realist,” Fra Lippo, who is able to discover the religious meanings.

Browning critics keep insisting, with weary iteration, that the poet’s characters never change, that they remain substantially the same from beginning to end. Though this is true of the early monologues, it is radically inadequate in describing the dramatic action in “Fra Lippo Lippi.” Near the opening of the monologue there is a reference to Fra Lippo as a “beast.” But as the monk lifts the dialogue to a philosophic plane by using the same conceit of man’s physical nature: “Being simple bodies,” we see that the “beast” is not simply a metaphor for sensuality. Fra Lippo passes from his intercourse with “the girls” to his Socratic intercourse with the officers on the sacramental status of man’s creatural realism: “The value and significance of flesh, / I can’t unlearn.” His celebration of the flesh is developed in systematic contrast to the anemic spirituality of the Prior. The highest level is reached, and the dialectic of flesh and

---

3J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (London, 1924), p. 186. “Every primitive mind is realist, in the medieval sense, independently of all philosophic influence. To such a mentality everything that receives a name becomes an entity and takes a shape which projects itself on the heavens.” For an excellent discussion of this whole question see chap. xv, “Symbolism in its Decline,” pp. 182-194.

4See Langbaum, p. 146, for example: “The speaker of the dramatic monologue starts with an established point of view, and is not concerned with its truth but with trying to impress it on the outside world.” Professor Langbaum seems to suggest that one difference between a soliloquy and a dramatic monologue is that in the first instance the speaker is a “free” character and in the second case a “fixed” one.
spirit is momentarily resolved, as Fra Lippo discerns, in analogy to the Christian Incarnation, the immanence of a spiritual power in nature that will enable him to “interpret God to all of you!” But this flash of perception immediately alternates with his wilful negation. As Fra Lippo reduces his argument to the lowest possible level (“I’m a beast, I know,” “It’s natural a poor monk / Should have his apt word to excuse himself”), the philosophy quickly dissolves. The struggle between flesh and spirit is not permitted to end, and we may assume that it will never end.

The habit of concluding a monologue with a brief restatement of the speaker’s most radical limitations is a recurrent one in Browning. One explanation is that the conflict between flesh and spirit has its intriguing parallel in Browning’s own artistic practice—in the interaction between the concrete elements of dramatic personality, which are the “flesh” of Browning’s poem, and the ideas they support. Fra Lippo’s philosophy is also an account of Browning’s poetic method—a dialectical play of opposites, brought together at their climax, like body and soul, in a synthetic union of personality and ideas. But if the “philosophy” solves the problem that the speaker raises—if, in this case, the dialectic of flesh and spirit is resolved, as it almost is—then the poem will cease to be a dramatic monologue and degenerate into a mere lecture by the poet.

The picture of the monk at the end, breaking abruptly into his painting, repeats the reversal of perspective already established in the opening, as Fra Lippo turns to involve us directly in his own poetic world, and so affirms the pattern. The monk in the painting solicits us in our world, frontally and melodramatically. He involves us in a round of sensual activity that is as totally opposed to his sacramental doctrines of nature as is the non-artistic world that we inhabit to the aesthetic space of his painting. The genius of this “violation” is that it is also a way of being consistent. For it preserves the dialectical condition and prevents the drama from becoming a philosophic disquisition. Once a character discovers the “truth,” the dramatic action is complete. Because we can predict what such a character will say, he is seldom entertaining as a person. This paradox helps explain why Browning’s increasing preoccupation with the “truth” could prepare the way for the tedious exposition of his later period.

The final picture of Fra Lippo as a blushing sensualist, hiding for very shame among the “company” of the blest, is Browning’s unobtrusive way of reminding us, especially after the monk’s lofty discourse on the sacramental status of nature, that the interaction between flesh
and spirit, personality and ideas, which is the very condition of his art, must not be suspended. Whereas the limitation of many of the early monologues is that they make everything over in their own image, the defect of the later didactic poems is that they project no image at all. The triumph of “Fra Lippo Lippi,” like most of Browning’s greatest monologues, is that just as the monk cannot separate flesh from spirit, so we, as readers, cannot isolate the characters from their ideas. The poem evolves a synthetic image, an indissoluble fusion, of character and philosophy together.

*Cornell University*