JOHN THE BAPTIST IN BROWNING'S
"FRA LIPPO LIPPI"

Michael H. Bright

Of all the saints referred to in Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi," John the Baptist is mentioned more often than any. In the course of the poem he is alluded to four times (ll. 34, 196-197, 354, 374-375), while Ambrose and Jerome appear twice each, and Jerome (the only one to receive critical attention) and Lucy appear only once. A possible explanation for these repeated references to John is Browning's concern for historical accuracy, since he would no doubt have read in Vasari that John was a favorite subject of Lippo's. But the allusions to John also emphasize a thematic function, which, like that served by the reference to St. Jerome, is to contrast the saint's mortification of the flesh with the friar's celebration of it. Although Browning does not indicate the asceticism of John as directly as he does that of Jerome, who is depicted "knocking at his poor old breast / With his great round stone to subdue the flesh" (ll. 73-74), he would nevertheless assume that his readers would recognize John as the most ascetic of all Biblical figures and therefore a foil to Lippo and his love of the world. That is, most readers would remember that it was prescribed before John's birth that he would never drink wine, and that during his sojourn in the wilderness he wore a garment of camel's skin and fed on locusts and wild honey. Furthermore, Browning makes explicit the difference between the two men when he has the "sweet angelic slip of a thing" ask, "'Could Saint John there draw / His camel-hair make up a painting-brush?'" The answer is clearly "no," for "'We come to brother Lippo for all that'" (ll. 374-376).

But it is not so much this difference between the two as it is the similarities that make the allusions to John thematically important. Here we see that the allusion to John is far more complex than the one to Jerome in that it serves not only as a foil but as a mirror to emphasize Lippo's roles as prophet, as messenger of light, and as herald of flesh and spirit reconciled. As for the first of these roles, both John and Lippo are prophets. John is the

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1 Three critics have discussed the contrast between St. Jerome's life of denial and Lippo's of indulgence: Margaret W. Pepperdene in "Browning's 'Fra Lippo Lippi' '70-75," Expl, 15 (1957), item 34; Laurence Perrine in "Browning's 'Fra Lippo Lippi' '70-75," Expl, 16 (1957), item 18; and Mark Siegchrist in "The Puritan St. Jerome in Browning's 'Fra Lippo Lippi'," SBHC, 1 (Fall, 1973), 26-27.

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voice crying in the wilderness, warning that the kingdom of heaven is near:
similarly, Lippo counsels that

If I drew higher things with the same truth!
That were to take the Prior’s pulpit-place,
Interpret God to all of you! (ll. 309-311)

John prepares the way for Christ, and Lippo for his pupil:

His name is Guidi—he’ll not mind the monks—
They call him Hulking Tom, he lets them talk—
He picks my practice up—he’ll paint apace,
I hope so—though I never live so long,
I know what’s sure to follow. (ll. 276-280)

John and Lippo share the plight of all revolutionaries in facing the resistance
that inevitably opposes the arrival of anything new in the world. John, in
preaching the coming of Christ, is opposed by the Pharisees and Sadducees and
Herodias; Lippo, in heralding the advent of realism in art, by the Prior and
“the old schooling sticks, the old grave eyes” (l. 231).

Unfortunately neither will live to see his prophecies fulfilled, for John
and Lippo only prepare for the change to come. For example, it is written of
John:

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a
man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness
of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent
to bear witness of that Light. (John 1.5-8)

This light imagery has a parallel in the poem, for Lippo too announces the
coming of light. In speaking of his pupil, Hulking Tom, Lippo remarks:

I see as certainly
As that the morning-star’s about to shine,
What will hap some day. (ll. 271-273)

The morning star, or Venus, is particularly apt for the man who sings, “Take
away love, and our earth is a tomb” (l. 54), but more to the point is the
association between Hulking Tom and the star, both on the verge of
appearing and both foretold by Lippo. A second light image occurs in Lippo’s
description of the Coronation of the Virgin, where he portrays his own
appearance in terms of light:

up shall come
Out of a corner when you least expect,
As one by a dark stair into a great light,
Music and talking, who but Lippo! (ll. 360-363)

Again the movement is from darkness to light, and significantly the one who
shelters him in the midst of the holy company is St. Lucy, whose name is
suggestive of light. Finally, at the end of the poem Lippo declines the torches
of the watch as he has declined the guidance of those who counsel “‘Fag on
at flesh, you’ll never make the third!’ ” (l. 237). Lippo knows the purposes of
art even as he knows his "own way back" (l. 391), and besides, the dawn, just beginning to break, will make it easier for "a poor monk out of bounds" (l. 341) to make his way home, or perhaps for a revolutionary artist to find his way in "the grey beginning" (l. 392) of the Renaissance. It is important, however, that it is just "the grey beginning," not the full dawn, for Lippo only prepares the way; he is not the light itself. As a precursor, a pathfinder, his is the most difficult task of all as he meets the resistance of the forces opposing change. His task is illustrated, and his success indicated, by the change from dark to light, a change that suggests also a movement from ignorance to enlightenment, from the Dark Ages to the Renaissance, and a change that is reinforced by the parallel with St. John.

The final similarity between John and Lippo is that both proclaim a form of "the infinite within the finite,"3 one in religious terms and the other in artistic. In such poems as Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day and A Death in the Desert Browning evinces a belief in the incarnation, an act that allowed "the only means whereby an eternal truth can be made available to finite intelligences"4 and one that "provided Browning a prototype of the realization of the Infinite within the finite."5 In "Fra Lippo Lippi" it is clear from the Prior's ineptitude in describing the soul that man's finite capabilities are inadequate to comprehend and express directly such abstractions as soul. If they are to be understood and explained they must, as Lippo knows, be embodied in material guise. It is, therefore, through the depiction of the beauty of the world, which "means intensely, and means good" (l. 314), that one comprehends the soul, just as it is through the incarnation and sacrifice of Christ that one knows God's love.

The similarities between Lippo and John emphasize and help to explain, then, three important aspects of the poem: the role of Lippo as precursor, the light imagery in the coming of dawn, and the artistic doctrine that joins the spiritual and material, the abstract and concrete. Finally, by recognizing that Lippo's relationship to the saints he depicts is not one of total opposition and contrast, one comes to see that there is some justification for Lippo's inclusion by St. Lucy in the celestial company.

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3This is a definition of poetry found in one of Browning's letters to Ruskin. The Works of John Ruskin, ed. F. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, XXXVI (London, 1909), xxxiv.
4C. R. Tracy, "'Caliban upon Setebos'," SP, 35 (1938), 492.