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Brief Articles and Notes

THE ABUSE OF THE HAND: A THEMATIC MOTIF IN BROWNING’S "FRA LIPPO LIPPI"

John Ower

Central to Browning’s “Fra Lippo Lippi” is the painter’s struggle to maintain his spiritual and artistic integrity in a society dominated by false values.1 As Lippi recognizes, the impossibly ascetic ideal of the Medieval Church leads to moral confusion, hypocrisy and, ironically, a greater license than would otherwise prevail. The tension within Lippi’s culture, reflected in the psychological conflicts that drive him to dissipation,2 is rendered symbolically by Browning through the motif of the abuse of the hand. This motif recurs throughout the poem, and is skillfully woven into its thematic texture.

The misuse of the hand in “Fra Lippo Lippi” derives much of its significance from a set of implicit meanings arising from the web of ideas and images in the poem. Man’s hand is one of his chief distinctions from the beasts, a noteworthy point in view of Browning’s ironic rendition of Lippi’s world in terms of animal behavior.3 As a unique sign of humanity, the hand is a vehicle of creativity and civilization, expressing man’s spiritual powers. It is therefore a physical sign that he is made in God’s image, a proof of Lippi’s belief in “The value and significance of flesh” (l. 268).4 The spiritual meaning of the hand is suggested by the painter’s allusion to the Biblical story of the shaping of Eve by God from Adam’s rib (l. 265-269; Genesis 2. 21-22). The hand of the Divinity, as the instrument of His creativity, has formed that of man, which in turn reflects its Maker’s powers. Thus Lippo as a painter uses his hand to glorify God by praising His creation. It is within

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2 For the tensions in Lippi, see Roma King, The Bow and The Lyre (Univ. of Michigan Press, 1957), p. 33.
4 All quotations and line references in this essay are uniform with Ian Jack, ed., Browning: Poetical Works 1833-1864 (Oxford Univ. Press, 1970).

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this religious context that the abuse of the hand by Lippi and others gains its full ironic and apocalyptic significance.\(^5\)

The first explicit reference to the hand occurs in lines 12-14:

\begin{quote}
Aha, you know your betters? Then, you'll take
Your hand away that's fiddling on my throat,
And please to know me likewise.
\end{quote}

Lippo has been apprehended by the watch under suspicious circumstances. Whether angered by the Monk's tone of indignant sarcasm, or whether in the course of a perfectly routine "police brutality,"\(^6\) one of the officers has grasped him by the throat. Lippi, wise in the ways of the streets from the bitter experiences of his childhood, is quick to give substance to his bluster by dropping the name of his patron. Although this tactic achieves the desired result, Lippo buys some extra insurance by slipping a bribe to a watchman (II. 27-31). Together, the first two allusions to the abuse of the hand in "Fra Lippo Lippi" suggest the corruption of Florence by characterizing its forces of law and order as little better than the thieves and murderers they are intended to suppress. Despite its pious pretensions, Florentine society is pervaded by violence and brute materialism. As a man, if not as an artist, Lippi is deeply implicated in its moral squalor.

Browning's intimations of the corruption of Lippi's world, of its betrayal of its own professed ideals, are crystallized in the poet's second major reference to the hand. With his painter's eye, which can read the spiritual character written in a face, the Monk sees in a particularly ill-favored guardsman a perfect model for the "slave" who executed John the Baptist:

\begin{quote}
I'd like his face--

His, elbowing on his comrade in the door
With the pike and lanterns,--for the slave that holds
John Baptist's head a-dangle by the hair
With one hand ("Look you, now," as who should say)
And his weapon in the other, yet unwiped. \(^{(II. 31-36)}\)
\end{quote}

Through this imaginary painting, in which the abuse of the hand figures centrally in the moral symbolism, Lippi's society is associated by implication with the vicious and decadent rulers to whom John the Baptist fell victim (Matthew 14. 3-12). In their unfortunate proclivity to lust and violence, Lippo's contemporaries resemble all too closely Herod and his circle. More subtly, just as John the prophet of the Messiah was murdered to satisfy Herodias' thirst for vengeance, and just as the slave proudly displays his handiwork in the expectation of a reward, so the Florentines are ready to

\(^{5}\)For the mixture of ironic realism and religious revelation in "Fra Lippo Lippi," see Donald S. Hair, Browning's Experiments with Genre (Univ. of Toronto Press, 1972), pp. 108-110.

sacrifice their Christian professions to their lower appetites and to their self-interest. This betrayal of spiritual principles is highlighted by Lippi’s characterization of a second guardsman as Judas (I. 25). The association reflects ironically upon the morals of both Lippi and his tormentors by connecting the bribe which has just changed hands with the “thirty pieces of silver” (Matthew 26. 15). The allusion is particularly appropriate to the painter who, in order to benefit from the protection and munificence of the Medici, has compromised his artistic principles by painting “saints and saints / And saints again” (ll. 48-49). However, Lippi’s dereliction represents only part of a complex and ambiguous moral situation. Although he has become a kind of Judas by prostituting his art to the religious hypocrisy of the “servants of Mammon” (Matthew 6. 24),7 his partial sellout is also a necessary self-protection if he is to survive and carry on his work. Both as a “voice crying in the wilderness” (Matthew 3. 3), and as a harbinger of the Renaissance, Lippi is himself a sort of John the Baptist, in imminent danger of an untimely and fruitless martyrdom unless he shelters himself as best he may.

The next pair of references to the hand provide a diagnosis of the moral disease afflicting Lippi and his society by indicating that not only its hypocrisy, but also much of its excessive carnality, can be traced to the imposition of an unduly ascetic religious ideal, which breeds rebellion in the flesh. For three weeks before his escapade, Lippo has been cooped up in his “mew,” “A-painting for the great man, saints and saints” (ll. 48-49). Just as his subject matter reflects the officially accepted “otherworldly” conception of art, his cloistering represents an ironic extension of his imprisonment by monastic asceticism. Lippi’s aesthetic and sexual frustrations are brought to a head by the beginning of Carnival, and the hands which were busy painting saints are now used to tear up curtains and bed-clothes for an escape ladder:

> Into shreds it went,  
> Curtain and counterpane and coverlet,  
> All the bed-furniture—a dozen knots,  
> There was a ladder! Down I let myself,  
> Hands and feet, scrambling somehow, and so dropped.  
> (ll. 61-65)

The degradation of the flesh to which its complete denial inevitably leads is pinpointed by the image of Lippi scrambling “Hands and feet” like a monkey down his make-shift ladder. The note of selbstrionie in his description of his escape indicates that the painter is well aware of the paradoxical relationship between puritanism and immorality. Nevertheless, he is unable to break the hold of the medieval ideal on his mind. Even as he returns from his spree he

7For the religious hypocrisy of the Medici, see William Irvine, “Four Monologues in Browning’s Men and Women,” VP, 2 (1964), 157.
thinks, in a mood which appears to be compounded of penitential guilt and *post coitum tristum*, of his unfinished painting of the arch-ascetic St. Jerome:  

And so as I was stealing back again  
To get to bed and have a bit of sleep  
Ere I rise up to-morrow and go work  
On Jerome knocking at his poor old breast  
With his great round stone to subdue the flesh. (ll. 70-74)

Lippi's perversion of his creative powers to appease his sense of guilt is strikingly rendered by the "chinese-box" conception of his misuse of his painter's hand to depict its still more flagrant misemployment. The image of St. Jerome bruising his breast with a stone, with its possible grotesque play on the notion of "self-abuse," indicates the destructive misdirection of sexual energies which Freud attributes to the moralistic and punitive superego.

Two minor but pointed indications of the failure of the Florentines to practise what they preach are contained in the hand-imagery in Lippo's account of his reception into the monastery:

Old Aunt Lapaccia trussed me with one hand,  
(Its fellow was a stinger as I knew)  
And so along the wall, over the bridge,  
By the straight cut to the convent. Six words there,  
While I stood munching my first bread that month:  
"So, boy, you're minded,' quoth the good fat father  
Wiping his own mouth, 'twas reflection-time,—  
'To quit this very miserable world'?" (ll. 88-95)

The old woman who can use her hands to beat or to dispose of a starving child, but not to feed him, suggests the lack of Christian charity in Lippi's society. This hardness is contrasted, in the picture of the Prior complacently wiping the crumbs from his mouth, with a religious hypocrisy which is better-tempered because it is fully fed.

These two passing references through the hand-image to the moral shortcomings of Lippi's Florence serve to introduce a third in which, once again, the Monk's insights are summed up in a painting. Lippo is recounting how he graduated from a more or less idle doodling in his books to the production of his first real picture (ll. 127-165). Browning may be ironically suggesting that the illumination of medieval manuscripts was the outcome of monastic indolence. If so, Lippi is not simply growing from a childish play to a mature seriousness in the use of his hands to express his spiritual and artistic gifts. He is also rising above a frivolous dissipation of his talents by employing

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8 For the portrait of St. Jerome as epitomizing the ascetic ideal, particularly in the denial of art and of sexual appetite, see Margaret W. Pepperdine, "Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi," 70-75," *Exp*., 15 (1957), Item 34; and Mark W. Siegchrist, "The Puritan St. Jerome in Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi," *Studies in Browning and His Circle*, 1 (1973), 26-27.

9 For the currency of this term in Browning's day, see *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1961), I, 45.
them to glorify God through His works. This positive use of the hand is ironically counterpoised with the centerpiece of Lippi’s painting:

the breathless fellow at the altar-foot,
Fresh from his murder, safe and sitting there
With the little children round him in a row
Of admiration, half for his beard and half
For that white anger of his victim’s son
Shaking a fist at him with one fierce arm,
Signing himself with the other because of Christ
(Whose sad face on the cross sees only this
After the passion of a thousand years). (ll. 149-157)

Not only has the murderer misused his hands in repeating the sin of Cain, but his victim’s son is about to compound the crime with his own homicidal revenge. The son’s utter forgetfulness of the Christian principles which he professes is once again suggested by his use of his hands, which implies a superficial, mechanistic observance with no relationship whatever to his feelings or to his actions (Irvine and Honan, pp. 337-338). His unconscious hypocrisy is summed up in his disregard of Christ’s injunctions to forgive one’s enemies, and to settle one’s disputes before going to the Temple (Matthew 5. 23-24, 44). His transgression of these commandments is underlined by his parody of a third: that when giving alms one should not let one’s left hand know what his right is doing (Matthew 6. 3).

The next reference to the abuse of the hand is also to a painting. Lippi angrily describes the crass misuse of his fresco of the martyrdom of St. Lawrence:

I painted a Saint Lawrence six months since
At Prato, splashed the fresco in fine style:
‘How looks my painting, now the scaffold’s down?’
I ask a brother: ‘Hugely,’ he returns
‘Already not one phiz of your three slaves
Who turn the Deacon off his toasted side,
‘But’s scratched and prodded to our heart’s content,
‘The pious people have so eased their own
‘With coming to say prayers there in a rage:
‘We get on fast to see the bricks beneath.
‘Expect another job this time next year,
‘For pity and religion grow i’ the crowd—
‘Your painting serves its purpose? Hang the fools! (ll. 323-335)

Once again, Browning skillfully exploits the implicit ironic contrast between Lippi’s creative use of the hand in painting, and its profanation in various moral and spiritual perversions. Like the slave who holds John the Baptist’s head, the minions “Who turn the Deacon off his toasted side” misuse their hands to perpetrate a revolting atrocity. The ironic relevance of their ferocity to Lippi’s own age is implied by the grotesque image of the angry churchgoers clawing in rage at his painting. Although masking as righteous indignation, the anger of the “worshippers” has the same animal origins as the brutality of Lawrence’s tormentors. This is cynically recognized by the brother who speaks to Lippi about the “restoration” of the fresco, and who regards the
fresco as a safety-valve for the base and violent passions of his congregation. That such a crass attitude represents the desecration of a sacred gift is underlined by the parishioners’ use of their hands to perpetrate, at least technically, an act of sacrilege. Their relationship to Christian ideals is precisely that of the slaves in the painting.

Lippi’s indignation at the treatment of his St. Lawrence leads him perilously close to an outright rejection of the Church’s authority. Aware that his hasty “Hang the fools!” has shocked the guardsmen, Lippo takes evasive action. To make perfectly sure that his words will not be repeated to the authorities, he passes a second bribe to the officers (l. 345). Once again, Browning is implying that fear and self-interest make Lippo play Judas to his own artistic ideals.

The tensions and confusions implicit in Lippi’s difficult position are epitomized in the painter’s use of the hand-image in his description of his proposed “Coronation of the Virgin.” Lippo imagines himself in his picture uncomfortably out of place in the “pure company” (l. 368) of Heaven. However, in a symbolic gesture of atonement and forgiveness, he is led into the celestial presence by the “soft palm” of a “sweet angelic slip of a thing” (ll. 370-371). Their handhold suggests Lippi’s communion with divine truth through his perception of “The value and significance of flesh.” However, his sensual appreciation of the “soft palm,” like his association of the “angelic slip” with the Prior’s mistress (l. 387), indicates that his sacramentalism too often breaks down into self-contradiction. Like his hypocritical society, he wishes to eat his cake in both this world and the next. Lippi’s double standard, particularly because of the strong hold of the ascetic ideal upon his mind, breeds in him a childish and neurotic fear of punishment. His pathetic need for moral security is indicated by his special care not to lose his grip upon his angelic protector’s hand (ll. 384-385).

In “Fra Lippo Lippi,” the motif of the abuse of the hand is thus complexly related to Browning’s ironic treatment of the partial involvement of the painter in the social and spiritual corruption of his milieu. The Monk’s final handshake with the guard (l. 390) may suggest an attempt on his part to transcend the shortcomings of his society by establishing a new communion arising from his aesthetic ideals. But it is equally probable that he is simply passing another bribe. Lippi’s gesture of apparent friendship therefore implies not only the possibility of a new spiritual brotherhood based upon his principles, but also the destruction of the human community by a pervasive immorality. The Monk’s refusal of the Guard’s offer of torches to light his

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10 For Browning’s use of the Prior’s “niece” to crystallize the hypocrisy imposed by the ascetic ideal, see Boyd Litzinger, “Incident as Microcosm: The Prior’s Niece in ‘Fra Lippo Lippi’,” *CE*, 22 (1961), 409-410.
way home underlines this moral and social breakdown by recalling that, only a short time before, the flames of the same brands were being thrust by the watchmen into his face (l. 2). The last implicit reference to the abuse of the hand in line 390 of “Fra Lippo Lippi” is thus subtly linked to one at the very beginning of the poem.