

## **Browning's View of Art, "Andrea del Sarto" and "Fra Lippo Lippi."**

Browning was not half so interested in his age and its problems as Tennyson was, he deliberately chose to keep himself aloof from the conditions of his time. Other than social problems, his attention was captivated by a great variety of things. His interests were neither narrow nor insular, nor he sought to circumscribe his genius by confining his muse to the singing of the social, political and economic conditions of his age. He was interested in a wide variety of subjects and his poetry reveals him as a lover of art, psychology, philosophy, love, crime and a variety of other subjects. Though his basic interest was centered in human beings, the soul and its varied and multifarious phases, his poems like "**Andrea del Sarto**" and "**Fra Lippo Lippi**" testify his interest in art and painting. For Browning art is a form of praise, i.e., of religion. Art is for Browning the creation of life by the imitation of life without and within him.

"**Fra Lippo Lippi**" and "**Ardea del Sarto**" are two substantial companion-pieces, admittedly creative achievements of very high order, great pieces of dramatic characterization. In both poems the blank verse is full of vitality and movement. In "**Fra Lippo Lippi**" it is rougher, as befits the rapid careless excited talk that makes up the poem and does not rise to the height of Browning's genius in colloquial verse; in "**Andrea del Sarto**" the verse is more flexible and less colloquial, the poem being rather a meditation. Each poem has a human setting, most vividly drawn in Fra Lippo's case the brilliant summary of his life history, in del Sarto's the marital situation, coming to us through the painter's half-tragic half-humorous hints. But the essential matter of both poems lies in the theories of art expressed by the two artists.

For Browning, the musician, the poet and the painter possess the capacity to do just this: reawaken us into a new consciousness of what his Fra Lippo Lippi calls "the beauty and the wonder and the power" of this world. Its "changes, surprises" staled by daily custom, become taken for granted until the artist enables men to see them suddenly afresh, with clear vision, as if for the first time. We are made, declares Lippo,

"so that we love  
First when we see them painted, things we have passed  
Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;"

[**Fra Lippo Lippi**: Robert Browning]

Fra Lippo's ideas are separable. He voices the gospel of realism. He scoffs at the way his contemporaries aim at to "Paint soul by painting body ill". Fra Lippo comments freely and quaintly on the absurdity of showing soul by means of bodies so ill-painted that no one can bear to dwell upon them, as on the fallacy involved in all contempt for the earthly life. He will never believe that the world with all its life and beauty, is an unmeaning blank. He is sure, "it means intensely and means good." He is sure too that to reproduce what is beautiful in it is the mission of Art. Lippo deduces his right to paint the world and its inhabitants as he sees them from the fact that God made them so.

Fra Lippo explains the function of Art as that of making us see and love things better through their artistic representation—to find the meaning of the world, reality behind

actuality. If anyone objects that the world being God's work, Art can not improve on it and the painter will best leave it alone: he answers that some things are better for being painted; because as we are made, we love them best when we see them so. The artist has lent his mind for us to see with. That is what Art means; what God wills in giving it to us. It is the artist who gives us back eyes for the reality:

"Art was given for that----  
God uses us to help each other so,  
Lending our minds out."

[**Fra Lippo Lippi**: Robert Browning]

The artist must miss nothing and "count it crime/ To let a truth slip."-- that is Lippo's claim.

"**Andrea del Sarto**", which penetrates perhaps deeper than any other of Browning's poems into the nature of art and the artist and is factually based, like "**Fra Lippo Lippi**" on Vasarie's "**Lives of the Painters**." Del Sarto wonders if it may not be possible that the higher vision should co-exist with an inferior degree of artistic skill. He admits that a placid and accomplished art may be a sign of an end too easily reached. He asserts—against Fra Lippo—that beauty must have mind behind it before it can inspire true art. He demonstrates to Lucrzia—tenderly but without flinching—the relation between art and marriage.

"**Andrea del Sarto**" lays down the principle that the soul of the true artist must exceed his technical powers; that in art, as in all else, "a man's reach should exceed his grasp." The poem, though a critical one, is more an expression of feeling; the lament of an artist who has fallen short of his ideal --- of a man who thinks himself the slave of circumstance—of a lover who is sacrificing his moral and in some degree his artistic conscience to a woman who does not return his love. It is the harmonious utterance of a many-sided sadness which has become identified with even the pleasures of the man's life; and is hopeless, because he is resigned to it.

The poem is about the insufficiency of art to satisfy its practitioner. It arises from the discrepancy between Andrea's personal endowment of artistic talent and his ideal of perfection, so that his conception of "all that [he] was born to be and do" stands perpetually mocked by what he can in fact achieve. Ironically his failure seems to lie in his faultlessness. He strikes to the core of his discontent when he describes his art as "silver-grey/Placid and perfect." He can execute perfectly, in the technical sense, without preliminary sketches or studies,

".....what many dream of all their lives  
Dream? Strive to do and agonise to do,  
And fail in doing."

[**Andrea del Sarto**: Robert Browning]

Yet he convicts himself of achieving "much less, so much less" and passionately envies the imperfect strives because:

"There burns a truer light of God in them,  
....."

.....  
Their works drop downward, but themselves, I know;  
Reach many a time a heaven that's shut to me...  
My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here."

[**Andrea del Sarto**: Robert Browning]

Andrea himself, technically flawless, can with one quick chalk stroke correct any fault. "Ay, but the soul!" he cries "its soul is right." It is that which continues to elude Andrea, so that all he paints so perfectly remains a travesty of the ideal. Once more, art has failed to satisfy the deepest needs of man's soul. Andrea has not committed the familiar Browningsque sin of rejecting life for art; but his tragedy is a double one. Because of his own defects of character and talent, life as well as art has betrayed him and he is debarred from tasting the full joys of either world. Browning made Andrea an illustration of a man who could not keep us the high ideas to which he had been called by God.

Andrea del Sarto was the perfect artist whose creative powers were hampered by emotional short comings of another kind; Lippo Lippi was the pagan creator overwhelmed at moments by a melancholy that testified to some deeper experience they were missing. They are different, yet both share one feature in common: a conviction, an intimation or perhaps no more than an inkling that there is some truth a little beyond their comprehension, the realization of which would alter the whole of their values. They are different, yet both speak for Browning himself.

However, to Browning life is greater than art. Whatever be the enrichment Browning experienced through music, poetry, and painting, his final allegiance is to something he acknowledges as greater than these: to the source and inspiration which art strives to capture and intensity life itself. This emerges plainly from many of the poems in "**Men and Women**." At the end of "**Transcendentalism**" the speaker declares that the younger poet in his reality as a man is much more important than his poem:

"You are a poem, though your poem's naught,  
The best of all you did before, believe,  
Was your own boy's-face o'er the finer chords  
Bent...."

[**Transcendentalism**: Robert Browning]

The infinite variety of human personality and of its capacity for experience can never be matched by any creation of man in art.

Browning was one of those great poets who took the art and vocation of the poet with great seriousness. He was as much a devoted votary of the muse of poetry as Milton. He did not consider poetry as the product of an idle imagination aimed to offer such literature as should be a substitute for a cigar or a game of dominoes to an idle man. He did not subscribe to the view that the poet was an utopian idealist taking the readers to an unreal world of shadows, dreams and idle visions. Browning held that poetry was closely related to life and its problems. He had no faith in the theory of the "Art for Art's sake"; nor did he subscribe to the views of the pre-Raphaelites glorifying art for its own sake.

He believed that art was no abstraction, thin, arid and theoretic. It must be pulsating with life. For him, art was for life's sake; and his poems of art, philosophy and religion vindicate his stand that poetry and art should be intimately in touch with reality and life.