

“Fra Lippo Lippi”: A Defense for Art and Material Reality

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By Elisa Stanczak

At first it might seem as though Robert Browning’s “Fra Lippo Lippi” drastically juxtaposes the flesh and the soul with the season of Carnival and the liturgical season of Lent representing these two opposing mindsets. The subjective viewpoint of the dramatic speaker—a monk of questionable character who is deeply skeptical of his religious superiors—seems to advocate for the former. However, upon inspecting the poem’s form, content, and the speaker himself, a more complex reading comes to light. Though the spiritual and the sensual are seemingly contrasted in his monologue, the speaker of “Fra Lippo Lippi” makes an apology for art as a uniting force, which expresses abstract ideas through realistic, concrete forms. By creating material representations of the soul in his paintings, he elevates the human experience and allows it to participate in the spiritual realm.

Fra Lippo Lippi himself embodies the unity of the spiritual and the material, which at first glance appears to be a walking contradiction to the reader. However, the poem reveals that the views of the monks are, in fact, self-contradictory. Lippi begins the monologue by trying to justify his suspicious circumstances to the guards that catch him “at alley’s end \ where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar” (ll. 5-6) in the middle of the night. The monk is presented in a questionable light as one who chases after the desires of the flesh. He bribes the guards with a “quarter florin” (l. 28) to let him go and appears to make light of the Church, the saints, and scripture throughout his entire speech. While being a man with seemingly secular values, he defends himself by claiming his monastic identity, flaunting his knowledge of the Scriptures and tradition. As a child, he took vows of chastity and poverty, renouncing all material goods and devoting himself to a life of seclusion from worldly pursuits. However, he admits to joining the monastery out of necessity. Lippi needed material reality—bread, shelter, and clothing—to survive. He says, “’Twas not for nothing—the good bellyful, the warm serge and the rope that goes all round” (ll. 103-104). He enters the monastic tradition to receive the sustenance he previously lacked while living in the world. This proves the importance of the Church’s mission to feed the poor and orphaned, while simultaneously exposing how it contradicts itself. The Church forces its members to denounce the very things that drew them to participate in the divine—the very things God provided for them in order to live.

Just as Lippi’s persona fuses the monastery with the dark alley, so does his art, through which he elevates the human experience to the transcendent. He talks about painting God and the Virgin Mary with a host of saints, saying, “[W]ell, all these / secured at their devotion, 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 Lippol II” (ll. 359-363). By painting the heavenly realm—an abstract and distant dimension—he transforms it into material reality. Through likening the “flowery angel brood” (l. 349) to “the ladies that crowd to church at midsummer” (l. 352), Job to suffering “Painters who need his patience” (l. 359), and the Prior’s niece to St. Lucy, he makes them accessible. He is even able to interact with these celestial beings as he does with the guards standing before him. When the angels praise his work, his emotions are manifested through visible, physical reactions by blushing and smiling..

This emotional manifestation through facial expression is something that fascinates Lippi. In both his monologue and his art, Lippi often fixates on the human face, which is the soul illustrated in the flesh. He says, “I drew men’s faces on my copybooks, scrawled them with the antiphony’s marge, / Joined legs and arms to the long music-notes, / Found eyes and nose and chin for A’s and B’s, / And made a string of pictures of the world” (ll. 129-133). Here, he compares the face to a musical score. Music is a purely auditory art form; however, notation allows sound to be seen on a piece of paper and immortalizes it. Similarly, when Lippi draws men’s facial expressions, he takes human emotion—an element of the soul, which has no material shape—and contains it in a physical form.

Not only the content of the monologue, but the poem’s form itself is a manifestation of the soul through the particular. Browning takes a commonly used and universally familiar form of poetry (iambic pentameter) and manipulates it by breaking the traditional rules of rhyme and rhythmic syllabic structure. By injecting elements of song, not stressing the proper syllables, and inserting ellipses, exclamations, and colloquial speech, Lippi’s language takes on a realistic (almost drunken) nature. He takes an elevated form associated with higher thought and makes it common, transparent, easy to follow. In addition to the form of the poem, the genre itself is also indicative of this idea. The dramatic monologue of a single realistic character in a particular situation—a monk suspected of unlawful behavior—expresses broad, complex, and philosophical theories, such as the purpose of art.

Throughout the poem, the grammatical structure mirrors the philosophy of the speakers, and the form of speech especially plays an important role in pointing out the fallacies in the Prior’s opinions on the purpose of art. The Prior believes that the soul should be devoid of the material. He instructs Lippi to “Make them forget there’s such a thing as flesh. / Your business is to paint the souls of men —/ Man’s soul, and it’s a fire, smoke... no, it’s not... / It’s vapor done up like a newborn babe—/ (In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth) / It’s... well, what matters talking, it’s the soul! / Give us no more of body than shows the soul” (ll. 183-188). The Prior is stumbling over his words and cannot seem to finish a sentence; he cannot coherently define what the soul is. Language is the form through which humankind can understand reality. Without such structure, it is impossible to make sense of the world. The Prior, in rejecting form, rejects language itself. When he comes close to defining the soul, he can only compare it to natural phenomena like fire, smoke, birth, and death. This language keeps creeping into his speech; he is actively fighting against his instincts to describe the spiritual in familiar, concrete forms.

In his monologue, Fra Lippo Lippi does not separate the spirit and the flesh. On the contrary: He stands firmly against dualism and argues that material reality is an extension of the spiritual realm—a means through which humankind can grasp at higher ideals that are otherwise beyond finite understanding. The artist-monk believes it is the delight in fleshly beauty that stirs up the soul and allows people to participate in the realm of the divine.

Work Cited

Browning, Robert. “Fra Lippo Lippi by Robert Browning.” *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43755/fra-lippo-lippi>



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