

Discussion on the critical essay

Character and Philosophy in "Fra Lippo Lippi"

In continuation with the mail shared with you all last week, I am sharing some critical observations on Browning's poem and analysis of the titular essay. Before that a brief introduction on the poem and its significant strands.

Setting: Set in Florence in mid 15th Century.

Source: Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Painters.

Browning used Vasari's account of Fra Lippo to show a dialectic interplay of spirit and substance in his poem. Fra is a combination of sensuality and artistic endeavour.

Form: - Blank Verse
Background and Context: To understand Fra Lippo, one first needs to look at Victorian poetry that emerges from a number of overlapping cultural contexts.

These recall attention to the women question in Victorian age (women, sexuality and desire), conflict of religion and technology/progress and other seminal issues which we will discuss below.

The effort to negotiate a content between self and the world has been the project of almost every Victorian poet. It has to be read ⁱⁿ simultaneity

- personal and cultural project. E. D. H. Johnson in The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry explored the tension between the poet and society. Browning worked with his 'infinite passion' (which is expended in excess of the finite object) and his dramatic monologue therefore can be seen as an attempt to utterance between two binarisms of feeling, between the unified selfhood and the other heightened awareness of the interrogating consciousness. Browning not only plays on the utterance but dramatises it. The duplicity involved in seeing the poem as a lyric expression is also to be seen as how the perceiving subject speaks.

e.g. Fra we know from the poem and Nasari's source that he was shut up in the palace of Cosimo de Medici so that he could carry out his work meticulously. But the strictness bores him and he escapes through the window one night making use of the cloth as ladder. Fra though was registered in the fear community, it is important to note that he has not let his eye lose the zest for good things around, he has not forsaken the pleasures of life. Fra, ^{the monk} then can be seen as a garb to cover his sensuality and calls attention

to the tension between his asceticism and his sensuality. Hence dramatic monologue, that has been hailed as the "flagship genre of Victorian poetry" (E. Warwick Slinn, ~~Chapman~~) encourages a dramatic ~~way~~ engagement with some key issues. Browning's statement "My poems are for the most part lyric in expression, always dramatic in principle and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine." [Men and Women] makes him make Fra Hippo a character who could be unperturbed by the carnality of his life-style. Vasari had written on the escapades of Fra Hippo Hippo and further the dramatic monologue form enables the confessional mode possible.

The poem has crucial pointers:

1) Presence of Fra Hippo at midnight in the streets; his interrogation by the guard followed by his colourful mild oath (he being under the patronage of Cosmo de Medici is quite influential) points out to the double-ness of his existence ~~and~~ that in monastic life, he has to carry his adventures with women (sportive ladies, line 6) in secret.

2) As Vasari had indicated that Hippo had a poor scholarship and all his talent was limited to his painting, here in the poem he declares himself as his "own master" defying a

lams and his naturalistic style of painting that focusses on the desire to paint life and human bodies in action instead of the prescriptive tyranny of artistic convention.

3) Fra becomes the mouthpiece for an important discussion on the role of arts. The great monastical painters Angelico and Lorenzo formed the canon but he could never make the third because the norms were not agreeable to him. His idea that soul is not divorced from the flesh and for a wholesome painting his art need not be enslaved by the orthodox conceptions of the times.

4) Painting / Art - Fra's art is borrowed from his experience. "I drew men's faces on my copy-books" His choice of paintings lies in "Being simple-bodies". The naturalistic painting is a "homage to the perishable clay" but he is told to "paint the souls of men" hence the clash. So his most important statement concerns the basis of art, should it serve didactic ends or should it be close to life and flesh?

QUESTION: Also intriguing is that ^{should} his paintings of the saints encourage an otherworldly feeling or should these come closer to the earthly life and look like the prior's mistress or people around?

5) Clash / Rebellion - ⁽⁵⁾ The poem at various points questions the conventions of the religion (here, Church's authority and sanctity) and society.

6) A look into the Victorian issues like corruption of the church and how the inner problems of church were covered by nice embellishments. It is hinted in the line "to do our church up fine, And put the front on it that ought to be!" and indications of thefts and Church's protection of the criminals when they became monks is highlighted in other line, "fresh from his murder, safe and sitting there," and the description about the priest not being a chaste person. All of these bring out the crevices in the religious sphere and cracks in the ^{sanctified} authority of the church.

Another issue that the opening of this discussion highlighted was the condition of women and brothels in Victorian era. It is a fact well known that women found themselves in prostitution forced by economic compulsions during the times. The 'sporting ladies' reference that surfaces in the beginning of the poem allude to the practice of "men of wealthy Victorian society" could choose or look through "sporting guides", "similar to shopping catalogues" and the fact that it was carried out in numbers between 800-20,000 prostitutes in London during Victorian age (ref)

to article Prostitution and life of hookers in Victorian Society) also shows about victorian men and their engagement outside marriage with women conveniently tagged as "fallen" in the patriarchal discourse to fulfil their fantasies outside the confines of marital life, since wives were largely conceived as sacred and sex was elevated to a holy duty confined to the ~~procreation~~ teleological consequence of child birth. The mid century Victorian conjunction of moralism was pushed by the idea that many women "are not troubled by sexual feeling of any kind and what men are habitually, women are only exceptionally" (refer to the article Sex and Sexuality in the 19th Century, ~~vam~~ (vam.ac.uk))

In the next lecture, we will extend this discussion on Victorian poetry and how the three poets - Browning, Tennyson and Rossetti, all of these ^{that} have been discussed and read in the class can be comparatively placed in their responses to victorian age and its faith and doubt.