THE NATURE OF ART IN BROWNING’S “FRA LIPPO LIPPI:” SHOULD ART BE REALISTIC OR IDEALISTIC?

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In “Fra Lippo Lippi,” Robert Browning analyzes the nature of art. He presents the question of whether art should be realistic and mirror nature or idealistic and instruct. The persona, an Italian painter and monk, is telling his life’s story to a couple of guards who found him wandering the streets at midnight. Fra Lippo Lippi explains that he wants to paint real people in his religious paintings, yet the church leaders want him to paint people that one can barely recognize as people. They want him to focus on the “soul,” not on the body and, thus, paint people who do not look like people. This struggle between realism and idealism is portrayed through the poem.

Lippi believes that art should be a representation of the natural world and, thus, be realistic. When the church leaders give him the chance to paint, he is thrilled: “Thank you! my head being crammed, the walls a blank, / Never was such prompt disemburdening” (ll. 143-144). He begins to paint church patrons in a realistic manner. The simple monks are amazed at Lippi’s ability to portray real people through his work. Yet, “The Prior and the learned pulled a face / And stopped that in no time” (ll. 174-175). They are dissatisfied with the realistic work and want Lippi to paint saints that evoke an ethereal surrealism instead:

- Faces, arms, legs, and bodies like the true
  - [...] it’s devil’s game!
  - Your business is not to catch men with show,
  - With homage to the perishable clay,
  - But lift them over it, ignore it all,
  - Make them forget there’s such a thing as flesh.
  - Your business is to paint the souls of men—(ll. 177-183)

In depicting real people and showing too much of the physical, the Prior thinks Lippi is overlooking the soul and, thus, not using art to elevate the subject. For the church leaders, the role of the religious artist is to make the viewer forget the temptations of the flesh; the artist is supposed to offer something that is above the human, material world. The Prior wants Lippi to show only as much of the corporeal form as needed to represent the soul: “Give us no more of body than shows soul!” (l. 188). The human form then becomes something one must hide, that is degraded, and is secondary to the soul. The Prior wants Lippi to represent the soul in his work, yet he has a difficult time explaining the exact nature of the soul:

- Man’s soul, and it’s a fire, smoke . . . no it’s not . . .
- It’s vapour done up like a new-born babe—
  - (In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth)
- It’s . . . well, what matters talking, it’s the soul! (ll. 184-187)

He has no definition but simply avows a soul is a soul. The Prior does not explain what a soul is, and Lippi has no idea how to represent it according to the Prior’s wishes.

Lippi is appalled that the church leaders do not share his love of the physical form. He is a naturalistic artist who wants to truthfully represent what he sees around him. He holds a mirror up to study nature, as verisimilitude is his ultimate goal:

- A fine way to paint soul, by painting body
- So ill, the eye can’t stop there, must go further
- And can’t fare worse! Thus, yellow does for white
- When what you put for yellow’s simply black,
- And any sort of meaning looks intense

When all beside itself means and looks nought. (ll. 199-204) He has no patience for the Prior’s approach to painting. In trying to paint as if ignoring the body and the real world, Lippi suggests that the painter is offering only a vague idea of soul and describes his own style of painting as actually enhancing the image of the soul: “Can’t I take breath and try to add life’s flash, / And then add soul and heighten them three-fold?” (ll. 213-214). When you offer a true representation of the body, you are making it easier for a viewer to see the soul of the person: “Make his flesh liker and his soul more like” (l. 207).

Lippi goes a step further by saying that the artist does not have to represent the soul at all, but instead can depict beauty of any kind:

- Say there’s beauty with no soul at all—
- (I never saw it—put the case the same—)
- If you get simple beauty and nought else,
- You get about the best thing God invents:
  - That’s somewhat: and you’ll find the soul you have missed,
  - Within yourself, when you return him thanks. (ll. 215-220)

God created all things. Thus, in reproducing something that God created, the artist is actually doing what the church leaders want him to do: representing something that evokes reverence and worship within the observer. However, the point might be moot because Lippi claims that he has never seen beauty without a soul.

In discussing the nature of art, Lippi offers the reader the perspective that realistic art should be used to promote religious aims instead of the idealistic art that the Prior wants. First, the church leaders, particularly the Prior, are discredited as authorities on art. As is the common reading, the Prior’s niece is in fact his mistress and not his niece, which compromises the Prior as a religious authority figure. Further, he cannot explain what soul is, so he cannot know how it should be represented.
Because we cannot see or even prove the soul’s existence, Lippi suggests we should instead represent the human form realistically because it is God’s creation.

Another question to ponder is whether art should be used for religious or didactic purposes. Art, any kind of art, can have dramatic, didactic effect. Lippi does not suggest art should not be used for religious reasons, but he also does not state that art should be used only for didactic purposes. The main argument in the poem is that in creating art that is realistic, the artist is connecting with a sense of spirituality, or soul, more than if he were to simply use an idealistic approach.

An interesting point is that Browning, in creating the poem, has created a piece of realistic art that is at the same time didactic. The poem lays out Lippi’s explicit argument that realistic art brings the viewer closer to God’s creation and, thus, closer to God, but Browning’s implicit argument goes further. The poem is a piece of art that is realistic, for the reader can imagine an actual painter who was upset with church officials under these circumstances. Yet, Browning also is presenting an argument beyond Lippi’s and in doing so is showing, or teaching if you wish, the reader that art should be realistic. In a remarkable rhetorical move, Browning’s own realistic art is didactic as well.

EDITOR’S NOTE: This is a literary analysis paper that was written for English 445, Victorian Literature.