Browning and 'The Sense of Self'

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The Victorian Age, which succeeded the Romantic Era, continued some of the poetic conventions of its preceding age as far as technique is concerned with the mellifluous, lyrical approach of Alfred Lord Tennyson and Matthew Arnold. The Victorian period, spanning from 1830 to i 890, witnessed conflicting opinions about Victorian society as expressed in the contemporary literary works. Evidently, the Victorians were in a state of immense moral, sentimental and psychological confusion which resulted from the challenges which advancements in the fields of science presented to the existing religious beliefs and faith.

> "Victorian History... is before all things a history of opinion. To see ideas embodying themselves in parties and institutions, institutions and parties closing in upon ideas: to show old barriers sometimes snapped and sometimes stormed by new opinions: positions once thought impregnable abandoned overnight, and forces once thought negligible advancing to unforeseen victories, that is to understand Victorian history" (Young, Introduction)

Robert Browning, one of the most widely misunderstood poets as well as a representative of the period, was, perhaps, the greatest assessor of the contemporary society, as would be pronounced by Professor Santayana in the 20[1h] Century, as he explored the intense moral tussles existing in the minds of the people. Browning, in addition to the heart, looks also "into the cerebral cortex, the nervous system and the digestive tracts", famously declared by T.S. Eliot. Browning himself had observed that the human soul has remained the same since the days of Adam. It is a union of thought and sensation where the level of experience on which thought, sense, and emotion are no longer dissociated realms but merged into a single pattern. This is best exemplified in Browning's signature form of expression, the dramatic monologue, where the ventriloquist poet, would choose a character, who would usually be a brooding individual and a fantastic speaker. "To fill his mind with the elements of dramas, to enter by sympathy into the lives, characters and conduct of others, has plainly been the business of his (Browning's) life." notes G. Brimley(Watson 19) Browning's proficiency is best appreciated in his four volumes published over a period of twenty years in mid-century- *Dramatic Lyrics(1842), Dramatic Romances and Lyrics(I845), Men and Women(1855)* and *Dramatis Personae(1864).* Gradually, brutal negative criticism gave way to acknowledgements and appraisal of Browning's works as critics realized that Browning championed the cause of the individual. "Indeed, in Browning's best poems he makes us feel that what we took for obscurity in him was superficiality in ourselves", states George Eliot in her essay *Men and Women* Some Victorian Assessments(Watson 53). In keeping with the age, Browning delineates how the disillusioned Victorian individual attempts to adapt himself in response to his environment and exercises his customized ethics and values which would work as effective successors of the long held beliefs he was forced to discard as received wisdom from scriptures was replaced by reason and individualism. Man gradually transcended the primal human impulse of the resistance to change. This event is remarkably explored by Browning as he provides his characters with a mindscape where they often put themselves under scrutiny of the readers as well as analyse themselves with respect to their surroundings. Browning's characters are exposed to elemental human emotions of vanity and conceit, crave for power as discerned in Alfonso, The Fifth Duke of Ferrara from *My Last Duchess* and the bishop from *The Bishop Orders His Tomb in St. Praxed's Church* or guilt and denial as perceived in *Soliloquy of The Spanish Cloister* or a longing for reform, metaphysical perfection and possessiveness as expressed in *Fra Lippo Lippi* and *Porphyria 's Lover.*

One of the archetypal forms of Victorian Individualism can be identified in Browning's *FraLippo Lippi* as Lippo, thcFlorencean friar, voices, in lieu of the poet, his opinions of life and art. Like most of Browning's characters, Lippo's justification of his self assigned ideals appear eerily convincing. Sourced in Vasari's narration of Lippo's life. Browning's poem makes a departure to make a reasoned appeal for artistic naturalism through a psychological analysis of Lippo as a man and an artist and asserts the schismatic nature of Renaissance art. Although Browning has omitted some of the slanders surrounding Lippo, the poet's fictionalized origin story of Lippo does make the readers gauge his temperament and anticipate his libertine ways that would dominate his later life. Browning skillfully manipulates readers into considering Lippo's compulsion of circumstances in becoming a monk rather than from his own free will. His duality of character can be traced from his diction as he is challenged by the Medici guards. This interaction which provides the premise for Lippi's monologue unveils the conflict between the man of the flesh with his irrepressible human sensuality and the ascetic demands of his profession as a monk and a painter of a religious order expects him to lead a chaste life. Lippo's colloquial street-usage of 'Zooks', 'weke

weke', 'gullet's-gripe', 'hangdogs' and hand 'that's fiddling' on his throat portray the earthy Lippo while the same man transforms his language into solemnity and dignity, adorned with erudite vocabulary and scriptural references when the artist in him warms to his subject.

The monologue commences, Lippo appears to be in an inebriated state in the wrong quarter of the town "where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar:" Browning makes a clever thematic use of the sensational situation when the artist is caught between the two spatial polarities which symbolise the sensual and the spiritual in his personality. Throughout the monologue, Lippo is attempting to demonstrate the pros and cons of these contraries from which there is a build-up for a plea to recognize the reality and essentiality of the 'flesh',the word serving as a motif in the poem. Lippo, though in an awkward situation, does not lose his own or sense of humour and commences introducing himself to the Medici guards: 'Flesh and Blood, That's all I'm made of,' and moves on seriously with the relation of life and art, firmly signifying his faith in the value and significance of flesh. He departs from conventionality through his firm belief in the synergy of the two, Lippo's philosophy represents Browning's poignant celebration of man's physical nature as opposed to the traditional Victorian reticence in matters of the body 'If you get simple beauty and not else,/ You get about the best thing God invents.' Body and the spirit are in effective natural alliance against insidious distortions of the intellect in Browning. He asserts the soul's interrelationship with the body on an instinctual level. E.D.H. Johnson, in his article, opines.

> "The vitalism inherent in Browning's emphasis on man's intuitive as opposed to his ratioinactivc faculties further explains the poet's acceptance of the real and demonstrable... The characters... are all exceptionally clear-sighted in their confrontation of actuality. They see through the false shows at which society connives, preferring to meet life on its own terms rather than to indulge in fanciful self-delusion." (Watson 99)

Thus, Browning becomes the great advocate of individual demonstration. Vasari historically recalls how Cosimo de Medici, who had shut Lippo in his palace, sought him after he escaped, caused him to return to work but allowed him liberty to move at his pleasure by means of which Medici was more promptly and effectually served by the painter. The excellence of rare genius was forms of light and not to be bonded slaves. Lippo could not ignore the claims of the senses of visible, physical beauty which then becomes a medium of revelation of the beauty of the soul. There exists no space of difference between the physical and the spiritual. Lippo rejects the myopic representation of the didactic approach to art as prescribed by the Prior and his scriptures. The great artist can adore the Lord, the creator of all animate and inanimate objects, by adoring his honestly all that is physical.

Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister explores moral hypocrisy. The very form of the monologue is significant as, unlike the total dispensation with rhyme in later monologues, the poem retains it, perhaps, to suggest the speaker's misplaced sense of self-righteousness and careful adherence to tradition and formal conventions. Browning depicts the speaker's mindscape to reveal the speaker's indulgence in the primal human defence mechanism of denial as he attributes his flawed characteristics at a fellow monk, a Brother Lawrence, accusing him of gluttony and lechery while it is obvious that it is he himself who is guilty of these sins. In fairly abundant details, he focuses on the failings of Lawrence. Browning implies that the most vehement moralists often invent their own opposition in order to elevate themselves. This, further, suggests that Brother Lawrence could be a figment of the speaker's imagination. The monk hopes to strike a bargain with Satan to bring about Brother Lawrence's damnation reserving a loophole to escape himself. The denial lies in the fact that striking any such bargain to the disadvantage of another must necessarily involve the loss of one's own soul, the very act of making such a treacherous bargain constitutes a mortal sin. He is a thinly veiled version of the much admired public moralists and preachers of Victorian times. Browning makes ample use of the conventions of spoken language including non-verbal and colloquial diction. The poem begins with Gr–r–r– there go, my heart's abhorrence!' and the readers are introduced to the speaker's soliloquy with a bestial sound as he is unable to express himself out of uncontrollable rage. The arrow(-) that follows 'Gr-r-r...' portrays his prolonged, unyielding and unresolved hatred, the basis of which is obscure. The speaker wishes 'If hate killed men...', he is overcome with such spite that he wishes to weaponise his emotions so that his "hate" may lacerate Lawrence. Acclaimed filmmaker Christopher Nolan's futuristic psychological thriller *Inception* echoes this notion as the subconscious of the characters is found militarized in the film. The speaker provides such insightful information about Lawrence's shady acts that they eerily seem to be first-hand accounts–'...While brown Dolores/ Squats outside the Convent bank.../ Steeping tresses in the tank,/ Blue-black, lustrous, thick like horsehairs,/- Can't I see his dead eye glow'. The speaker claims that Lawrence drains his watered orange-pulp 'at one gulp' and craves 'those melons', 'If he's able/ We're to have a feast!'

'A little guilt goes a long way'-Trevor Reznik *(The Machinist 2004)*. Guilt is the recurring motif Brad Anderson's film, *The Machinist,* starring Christian Bale as Trevor Reznik, thrives on. Reznik, a chronic insomniac, unable to cope with his crime of a hit-and-run incident resulting from careless driving, blames Ivan, another machinist in the factory, for the strange events that continually affect his life. Reznik eventually realizes that Ivan was a figment of his imagination and he was living in denial. Most characters in modern fiction, especially contemporary cinema have traits similar to Browning's characters. In Martin Scorsese's cinematic adaptation of Denis Lehane's novel *Shutter Island (2010)* the lead psychiatrist of a mental asylum for the criminally insane, Dr. Cawley, humours a patient, an ex-soldier Andrew Laeddis by allowing him to investigate his own crime of murdering his manic depressant wife who had drowned their children. In Stanley Kubrick's 1980 horror masterpiece, *The Shining,* loosely based on Stephen King's novel of the same name, the ghost of the butler, Delbert Grady, who murdered his wife and committed suicide, tells the current caretaker of The Overlook Hotel, Jack Torrance, "And when my wife tried to prevent me from doing my duty, I corrected her...". This statement is reminiscent of The Duke's words in Browning's *My Last Duchess,* "This grew; 1 gave commands;/ Then all smiles stopped together."

Author and critic Jorge Luis Borges suggests, "The poem *Fears and Scruples* by Browning foretells Kafka's work, but our reading of Kafka perceptibly sharpens and deflects our reading of the poem " Robert Browning has been the predecessor of artists investigating warped individuals as case studies in their works and has anticipated Freudian psychoanalysis and psychological fiction. He has sincerely examined the recesses of the human mind's labyrinth and has explored its strengths, frailties, probabilities and possibilities.

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