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Of Pictures and Poets: The humanist interpretation of Renaissance art in Browning's *Dramatic Lyrics* and Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*

Walter Pater's landmark *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* suggested that artists should attempt to capture emotive realities as best as possible even if meant subverting the purposes of moral instruction. This shift away from didactic writing, with a view to faithfully representing reality is also demonstrated time and again Robert Browning's poetry. This essay will suggest that his style of writing in dramatic monologues is similar to Pater's treatment of the Renaissance, in that it identifies and illustrates the emotional or human aspects of artists and their work as opposed to focusing abstractly on technical superficial impressions.

In an anonymous essay written for the *Guardian*, on the 9th of November 1887, two years after the death of Robert Browning, Pater reviewed *An Introduction to the Study of Browning* by Arthur Symonds that showed his great respect for the poet and playwright. Describing his style as 'the condensed expression of an experience, a philosophy, and an art'¹, that he 'had fared up and down among men, listening to the music of humanity, observing the acts if mean, and he has sung what he has heard, and he has painted what he has seen'.² Indeed Pater went far as to say that Browning's work would be hailed through the years, a foresight that has indeed held true.

This high regard Pater held for Browning can perhaps be explained by the similarity in approach that both of them employed with respect to interpreting the past. The volatile and frequently dramatic pace of change in the politics and art of Renaissance Italy fascinated them both, and it featured heavily in their works. Pater's essays and Browning's poetry suggest that the environment which fosters creative development is very much an extension of the artist or writer themselves implying that a holistic view of a piece of art or philosophy cannot develop unless seen from the context of the environment from which it originates. For Pater, Michelangelo's art was a reflection

¹ Walter Pater, *Essays from the Guardian*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1910), p. 50

² *Ibid*

³ Walter Pater, *Studies in the Histories of the Renaissance*, (Oxford: OUP, 2010), pp. 41-55

of his personality, with his childhood spent among stone carvers and in close relation to the Medici family, in the cultural wellspring that was Florence in the 1600s.³ Whilst for Browning, Fra Fillippo Lippi's art was the reaction to his impoverished roots and his mirthful rebellion against the stringency of cloistered life.⁴ By explaining art and philosophy through looking at the lives of artists, both Pater and Browning give emotional contexts to creative output, which goes some way towards contemporizing it. In that readers are confronted with the fact that art is often composed in chaotic and unpredictable ways and that some of its outstanding qualities arise as a result of this.

Pater in his essay 'The School of Giorgione', an appendix to the *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, summarizes this approach to history, individuals and art particularly well. He wrote:

It is a mistake of much popular criticism to regard poetry, music and painting – all the various products of art - as but translations into different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought, supplemented by certain technical qualities of color, in painting; of sound, in music; of rhythmical words, in poetry. In this way, the sensuous element in art, and with it almost everything in art that is essentially artistic, is made a matter of indifference; and a clear apprehension of the opposite principle – that the sensuous material of each art brings with it a special phase or quality of beauty, untranslatable into the forms of any other, an order of impressions distinct in kind – is the beginning of all true aesthetic criticism. For as art addresses not pure sense, still less the pure intellect, but the 'imaginative reason' through the senses, there are differences in kind of the gifts of sense themselves.⁵

He goes on to say that in order to delineate and analyze a specific instance of beauty or harmony created through a skilled and inventive use of a given medium one must appreciate not only technical skill but also the subtle quality of emotion that underwrites a work of art. Pater's view differed from his contemporaries, in that he stressed on an almost hedonistic conception of the impact of art on the lives of people. Arguing that emotional interaction with beauty however fleeting in nature ought to be considered the highest and the most worthy of occupations.⁶ Indeed this was a principle shared by many of the proponents of the aesthetic movement at the time such as Charles Swinburne, Arthur Symonds, Oscar Wilde and William Morris.⁷ Those who took on these views regarding art and its centrality to a fruitful life also at times extended these beliefs to their view of politics and the question of how to

⁴ Robert Browning, *Selected Poems*, (London: Penguin Group, 1989), pp.62-72

⁵ Pater, *Studies in the Histories of the Renaissance* p.122

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Carolyn Burdett, *Aestheticism and decadence*, British Library, <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/aestheticism-and-decadence>, [accessed: 1 March 2017]

govern society. Wilde in particular was infamous for his elaborate style of dressing and dandyism, once remarking that his life itself was a work of art. Infamous for rejecting a didactic approach to writing, he instead adopted, witty almost frivolous styles when approaching topics such as moral depravity. Prose writers such as Arthur Symonds and Pater also, were often accused of using ‘purple prose’ in their writing, referring to an overelaborate but ill advised style that appeared to be somewhat lacking in gravity.⁸ This opinion seems particularly well expressed by Henry James in a letter to Edmond Gosse in 1894 when he said of Pater, ‘He is a mask without the face, and there isn’t in his total superficialities a tiny point of vantage for the newspaper to flap its wings on.’⁹

Whilst Robert Browning himself, was not as outspoken as Pater or Wilde in encouraging a shift away from paying emphasis to structured, serious arguments his work does reflect some of the developments in the freeing of stylistic form that Pater seems to define in his *Studies*. His first published poem *Pauline* especially shows a liberal treatment of the subject of self-examination. It regards Browning’s relationship with the character of Pauline, who becomes an almost allegorical figure for poetic aspirations and frustrations. The poem draws on fragmented imagery and contains a strong sense of barely restrained energy that permeates the writer’s vision of himself and his art. Browning did not receive much popular or critical success in his early career, with *Pauline* being self published by the help of his aunt who lent him thirty pounds as a guarantee. John Stewart Mill’s criticism of *Pauline* made a deep impression on Browning, who had published the poem anonymously. Mill remarked that the poem was saturated with an ‘intense and morbid self-consciousness,’ and went some way to rattle Browning’s self-possession, and was known to have affected his style.¹⁰ Later in his life, he claimed authorship of the poem and in an introductory note to a reprint of the poem in 1888 he wrote: ‘Twenty years endurance of an eyesore seems more than sufficient: my faults remain duly recorded against me’.¹¹

Following his initial attempts, Browning later developed the style of writing in dramatic monologues. Rising to great critical and popular acclaim later in his life, especially following the publication of *The Ring and The Book* in 1868-69. With Wilde in May 1891 commenting ironically in *The Critic As Artist*, ‘he is the most Shakespearian creature since Shakespeare. If Shakespeare could sing with myriad lips, Browning could stammer through a thousand mouths.’¹² This method seemed to have been

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Tomoko Eguchi, *Ethical Aestheticism in the Early Works of Henry James: The Shadow of John Ruskin*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016) p 115

¹⁰ William Clyde DeVane, *A Browning Handbook*, (London: John Murray, 1937) pp 11-13

¹¹ Ibid. p 38

¹² Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist With (Upon the Importance of Doing Nothing and Discussing everything)*, (Mondial, 2015) pp 10

able to create a freedom of expression that built on historical contexts. By humanizing distant figures from the past, he made them almost contemporary but making them emotionally relatable to the reader.

His first mastery of this style of writing appeared in the poems published under the title of *Dramatic Lyrics* by Moxon in November 1842. In it he worked to delineate characters and their motives from national stereotypes. This is perhaps best signified by the way in which he grouped his poems when they were printed as a 16-page pamphlet. It consisted of six categories; ‘Cavalier Tunes’, ‘Italy and France’, ‘Camp and Cloister’ (France and Spain), ‘Queen Worship’ and ‘Madhouse Cells’, as well as five other individual poems. Under the category of ‘Camp and Cloister’, ‘Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister’ refers to the contrast between everyday life and the formality of a life dedicated to ecclesiastical learning in a monastery. He humorously explores the small hypocrisies that infuse lives so intent on the outward expression of piety. The second stanza summarizes this effect particularly well:

‘At the meal we sit together:
Salve tibi! I must hear
 Wise talk of the kind of weather,
 Sort of season, time of year:
Not a plenteous cork-crop: scarcely
Dare we hope oak-galls, I doubt:
What’s the Latin name for “parsley”?
 What’s the Greek name for Swine’s Snout?’¹³

The lines in italics seem to refer to the conversations around the dinner table. Appearing polite and moderate it takes on an air of affected learning especially as it seems to lack in true philosophical insight yet takes on the gravity of a meaningful discussion. The sense of resentment that such an environment of prolonged, enforced moderation seems to be reflected in the last line, ‘What’s the Greek name for Swine’s Snout?’ Acting almost as an aside, it perhaps reflects the real thoughts of the speaker showing an ironic apprehension of the artificiality of the exchange. Similarly the stanza regarding the reading of what was thought to be subversive literature illustrates this sense of the juxtaposition between real people and their everyday lives and the façade imposed by their environment:

‘Or my scrofulous French novel
 On grey paper with blunt type!
 Simply glance at it, you grovel
 Hand and Foot in Belial’s gripe...’¹⁴

¹³ Browning, *Selected Poems* pp.27-28

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The terminology used in this passage seems to evoke an ironic regard for the rigorous censure on reading that the conservatism of the cloister vilified. The use of ‘scrofulous’ in particular is suggestive of this as it draws on the imagery associated with the medical term used to describe the inflammation of lymph nodes. Likewise the use of the term ‘Belial’ to describe Satan is reminiscent of a more archaic term for Satan drawn from the readings of the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps also, suggesting that the perspective to regard popular novels in such a manner was likewise antiquated and over emphasized. Added to this, the ‘Soliloquy’ is composed of nine stanzas with a trochaic tetrameter, which uses sets of four stressed syllables each followed by unstressed syllables. The formality and rigid order in the structure of the poem perhaps is likewise suggestive of the stringent formality and order that pervaded in the life of those who lived in the cloister.

One of the most striking aspects of Browning’s work is that he juxtaposes the lives of individuals from their own perspectives with how they are widely perceived. He drew extensively upon cultural stereotypes and popular historical references for this purpose. Throughout *Dramatic Lyrics* he draws attention to the differences in cultural perception by specifying *French* novels that were frequently associated with a more liberal attitude towards relationships and politics. The general title of ‘Italy and France’ is used to thematically classify two poems each of which draws on cultural stereotypes regarding different attitudes towards romantic relationships. Whilst the poem about Italy refers to the violence directed against an unfaithful wife from the point of view of her husband, the poem ‘Count Gismond’, presented under the title of *France* speaks from the perspective of a much-adored mistress. Perhaps this reflects the general pattern in Italian Renaissance history that saw much violence spurred on by romantic liaisons amongst the ruling parties,¹⁵ a historical trend not seen so markedly in France. Also the fact that the ‘Soliloquy’ is specifically from a ‘Spanish Cloister’, further draws on cultural stereotypes as the Spanish monarchy were certainly highly religious and committed to the Church.

The medium of dramatic dialogues gives a sense of compression to storylines as a reader is plunged into a given perspective with only the context that they surmise from their own knowledge of the background of the poem. This method is particularly successful in creating a sense of immediacy. This is because once the context becomes clear the dialogue can combine commonly felt emotions with background knowledge to create a relatable impression of the lives of otherwise distant historical figures. This seemed to be a quality that was much appreciated by Pater who felt that it reflected Hegel’s conception of aesthetic in his ‘*Heitekeit*’ and ‘*Allgemeinheit*’ theories of generality and idealization for artistic success.¹⁶ In his essay on Winckelmann, Pater writes about the legacy of Hellenic ideals in creative output, referring to Hegel’s conception of

¹⁵ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, (Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 19-96

¹⁶ Pater, *Studies in the Histories of the Renaissance*, pp. 86-117

'*Heitekeit*' which talks of a sense of a purposeful reduction of reality, observing a certain 'blitheness or repose' and '*Allgemeinheit*' that refers to generalities. He argues that it is the work of an exceptional artist to create new ways of expressing reality, with the capacity to exert 'a novel power of refraction, selecting, transforming, recombining the images it transmits, according to the choice of the imaginative intellect.'¹⁷

In *Men and Women* Browning shows this transformative capacity by relating historical figures with colloquial imagery. Published first in 1863, it did not meet with much critical success at the time, but as Browning's reputation rose later in his career; it came to be more widely well regarded. With 'Fra Lippo Lippi' and 'Andrea del Sarto' in the anthology, in particular now being regarded as among his masterpieces. It represents an instance where the use of dramatic dialogues is developed and expanded to create a free-flowing, informal narrative that interprets the life of a sixteenth-century painter in very vivid, modern terms. Composed of 392 lines of which the majority, excepting six and a half lines of lyrical interlude of *stornelli* or 'flower-songs' is free verse, it tells the story of the life of the Carmelite monk whose life is recorded, albeit somewhat inaccurately, in Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists*, presumably written whilst Browning was living in Florence with his wife Elizabeth Barrett. A note on their copy of Vasari's work of *Florence 1846-57* has suggested that Vasari might very plausibly have been the source of Browning's inspiration for the poem.¹⁸ Although Browning appeared to be discontent with Vasari's version of the artist's biography, and in writing to Edward Bowden in 1866 showed a preference to Filippo Baldinucci's account of his life and constructed his own theories based on this.¹⁹

The life of Fra Lippo Lippi, according to Vasari, was something of great drama and turbulence, frequently coloured by instances of neglected oaths and volatile emotions. Born around 1409, the son of a butcher by trade and orphaned at a young age, Filippo Lippi was entered into a Carmine convent at the age of eight and was accepted as a Friar in the Carmelite Priory of Florence taking oath at the age 16 in 1421 and ordained as a priest four years later. Vasari notes of his character that Lippi was 'always liked to befriend cheerful people and he always lived a happy life' and 'spent exceptional amounts on his love affairs, which he continued to enjoy throughout his life up to the time of his death.'²⁰ For instance on being imprisoned by Cosimo di Medici, in order to be forced to work, he was known to have escaped from his room by means of a rope constructed from his sheets. Whilst later in his life, during his commission to paint the frescoes at the cathedral in Prato, he asked for Lucretzia Buti, thought either to be a ward of the Covent of Carmelites in Prato or a young novice to pose as a model for his work. He was known to have abducted Lucretzia,

¹⁷ Ibid. p.107

¹⁸ William Clyde DeVane, *A Browning Handbook*, (London: John Murray, 1937) p.194

¹⁹ Ibid. p.195

²⁰ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2008) p.198

²¹ Ibid. p.199

and together they had a son Fillipino Lippi, who later became a novice of his father alongside Sandro Botticelli. Fra Lippi is thought to have died in 1469, from poisoning, although the motives for this still remain under conjecture.²¹

Browning in *Fra Lippo Lippi*, writes about the painter's conversation (albeit one-sided) with some city guards to whom he speaks with freedom as he is under the patronage of Cosimo di Medici. He creates a colloquial dialogue that removes the formality from the encounter and captures something of the real feeling of the humorous, drunken meeting between the painter and the guards. The questions it raises about whether art should be restricted to the conscious inculcation of Christian morality or whether it should be an illustration of real life appears throughout:

‘It makes me mad to see what men shall do
And we in our graves! This world's no blot for us,
Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good:
To find its meaning is my meat and drink.
“Ay, but you don't so instigate to prayer!”
Strikes in the Prior: “when your meaning's plain
It does not say to folk — remember matins,
Or, mind you fast next Friday!” Why, for this
What need of art at all? A skull and bones,
Two bits of stick nailed crosswise, or, what's best,
A bell to chime the hour with, does as well.’²²

Lippo's questioning of the nature of what art should represent, seems to reflect also the question of how writers should also interpret and portray the past. Should it be seen as a sequence of events characterized by logical causality, as a warning for future generations or should it be the representation of the frequently chaotic lives of real people? By nuancing what art should represent by representing artists and their work in real life terms, Browning seems to give an answer to the question. He implies that art, whatever form it may take should attempt to represent moments of emotional intensity, which characterize the lives of real people. And that to restrict expression to didactic aims or overtly idealized settings does not well represent the truth. Indeed this was an approach that Pater also promoted as he saw art, poetry and music, not merely as composed of technical qualities that are observed and commented in an abstract manner. Rather he saw creativity, as artist working with their chosen medium, be it paint or verse or music in new and skillful ways to create an emotional response in the viewer. He saw art as a means to inspire feeling and not merely moral instruction, a view that was forward thinking for his time, and indeed went some way in helping to lay the foundations for modernism.

²² Browning, *Selected Poems* pp.62-72

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