

Ekphrasis in Robert Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi"

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As an ekphrastic poem re-created from the painting *Coronation of the Virgin*, "Fra Lippo Lippi" lacks adequate scrutiny from the perspective of interart poetics. With regards to the core concept of ekphrasis, this paper makes an in-depth analysis of the features and functions of ekphrasis in the poem. The former lie in the poet's identification with the painter, and his imaginative supplementation in "the verbal representation of visual representation". The latter are embodied in the revelation of the invisible in the painting, namely, the desires and value of human beings, as well as the power of beauty and truth. Browning enriches the poem with both philosophical and artistic contemplation, thus strongly conveying the thematic implications of "know thyself" and the persistent pursuit of beauty and truth. It is hoped that this study can shed some light on the studies of Robert Browning and the poem itself, and contribute to the development of the interart poetics.

Keywords: interart poetics, ekphrasis, Robert Browning, "Fra Lippo Lippi"

Introduction

The poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" is an ekphrastic poem written by the Victorian poet Robert Browning (1812-1889), first published in his collection *Men and Women* (1855). In the poem, Browning depicts a 15th-century real-life painter, Filippo Lippi, related to Lippi's painting *Coronation of the Virgin* (*Incoronazione della Vergine*, 1441-47), a religious painting that depicts the scene of the Virgin's coronation. Since the medieval period and early Renaissance, European artists had begun to depict historical or mythical scenes (from the Bible or classical literature) using a number of actual persons as models, often including the artist himself, giving the work a multiple function as portraiture, self-portraiture and history/myth painting. In these works, the artist usually appears as a face in the crowd or group, often towards the edges or corner of the work and behind the main participants. Taking this convention of his times, Lippi painted himself into the painting as a way to break the restrictions imposed by the Church and to manifest the value of human creation. Approximately four centuries later, Browning transformed the painting into an ekphrastic poem by adopting a first-person narrator to speak in the painter's tone.

As a core concept of interart poetics, "ekphrasis" has revived since the 1950s. Originally, ekphrasis is a rhetorical device in ancient Greece which means "description". It functions as a way to improve the vividness of

Acknowledgements: this paper is funded by project Funding: Transcultural Art of History (21WYSB003-2024), Chinese Academic Literature Translation & Publishing Project of National Social Science Foundation.

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verbal representation and bring what is described in the audience's mind's eye (Webb, 2009, p. 5). Since the latter half of the 20th century, the concept of ekphrasis has been renovated, especially in interart poetics. W. J. T. Mitchell and James Heffernan define it as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (Heffernan, 1993, p. 3). Claus Clüver extends it into "the verbal representation of a real or fictional text composed in a non-verbal sign system" (Clüver, 1997, p. 26). In the modern study of interarts and intermediality, the concept remains open to certain modifications. Zhaoming Qian regards ekphrasis as "artistic transformation and re-creation" (Ou, 2013, pp. 229-249). Ou Rong further proposes that "ekphrasis is the transformation and rewriting of a source text across different artistic media", and "in the process of transformation, the re-creation by the new author is bound to be involved" (Ou, 2013, pp. 229-249). She emphasizes "the interaction and transformation across different artistic texts, and the continuous and dynamic bi-directional/multi-directional influence" by means of ekphrasis (Ou, 2020, p. 132). This paper adopts Ou's definition of ekphrasis to illustrate the dynamic conversion and prominent re-creation by Browning in the ekphrastic poem of "Fra Lippo Lippi".

"Fra Lippo Lippi" is usually not included in Browning's best works. Therefore, it has drawn much less attention from scholars. Some scholars are interested in the textual analysis of the poem, including its structure (Shaw, 1964, pp. 127-132), thematic motif (Ower, 1976, pp. 135-141) and vivid characters (Toole, 1970, pp. 3-8) in it. In addition, the poet's underlying philosophical attitudes and the idea of "male versus female" are explored by some scholars (Sussman, 1992, pp. 185-200). American scholar Daniel Albright introduces different approaches of artistic appreciation and ekphrastic analysis in his *Panaesthetics: On the Unity and Diversity of the Arts*, and the very poem is mentioned to illustrate his categorization of ekphrastic poets' subject position, which provides some inspiration in the regard of the features of ekphrasis for this paper. However, Albright primarily focuses on the poet's role in the ekphrastic re-creation, rather than a comprehensive investigation on the functions of ekphrasis, let alone the thematic implications of the poem.

In China, studies of Browning reveal a tendency towards the overall analysis of his poems. For instance, Liu Li applies theories of Bahktin's dialogism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, neo-historicism, poetic aesthetics, and new criticism to analyze Browning's dramatic monologue. She focuses on the dialogues in Browning's poems, using "Fra Lippo Lippi" as an example to showcase the vividness of Browning's characters (Liu, 2019). Zhang Wen examines Browning's poems from the cinematic narrative perspective, citing "Fra Lippo Lippi" again to highlight the ingenuity of Browning's characterization (Zhang, 2007).

To sum up, previous studies of Browning's poems mainly focus on the analysis of philosophical connotations, textual details and the dramatic monologue, while the ekphrastic relations between the poem and the painting *Coronation of the Virgin* have not been scrutinized. Based on the modernized concept of ekphrasis and the methodology on ekphrasis proposed by Daniel Albright, this paper will analyze the features and functions of ekphrasis in "Fra Lippo Lippi", and further discuss the thematic implications of this poem. Shuttling between the world of poetry and painting, hopefully, this paper would contribute to the poetics of ekphrasis and shed some new light on the interpretation of Browning's poems.

Features of Ekphrasis in "Fra Lippo Lippi"

Mode of "Subject Position": Identification with the Painter

According to Daniel Albright, when poets compose ekphrastic poems, the chief factor that they must contemplate is the "subject position", which refers to the role of poets in the narrative of ekphrasis (Albright, 2014). Accordingly, Albright offers the following catalogue to demonstrate the stances that "range from objective to subjective" (Albright, 2014).

1. Most objective is the poet as transcriber.
2. The poet may also be a participant, in any of several modes.
 - a. The poet may identify with one of the visible characters.
 - b. Conversely, the poet's sensibility might be transformed as the image effects a kind of seizure.
 - c. In the most subjective form of ekphrasis, the image itself speaks. (Albright, 2014)

Albright further points out that Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi" falls into the catalogue of 2a because Browning identifies himself with one of the visible characters. The poem is written in the first persona of "I", referring to the painter Lippi. Thus, Browning actually identifies himself with the painter and adopts the tone of the fifteenth-century artist.

Amazed, motionless and moonstruck—I'm the man!
 Back I shrink—what is this I see and hear?
 I, caught up with my monk's-things by mistake,
 My old serge gown and rope that goes all round,
 I, in this presence, this pure company! (Browning, 2013, p. 124)



Figure 1. *Coronation of the Virgin* (1441-47) by Filippo Lippi, now in The Uffizi Gallery, Italy.

In Browning's artistic interpretation, the presence of the painter (equivalent to the poet) in the painting (Figure 1) is revealed through the clever depiction of a specific detail, hinted at in the poem: "Iste perfecit opus," translating to "he finished the work" (Browning, 2013, p. 124). It allows both readers and viewers to swiftly

identify the painter. However, the line "*Iste perfecit opus*" directs attention to two characters at the lower right corner of the painting: an angel and a gray-haired man kneeling on the ground (Figure 2), each holding one end of the cloth bearing the inscription. Browning's poetic reinterpretation enhances the portrayal of the painter ("I") with more details and offers the painter opportunities to speak for himself.



Figure 2. The angel and the man with "*Iste perfecit opus*".

We come to brother Lippo for all that,
Iste perfecit opus! So, all smile—
 I shuffle sideways with my blushing face
 Under the cover of a hundred wings
 Thrown like a spread of kirtles when you're gay. (Browning, 2013, pp. 124-126)

The details of "blushing face" and "Under the cover of a hundred wings" provide crucial insights for readers to identify the gray-haired man wearing a red scarf as the painter (Figure 3)¹.

¹ Although there is some controversy regarding the identity of the painter, this paper adopts Daniel Albright's interpretation.



Figure 3. The Painter.

"My Last Duchess", one of Browning's most acclaimed poems, is distinguished by its use of the "dramatic monologue," a feature that has garnered sustained scholarly attention. However, an ekphrastic analysis offers an alternative perspective for textual analysis. In contrast to "Fra Lippo Lippi," "My Last Duchess" exhibits entirely different characteristics in terms of "subject position." Set against the backdrop of the Italian Renaissance, the poem is inspired by the painting *Lucrezia de' Medici* created by the Italian portraitist Agnolo Bronzino (1503-1572). This portrait depicts Lucrezia, the daughter of Cosimo I de' Medici. At the age of 14, she married the fifth Duke of Ferrara—Alfonso with a sizeable dowry. Approximately two years later, Lucrezia died under suspicious circumstances, with strong indications of poisoning. The entire poem unfolds through the first person of the Duke, Alfonso. At the beginning of the poem, the Duke ("I") entertains a guest in his home, guiding the emissary through his collection and specifically drawing attention to the painting of his last duchess. "That's my last Duchess painted on the wall/Looking as if she were alive" (Browning, 2013, p. 4). The Duke goes on to describe how her innocent, virtuous and simplehearted nature repulsed him. The duchess "had a heart" that "too soon made glad", she smiled to everyone who passed her (Browning, 2013, p. 6). These traits made the Duchess a trifling woman in his eyes, so he "gave commands" that "all smiles stopped together" (Browning, 2013, p. 6). This phrase can be interpreted in two ways: either the Duke ordered the duchess to cease smiling, or he commanded her execution. Regardless, the Duchess is deceased by the time the Duke discusses the portrait in which she is painted, now hidden behind a curtain and reserved for his gaze alone.

In contrast to the subject position in "Fra Lippo Lippi", the subject position in "My Last Duchess" does not conform to category of 2a, where "the poet may identify with one of the visible characters" because Browning did not identify himself with the Duke or the duchess (Albright, 2014). Nevertheless, readers can perceive that "the poet's sensibility might be transformed as the image effects a kind of seizure" through the critical gaze of the Duke (Browning, 2013).

To conclude, the degree of objectivity/ subjectivity in Browning's stance varies significantly between the two poems. In the ekphrasis of "My Last Duchess", Browning adopts the role of a critical spectator, veiled behind

the first-person narrator. In contrast, in "Fra Lippo Lippi," he immerses himself within the painting, adopting the perspective of the painter. This distinctive feature makes the ekphrasis of "Fra Lippo Lippi" different from others.

Imagination and Supplementation: Intellectual Re-creation Based on the Painting

It is common for poets to incorporate their own re-creation in the work of ekphrasis. Specifically, they employ various strategies to achieve this, such as description, interpretation, commentary, imagination, supplementation and so on. In "Fra Lippo Lippi", Browning primarily utilizes the latter two—imagination and supplementation. On one hand, he fully engages his imagination to construct the entire story of the painter "I"; on the other hand, he skillfully supplements the poem with relevant information and expand its thematic implications.

Browning employs his imagination to develop the entire story of the painter. In general, the entire poem is built upon an imaginary story. At the beginning of the poem, the painter "I" is apprehended by the patrol "at an alley's end" while on the way to meet with "sportive ladies" (Browning, 2013, p. 98). Confronted by the patrols, the painter begins recounting his life story from childhood in the first person, using flashbacks. Before writing this poem, Browning read extensively on Giorgio Vasari (1511-1674), most of the biographic information related to Lippi in the poem derives from Vasari's *The Lives of the Painters* (Woolford, 2013, p. 477).

Fra Filippo Lippi (1406-1469), also called Lippo Lippi, is an Italian painter of the Italian Quattrocento (15th century) school. Lippi was born in Florence to Tommaso, a butcher. Unfortunately, both of his parents died when he was still an infant. His aunt, Mona Lapaccia, took charge of him. Robert Browning vividly depicts Lippi's childhood in his poem. As an orphan, Lippi was sent to the Carmelite friary in Florence at the age of 7, but he was not temperamentally suited to be a friar. Instead, he devoted himself to painting, leading the Prior to allow him receive a minor education. Initially, Lippi's style followed Masaccio's, but he later shifted towards more decorative and lyrical effects. As Lippi's reputation grew in Florence, the Medici family actively supported him, commissioning works like *The Annunciation* and the *Seven Saints*, which became his best-known pieces. Lippi was versatile, excelling in colouring, composition, and ornamentation. Despite his artistic prowess, Lippi led a tumultuous life filled with lawsuits, complaints, and scandal, including his abduction of a nun, Lucrezia Buti, with whom he had a son named Filippino, who was later taught in Lippi's workshop, as was Botticelli.

Browning integrated Lippi's biography into the poem. Almost born an orphan, "I" led a difficult life begging on the streets. However, this experience taught "me" to observe different walks of life, laying a solid foundation for "me" to learn painting and excel among "my" peers. After aunt Lapaccia took "me" to the convent, "my" talent of painting began to emerge, leading the Medici family to sponsor "me".

There are several highlights in the poem, derived from Browning's imagination, that showcase his sophisticated and refined construction of the poem. One example is the poem's beginning, when "I" am caught by the patrols, most readers would feel emotionally tense and concerned for "me". Another example is "my" revelation of the adultery between the Prior and his so-called niece, Herodias, through the painting of her lively image on the convent wall. Although they claim Herodias came to look after the Prior's asthma, readers can easily discern the falsity of this explanation. When the Prior first sees the image of Herodias, he exclaims, "Oh, that white smallish female with the breasts" (Browning, 2013, p. 112). This sexually suggestive description

clearly alludes to a lover and is inappropriate for describing a family member. The Prior's own words expose the adultery to everyone present, thereby reinforcing the artistic effect of irony in the poem.

Moreover, the vivid description of characters in the poem reveals Browning's imaginative prowess. Under the pressure of life, "I" constantly find "myself" struggling between the reality and ideal. As a pioneer of the Italian Renaissance, "I" have "my" own artistic principles, which sometimes conflict with the Church's doctrines. "I" am trapped in dilemmas and must make difficult decisions regularly. "Clench my teeth, suck my lips in tight, and paint/To please them--sometimes do and sometimes don't" (Browning, 2013, pp. 114-116). These lines reveal "my" reluctance to follow the Church's instructions and foreshadow "my" rebellion by painting "myself" into the *Coronation of the Virgin*.

Another feature of the poem's ekphrasis is Browning's ingenious supplementation, which allows for the discussion of serious artistic questions, one of which is "what is real art". As a liberal Protestant, Browning is particularly interested in the topic of how art and religion interact. Alexis Rio (1797-1874), whose view on the art was widely influential, insisted "paintings of religious subject-matter served a directly spiritual function" and art is "a direct spiritual medium and agency" (Hawlin, 2002, p. 180). However, Browning's view is clearly opposed to Rio's. In his mind, art awakes people to "the beauty of the human form and face" and "the loveliness of the physical world", which is "a profound reflex of his liberal Protestantism" (Hawlin, 2002, p. 181). After "I" finish painting on the convent's wall, the Prior and the learned criticize "my" way of painting. "It's art's decline, my son!" (Browning, 2013, p.114). Contrary to "my" depiction of lively, fleshy images, the Prior and the learned assert that "Your business is not to catch men with show", but to "Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh" because the art is "given for that" (Browning, 2013, pp. 110, 120). While the Prior's teaching is hypocritical, the learned are rather mechanical and conservative. However, as a Renaissance pioneer, Fillip Lippi challenges this by boldly including himself in the painting. Similarly, Robert Browning, as a successor to the Renaissance spirit, decodes the painter's intentions and transforms Lippi's silent painting into a speaking poem. To them, real art is meant to capture the "value and significance of flesh"; to accept the nature with its changes and surprises; to appreciate the wonder and power of existence, particularly human beings, and to represent shapes, colours and lights faithfully (Browning, 2013, p. 116). In short, real art empowers humans to be their own masters and to depict the world truthfully and faithfully based on their observations. Through the poem, Browning further emphasizes that practicing the essence of real art is an indispensable mission for each conscientious artist.

In addition, Browning's supplementation extends the thematic implications of both the poem and the painting. A case in point is the supplementation of the painter's upbringing experience. Almost born an orphan, "I" begged for a living on the streets, carefully observing different walks of life. This accumulated experience enabled "me" to develop a unique painting style and principles that set "me" apart from contemporary peers. It also laid a solid foundation for "my" rebellion against the Church's strict control, allowing "me" to justify for human love and desires. Most significantly, "I" view people as human beings, emphasizing their existence and subjectivity, resonating with Renaissance ideals. These values and artistic principles contribute to the thematic implications of this ekphrastic poem: to praise human value and desire, and to reflect upon the perpetual philosophical proposition "Know thyself".

To conclude, Browning identifies himself with the painter and creates the entire story based on his reading of Vasari and the understanding of Lippi, reacting against the view of Alexis Rio.. The eminent features of the

poem lie in Browning's creative role in the ekphrasis, including his identification with the painter and the application of imagination and supplementation. Browning tactfully utilizes the line "*Iste perfecit opus*" as a marker to help readers recognize the painter Lippi for his great courage and innovation, even in the 15th-century Italy under the Church's control. Moreover, the use of the first-person narrator "I" makes the poem appear more natural and realistic. In this sense, the poet and the painter successfully integrate into one, amplifying the aesthetic value and features of ekphrasis.

Functions of Ekphrasis in "Fra Lippo Lippi"

From the painting (*Coronation of the Virgin*) to the poem ("Fra Lippo Lippi"), Browning ingeniously re-creates the painting in the form of an ekphrastic poem, which not only draws from the painting but also transcends it. Danial Albright claims in the *Panaesthetics: On the Unity and Diversity of the Arts* that "Painters in the West have often considered the invisible more worthy of representation than the visible" (Albright, 2014). Illuminating what is hidden beneath the surface of life is the vocation of all the conscientious artists. The presentation of something invisible with masterful techniques is the primary function of ekphrasis in Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi", which can be further analyzed in the following two parts: the value and desire of human, and the power of beauty and truth.

Something Invisible: The Value and Desire of Human

Lippi is quite different from his peers in the Middle Ages. He dares to acknowledge the value and desire of human, spending his life in pursuit of beauty and truth. To his contemporaries, Lippi might have seemed strange, cynical and wild. However, Browning viewed Lippi as a symbol of liberation, a Renaissance pioneer, and a fighter of art. "Fra Lippo Lippi" is an 1855 dramatic monologue written in blank verse, non-rhyming iambic pentameter, first published in Browning's collection *Men and Women*. In this poem, Browning adopts Lippi's persona, transforming the painter's visual artistry into compelling verse.



Figure 4. Angels I.



Figure 5. Angels II.

Lippi's painting, *The Coronation of the Virgin*, subtly depicts human striving for righteous yet restrained values and desires, particularly love and sex. One significant feature of the painting is the proportion of males and females. At first glance, the numbers of males and females seem equal, but a closer look reveals more males in the central part, alongside different categories of females, each with distinct implications. The first category includes the female angels that do not have wings on both sides of the Virgin (Figure. 4, 5), symbolizing innocence and divinity. The second category consists of two women. One is the Virgin, positioned at the right side of the central

arch (Figure 6). Her head lowers slightly, conveying dignity and divinity. The other woman stands below the coronation stage, holding a piece of ribbon from God's vestments in one hand and twigs of lily and orris in the other (Figure 7). Compared with the Virgin, the second woman occupies more space in the painting and is positioned closer to the center, implying her unusually significant status. The third category includes two young adult women (Figure 8). One is sitting, the other stands beside her with head lowered. These two women exhibit quite different moods. The seated woman raises her head high, staring forward confidently and exalted. She cradles the chin of the little angel beside her with her right hand. Her nobility is undeniable and self-evident. In contrast, the woman beside her appears unhappy. From her facial expressions, it is reasonable to infer that she is not free and is constrained by various societal rules.



Figure 6. The woman in the arch.



Figure 8. The sitting woman and her neighbour.



Figure 7. The woman who stands.

The seemingly balanced proportion of men and women, as well as the composition of different types of females in the painting, convey a hidden message that Lippi tries to express. Firstly, the number of men and women in the painting is not balanced or equal. There are more males in the central part of the painting. Secondly, the three categorizations of females imply different meanings. In Western culture, angels embody happiness and good luck. They are the messengers of God, who are obviously divine and detached from mundane life. The seemingly unhappy woman represents contradictory meanings: on the one hand, she symbolizes freedom, as she retains her social individuality and remains unbound by marriage; on the other hand, moral rules imposed by the Church prevent her from freely engaging in romantic relationships with young men.

At first glance, the painting appears to be a typical depiction of a coronation. However, the painter strives to reveal something invisible in the painting. The number and age distribution of the females in this painting subtly reveal the suppression of human desires by the Church during the Middle Ages, especially for women. Angels, being sacred, and nobles, due to their wealth and power, are deemed worthy of inclusion. However, there are no ordinary people present, with Lippi only including himself in the composition. This exclusion raises the question: why are ordinary people not allowed to participate in such a grand and important occasion? According to the beliefs of the Church, it is because human beings are born with original sin. The frowning and depressed woman is the epitome of all the human beings in the Middle Ages—repressed and mentally imprisoned.

Relating to the historical background of Lippi provides insight into why he created such a painting and underscores his pioneering role in the Renaissance. Lippi lived in the 15th century Italy, a period that falls within the Late Middle Ages (1250-1500) of Europe. This era, lasting more than a thousand years (from the 5th to the late 15th century), is the middle period of the three traditional divisions of Western history, namely, the classical

antiquity, the medieval period, and the modern period. More specifically, it can be further subdivided into the Early, High, and Late Middle Ages. The days that Lippi lived falls into the Late Middle Ages (1250-1500), a period filled with crisis. On one hand, Europe faced a series of famines and plagues that severely damaged its prosperity. For instance, the Great Famine (1315-1317) and the Black Death (1346-1353) collectively reduced the European population by half. On the other hand, serious peasant uprisings, such as the Peasants' Revolt (1381) in France and England, indicated widespread social unrest. Compounding these issues, the Western Schism (1378-1417) fragmented the unity of the Catholic Church, exacerbating the instability of the period. However, it is undeniable that great progress in the arts and sciences was achieved in late Middle Ages, inspired by a renewed interest in the ancient Greek and Roman culture, leading to the rise of Renaissance for its numerous achievements in painting, architecture, sculpture, literature, music, philosophy and science.

In Florence, where Lippi resided, the seeds of the early Renaissance had begun to sprout. The painter Giotto di Bondone (1266-1337) preceded Lippi, bridging the end of the Middle Ages, while Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510), who followed Lippi, marked the beginning of the Renaissance with his masterpiece, *The Birth of Venus* (1485-1486). During Lippi's time, he was constrained to paint religious themes strictly controlled by the traditional ideas. Nevertheless, driven by the awakening spirit of humanism, Lippi is considered "the first to paint secular figures into religious paintings" (Browning, 2013, pp. 98-127). His paintings are featured with realistic, natural, expressive and energetic styles, especially rich in lively observation. His commitment to realism in painting demonstrates his opposition to the notion that art should solely serve religious purposes. *Coronation of the Virgin* reflects the conflict between Renaissance humanism and Papal suppression. The distribution of women in the painting subtly satirizes medieval asceticism and represents a burgeoning appeal for the recognition of human value. Despite its static nature, the painting conveys "something invisible"—a recognition of human beings' value and desires.

Robert Browning starts the poem with the dramatic scene of "I" (the monk) being caught by patrols at the end of an alley at midnight. This shocking and exciting plot immediately immerses readers in the conflict, drawing them directly into the scene. Unlike the static nature of painting, poetry can provide an immersive experience, making readers feel as if they are personally present with the monk. However, the charm of Browning's poem extends beyond mere immersion; he boldly conveys the painter's message with striking clarity and intensity.

Firstly, Browning directly addresses the theme of human desire for love. He supplements his original poem with elements of Italian love songs, in which love is expressed openly and straightforwardly. For instance, "*Take away love, and our earth is a tomb!*"; "*All the Latin I construe is, 'amo' I love!*" (Browning, 2013, pp. 102, 106) Browning makes the speaker proclaim loudly: "I Love"! Without love, the earth becomes uninhabitable; without love, people struggle to suppress their primal desires; without love, people live as zombies, turning the earth into a vast tomb. In addition, Browning employs quite a few metaphors to symbolize the relationship between men and women. In line 9, "I" tell a story of a "rat" that notices the "softling of a wee white mouse" and wishes to keep her company. By narrating the story of male animals pursuing female animals, Browning compares the "I" in the poem to the "rat", and the woman to the "white mouse". This metaphor suggests that the attraction between males and females is ubiquitous, existing in both animals and humans. More specifically, to love and to be loved is the inherent ability and the need of all human beings. Browning reveals the hidden message in Lippi's painting, and

genuinely adopts the Italian love songs as well as metaphors to straightly show that love, as an inborn ability and need, should not be suppressed or ignored.

Secondly, Browning offers a direct portrayal of the Church's oppression and its absurd understanding of humanity. In line 47, "I" say that "I've been three weeks shut within my mew". Here, "mew" means cage that is small and confined. Given that Browning writes from the first-person of Lippi, "I" refers to "Lippi" himself. Lippi, employed by the Church to paint religious works, uses "mew" metaphorically to describe the Carmine cloister where he resides. It is another metaphor to suggest the oppression on ordinary people from the Church. In addition, when "I" complete my painting, the Prior criticizes the work for its realistic depiction of "faces, arms, legs, and bodies", claiming it overshadows the souls within them (Browning, 2013, p. 110). He commands "me" to paint again, and the focus should be on the souls rather than the bodies. This is ironic, as the Prior, who extols the essence of painting as capturing souls rather than flesh, hypocritically admires the physical beauty of his "niece", who is actually his secret lover. The Prior provides further guidance, stating that the best way to paint the soul is "by painting body So ill" (Browning, 2013, p. 112). Furthermore, He describes the soul in convoluted terms, likening it to "a fire, smoke..." and "vapour done up like a new-born babe" (Browning, 2013, p. 110). His stumbling, hesitant explanation culminates in the assertion that the "soul" is simply the thing that "leaves your mouth when you die" (Browning, 2013, p. 110). Losing patience, the Prior bluntly concludes that talking about "soul" does not matter at all, just remember that "it's the soul!" (Browning, 2013, p. 110). Through this portrayal, Browning effectively exposes the Prior's absurdity and fraudulence, presenting him as an epitome of the religious authority that controls people's physical and mental lives.

Thirdly, Browning extols the value and desires of human beings. He does not merely reveal the absurdity and hypocrisy of the Church; he celebrates the value and desires of human beings. There are several details to illustrate people's desires in the poem. One striking example is the depiction of the "Jerome", who is described as "knocking at his poor old breast with his great round stone to subdue the flesh" (Browning, 2013, p. 102). This self-mortification highlights the suppression of natural desires. Not only "Jerome", "I" also declares: "sir, flesh and blood, / That's all I'm made of!" (Browning, 2013, p. 102). When confronted by the patrols, "I" asserts: "You should not take a fellow eight years old and make him swear to never kiss the girls" (Browning, 2013, p. 114). These lines are the concrete confession of people's nature-born desires: to love and to experience reciprocal affection. Denying these basic freedoms equates to depriving individuals of fundamental happiness. Being constantly caged in such an ascetic environment, people would grow more and more rebellious, as the natural instincts resist repression. This tension is reflected in numerous literary works about forbidden love from the Middle Ages. As the Italian love songs sing highly, "*If I've been merry, what matter who knows?*" (Browning, 2013, p. 102). People begin to focus on personal happiness, marking the initial steps towards recognizing their value as human beings. In the latter half of the poem, Browning sings highly of human value. The uppermost issue should be "who is the master of human beings". In line 226, "I" proudly say that "I'm my own master". This declaration encapsulates the essence of the painting's message: regaining human value involves realizing the truth that "I am my own master" and that self-salvation is possible without reliance on God. Being the "master" means controlling one's own life, believing in oneself, loving and appreciating oneself as a human being, and consequently, loving others. This self-mastery creates a world imbued with beauty, love, and equality.

At the same time, Browning also seeks reconciliation between human beings and religion.

For me, I think I speak as I was taught;
 I always see the garden and God there
 A-making man's wife: and, my lesson learned,
 The value and significance of flesh,
 I can't unlearn ten minutes afterwards. (Browning, 2013, p. 116)

Browning does not completely deny the existence of God; rather, he cherishes the power of truth that he has received ("I speak as I was taught"), the love and desires of each concrete human, as well as the "value and significance of flesh". The "garden" and "God" in line 266 imply the origin of human beings according to the Bible. Browning writes that "I always see" them, which means that he acknowledges and appreciates the birth of human beings. He is also grateful to God for the kindness, courage and love he has spread among us. By directly revealing the desires of human beings and highly praising the value of human beings, Browning manages to transform something invisible in the painting into the beautifully written poem in an ekphrastic re-creation.

Something Invisible: The Power of Beauty and Truth

Another distinctive characteristic of this painting is the facial expressions of the crowd, as well as the foci of their eyes. As is shown in the painting (Figure 1), almost every audience at the coronation looks away from the Virgin, and their faces show a sense of impatience and tiredness. Some look to the left or right, while others look up or down, displaying slightly disengaged, detached and scornful expressions. This depiction invites viewers to speculate: in such a grand ceremony, why do they have these facial expressions? The reason is that they are all thinking about something other than the coronation itself. They are unwilling participants, forced to attend by the commands of the Church. Browning, through his work, strips away these deceptive masks and guides readers to experience the power of beauty and truth.

As a poet who shares the same artistic insight as the painter Lippi, Browning is inspired by the facial expressions of the people depicted and creates a variety of vivid characters in his poem. These characters include "I", "Old Aunt Lapaccia", "the good fat father", "the Eight", "the monks", "the Prior and the learned", "Guidi", "every sort of monk" (the black and white), "folk at church", "old gossips", "the breathless fellow", "victim's son", "poor girl", "the boy", and "that woman" (the Prior's niece). Each character is distinct and vividly portrayed. For instance, when "my" aunt "Lapaccia" takes "me" to the convent, "we" encounter "the good fat father" who is "wiping his own mouth, 'twas refection-time"; when "I" recount the story of "my" childhood, "the Eight" is compared to a "dog" that "bites" (Browning, 2013, pp. 104, 106). By presenting individuals from different walks of life, Browning constructs a micro-society within his poem, illustrating that the so-called rules of the Church have begun to collapse across all social strata. It is invariably the people at the bottom of society who suffer the most.

Since the entire poem is written from the perspective of "I" (Lippi, the painter), naturally, the most vivid character is "me". In the poem, Browning depicts the painter as a liberated, bold, forthright and conscientious fighter of the humanism. The essence is not only to reveal the value of human beings, but also to defend real art, as well as to protect and spread the values of beauty and truth. At the beginning of the poem, "I", as a monk, am caught at the end of an alley. When those patrols clap their torches to "my" face, "I" reply without any trepidation: "The Carmine's my cloister: hunt it up" (Browning, 2013, p. 98). Instead of worrying about being caught by them, "I" directly tell them to hunt up "my" place, implying that the Church's suppression does not matter to "me" at all.

Furthermore, "I" express "myself" in a rather direct manner, "Come, what am I a beast for? tell us, now!" (Browning, 2013, p. 104) Ironically, people with common desires of humans are called beasts. In a society dominated by the Church, "I" am distinctive and eccentric compared with others. However, "I" fear nothing and dare to live in "my" way. In Browning's eyes, Lippi is a fighter who dares to paint something that other painters would never consider. Thus, Browning represents him (Lippi) a Renaissance pioneer in the poem, one who dares to say what others would never do. In line 239, "I" employ a deliberate slip of the tongue to reveal the Prior's affair: "*You keep your mistr ... manners, and I'll stick to mine!*" The incomplete word is "mistress", referring to the "niece". In reality, the monks in the cloister all know about the adultery between the Prior and the so-called "niece", but they dare not speak of it. As a real fighter, "I" fear nothing, including death. "*Flower o' the peach / Death for us all, and his own life for each!*" (Browning, 2013, p. 116). This line demonstrates "my" determination to fight for the recognition of human values and desires, as well as beauty and truth, until death.

Browning writes about Lippi's growing experience to enrich the ekphrastic content, transforming the painting into a poem. By incorporating Lippi's childhood experience, Browning aims to demonstrate how Lippi began drawing, his attitudes towards the purpose of art, and his concept of "what is real art". From lines 81 to 222, "I" share "my" personal experience with the patrons. In line 223, "I" end it with "I'm grown a man no doubt, I've broken bounds" to illustrate how "I" find "myself" throughout "my" life journey. Such insights into Lippi's childhood are not evident in the painting but emerge from Browning's personal investigation and reflection. One reason Browning narrates Lippi's unfortunate childhood is to highlight how "I" gained sharp and penetrating insights into humans and the world. As a boy starving on the streets, he had to "watch folk's faces" to judge whether they would give him food based on their facial expressions and body movements (Browning, 2013, p. 106). After living this way for 8 years, "I" had observed enough people from different professions and social classes, witnessing both the beauty and ugliness of human nature. This experience is why Lippi's paintings are distinctive for their realistic portrayal of human expressions and feelings.

However, Lippi is nominated by the convent to paint religious artworks exclusively, prompting him to grapple with the question of "what is art for". In the Middle Ages, art was primarily intended for religious purposes. When "I" paint the Prior's niece on the wall, "I" am severely criticized by the Prior for "my" ill presentation of the bodies and souls. He shakes his head, and declares that "It's art's decline, my son! / You're not of the true painters, great and old" (Browning, 2013, p. 114). From the Church's perspective, art that does not serve a religious purpose is viewed as a decline. In other words, what qualifies as art depends solely on whether it serves the Church. However, as a painter who has witnessed the beauty of nature and humanity, Lippi defends the purpose of art.

However, you're my man, you've seen the world
 --The beauty and the wonder and the power,
 The shapes of things, their colours, lights and shades,
 Changes, surprises, --and God made it all!
 --For what? Do you feel thankful, ay or no,
 For this fair town's face, yonder river's line,
 The mountain round it and the sky above,
 Much more the figures of man, woman, child,
 These are the frame to? What's it all about?
 To be passed over, despised? or dwelt upon,

Wondered at? oh, this last of course! --you say.
 But why not do as well as say, --paint these
 Just as they are, careless what comes of it?
 God's works--paint any one, and count it crime
 To let a truth slip. Don't object, "His works
 Are here already; nature is complete: (Browning, 2013, p. 118)

The essence of "real art" originates from humans' love and respect towards the world, encompassing the charming "nature" (the colors and shades of the "river", "mountain" and "sky"), and the endearing figures of "man, woman, child". Grounded in an appreciation for the entirety of nature and humanity, real art should always strive to reveal the beauty and truth of the universe, namely, to demonstrate the beauty of the complete nature, the wisdom of human beings, and the value of truth. This is the responsibility of every conscientious artist. Despite being born as an orphan with a miserable childhood, Lippi embodies a determined artistic fighter who unwaveringly pursues beauty and truth in an era when art was solely for religious purposes. Boldly, Lippi paints himself into his work, displaying his greatest contempt and rebellion against the absurd doctrines of his time. Browning deeply appreciates Lippi's courage and recreates the painting through his literary innovation. Through ekphrastic re-creation, Browning not only brings the painting to life for the viewers, but also conveys his own meditation upon the power of beauty and truth.

Thematic Implications of the Poem

The motivation of Browning's writing informs the thematic implications of the poem. As a poet of the 19th century, Browning was far removed from the social circumstances of the Middle Ages. The connection between him and Lippi lies solely in the painting that has been handed down through generations since the 15th century. Browning must have grasped the message Lippi intended to convey and found in it a precious combination of beauty and truth, with which he deeply empathized. The poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" is written in the first-person perspective of the painter Lippi. However, as mentioned earlier, ekphrasis is a process that involves the new author's own creation. Consequently, Browning is not a mere by-stander but "a participant" who identifies with "the visible character", speaking "in the persona of the fifteenth-century painter" (Albright, 2014). Thus, Browning achieves a high degree of unity with Lippi regarding the thematic implications of the poem, while also infusing his own thoughts and reflections into the work.

From Art to Philosophy: Know Yourself

Compared to the poem, the painting appears more reserved in expressing emotions, reflecting the different eras in which the two creators lived: Lippi in the 15th century and Browning in the 19th century. Between these periods, the Renaissance transformed Europe, leading to greater liberation of both body and mind. The essence of Renaissance was to rethink and seek answers to the fundamental question: "Who am I?" This philosophical proposition has intrigued humanity since ancient Greece, a time when Gods, Goddesses and humans coexisted in harmony. However, in the Middle Ages, conflicts between the divine and the human intensified dramatically. Thus triggered the Renaissance, a liberating movement aimed at breaking free from the restraints of the Church and feudalism. In the 19th century, Romanticism emerged, emphasizing the freedom of individuality and affirming human subjectivity, especially in spiritual and sensual realms. As a Victorian poet of the 19th century, Browning re-creates Lippi's the *Coronation of the Virgin* into "Fra Lippo Lippi", not only acknowledging the

value and desires of human beings, but also celebrating them. A key thematic implications of this poem is that by fully affirming one's value as a human being, and daring to liberate oneself, one can ultimately answer "who am I" and reveal his/her true self.

From art to philosophy, Browning leads readers to meditate upon the concept of "self", which is the first step in rebuilding the value of human beings. There is no denying that "know yourself" is a lifelong mission. In the temple of Apollo at Delphi, ancient Greece, "Know Thyself" was inscribed as one of the oracles from the gods. The ancient Greek philosopher Socrates emphasized this idea, leaving it as a philosophical proposition for every human being to consider. In the Middle Ages, people lacked the right to express their feeling, resulting in serious and expressionless depictions of human beings in early medieval art. However, as a courageous pioneer of the Renaissance, Lippi paints himself into his work to demonstrate his existence as a human being with emotions, desires and value. "Music and talking, who but Lippo! I!— / Mazed, motionless, and moonstruck—I'm the man!" (Browning, 2013, p. 124). Browning allows "me" to speak out loudly, emphasizing Lippi's presence and humanity. Browning and Lippi both find the key to living out their true selves. At the end of the poem, "I" rakishly leave the patrols after telling all the stories, saying "I know my own way back, / Don't fear me! There's the grey beginning. Zooks!" (Browning, 2013, p. 126). The first beam of dawn light of the Renaissance, the light of humanity, has shone on the earth, guiding everyone towards discovering their true selves.

Even in the 21st century, distinct from the Renaissance, Browning's poem remains valuable in inspiring contemporary individuals to reflect on finding their own value in an increasingly impetuous society. The philosophical question of "who am I" persists as a haunting inquiry in one's mind. Without a proper and thoughtful self-recognition, individuals may lose confidence, stray from their paths, or lose touch with their souls. In fact, there is a "Mental Middle Age" in everyone's mind. If one disregards the beauty and truth, and lives an unexamined life, they risk confining themselves within a metaphorical "cage", reminiscent of the dark Middle Ages. Through his poem, Browning appeals to every reader that regardless of time or era, the philosophical proposition of "know yourself" remains as the universal responsibility and lifelong mission for every human being.

Real Art: Persistent Pursuit of Beauty and Truth

In essence, both the painter and the poet are artists deeply passionate about their craft. When "I" paint lively bodies and facial expressions on the convent wall, "I" suffer strict criticism from the Prior, who deems "my" art as a decline. It provokes Browning to contemplate "what is real art" and "what is art for". However, he does not directly provide definitive answers. Instead, he brilliantly expresses his own ideas through the voice of "my" (the painter's) narrative.

According to Wang Qing and Fei Bai, two eminent Browning scholars in China, there are two distinctive types of poets: one seeks to indoctrinate readers with their own ideas, shaping their thoughts accordingly; Browning, however, belongs to the other type that empowers readers freedom to think, conclude, and make judgments independently (qtd. in Browning, 2013). Readers of Browning's poetry are encouraged to maintain their discernment, to engage critically, and to draw their own conclusions through thoughtful reflection, rather than simply following prevailing opinions or trends.

That perfectly explains why Browning refrains from directly providing answers to readers. By allowing his ideas to naturally unfold through the narrator's voice ("I") in the poem, Browning creates an equal dialogue with his readers. During the process of reading and decoding the poem, unique dialogues are formed in every careful reader's mind. As the saying goes, "there are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes". Similarly, different readers may derive different meanings, which yet all build upon a fundamental basis; that is, art should always reveal the beauty and truth through vivid shapes, lights, shades, and colors. Like literature, art is a form of expression, a bridge for communication and a common ground for human comfort. Beneath the surface discussion of "what is real art", Browning's real intention in writing this poem is to encourage people to pursue the beauty and truth. In the poem, Browning uses the painter as an example: in line 251, "I" confess that "the world and life's too big to pass for a dream". For him (Lippi), art is his most cherished aspiration. He is unwavering in his commitment, even in the face of Church's control. Lippi vows to fight for art with his entire life. Remarkably, Lippi is portrayed as someone willing to sacrifice for art, beauty and truth. Through ekphrastic re-creation from painting to poem, Browning artistically illustrates Lippi's bravery, determination and farsight as he relentlessly pursues beauty and truth during the dark era of the Middle Ages.

Conclusion

As an ekphrastic poem, Robert Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi" exemplifies the transformation of painting into poetry. Browning not only brings out the invisible message that Lippi tries to convey through the painting, but also reveals his own reflections upon human beings, art, beauty and truth. As conscientious poet and painter, both Browning and Lippi view unveiling the invisible truth under the surface of life as an indispensable aspect of their artistic responsibilities. Therefore, the ekphrastic poem serves to rebuild the value of human beings and uphold real art. As a 19th-century poet, Browning closely aligns himself with Lippi's views on art and the spirit of the Renaissance. This alignment allows Browning to position himself as a participant within the painting, conveying the thematic implications of the poem through the lens of philosophical propositions such as "know yourself" and the persistent pursuit of beauty and truth.

It's fascinating to delve into the interconnectedness of art and literature through ekphrasis. From the perspective of interart studies, paintings can be regarded as transformations of poetry, possessing the capacity to narrate stories. This interconnectedness underscores the foundation of ekphrastic criticism, which hinges on unraveling the nuances of sensory engagement, liberating the imagination, and actively empathizing with artworks. By immersing oneself fully in this sensory and imaginative experience, one can uncover multiple layers of aesthetic pleasure. Exploring ekphrastic poems allows readers to step into multiple roles within the interart world and experience the beauty and creativity that transcends individual forms of expression. In this way, everyone can become a poet, a painter, a musician, etc. in the interart world.

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