



ROMANTIC DISSOLUTION VS. ARTISTIC DISILLUSION IN ROBERT BROWNING'S ANDREA DEL SARTO

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Abstract: The present paper sets out to explore Robert Browning's dramatic monologue introducing Andrea del Sarto (1486-1531), a late fifteenth-century Florentine painter who was praised for his technical skills in painting but who lacked a spiritual dimension in his art, compared to the works of his contemporaries, Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) and Raphael (1483-1520).
Keywords: dramatic monologue, displacement, Neoplatonic, oppressed labour, determinist philosophy

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Browning wrote several poems in which he posed questions related to the nature of art, the nature of the artistic creation, the role of the artist, etc. Most of these poems introducing art in all its forms were included in Browning's collection of poems identifying his mature phase of writing under the title *Men and Women*, published in two volumes in 1855. Such poems introduce but are not limited to "Fra Lippo Lippi", "Andrea del Sarto", "Old Pictures in Florence", "Popularity", "Transcendentalism" etc.

Questions on why Browning was obsessed with writing poems about the nature of art and artistic creation have found several answers on the part of the critics. For example, critic Stefan Hawlin in his work *The Complete Critical Guide to Robert Browning* claims that Browning considered poetry a "skill or craft that necessarily involves real work" (Hawlin 84). In order to be complete, the work of art needs to be complemented by "spiritual intensity" (id.).

An equally interesting approach to the work of art being a craft is proposed by Isabel Armstrong, who in her work *Victorian Poetry. Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (1993) considers that all of Browning's poems experience "the phenomenological form of oppressed labour" that results in a "violent sense of limit" which triggers a sense of "longing" (Armstrong 284). The implication here is that what these poems have in common is energy and libido; if these are excessively used or distorted they result in a "displacement from or in work". What is at stake here is that Browning does not "describe alienated labour but

the results of it" (id.). Both ideas related to the work of art seen as a craft, on the one hand, and "the phenomenological form of oppressed labour", on the other hand, are at play in Browning's "single greatest monologue" (Bloom 60), "Andrea del Sarto".

In his *Lives of the Most Eminent Sculptors and Architects* (1913), Giorgio Vasari considers Andrea del Sarto as "the most excellent Andrea del Sarto, in whose single person nature and art demonstrated all that painting can achieve by means of draughtsmanship, colouring, and invention" (Vasari 85). But Vasari continues to explain that if Andrea del Sarto "had possessed a little more fire and boldness of spirit, to correspond to his profound genius and judgment in his art, without a doubt he would have had no equal" (Vasari id.). Born in Florence in 1478, Andrea del Sarto was the son of a tailor. As early as the age of seven Andrea was sent by his father to learn the craft of a goldsmith's but the young child manifested an interest in the art of drawing and therefore he was sent to learn the art of painting with Gian Barile and a few years later he was given in the care of the most famous painter at that time in Florence, namely Piero di Cosimo.

The presentation made by Vasari to Andrea del Sarto is pretty much subjective and the painter's craft falls under the auspices of nature: "...nature, which had created him to be a painter, so wrought in him, that he handled and managed his colours with as much grace as if he had been working for fifty years" (Vasari 86). Vasari offers many details related to Andrea del Sarto including the ones connected to his marriage to a

younger woman which led to him “letting himself be harassed now by jealousy, now by one thing, and now by another (Vasari 94). According to Vasari, Andrea del Sarto was unable to perfect the portraits of women in his paintings as they kept going back to Sarto’s own wife, Lucrezia del Fede: “from his being used to see her continually, and from the circumstance that he had drawn her so often, and, what is more, had her impressed on his mind, it came about that almost all the heads of women that he made resembled her” (Vasari 99).

Browning seems to have been faithful to the story of Andrea del Sarto, as presented by Giorgio Vasari who considered that what Andrea del Sarto’s art lacked was “a little more fire and boldness of spirit” (Vasari 86). Even though Andrea del Sarto’s art was “free from errors, and perfect in every respect”, “he lacked those adornments and that grandeur and abundance of manners which have been seen in many other painters” (id.). The opening lines of Browning’s dramatic monologue identify a quarrel that must have started way before the poem opens as is suggested by the conjunction “but” which implies that the reader is exposed to a fragmented beginning: “But do not let us quarrel anymore/No, my Lucrezia; bear with me for one more:/Sit down and all shall happen as you wish./You turn your face, but does it bring your heart?” (AS, 432, lines 1-4)

The implication here is that Andrea del Sarto is disquieted by the fact that money, which is pivotal in the poem, disrupts a sought-for spiritual harmony, so much needed for the artistic act. The enjambment in the second and third lines announces a resolution on del Sarto’s part: if he, the artist can be once more reunited in spirit with his beloved wife, he will be able to produce the works of art requested by Lucrezia. However, the question raised by Andrea del Sarto remains unanswered: “You turn your face, but does it bring your heart?” (AS, 432, line 4). In other words, we do seem to agree once more on what needs to be done but will I, the artist, be surrounded by your love, your heart, your gentle touches so as to breathe life into my paintings?

In their work entitled *The Dramatic Imagination of Robert Browning. A Literary Life* (2007), Kennedy and Hair argue that in keeping with the suggestions made by Vasari about Andrea del Sarto’s wife, Lucrezia, Browning delineates her dominating, manipulative and money-prone nature in the poem: “Browning developed the character of Lucrezia, who dominates her husband; Andrea sees her for what she is, an unfaithful, manipulative, money-wheedling woman, and while faithfulness in love might, in another context, be admirable, Andrea’s reiterated choice of Lucrezia is clearly a sign of his weakness” (Kennedy and Hair 266).

As he is drained of emotional and psychological energy, Andrea del Sarto pleads for a delay in giving his wife the sum of money that generated the whole conflict between the two. The promise that he makes is that if she agrees to sit down in front of the window and watch the sun setting on Fiesole, her hand in his, like true “married people” (line 16), he “might get up to-morrow to my work/ Cheerful and fresh as ever. Let us try” (lines 18-19).

The repetition of the word “to-morrow” is apparently a far cry from Macbeth’s famous soliloquy, although not really so:

“To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,/ Creeps in this petty pace from day to day/ To the last syllable of recorded time,/ And all our yesterdays have lighted fools/ The way to dusty death./ Out, out, brief candle!/ Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/ And then is heard no more: it is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing/” (“Macbeth”, Act V, scene v, lines 18-28).

Just like Macbeth, who thinks that man is foolish enough to ponder upon the idea that tomorrow becomes yesterday which brings him closer to the end of his life, so does Andrea del Sarto think that “I might get up to-morrow to my work/ Cheerful and fresh” (lines 18-19). What gives him away in this whole artistic charade is the use of the modal “might” which clearly underscores the very remote possibility for the artist to redeem himself through his paintings. In fact, he has clearly understood by now that he is a failure: “Andrea is a failure, in spite of his reputation (he is, as the ironic subtitle of the poem says, “Called ‘The Faultless Painter’”), and his failure extends from his art to his marriage” (Kennedy and Hair 266).

It becomes absolutely fascinating to the readers to partake of the wonderful words used by the artist himself to describe his own understanding of the man-woman/husband-wife relationship: “Your soft hand is a woman of itself,/And mine the man’s bared breast she curls inside” (AS 432, lines 21-22). Symbolically speaking a painter’s “tool” is represented by his hands which are vital in the artistic process. Therefore, the artist uses a splendid metaphor of the “soft hand” standing for the woman herself which curls for protection inside the man’s hand equating “the man’s bared breast”. The visual imagery in these two lines is pregnant with the powerful image describing the beauty and fragility of the woman who seeks shelter/protection beside the man’s “bared breast”. The repetition of the **b** consonant in the alliteration “**bared breast**” is only meant to suggest the masculine power which the artist possesses, or so he imagines.

These terms of endearment that come to shape Lucrezia’s gracious allure are continued in the next lines of the poem: she is, in turn, identified as a “serpentine beauty” as well as “my face”, “my moon”, “my everybody’s moon”, with an explicit focus on the possessive adjective “my”: “My serpentine beauty, rounds and rounds!/ —How could you ever prick those perfect ears,/ Even to put the pearl there! oh, so sweet—/ My face, my moon, my everybody’s moon,/ Which everybody looks on and calls his, And, I suppose, is looked on by in turn,/ While she looks—no one’s: very dear, no less/” (AS 432, lines 26-32).

Andrea del Sarto takes phenomenal pride in Lucrezia’s stellar beauty. But just like the heavenly bodies (i.e. the moon) she radiates beauty on the outside which cannot be matched with an inward beauty as this is practically inexistent. She is a soulless beauty and this has repercussion on Andrea del Sarto’s own paintings of Madonnas as they all resemble Lucrezia’s physiognomy but are devoid of any spiritual dimension. They are technically perfect but lack the energy, the spirit and the



soul that should lift them to the level of genius.

According to Stefan Hawlin “The Florentine painter, Andrea del Sarto (1486–1531), the monologist, displays a perfect technical facility but lacks spiritual fire: he cannot ‘pour’ out his ‘soul’ onto the canvas, he cannot reach through naturalism to supernaturalism. The monologue implies that the great artist (like Raphael or Michelangelo) is necessarily religious, and that to be such an artist is difficult” (Hawlin 84).

The perspective of perfection/imperfection in art was seriously approached by the Victorian writer and art critic John Ruskin in his work entitled *The Stones of Venice (II). The Sea-Stories (1853)*. In Chapter VI of his work Ruskin states that “no good work whatever can be perfect, and *the demand for perfection is always a sign of a misunderstanding of the ends of art*” (Ruskin 170). In other words, Ruskin suggests that any endeavor to attain perfection in art implies an utter misunderstanding of the “ends” of art. In the same chapter Ruskin vindicates imperfection claiming that

“... in all things that live there are certain irregularities and deficiencies which are not only signs of life, but sources of beauty. No human face is exactly the same in its lines on each side, no leaf perfect in its lobes, no branch in its symmetry. All admit irregularity as they imply change; and to banish imperfection is to destroy expression, to check exertion, to paralyse vitality. All things are literally better, lovelier, and more beloved for the imperfections which have been divinely appointed, that the law of human life may be Effort, and the law of human judgment, Mercy.” (Ruskin 171)

By extension, what leads to Andrea del Sarto’s artistic fall is his obsession to attain perfection in art. He is fully aware of this hamartia but he would rather go safe in life than simply try to overcome his artistic limitations. It is the exact same feeling that is rendered in the lines describing the way the convent walls across the street enclose the trees and make them feel “huddled more inside” (AS 432, line 43). Andrea del Sarto does not seem to feel regretful for being an underachiever in his life, his work and his marriage. What holds these things together is “a common greyness” which “silvers everything” (line 35).

There is another “hand” called in symbolically to explain Andrea del Sarto’s artistic underachievements: God’s hand. Apparently, the artist thinks that he cannot go against a certain determinism that rules people’s lives. We, as people, are free to make choices in life, although not really so, according to the artist: “Love, we are in God’s hand./ How strange now, looks the life he makes us lead; So free we seem, so fettered fast we are! I feel he laid the fetter: let it lie!” (AS 432, lines 49–52). According to Stephen Brennan in his study “Andrea’s Twilight Piece: Structure and Meaning in ‘Andrea del Sarto’” (1977), this “determinist philosophy” represents “Andrea’s attempt to blame his failure on forces outside himself” (Brennan 38).

This spiritual enchainment is even more forcefully expressed by the repetition of the fricative consonant **f** in the alliteration “So free we seem, so fettered fast we are” (line 51). There is also a surrender of the first person plural “we” (Andrea and Lucrezia)

and the first person singular “I” (Andrea) to the all-governing third person singular “he” (God) which comes to round off basically the same idea: there is no point in trying to improve your life, your art, your marriage as this is God’s call. All you can do is resign yourself to this already pre-established order/existence. Therefore, “I feel he laid the fetter: let it lie!” (line 52). The next section in the poem starts with some bitter undertones identifying a reproachful artist complaining about his wife’s inability to or carelessness in understanding art. The painter takes pride in his paintings and sketches as they are “the thing”: they reflect so vividly the realistic details and have been drawn “perfectly” from a technical point of view. This is the way they should be drawn, thinks Andrea del Sarto. His works have been praised even by the Pope himself for their accuracy.

Back in the day, his paintings were highly praised at King Francis’s court in France: “I can do with my pencil what I know,/ What I see, what at bottom of my heart/ I wish for, if I ever wish so deep—/ Do easily, too—when I say, perfectly,/ I do not boast, perhaps: yourself are judge,/ Who listened to the Legate’s talk last week,/ And just as much they used to say in France. /At any rate ’tis easy, all of it!” (AS 433, lines 60–67). Lucrezia, his wife, should also know better than anyone how skillful her husband is at drawing Madonnas like no one else. The artist has easiness in drawing sketches and does not need any study or any preparations to draw anything: “At any rate, ’tis easy, all of it!” (line 67). There are so many aspiring artists who have been striving all their lives, who agonize in reaching perfection in their paintings yet “fail in doing” (line 71) and achieve “much less” (line 76). The self-complacent and self-excusing line “Well, less is more, Lucrezia: I am judged” (line 78) targets two possible interpretations: on the one hand, even if his art is not exactly superior, the artist does not feel intimidated to still aspire to higher levels of artistic creation; on the other hand, the latter, and the more plausible interpretation highlights the idea that even if these other artists have done lesser things in their works of art they are very much appreciated as “There burns a truer light of God in them” (line 79).

These technical imperfections of del Sarto’s fellow artists are not even considered so important since the paintings as such lift the spirit and take it to Heaven so many times. In contrast, Andrea del Sarto’s works are close to touching Heaven but never really reaching it: “My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here” (line 87). There is a higher elevation in these works that Andrea del Sarto does not have in his paintings. What he offers as an excuse is the fact that his hand is that of a craftsman in execution and nothing more.

Harold Bloom claims in his work *Robert Browning (2001)* that Andrea del Sarto is acutely aware of his artistic limitations but that he is not willing to surpass them: “Rather than striving to transcend personal limitations, Andrea accepts them, thus assuring himself that he will experience neither the pain of artistic failure nor the glory of genuine artistic success” (Bloom 61). Del Sarto confesses that “I, painting from myself and to myself./ Know what I do, am unmoved by men’s blame/

Or their praise either/ (lines 90-92). The artist claims to paint "from myself and to myself" (line 90) which precludes any competition with other talented artists and rules out any grand artistic project. All his disquietudes, unhappiness and frustrations will be swept under the dismissive yet puerile question "What of that?" (line 95).

However, the artist knows that "a man's reach should exceed his grasp" (line 97), in other words, the artist should aspire to do better in his work and to challenge his abilities continually. According to Bloom, "Andrea trades the chance for greatness for the certainty of mediocrity, preferring the safety of low expectations to the risk of a rampant ambition" (Bloom 61).

There is an artistic pattern in Andrea del Sarto's work that keeps repeating itself to the point in which "All is silver-grey/Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!/" (lines 98-99). Elizabeth Bieman suggests in her study "An Eros Manqué: Browning's 'Andrea del Sarto'" (1970) that the lines "Had I been two, another and myself/ Our head would have o'erlooked the world! No doubt" (lines 102-103) could be read in a Neo-platonic key focusing on the idea that "men and women are incomplete halves of a once-perfect sphere" (qtd. in Brennan 39). By extension, Andrea del Sarto thinks that if he had found a better suited partner, the other perfect half, he would have exceeded his limits in art and would have reached monumentality.

This train of thought is interrupted by Andrea del Sarto himself who becomes suddenly interested in a copy of a painting that was sent to him by Giorgio Vasari. It is one of the paintings belonging to "The Urbinate who died five years ago" (line 105), namely Rafael. This copy has its imperfections, Andrea del Sarto admits, in the way the arm is drawn, "That arm is wrongly put" (line 111) and there are also certain faults in drawing the lines "A fault to pardon in the drawing lines" (line 112). But beyond all these imperfections that can be easily overlooked, the artist breathed life to the painting through his art. Therefore, "Its body, so to speak: its soul is right,/He means right-that a child may understand/" (lines 113-114).

Andrea del Sarto holds his wife responsible, in part, for his artistic limitations. Lucrezia's perfect half goes back to her physical beauty. However, this half is not complemented by one identifying a beautiful mind and soul, an inner beauty that might have changed the artist's perspective on art and life. Since Lucrezia's other spiritual half is missing, so is del Sarto's other half missing in his art: the perfect technical skills are not complemented in his case by the spiritual dimension and thus the viewers are constantly faced both with beautiful paintings of Madonnas as far as the technical skills are concerned and with mediocre works when it comes to the "soul" of the paintings.

In keeping with the theory of the halves that make up the whole, Andrea del Sarto ponders on the idea that what

prevents people from reaching monumentality goes back to the fact that some are able to reach it but don't have the will to do it and conversely, those who have the will lack the ability. And thus "half-men" like himself struggle all their lives to become a whole made up of both will and power.

Once again the whole discussion returns to God Almighty who "compensates" and "punishes" (line 141) in the afterlife, depending on people's good or bad conduct in their lives. According to Brennan

"Andrea will begin to think of his failings in art and love as part of the price he must pay in order to be better judged by God. He does not merely deny the need for fame; he feels he must suffer, not just to be underrated, but "despised." He feels that if God is really just, 'if the reward is strict', he must suffer a life of degradation." (Brennan 41)

Andrea del Sarto has come to terms with his unfulfilled life and disastrous marriage as he considers these a way of suffering in the physical world. The greater the suffering in life, the higher the "compensation" in the afterlife. After all, this deterministic perspective of a God "over-ruling" (line 133) people's lives, helps the artist accept his own fate, as fatalistic as it may sound.

The next section in the poem transports the artist in the past, at King Francis's court, in France, during that "festal year at Fontainebleau" (line 150) where his work was praised by the king himself and his retinue. He could have reached a higher level in his artistic career if he had stayed longer at King Francis's court. Unfortunately, del Sarto's wife, Lucrezia, "grew restless" (line 166) and the artist had to return to Florence.

At this point in the poem, Andrea del Sarto has finally accepted that "'tis done and past" (line 167). Stephen Brennan has an interesting interpretation of this part in the poem, namely that Lucrezia is considered as God's reward for the artist: "As he previously associated Lucrezia's power with God's, so he now associates God's final compensation with his wife" (Brennan 42).

The poem's final section voices Andrea del Sarto's ardent wish for "one more chance" to redeem his art in heaven by competing with his rivals "Leonard, Rafael and Agnolo" (i.e. Michelangelo) (line 263) in a room watched over by angels playing their pipes. According to Bloom "The images center Andrea's optimism, and like the "four great walls" set forth toward the end of the poem, they represent an alternative past, one in which Andrea enjoys a sympathetic public, financial security, a faithful wife, and a place among the great artists of the time" (Bloom 63).



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Andrea del Sarto, self-portrait (1528), Florence, Uffizi