



EDITED BY
THOMAS J. COLLINS
& VIVIENNE J. RUNDLE

ASSITANT EDITORS: WAI YING LEE & KIRSTEN MUNRO

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Canada

While the patching houseleek's¹ head of blossom
 winks
 Through the chinks—
 Marks the basement whence a tower in ancient time
 Sprang sublime,
 45 And a burning ring, all round, the chariots traced
 As they raced,
 And the monarch and his minions and his dames
 Viewed the games.

v

And I know, while thus the quiet-coloured eve
 50 Smiles to leave
 To their folding, all our many-tinkling fleece
 In such peace,
 And the slopes and rills in undistinguished grey
 Melt away—
 55 That a girl with eager eyes and yellow hair
 Waits me there
 In the turret whence the charioteers caught soul
 For the goal,
 When the king looked, where she looks now,
 breathless, dumb
 60 Till I come.

vi

But he looked upon the city, every side,
 Far and wide,
 All the mountains topped with temples, all the
 glades'
 Colonnades,
 65 All the causeys,² bridges, aqueducts,—and then,
 All the men!
 When I do come, she will speak not, she will stand,
 Either hand
 On my shoulder, give her eyes the first embrace
 70 Of my face,

¹ a flowering plant.

² causeways.

Ere we rush, ere we extinguish sight and speech
 Each on each.

vii

In one year they sent a million fighters forth
 South and North,
 75 And they build their gods a brazen pillar high
 As the sky,
 Yet reserved a thousand chariots in full force—
 Gold, of course.
 Oh heart! oh blood that freezes, blood that burns!
 80 Earth's returns
 For whole centuries of folly, noise and sin!
 Shut them in,
 With their triumphs and their glories and the rest!
 Love is best.
 —1855

*Fra Lippo Lippi*³

I am poor brother Lippo, by your leave!
 You need not clap your torches to my face.
 Zooks,⁴ what's to blame? you think you see a monk!
 What, 'tis past midnight, and you go the rounds,
 5 And here you catch me at an alley's end
 Where sportive ladies leave their doors ajar?
 The Carmine's my cloister: hunt it up,
 Do,—harry out, if you must show your zeal,
 Whatever rat, there, haps on his wrong hole,
 10 And nip each softling of a wee white mouse,
Weke, weke, that's crept to keep him company!
 Aha, you know your betters! Then, you'll take
 Your hand away that's fiddling on my throat,
 And please to know me likewise. Who am I?
 15 Why, one, sir, who is lodging with a friend
 Three streets off—he's a certain...how d'ye call?

³ Fra Lippo Lippi (c.1406–69), Carmelite painter and friar. His artistic creed shares much with that of Browning.

⁴ "Gadzooks," a mild oath.

ROBERT BROWNING

Master—a... Cosimo of the Medici,¹
 I' the house that caps the corner. Boh! you were best!
 Remember and tell me, the day you're hanged,
 20 How you affected such a gullet's-gripe!
 But you, sir, it concerns you that your knaves
 Pick up a manner nor discredit you:
 Zooks, are we pilchards,² that they sweep the streets
 And count fair prize what comes into their net?
 25 He's Judas to a tittle, that man is!
 Just such a face! Why, sir, you make amends.
 Lord, I'm not angry! Bid your hangdogs go
 Drink out this quarter-florin to the health
 Of the munificent House that harbours me
 30 (And many more beside, lads! more beside!)
 And all's come square again. I'd like his face—
 His, elbowing on his comrade in the door
 With the pike and lantern,—for the slave that holds
 John Baptist's head a-dangle by the hair
 35 With one hand ("Look you, now," as who should say)
 And his weapon in the other, yet unwiped!
 It's not your chance to have a bit of chalk,
 A wood-coal or the like? or you should see!
 Yes, I'm the painter, since you style me so.
 40 What, brother Lippo's doings, up and down,
 You know them and they take³ you? like enough!
 I saw the proper twinkle in your eye—
 'Tell you, I liked your looks at very first.
 Let's sit and set things straight now, hip to haunch.
 45 Here's spring come, and the nights one makes up
 bands
 To roam the town and sing out carnival,
 And I've been three weeks shut within my mew,⁴
 A-painting for the great man, saints and saints
 And saints again. I could not paint all night—
 50 Ouf! I leaned out of window for fresh air.
 There came a hurry of feet and little feet,

¹ the Florentine ruler and patron of the arts.

² small fish.

³ catch the fancy of.

⁴ cage.

A sweep of lute-strings, laughs, and whiffs of song,—
Flower o' the broom,
Take away love, and our earth is a tomb!
 55 *Flower o' the quince,*
I let Lisa go, and what good in life since?
Flower o' the thyme—and so on. Round they went.
 Scarce had they turned the corner when a titter
 Like the skipping of rabbits by moonlight,—three
 slim shapes,
 60 And a face that looked up...zooks, sir, flesh and
 blood,
 That's all I'm made of! Into shreds it went,
 Curtain and counterpane and coverlet,
 All the bed-furniture—a dozen knots,
 There was a ladder! Down I let myself,
 65 Hands and feet, scrambling somehow, and so
 dropped,
 And after them. I came up with the fun
 Hard by Saint Laurence,⁵ hail fellow, well met,—
Flower o' the rose,
If I've been merry, what matter who knows?
 70 And so as I was stealing back again
 To get to bed and have a bit of sleep
 Ere I rise up tomorrow and go work
 On Jerome⁶ knocking at his poor old breast
 With his great round stone to subdue the flesh,
 75 You snap⁷ me of the sudden. Ah, I see!
 Though your eye twinkles still, you shake your
 head—
 Mine's shaved—a monk, you say—the sting's in
 that!
 If Master Cosimo announced himself,
 Mum's the word naturally; but a monk!
 80 Come, what am I a beast for? tell us, now!
 I was a baby when my mother died
 And father died and left me in the street.
 I starved there, God knows how, a year or two

⁵ the church of San Lorenzo.

⁶ St. Jerome (340–420), the highly ascetic saint Lippo is painting.

⁷ seize.

85 On fig-skins, melon-parings, rinds and shucks,
 Refuse and rubbish. One fine frosty day,
 My stomach being empty as your hat,
 The wind doubled me up and down I went.
 Old Aunt Lapaccia trussed me with one hand,
 (Its fellow was a stinger as I knew)
 90 And so along the wall, over the bridge,
 By the straight cut to the convent. Six words there,
 While I stood munching my first bread that month:
 "So, boy, you're minded," quoth the good fat father
 Wiping his own mouth, 'twas refection-time,—
 95 "To quit this very miserable world?
 Will you renounce" . . . "the mouthful of bread?"
 thought I;
 By no means! Brief, they made a monk of me;
 I did renounce the world, its pride and greed,
 Palace, farm, villa, shop and banking-house,
 100 Trash, such as these poor devils of Medici
 Have given their hearts to—all at eight years old.
 Well, sir, I found in time, you may be sure,
 'Twas not for nothing—the good bellyful,
 The warm serge and the rope that goes all round,
 105 And day-long blessed idleness beside!
 "Let's see what the urchin's fit for"—that came next.
 Not overmuch their way, I must confess.
 Such a to-do! They tried me with their books:
 Lord, they'd have taught me Latin in pure waste!
 110 *Flower o' the clove,*
All the Latin I construe is, "amo" I love!
 But, mind you, when a boy starves in the streets
 Eight years together, as my fortune was,
 Watching folk's faces to know who will fling
 115 The bit of half-stripped grape-bunch he desires,
 And who will curse or kick him for his pains,—
 Which gentleman processional and fine,
 Holding a candle to the Sacrament,
 Will wink and let him lift a plate and catch
 120 The droppings of the wax to sell again,
 Or holla for the Eight¹ and have him whipped,—

¹ the eight magistrates of Florence.

How say I?—nay, which dog bites, which lets drop
 His bone from the heap of offal in the street,—
 Why, soul and sense of him grow sharp alike,
 125 He learns the look of things, and none the less
 For admonition from the hunger-pinch.
 I had a store of such remarks, be sure,
 Which, after I found leisure, turned to use.
 I drew men's faces on my copy-books,
 130 Scrawled them within the antiphony's marge,²
 Joined legs and arms to the long music-notes,
 Found eyes and nose and chin for A's and B's,
 And made a string of pictures of the world
 Betwixt the ins and outs of verb and noun,
 135 On the wall, the bench, the door. The monks
 looked black.
 "Nay," quoth the Prior, "turn him out, d'ye say?
 In no wise. Lose a crow and catch a lark.
 What if at last we get our man of parts,
 We Carmelites, like those Camaldolese³
 140 And Preaching Friars, to do our church up fine
 And put the front on it that ought to be!"
 And hereupon he bade me daub away.
 Thank you! my head being crammed, the walls a
 blank,
 Never was such prompt disemburdening.
 145 First, every sort of monk, the black and white,
 I drew them, fat and lean: then, folk at church,
 From good old gossips waiting to confess
 Their cribs⁴ of barrel-droppings, candle-ends,—
 To the breathless fellow at the altar-foot,
 150 Fresh from his murder, safe and sitting there
 With the little children round him in a row
 Of admiration, half for his beard and half
 For that white anger of his victim's son
 Shaking a fist at him with one fierce arm,
 155 Signing himself with the other because of Christ
 (Whose sad face on the cross sees only this

² the margin of a book with choral music.

³ rival religious orders. The Camaldolese are Dominicans.

⁴ petty thefts.

ROBERT BROWNING

After the passion of a thousand years)
 Till some poor girl, her apron o'er her head,
 (Which the intense eyes looked through) came at eve
 160 On tiptoe, said a word, dropped in a loaf,
 Her pair of earrings and a bunch of flowers
 (The brute took growling), prayed, and so was gone.
 I painted all, then cried "'Tis ask and have;
 Choose, for more's ready!"—laid the ladder flat,
 165 And showed my covered bit of cloister-wall.
 The monks closed in a circle and praised loud
 Till checked, taught what to see and not to see,
 Being simple bodies,—“That's the very man!
 Look at the boy who stoops to pat the dog!
 170 That woman's like the Prior's niece¹ who comes
 To care about his asthma: it's the life!”
 But there my triumph's straw-fire flared and
 funk'd;²
 Their betters took their turn to see and say:
 The Prior and the learned pulled a face
 175 And stopped all that in no time. “How? what's here?
 Quite from the mark of painting, bless us all!
 Faces, arms, legs and bodies like the true
 As much as pea and pea! it's devil's-game!
 Your business is not to catch men with show,
 180 With homage to the perishable clay,
 But lift them over it, ignore it all,
 Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh.
 Your business is to paint the souls of men—
 Man's soul, and it's a fire, smoke...no, it's not...
 185 It's vapour done up like a new-born babe—
 (In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth)³
 It's...well, what matters talking, it's the soul!
 Give us no more of body than shows soul!
 Here's Giotto,⁴ with his Saint a-praising God,
 190 That sets us praising,—why not stop with him?

¹ not a relation, but with whom he has relations.

² expired in smoke.

³ a reference to the old doctrine that the soul leaves the body with the last breath in the form of vapour.

⁴ Florentine painter and architect (1267–1337).

Why put all thoughts of praise out of our head
 With wonder at lines, colours, and what not?
 Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms!
 Rub all out, try at it a second time.
 195 Oh, that white smallish female with the breasts,
 She's just my niece...Herodias,⁵ I would say,—
 Who went and danced and got men's heads cut off!
 Have it all out!” Now, is this sense, I ask?
 A fine way to paint soul, by painting body
 200 So ill, the eye can't stop there, must go further
 And can't fare worse! Thus, yellow does for white
 When what you put for yellow's simply black,
 And any sort of meaning looks intense
 When all beside itself means and looks naught.
 205 Why can't a painter lift each foot in turn,
 Left foot and right foot, go a double step,
 Make his flesh liker and his soul more like,
 Both in their order? Take the prettiest face,
 The Prior's niece...patron-saint—is it so pretty
 210 You can't discover if it means hope, fear,
 Sorrow or joy? won't beauty go with these?
 Suppose I've made her eyes all right and blue,
 Can't I take breath and try to add life's flash,
 And then add soul and heighten them threefold?
 215 Or say there's beauty with no soul at all—
 (I never saw it—put the case the same—)
 If you get simple beauty and naught else,
 You get about the best thing God invents:
 That's somewhat: and you'll find the soul you have
 missed,
 220 Within yourself, when you return him thanks.
 “Rub all out!” Well, well, there's my life, in short,
 And so the thing has gone on ever since.
 I'm grown a man no doubt, I've broken bounds:
 You should not take a fellow eight years old
 225 And make him swear to never kiss the girls.
 I'm my own master, paint now as I please—
 Having a friend, you see, in the Corner-house!

⁵ The Prior is confused. It was Salome, daughter of Herodias, who, after dancing for Herod, asked him for the head of John the Baptist.

Lord, it's fast holding by the rings in front—
 Those great rings serve more purposes than just
 230 To plant a flag in, or tie up a horse!
 And yet the old schooling sticks, the old grave eyes
 Are peeping o'er my shoulder as I work,
 The heads shake still—"It's art's decline, my son!
 You're not of the true painters, great and old;
 235 Brother Angelico's¹ the man, you'll find;
 Brother Lorenzo² stands his single peer:
 Fag on at flesh, you'll never make the third!"
Flower o' the pine,
You keep your mistr. . . manners, and I'll stick to mine!
 240 I'm not the third, then: bless us, they must know!
 Don't you think they're the likeliest to know,
 They with their Latin? So, I swallow my rage,
 Clench my teeth, suck my lips in tight, and paint
 To please them—sometimes do and sometimes don't;
 245 For, doing most, there's pretty sure to come
 A turn, some warm eve finds me at my saints—
 A laugh, a cry, the business of the world—
(Flower o' the peach,
Death for us all, and his own life for each!)
 250 And my whole soul revolves, the cup runs over,
 The world and life's too big to pass for a dream,
 And I do these wild things in sheer despite,
 And play the fooleries you catch me at,
 In pure rage! The old mill-horse, out at grass
 255 After hard years, throws up his stiff heels so,
 Although the miller does not preach to him
 The only good of grass is to make chaff.
 What would men have? Do they like grass or no—
 May they or mayn't they? all I want's the thing
 260 Settled for ever one way. As it is,
 You tell too many lies and hurt yourself:
 You don't like what you only like too much,
 You do like what, if given you at your word,
 You find abundantly detestable.
 265 For me, I think I speak as I was taught;

¹ Fra Angelico (1387–1455), an ethereal painter.

² Lorenzo Monaco (c.1370–c.1425), painter.

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.

270 You understand me: I'm a beast, I know.
 But see, now—why, I see as certainly
 As that the morning-star's about to shine,
 What will hap some day. We've a youngster here
 Comes to our convent, studies what I do,
 275 Slouches and stares and lets no atom drop:
 His name is Guidi³—he'll not mind the monks—
 They call him Hulking Tom, he lets them talk—
 He picks my practice up—he'll paint apace,
 I hope so—though I never live so long,
 280 I know what's sure to follow. You be judge!
 You speak no Latin more than I, belike;
 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,
 285 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,
 290 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?
 295 God's works—paint anyone, and count it crime
 To let a truth slip. Don't object, "His works
 Are here already; nature is complete:
 Suppose you reproduce her"—(which you can't)
 "There's no advantage! you must beat her, then."
 300 For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love
 First when we see them painted, things we have
 passed
 Perhaps a hundred times nor cared to see;

³ Tommaso Guidi (1401–28?). In fact, Lippo's teacher, not his pupil.

ROBERT BROWNING

And so they are better, painted—better to us,
 Which is the same thing. Art was given for that;
 305 God uses us to help each other so,
 Lending our minds out. Have you noticed, now,
 Your cullion's hanging face? A bit of chalk.
 And trust me but you should, though! How much
 more,
 If I drew higher things with the same truth!
 310 That were to take the Prior's pulpit-place,
 Interpret God to all of you! Oh, oh,
 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:
 315 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
 320 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.
 I painted a Saint Laurence¹ six months since
 At Prato, splashed the fresco in fine style:
 325 "How looks my painting, now the scaffold's down?"
 I ask a brother: "Hugely," he returns—
 "Already not one phiz² of your three slaves
 Who turn the Deacon off his toasted side,
 But's scratched and prodded to our heart's content,
 330 The pious people have so eased their own
 With coming to say prayers there in a rage:
 We get on fast to see the bricks beneath.
 Expect another job this time next year,
 For pity and religion grow i' the crowd—
 335 Your painting serves its purpose!" Hang the fools!

—That is—you'll not mistake an idle word
 Spoke in a huff by a poor monk, Got wot,
 Tasting the air this spicy night which turns

¹ The saint was roasted to death in 258.

² face.

The unaccustomed head like Chianti wine!
 340 Oh, the church knows! don't misreport me, now!
 It's natural a poor monk out of bounds
 Should have his apt word to excuse himself:
 And hearken how I plot to make amends.
 I have bethought me: I shall paint a piece
 345 ... There's for you! Give me six months, then go, see
 Something in Sant' Ambrogio's!³ Bless the nuns!
 They want a cast o' my office.⁴ I shall paint
 God in the midst, Madonna and her babe,
 Ringed by a bowery flowery angel-brood,
 350 Lilies and vestments and white faces, sweet
 As puff on puff of grated orris-root⁵
 When ladies crowd to Church at midsummer.
 And then i' the front, of course a saint or two—
 Saint John,⁶ because he saves the Florentines,
 355 Saint Ambrose, who puts down in black and white
 The convent's friends and gives them a long day,
 And Job, I must have him there past mistake,
 The man of Uz (and Us without the z,
 Painters who need his patience). Well, all these
 360 Secured at their devotion, up shall come
 Out of a corner when you least expect,
 As one by a dark stair into a great light,
 Music and talking, who but Lippo! I!—
 Mazed,⁷ motionless and moonstruck—I'm the man!
 365 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!
 Where's a hole, where's a corner for escape?
 370 Then steps a sweet angelic slip of a thing
 Forward, puts out a soft palm—"Not so fast!"
 —Addresses the celestial presence, "nay—
 He made you and devised you, after all,

³ a convent in Florence.

⁴ example of my work.

⁵ iris root, used in perfume.

⁶ patron saint of Florence.

⁷ bewildered.

Though he's none of you! Could Saint John there
draw—

375 His camel-hair¹ make up a painting-brush?
We come to brother Lippo for all that,
*Iste perfecit opus!*² So, all smile—
I shuffle sideways with my blushing face
Under the cover of a hundred wings
380 Thrown like a spread of kirtles³ when you're gay
And play hot cockles,⁴ all the doors being shut,
Till, wholly unexpected, in there pops
The hothead husband! Thus I scuttle off
To some safe bench behind, not letting go
385 The palm of her, the little lily thing
That spoke the good word for me in the nick,
Like the Prior's niece... Saint Lucy,⁵ I would say.
And so all's saved for me, and for the church
A pretty picture gained. Go, six months hence!
390 Your hand, sir, and good-bye: no lights, no lights!
The street's hushed, and I know my own way back,
Don't fear me! There's the grey beginning. Zooks!
—1855

*A Toccata of Galuppi's*⁶

I
Oh Galuppi, Baldassaro,⁷ this is very sad to
find!
I can hardly misconceive you; it would prove
me deaf and blind;
But although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a
heavy mind!

¹ St. John wore camel hair.

² "This man did the work."

³ skirts.

⁴ a rustic game (here a euphemism for amorous activity).

⁵ The martyr was a virgin, unlike the Prior's "niece."

⁶ from *toccare*, "to touch" in Italian, a fast-moving keyboard piece.

⁷ Baldassaro Galuppi (1706–85), the Venetian composer.

II

Here you come with your old music, and here's all
the good it brings.
5 What, they lived once thus at Venice where the
merchants were the kings,⁸
Where Saint Mark's is, where the Doges used to
wed the sea with rings?⁹

III

Ay, because the sea's the street there; and 'tis arched
by... what you call
... Shylock's bridge¹⁰ with houses on it, where they
kept the carnival:
I was never out of England—it's as if I saw it all.

IV

10 Did young people take their pleasure when the sea
was warm in May?
Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning ever to
midday,
When they made up fresh adventures for the
morrow, do you say?

V

Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round and lips so
red,—
On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bell-
flower on its bed,
15 O'er the breast's superb abundance where a man
might base his head?

VI

Well, and it was graceful of them—they'd break
talk off and afford
—She, to bite her mask's black velvet—he, to
finger on his sword,

⁸ the Cathedral of Venice.

⁹ The Dukes of Venice annually celebrated the relationship of the city
to the sea in a ceremony in which a ring was cast into the sea.

¹⁰ the Rialto.