



# Unattainable Infinity: The Divorce Between Art and Life in Robert Browning's Three Renaissance Poems

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**Abstract**— Robert Browning is celebrated not only for his refinement of the dramatic monologue, which unveils the complexity of human psychology, but also as a poet of art who explores the role of art in life. For him, art and life are inseparable, forming a union through which humanity pursues the infinite. This infinity rests on the idea of “perfection in imperfection”: only by confronting imperfection with passion can human life approach the divine. In “My Last Duchess” (1842), “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church” (1845), and “Andrea del Sarto” (1855), Browning dramatizes characters whose attachment to art is reduced to materialism or vanity, exposing the limits of their finite existence. Their finitude is mirrored in the form of the dramatic monologue, underscoring isolation and rigidity. By revisiting the Renaissance—a moment of artistic and humanistic liberation—Browning articulates his philosophy of art and life, perfection and imperfection, the finite and the infinite.

**Keywords**— Robert Browning, art, life, dramatic monologue, infinity



## I. INTRODUCTION

Before perfecting dramatic monologue as his most known achievement, Robert Browning experienced the failure to be a playwright, which appropriately opened up his path to be an influential poet. He seemed not to be endowed with dramatic talent that mostly emphasizes the plot, and after writing several plays lack of success, Browning was remarked by his patron William Macready as having persistent difficulties in creating theatrical plots. Though he was frustrated by his unrealized ambition for stage, his brilliant power in the representation of human souls made him one “the most like Shakespeare” (Corson 47) who fully explored human nature by “creating

characters of much greater subtlety and complexity” (Roberts 57) in his poetry that demonstrates various slices of humanity. Dramatic monologue as a poetic type suits to Browning very well, which is a “substitute” for those whose main interest or skill is in the character rather than the plot (Sinfield 3).

The concentration on character makes Browning a scholar who has a theory of human life to be the foundation of his poetry that profoundly studies humanity, supporting his conception of human nature. The tension between perfection and imperfection of humanity constitutes what Browning views as an infinite life, which has no destination in the journey for freedom. In “An

Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley" (1851), Browning reflects on the poet's vocation as the capacity to discern what he calls the "perfection in imperfection" of the universe, of nature, and of humankind (Browning 71). For Browning, mortals—by virtue of their corruptibility and finitude—can never possess the "absolute vision" of ultimate truth, a privilege belonging only to the infinite and divine. What they can attain, however, is a continual approximation to the perfection. This very impossibility of final attainment becomes the cornerstone of Browning's moral philosophy: value lies not in the terminus, but in the endless movement toward it. As Stopford A. Brooke points out, this theory might be derived from more ancient thoughts, yet Browning's integrated understanding is original amongst the English poets (84). He believes that we are born to engage in others' life, but the limitations in us impede our way to connect with others. Only by conquering those limitations, which refer to the imperfection of humanity, can we live a useful and meaningful life as an awakening man. Whereas the state of perfection is impossible as no one can be absolutely perfect, hence the process of conquering our limitations definitely entails misery and failure, which exactly demonstrates the divine soul.

This kind of infinity is exactly what those speakers in Browning's three Renaissance poems, "My Last Duchess" (1842) "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church" (1845) and "Andrea Del Sarto" (1855), did not and will never possess. In these three poems concerned with art, the poet subtly creates a collision between their love for art and their real life, for morality which is contained as an implied function in art per se did not work. Though sharing the passion for artistic beauty, the three unconsciously revealed themselves as morally defective, far away from the core of art, which according to Browning is to be invested into the real life. It is the failed moral function in art that gives rise to the divorce between art and life, making them contradictory to what Browning eulogizes as Divine and infinite life. For they paused and

immersed themselves in the perfection of art, yet not confronted the imperfection in their personality. Thus in the three poems, art is not the manifestation of infinite life, but of a pathetic finitude.

## II. BROWNING AS A POET OF ART

Browning is viewed as a poet of art. Many of his poems are concerned with art or artists. His mother's talent in painting and music might enlighten his interest in art, and his father who was driven by a scholarly zest to build a personal library of six thousand volumes that cover many legends and anecdotes in various languages helped him cultivate a keen sensibility for life and art. "[Browning] speaks of [the arts], not as a critic from the outside, but out of the soul of them, as an artist" (Brooke 104). Thus the subject of art in his poetry is not only a special way to express himself but also a formation of his subtle observation on the world and human, for art is deeply connected with human nature as a media of human's mind to be voiced to the world.

Browning has a special obsession with Renaissance, a period when human's value began to be mostly praised and art began to shine the light of humanity. It is his three visits and then stay in Italy for about fifteen years that made him find the "the heart of Renaissance" by recognizing its intellect, art, music, literature, and feel the fullness of its life (Black 10). In this period, people did not look up to the mysterious God all the time with their palms devoutly being put together; rather, they looked down at the earth and found a flourishing world in amaze that they overlooked all along. That moved Browning a lot, touched by the dawn of humanity which signifies the daylight, freedom and infinity.

Liberated from the repression of the Middle Ages when artists were at the service of theology primarily representing the abstract saints that emphasizes the soul, the Renaissance art adopted a more scientific and bold

approach to represent the flesh. The natural beauty of the body, which Browning values as divine in humanity, marks the new age of art full of vividness and passion for human life. However, that is not to say that preference to the body will definitely impair the soul, which is the case of Andrea del Sarto who went to the extremes and pursued a perfection of scientific drawing. What Browning attempts to quest is not “either/or”, but a harmonious combination of the two: using the body to illuminate the soul.

Browning's view on art, especially on painting, actually demonstrates his theory of human life, which, according to one of his letters to Ruskin in 1855, is “a putting the infinite within the finite” (Collins 148). For Browning, art and life is meaningfully interrelated as “a perfect union”: the purpose of art is “to help careless humans to comprehend beauty – the daily beauty of their own harried lives” (De Baun 388+393). He regards art as an approach to lightening a passionate life, within which whether the artists or ordinary men must pursue the infinite, like Andrea confided in his monologue: “Ah, but man's reach should exceed his grasp. / Or what's a heaven for?” Browning's another conviction that explains the necessary link between art and life is what L. Robert Stevens points out, that art for its own sake is “not enough to redeem a human spirit otherwise deficient” (20). That is, only containing an ethical will can art be complete and sufficient to make men gain spiritual salvation. In the following analysis of the three Renaissance poems concerned with art, we will see how Browning subtly clarifies his dialectic idea of finite and infinite in his poetic discussion about art and life.

### III. FALSE ART WITHOUT THE SOUL

When reading the three poems, we might be fascinated by an aesthetic charm in the three speakers for whom art is an obsession. What they demonstrate in the pursuit of art seems to make a shield that averts any judgment on their personality as beauty is tended to be

related to *fineness*. Robert Langbaum perceives an “immense attractiveness” in the Duke who has power, freedom, and artistic appreciation (77). Indeed, he showed the portrait and the sculpture with enthusiasm, which demonstrates his taste of art, making his aristocratic identity more remarkable. In the Bishop's design of his luxurious tomb, we can also find his mastery of sculpture and art of ancient Greek, and even acclaim that visual exquisiteness composed of “the rare” stones. Andrea del Sarto, the faultless painter who could “do what many dream of” with his pencil and possesses a nearly pious attitude towards beauty, reveals an insistent pursuit of perfect technique to represent the beauty, almost touching us. However, if posing the question “what does art mean for them?”, we have to face up with that suspended judgment which tears up the phantasmic shield formed by their love for art. Behind that shield we will see the huge crack in their personality that cannot be filled up by art. Their love for art is not affectedly pretended, yet what they recognize in art is false. For it is the material things that motivate their obsession, rather than the spiritual which can get them genuinely involved into art.

In “My Last Duchess”, the egotism demonstrated by the Duke comes from his obsession with absolute power that made art an appendage to manifest and expand his power. That the Duke mentioned the two artists' name “by design” is out of vanity to show off his special appreciation of art that can be a symbol of his social status. Though the two artists Fra Pandolf and Claus of Innsbruck are made up by the poet, they are likely to possess good reputation in that time, whose works represent an admirable taste of art. When the Duchess showed her lively love for other things and people, he thought it a neglect of his aristocratic family reputation, “a nine-hundred-years-old name” which should have been her great honor that disallowed her to look elsewhere. Yet he never stooped to “blame / This sort of trifling”, as what he wanted is an absolute obedience and a strong sense of

control. In spite of his aristocratic identity and property, he still coveted his fiancée's dowry, repeating that the "master's known munificence" will warrant his requirement. The nature of his obsession in art is exactly an obsession in power and money, the material things that brought him a great enjoyment of control. Just as he used rhetoric to cover up his real intention, art for him was but a tool to decorate his hypocritic nature. This point can be demonstrated by his inability to appreciate the two artworks. He called "That piece a wonder" not for "The depth and passion of its earnest glance" that attracted many strangers, but for its verisimilitude.

Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without  
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave  
commands;  
Then all smiles stopped together. There she  
stands

As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet

The Duchess' smile, "that spot of joy", is a manifestation of her lively soul which shows her vitality, kindness, and longing for other lives. Yet in the jealous Duke's view, that proves her flirtatiousness, evoking his anger and thus causing her final death. Though Pandolf possessed the ability to represent both the body and the soul, the Duke was totally blind to what art should reveal profoundly, only seeing the former and taking this portrait as the result of his untold "commands". His praise for that sculpture Neptune which is called as "a rarity", was as well due to the power demonstrated by it through "Taming a sea-horse", of which he narcissistically identified himself as an ideal incarnation.

In "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church", the poet portrays a more complicated and ironic character who faced up with his miserable past in desperation at the end of his life. The Bishop ordered his "nephews" who were actually his illegal sons to build him a magnificent tomb like a piece of artwork to be

remembered and admired. That is to say, he was not a pious adherent to Christianity, according to which one can get into the heaven to enjoy an eternal life after death. The woman he mentioned in the beginning and the end, "so fair she was", was his mistress, and their illegal marriage reveals his hedonism and weak resistance to the temptation of beauty. His great effort, "With tooth and nail to save my niche" not only demonstrates an obsession in material things, but reveals his multiple defectiveness: blasphemy to God, fear of death, and vanity of comparing with old Gandolf. The hollowness of his heart after losing the faith further grew his extreme materialism, bringing him an insatiability. As a result, despite the fact that he had ability to appreciate the sculpture art and perceive the beauty, art was but an externalization of his bottomless desire. In his monologue, he ceaselessly made sure that his sons would use the rare stones to build his tomb, raising the requirement for materials from "slab of basalt" to the most valuable "lapis". His worship to art did not cover up his misbehavior of stealing some lump of "lapis lazuli" in the conflagration of his church, from which we can see that his obsession in art was abnormal and even allowed him to transgress morality. Art, in the Bishop's circumstance, is a traumatic reaction to the loss of the faith, through which he intended to make up for his voidness but failed. Even if he could lie in the tomb made of rare stones and exquisite artistry, it could never be a piece of artwork fertilized by the soul, but a reminder of his obsessiveness of being an immortal flesh without the soul.

The poem "Andrea del Sarto" is the most essential revelation of Browning's view on the nature of art, in which the painter Andrea, unlike the Duke and the Bishop who lacked the ability of appreciation, suffered his lack of creation. Andrea is known as an artist without errors, yet his reputation is covered up by his contemporaries da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Raphael. His career climaxed during the time in France when he was invited by François I to paint for the king whose favor brought him "kingly

days". Yet in the poem, that glory time of "painting proudly" was Andrea's reminiscence, sharply contrasting to his situation at present: a person in eclipse. The end of his "kingly days" was due to his wife Lucrezia's restlessness, making him come back "to [her] heart". Andrea, in his nature, could not resist the temptation of beauty, just like the Bishop. He embezzled the king's funds, "was tempted and complied", to build the house for his wife, who was viewed by Andrea as his "serpentine beauty". Thus his career went into "a twilight": "My youth, my hope, my art, being all toned down/ To yonder sober pleasant Fiesole." He was trapped in a struggle which was not solely caused by the lost glory, but moreover his problem in painting that impeded his artistic representation. Although he captured Lucrezia's smile as "what we painters call our harmony", he was unable to represent what he perceived as beauty. For he blindly pursued the correctness that veiled his insight into those beyond lines, composition and technique.

But had you – oh, with the same perfect brow,  
 And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,  
 And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird  
 The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare –  
 Had you, with these the same, but brought a  
 mind!

That Andrea attributed his failure to Lucrezia's lack of mind unconsciously reveals his own deficiency in art: what he saw and painted is such a perfect beauty that causes a voidness in his work. He was clearly aware of this fatal flaw, though claiming that he could draw whatever he saw "easily" and "perfectly".

There burns a truer light of God in them,  
 In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up  
 brain,  
 Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt  
 This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of

mine.

He admitted that he was but a craftsman who was not shined by the burning light of God. His contemporaries' work might not be perfect like his, but it is in the imperfect representation that the trace of true art can be found. For art, as Browning's theory of human life reveals, only through the imperfection can it be connected with the soul. What behind that imperfection is the artist's struggle to make it perfect, which was exactly despised by Andrea. He pointed out Raphael's "wrongly put" arm and yet realized that "its soul is right". That is why others could reach the heaven yet it was shut to him: "My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here." That perfection in his work separated him from the true art where there is the soul and the way to heaven.

In the three cases, the real art is seemingly manifested by their extreme pursuit of beauty and yet connected with invalid motivations in various degrees. That might be caused by a preference to materialism, which means ceaselessly seeking for things from the physical world. Hence art is taken as an object lack of agency, without the function of filling up the hole of void in their heart. What they recognized in art is not the combination of body and soul, but only the perfect body which is fascinating yet sterile. Within that, there is nothing but endless darkness, doomed not to be illuminated by the divine infinity of real art.

#### IV. IMPRISONED SELF IN THE MONOLOGUE

What the attitude of Browning's three characters towards art reveals is not a dynamic pursuit of perfection as they showed a narcissistic satisfaction in art, which made them indulge in an art of perfection by the absolute standard of themselves. That narcissistic satisfaction in art is profoundly connected with their stagnant self, exactly manifesting the essential moral deficiency in their personalities: an inability to get themselves engaged in



others' life. Hence in the three poems their broken human relations are exposed to various degrees.

Andrea was obviously suffering from his precarious marriage, showing his ambivalent feelings towards his wife: on the one hand, he was fascinated by Lucrezia's beauty and endeavored to detain her from leaving; on the other, he viewed his wife as one of the reasons for his failure who as his model had not "given [him] soul", and complained that "You don't understand / Nor care to understand about my art". His narcissism seemed to be partially transformed into an attack on others as a way of furthest protecting his self. He treaded on others' struggle to "paint a little thing" that he could do "easily" and "perfectly", greatly showing his privilege of possessing unique talent and technique. At the same time, he was aware that he was "something underrated here" and despised by others, which dragged him into the conflict between superiority and inferiority, isolating him from his peers and the Paris lords. Whether his marriage or social relations, Andrea was unable to take any effort in restoring it: at last, he failed in detaining his wife and let her leave with her cousin who might be her lover; facing up with others' gossips or ironical remarks, he "must bear it all" without any refutation or change in act.

The moral deficiency of the Bishop primarily lies in his absent link with the God, as what he did and believed were divorced from his identity as a priest of the Church. He covered up his guilt by means of hypocritic rhetoric: "ah God, I know not!" That lost faith brought him a deep fear, which was demonstrated by his rivalry against the old Gandolf. Only through the illusionary victory in this kind of imaginary relationship could he gain a sense of satisfaction and security, which were used to feebly support his frail nature. The relationship with his illegal sons were also problematic. Facing up with their dying father, they seemed not to demonstrate any grief: when the Bishop called them to gather round his bed, his favorite son Anselm was "keeping back", reluctant to show the

final care. The Bishop was conscious of the truth that his sons were not reliable to do what he asked, so he induced them with his legacy and blessings from Saint Praxed. Yet he failed in persuading himself that "boys, ye love me", and confided the ruthless fact: "For ye have stabbed me with ingratitude / To death – ye wish it – God, ye wish it!" This disharmonious father-son relationships indirectly caused his death in the spiritual level, by ultimately collapsing his broke relations with other lives and showing him the emptiness under his sterile self.

The Duke is the only one full of enjoyment amongst the three, an existence of jouissance who was totally blind to his moral deficiency. Unlike Andrea and the Bishop, he was not in any painful struggle and thus demonstrated the seemingly perfection of being, which exactly manifests his absolute closure to others. Though using interrogative sentences that could demonstrate his politeness, "Will't please you sit and look at her?", he intended to show off and thus manipulated his guest to satisfy his vanity. Under the oppressive commands, his guest had no choice but to coordinate in their imbalance relationship. The way he dealt with his relationship with the Duchess also proves his absolute closure caused by his abnormal egotism. "Never to stoop" is an intense rejection to get himself engaged into any interaction with others; the expansion of his self muffled all other voices that attempted to dialogue with him but failed. Turning the Duchess' "that spot of joy" into a still painting, the Duke revealed his morbid tendency to materialization: treating other lives as objects like those lifeless artworks which could be played with at his will.

Browning intended to show us what he disdained as finite life by revealing the three characters who were imprisoned by their stagnant self and could not enrich life experience by engaging with others. The poet's voice is contained in Andrea's and the Bishop's words when they confided the truth of their unattainable infinity. The images and atmosphere in "Andrea del Sarto" implied the painter's bleak future and withered vitality as he already

perceived that "All in a twilight".

A twilight-piece. 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!

The fetter put on him is actually the flaw of human nature that makes men be imperfect "half-men". Despite telling the "strange" truth of destiny, Andrea did not realize that there was no absolute freedom of being a man, which means only through conquering those limitations would he glimpse the impossible perfection in humanity. He knew that his art was problematic, "Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!" Yet he was not willing to change, saying "Since my past life lies, why alter it?" He gave up another choice to fight against destiny, attributing his failure to God's "over-rules": "At the end, / God, I conclude, compensates, punishes." Finally, he would always put on the fetter and no matter his art or life was forever confined in that "melancholy little house". The Bishop to the most extent displayed the disastrous result of the finite life as he literally had no time to compensate for his defects. Like all the dying people who looked back their life and felt illusory, he sighed that "the world's a dream" and could not perceive the border between live and death when lying "in the dead night". Whereas he still attempted to capture the last chance to fill up his restless desire, which was conflictive to what he said: "Peace, peace seems all." That he repeated asking "Do I live, am I dead" demonstrated his reluctant feeling to leave in the last lingering moment. In the end, all the magnificent ornaments and rare stones vanished, and he ordered his sons to leave him alone in the church. Perhaps he was aware of that "Vanity, saith the preacher, vanity!", yet he had no possibility to approach the infinity as he already became a haunting ghost who was rejected by the God to enter into the heaven and eternally confined in his shabby tomb. The finite life of the

Duke is demonstrated in the contrast with the Duchess who had a heart "too soon made glad". What he thought as disgraceful behaviors exactly show an openness of the Duchess' life. That she was "Too easily impressed" implied her talent for empathy and vitality of spreading love and friendliness, which precisely reflects the aura of Renaissance a period of divine humanity. Yet the Duke with his closure in personality strangled that openness because he could not understand that the Duchess' open love to everything embodied the potential infinity of life. Though he was still indulging in the joy of narcissism and egotism, he would someday confront his broken and sterile life like the Bishop did before dying.

Browning's superb poetic art lies in that he integrates the characters' twisted psychology with dramatic monologue the specific form. In the monologue that displays only "one end of the conversation" (Sessions 503), the speaker in certain situation seems like having an impulse to speak, unconsciously revealing his fatal defect. In Andrea's monologue he demonstrated an urgency to time as his wife was going to leave. Ceaselessly outpouring his thoughts and feelings was not only for detaining Lucrezia to keep being his model so that he could finish another painting, but also for easing the anxiety and loneliness caused by his failure. In face of the imminent death, the Bishop urgently attempted to be remembered by building a luxurious tomb, and to cover his fear and regret by means of speaking. In "My Last Duchess", enjambment is adopted to form a driving force behind the Duke's revelations, showing his compelling desire to control others and self-obsessed nature. In the three poems, the dramatic monologue is connected with the loneliness of paranoia; the speakers' voice and their stagnant self are imprisoned in the monologue without any response, consuming the residue of their finite life.

## V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Browning's return to Renaissance

settings in the three poems reveals how the unity of art and life is fractured by self-absorption, material desire, and the will to power. The Duke reduces art to an instrument of domination; the Bishop treats it as a substitute for the faith he has lost; Andrea conceals the absence of inner vitality beneath the sheen of flawless technique. All three figures remain trapped within the illusion of a finite perfection, unable to realize the transcendent potential that art promises. In Browning's view, art and life should be a harmonious union like soul and body: one can illuminate another without being superior to it. Featured with its self-discipline, art is a manifestation of human spirit and thus can be invested into a zealous life which is demonstrated as men's struggle to pursue the perfection of humanity. In the cases of the three problematic characters, their passionate pursuit for art seemingly makes them stand by the side of perfection, yet what they demonstrated as aestheticism is untenable. For their link with art is in essence motivated by the materialism that detached them from the soul of art. The divorce between art and life is fundamentally caused by their insufficient morality, the agency that makes art and life mutually interrelate.

Browning's choice of the dramatic monologue is itself ethically charged: by allowing each speaker to unfold within a closed circuit of self-address, the form highlights the failure of relationship, the collapse of dialogue, and the diminishment of spiritual growth. Art, for Browning, cannot remain a self-enclosed ornament or an emblem of personal vanity. Rather, it becomes a mode of living that places the infinite within the finite—a dynamic practice animated by the tension of imperfection, by engagement with others, and by the ethical responsibilities that accompany creation. Only when art is illuminated by love, humility, and responsibility does it reenter life as a vital force, capable of guiding the human soul beyond limitation toward something akin to the divine. In their narcissistic satisfaction with art, they are revealed not as men in act but as still and stagnant men whose personalities were not

nourished by the human spirit in art. Their narcissism is accompanied by their failure in living a possible infinite life which can be realized in the dynamic process of engaging with others and pursuing the perfection of humanity. Demonstrated by their stagnant self and broken human relations, the three figures have no possibilities in getting themselves involved in whether art or life, only being ironically presented as lingering bodies without the soul.

Seen in this light, Browning's Renaissance is not merely a historical reconstruction but a poetic arena in which the dangers of art's misdirection are laid bare. His portraits of corrupted beauty and hollow magnificence remind us that art, when severed from humanistic and ethical concerns, turns sterile: it is collected, displayed, and perfected, yet loses its generative relation to the world. The very notion of "perfection" is recast as an illusion of closure, which, far from elevating the human spirit, imprisons it in finitude. By contrast, Browning insists on a vision of "perfection in imperfection": a paradoxical condition in which human limitation is not denied but embraced as the ground for striving, revision, and growth. Failure, incompleteness, and the ceaseless reaching beyond the self are not marks of deficiency but signs of vitality. It is in these processes—painful, unstable, and unfinished—that art and life mutually authenticate each other. Thus, Browning's Renaissance monologues do not merely lament the corruption of art but open a deeper meditation: true art is inseparable from ethical being, and it is through the very fractures of imperfection that both artist and humanity may find their way toward transcendence.

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