

The New York Browning Society, Inc. Newsletter

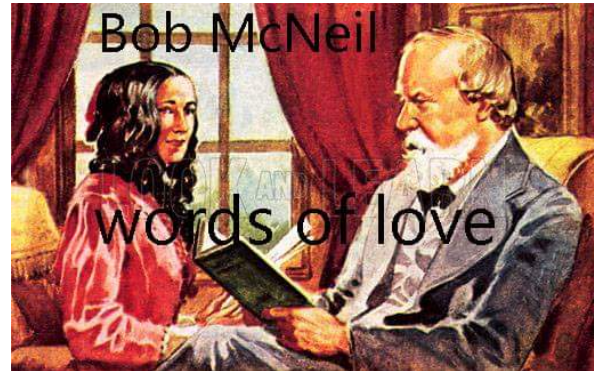
Founded in 1907

The National Arts Club
15 Gramercy Park South
New York NY 10003

Meeting Wednesday, April 10

Time 1:00– 2:00PM

Bob McNeil, “Words of Love”



In anticipation of Bob McNeil’s talk “Words of Love,” I want in this month’s newsletter to take a closer look at Browning’s first letter to Elizabeth Barrett. It is the letter that began one of the most renowned literary love stories of all time, and it also provides an interesting insight into the Romantic poetic persona that Browning wanted to present to his future wife. The letter also foregrounds some of the key themes that Browning explores in his poetry:

I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett,—and this is no off-hand complimentary letter that I shall write,—whatever else, no prompt matter-of-course recognition of your genius and there a graceful and natural end of the thing: since the day last week when I first read your poems, I quite laugh to remember how I have been turning and turning again in my mind what I should be able to tell you of their effect upon me—for in the first flush of delight I thought I would this once get out of my habit of purely passive enjoyment, when I do really enjoy, and thoroughly justify my admiration—perhaps even, as a loyal fellow-craftsman should, try and find fault

and do you some little good to be proud of hereafter!— but nothing comes of it all—so into me has it gone, and part of me has it become, this great living poetry of yours, not a flower of which but took root and grew .. oh, how different that is from lying to be dried and pressed flat and prized highly and put in a book with a proper account at top and bottom, and shut up and put away .. and the book called a “Flora,” besides! After all, I need not give up the thought of doing that, too, in time; because even now, talking with whoever is worthy, I can give a reason for my faith in one and another excellence, the fresh strange music, the affluent language, the exquisite pathos and true new brave thought—but in this addressing myself to you, your own self, and for the first time, my feeling rises altogether. I do, as I say, love these Books with all my heart—and I love you too.

Robert Browning begins his first letter to Elizabeth Barrett by declaring a love so deep and sincere that it goes quite beyond the ordinary. Browning concedes that it is not a typical letter of praise because he cannot offer Elizabeth constructive feedback about

her poetry as a fellow poet or as a critic, since he has perceived the totality of her poetry through feeling that ‘rises altogether.’ Since to break that feeling down into its constituent parts through analysis would be to lose its organic or natural power, he can only do justice to her ‘great living poetry’ by asserting the totality of his love, rather than by giving reasons for his appreciation.

Browning constructs a metaphor to convey the difference between knowing and feeling, comparing a flower desiccated and trapped between the pages of a book to a flower flourishing in nature, blooming from the growth of its plant and falling to the ground to contribute to the plant’s growth with its own decay. For Browning, to know something is to give ‘a proper account’ of it, and this knowledge is thus only as deep as its details; whereas to feel something is to be overcome with the inherent truth or genius of that thing, only expressible ‘with all my heart.’

This comparison between feeling and knowledge or analysis is indeed an enduring theme throughout Browning’s poetry. When the force of a person’s feelings triumphs over their analytical faculties, they can bypass an analysis of its parts and open themselves to a perception of the organic whole of a work of art in all its intended vitality.

Browning ends the letter by disclosing to her that he had once before had the chance to meet her in person:

Mr Kenyon said to me one morning “would you like to see Miss Barrett?”—then he went to announce me,—then he returned .. you

were too unwell—and now it is years ago—and I feel as at some untoward passage in my travels—as if I had been close, so close, to some world’s-wonder in chapel or crypt, .. only a screen to push and I might have entered—but there was some slight .. so it now seems .. slight and just-sufficient bar to admission, and the half-opened door shut, and I went home my thousands of miles, and the sight was never to be.

With this image of the crypt or chapel, Browning depicts Elizabeth as the object of his reverence and worship, and hints at an almost spiritual calling to see her, just as in the trope of the heroic quest. Although his journey was thwarted, he declares that reading Elizabeth’s poetry allowed him to experience this mystical union with her. He ends the letter with an affirmation of the force of her poetry and his commitment to her and to her art:

Well, these Poems were to be—and this true thankful joy and pride with which I feel myself

*Yours ever faithfully,
Robert Browning.*

We hope you can join us to learn more about Robert and Elizabeth’s famous love story.

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