

The New York Browning Society, Inc. Newsletter

Founded in 1907

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

Date Wednesday, February 12, 2020.

Time 1:00– 2:00PM

Xavier High School and Clinton High School Poetry Reading



We hope that you will be able to join us in February for a poetry reading with Xavier and Clinton High Schools as they continue the poetic legacy of the Brownings. Not only does the poetry of the Brownings continue to influence later generations but their relationship continues to have a pervasive hold on the literary imagination. Every Christmas I spend the holidays in England with my family in East Sussex, and this year I had the opportunity to visit Virginia Woolf's summer retreat, Monks House. When I was perusing the gift shop, I happened upon her novel, *Flush*, an experimental biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's beloved cocker spaniel. This extremely funny and charming biography charts Flush's early life with Mrs. Mitford: how he sacrifices the joys of nature to become Elizabeth's companion, his jealousy over Elizabeth's burgeoning romance with Robert Browning, his horrific kidnap and daring rescue, and the excitement and fear of leaving Wimpole Street for Italy where he finally finds love, freedom, and

happiness. Although Woolf's novel is ostensibly about Elizabeth's dog, through the vivid immediacy of Flush's senses—his tastes, smells, and perceptions—Woolf beautifully evokes the intense emotion and drama of the Brownings' love story.

Through Flush's impressions of the external world, Woolf paints a picture of the complete transformation that takes place in Elizabeth after meeting Browning. Before Browning's first visit, Flush and Elizabeth live a life of seclusion in a room with dark, heavy drapes and furniture. Elizabeth rarely eats; she is weak and apathetic: "Flush felt that he and Miss Barrett lived alone together in a cushioned and fire-lit cave." But after receiving mysterious letters, Flush perceives Elizabeth's agitation and notices her increasing appetite. Flush's world is turned upside down once Browning enters their insulated sphere: "that dark, taut, abrupt, vigorous man, with his black hair, his red cheeks and his yellow gloves, was everywhere." Through *Flush*, we are able to viscerally experience Elizabeth's new vitality: "Flush had never heard that sound in

Miss Barrett's voice before—that vigour, that excitement. Her cheeks were bright as he had never seen them bright; her great eyes blazed as he had never seen him blaze.”

At first, Flush resents Browning's intrusion into their isolated and withdrawn lives, but escaping to Italy saves them both from their listless existence. Flush and Elizabeth leave behind the dark, heavy, and oppressive Victorian bedroom at Wimpole Street for the spacious and airy rooms of Casa Guidi, graciously bathed in light. Flush's freedom is mirrored in the joy of Elizabeth's new life with Robert. Together they explore lakes and mountains, delight in both the sun and the cold, and Flush roams the countryside, fulfilling his natural urges, and reveling in the sensory landscape of Italy. Flush's physical pleasure clearly reflects Elizabeth's serenity and self-actualization.

The Brownings' love story deeply affected Woolf. She wrote in her essay on *Aurora Leigh* that “nobody can deny the power of the Brownings to excite our sympathy and rouse our interest.” When I read Woolf's description of Casa Guidi and her depiction of Flush's exhilaration in Italy, I could not help but think that Woolf must have felt the same sense of liberation when she rejected the shackles of the previous Victorian generation. Woolf enjoyed spending time at Charleston House, the summer home of her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell who, along with the painter Duncan Grant, painted directly onto the walls and furniture of the house in a bright vivacious colors and experimented with new post-impressionistic styles. Vanessa Bell's simple and beautiful sketch of Elizabeth at Casa Guidi depicts her sitting in front of large open windows,

looking out at the city of Florence. Woolf's novel *Flush* and Bell's illustration reveal the sympathy the sisters felt with Elizabeth and how her story enriched their imaginations, especially the communion they felt having made a daring escape from the oppressive Victorian world.



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