

The New York Browning Society, Inc. Newsletter

Founded in 1907

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

Monthly Meeting 1:00– 2:00PM

Wednesday, March 13, 2019

**Robert Kramer, “Elizabeth's Rivals:
Women and their Mirrors”**



We hope that you will be able to join us for Robert Kramer’s talk this month, “Elizabeth's Rivals: Women and their Mirrors.” Considering Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s popularity and influence, Kramer’s talk will explore several poems by women authors on the theme of the mirror and the reflection in the mirror, including poems by Christina Rossetti, Mary Elizabeth Coleridge, Sylvia Plath, and Annette von Droste-Hülshoff.

Elizabeth’s influence on women poets has been profound and wide reaching. Indeed, in her own time, Elizabeth was a much more popular poet than her husband, Robert Browning. Although Elizabeth also experimented with a variety of dramatic forms in her poetry, her self-expressive lyrical poems were extremely popular considering the vogue for romantic and sentimental ballads and lyrics in the nineteenth century.

In their early courtship, Browning praised his future wife for her ability to express herself in her lyrics, something he had turned away from in his own work. Browning exclaimed to Elizabeth in a letter:

“you *do* what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only seem now likely to do for the first time—you speak out, *you*,— I only make men & women speak,—give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me: but I am going to try.” In turn, Elizabeth encouraged him to be more self-expressive in his poetry:

“I do not think that, with all that music in you, only your own personality should be dumb, nor that having thought so much & deeply about life & its ends, you should not teach what you have learnt, in the directest & most impressive way, the mask thrown off however moist with the breath. And it is not, I believe, by the dramatic medium, that poets teach most impressively.”

It is perhaps the fact that Browning positioned himself as an “objective” poet that appealed less to Victorian readers, but for him this was an important philosophical stance. Browning tried to explain this position to Elizabeth in his poem “One Word More,” which he conceived of as an epilogue to his collection of dramatic monologues *Men and Women*. In this poem, Browning

explains that his inner feelings, the ineffable nature of his love, cannot be perfectly expressed, in much the same way that any transcendent truth cannot be perfectly articulated. However, he suggests that this inner transcendent reality can be embodied in symbols. As the expression of the infinite in the finite, symbols can indirectly communicate the transcendent truths of the soul.

In “One Word More,” Browning acknowledges Elizabeth’s wish to see more self-expression in his poetry, and at first it appears he will try when he addresses her in his own voice: “Let me speak this once in my true person.” However, Browning quickly concedes the ultimate futility of this endeavor: “Where my heart lies, let my brain lie also! / Poor the speech; be how I speak for all things.” Although Browning admits here the impossibility of fully expressing his divine love for his wife, he calls her attention to another mode of communication: “Yet a semblance of resource avails us— / Shade so finely touched, love's sense must seize it.” This resource is for Browning the symbol.

Browning reminds Elizabeth that she saw him “gather men and women” and “enter each and all, and use their service, / Speak from every mouth, —the speech, a poem,” and he asks her to see them as symbols. He exclaims, however, that it takes “love's sense”—the feelings that intuit the soul—to recognize them as such. Therefore, he asks Elizabeth, and by implication the reader, to look at his dramatic monologues “lovingly,” through the exalted sense of love that perceives truth, as well as “nearly,” to see how they embody the feelings of soul that he cannot express in language.

We hope you can join us for Robert Kramer’s exciting talk.

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