

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, November 16, 2019

Michael Polesny: “The Drama of Music, The Music of Drama: Echoes of Browning in T. S. Eliot.”



We hope that you will be able to join us for Michael Polesny’s talk, which questions the purposes behind T.S. Eliot’s readiness to single out Browning to later generations of poets as “the one poet” worth studying.

T.S. Eliot in 1920 remarked that among all the Victorian poets there exists only “one Victorian poet whom our contemporary can study with much profit.” Eliot -- who was always also something of an evangelist of Elizabeth Barrett Browning -- was speaking of EB Browning’s husband, Robert Browning, and he knew well that, in his exclusion of about a dozen other monumental Victorian poets, he was singling out Browning as “the one” poet who could give to early-twentieth-century poets something without which their poetry would remain facile and socially insignificant. More specifically, Eliot’s Browning is a poet who gave to poets of later centuries the sound of authentic dramatic conflict, the sound of epektasis (Greek for “outstretching”), which for Eliot was the sound of that rare human who, to use Browning’s own words for epektasis, dares

to let his “reach exceed his grasp.” Specifically, Eliot identifies that sound as “the music of a word...[that] can be made to insinuate the whole history of a language and of a civilization.”

The declaration that “man’s reach should exceed his grasp” is spoken by Browning’s perfect painter, Andrea del Sarto, when he compares the technical virtuosity of his paintings to those of Raphael:

That arm is wrongly put—and there
again—
A fault to pardon in the drawing’s lines,
Its body, so to speak: its soul is right,
He means right—that, a child may
understand.
Still, what an arm! and I could alter it:
But all the play, the insight and the
stretch—

Browning’s del Sarto sees that the arm in Raphael’s painting is not empirically correct— “That arm is wrongly put”— unlike his own flawless technique, but he admits that Raphael’s painting is superior to

his own since it is the soul that makes a true work of art— “its soul is right.”

For Browning, the imperfections of Raphael’s painting point toward the ineffable source of inspiration— “all the play, the insight and the stretch.” Art for Browning is not just about the perfection of form but the transcendent idea that is embodied in it. This is why he felt that Christian art was superior to classical art: while spirit is perfectly embodied in the grace and beauty of form in classical art, the Christian soul always longs for the perfection of the next world, and thus its transcendent longings can never be fully embodied.

Browning’s idea that “man’s reach should exceed his grasp” is also illustrated in one of his early lyrical dramas, *Pippa Passes*. When Jules, a neoclassical artist studying in Rome, hears Pippa’s song, he experiences a spiritual awakening that transforms his view of art. Jules realizes that he has erred by focusing on the external form—the classical ideal—at the expense of soul, which is the essence of the Christian perspective: “This body had no soul before, but slept / Or stirred, was beautiful or ungainly, free / From taint or foul with stain, as outward things / Fastened their image on its passiveness.”

Upon hearing Pippa's song, Jules is awakened to a higher order of things that enables him to perceive the spirit in the body. Embarking on a new kind of art to express this epiphany, Jules knows that he will either be successful at embodying soul in form, or he will fail and the result will be as lifeless as before: “Now, it will wake, feel, live—or die again!” However, art for

Browning is about taking this risk and stretching outside the bounds of the finite.

Please hold the date, December 11th, for our annual poetry reading with students from Clinton and Xavier High Schools. Join us in choosing your favorite Robert and/or Elizabeth Browning poems.



T. S. Eliot

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