

The New York Browning Society, Inc. Newsletter

Founded in 1907

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

Monthly Meeting:

Wednesday, October 10, 2018

The Brownings in Tuscanysire

Tom d'Edigio - Poet



When I met our president James Kepple over lunch to discuss my new position as the Corresponding Secretary, he handed me an innocuous looking cardboard box. To my great delight, I found inside a treasure trove of documents relating to the rich past of the New York Browning Society. Among the documents there were programs that detailed plans for ambitious study classes as well as the minutes from meetings dating back to the 1920s. I spent a wonderful afternoon reading through this eclectic collection of materials, but I was particularly struck by the published minutes from the December meeting of 1942, held at the Waldorf Astoria, in which Grace Hazard Conkling, a professor of poetry at Smith College, gave a talk on Browning entitled “The Responsibility of the Poet.” This responsibility was certainly a concern for Browning in the nineteenth century, just as it was for Professor Conkling at the time of the Second World War.

For my first newsletter and as an opening to this season’s program of talks and events, it seemed fitting to ponder: what interested people about Browning in the past?

What interests us about Browning now? What were the goals of the Browning society when it began? How has it evolved, and what new directions will it take in the future? When reading the minutes for Professor Conkling’s talk, I could not help but linger on a paragraph in which she spoke of Browning’s enduring modernity. I quote this section in full because it speaks to the importance of Browning today and to the continuation of our society, especially at a time when the humanities are seen to be have less relevance for our contemporary issues and needs:

When planning a course at Smith College, to serve as a sort of connection between the older poetry and modern verse, given a choice between Tennyson and Browning, Mrs. Conkling unhesitatingly chose Browning. For, she said, Browning scarcely seems to belong in the nineteenth century. He seems of the moment. He has the modern approach—the indirect, the colloquial. The flicker and flash of his irony; the way in which his interest in

people takes in both the evil and the good; the fact that he doesn't moralize or preach but lets people speak for themselves—if they are condemned, it is out of their own mouths; the fearless way in which he tells the truth, no matter how unpleasant—all this is modern. Mrs. Conkling expressed the wish that Browning could be back here to “do” a few people right now. What a study he would make of Hitler!

Professor Conkling's assessment holds true today, for Browning still has much to say to us. In looking back at Browning, he can help us to think about our present moment and to envision the future. Indeed, Browning believed this to be the role of the poet. Browning exclaimed in his famous “Essay on Shelley” that when “the world is found to be subsisting wholly on the shadow of a reality, on sentiments diluted from passions, on the tradition of a fact, the convention of a moral, the straw of last year's harvest” there is a need for the poet to “replace this intellectual rumination of food swallowed long ago, by a supply of the fresh and living swathe.” This requires a poet to interpret the present in light of the past and to fashion the forms of the future, which is something Browning admired in Percy Shelley, writing in “Popularity”: “My poet holds the future fast, / Accepts the coming ages' duty, / Their present for this past.”

Our President, as both a poet and a lover of Browning, has fused the creative and the critical to shape the new direction of the society. The Browning Society's annual poetry competition, held in over one hundred and twenty schools, has introduced

young people to Browning's work, ensured his inclusion in the high school curriculum, and incited a passion for poetry in the young adults who are our future civilians and leaders. In order to continue this goal, the Browning Society is striving to make itself more accessible to a younger generation of members, and we hope to expand our reach in the future by offering additional evening meetings.

Browning scholarship continues to attest to Browning's striking modernity. Hédi A. Jaouad, who has previously presented his work to the Browning Society of New York, has recently published a groundbreaking new book, *Browning on Arabia: A Movable East*, with Palgrave Macmillan. As we grapple with the legacy of nineteenth-century politics on the Middle East, Jaouad's book is a timely reminder of Browning's progressive views. Below I excerpt the abstract for this engaging new study, which can be purchased on Amazon or through the Palgrave website.

Browning Upon Arabia charts Robert Browning's early and enduring engagement with the East, particularly the Arab East. This book highlights the complexities of Browning's poetry, revealing Browning's resistance to triumphalist and imperialist forms of Orientalism generated by many nineteenth-century British and European literary and scholarly portrayals of the East. Hédi A. Jaouad argues that Browning extensively researched the literature, history, philosophy, and culture of the East to produce poetry that is sensitive to its Eastern resources and devoted to

confirming the interrelation of Northern and Eastern knowledge in pursuit of a new form of transcendental humanism.

We are fortunate to have Tom d'Egidio, a noted poet, as the speaker for our October meeting, where he will address another fascinating facet of Browning's life and work. D'Egidio, who is currently working on a memoir of 80s Downtown Manhattan called "Basquiat Requiem," will explore the Brownings' relationship to Florence, in a talk that raises complex issues of identity, politics, and history. Please find the below the abstract for this exciting presentation:

In 1846 Elizabeth and Robert Browning eloped to Italy, spending most of the time until Elizabeth's 1861 death living in Florence. Elizabeth had been a lifelong Italophile who had written poems in Italian while still in England. Yet during all their Florentine years they essentially had no Italian friends, living exclusively within the English colony wryly referred to by some, as Tuscanyshire.

Although they were generally in accord with the ongoing struggle for Italian unification, their greatest interest, especially on Robert's part, was in Italy's past. They were both highly taken by the Italian literature and art of yesteryear, at the precise moment when the Swiss historian Jakob Burckhardt was in Italy formulating for the first time the concept of what we now refer to as the Renaissance, a period whose artists and princes fascinated Robert to the point of utterly transforming his poetry.

In going to live in Italy, Robert was following the example of his hero Shelley whom he otherwise resembled neither as poet nor in personality. Whereas Shelley struck those who knew him as the personification of Renaissance individuality, Browning's surprisingly banal conventionality led his friend Henry James to portray him as a doppelganger straight out of Edgar Allan Poe.

What were the complex reasons the Brownings had for going to Italy and what was the effect on their poetry of living there? What did Robert Browning in particular find in Italy that enabled him to become a great poet? What was really going on in Tuscanyshire?

We look forward to seeing you at the October meeting and to an exciting new season. Please look out for our November newsletter to learn more about James Kepple's discussion of Browning's mysterious poem "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came."

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