

The New York Browning Society, Inc. Newsletter

Founded in 1907

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

Annual Luncheon Wednesday, May 15

Time 12:00– 1:00PM

Timothy Donnelly, “Thirty-Four Observations on ‘Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came’”

May was an important month for Browning, since it was during this month in 1837 that his first play *Strafford* was performed at Covent Garden Theatre. This performance would mark the beginning of Browning's difficult and disappointing experience with the Victorian theater. Indeed, Browning is famous for being a failed playwright, and his plays were criticized for being too intellectual and philosophical, especially at a time when sensational melodramas were more popular on the stage.

Browning's *Strafford* was an ambitious play. It was not simply a historical tragedy but rather an exploration of Carlyle's concept of symbols—the material forms in the world that embody spiritual ideas. For Carlyle, these symbols must continually evolve so that they do not become fixed in tradition and stymie the spiritual vitality that ever embodies itself anew. The historical context for *Strafford* is seventeenth-century England leading up to the Civil War. Strafford believes in the undisputed power of the king, whereas Pym champions the increasing power of the people as it is



embodied in parliament. This for Browning represents the progress of symbols in history and the manifestation of spirit in new political forms.

Strafford is clearly influenced by Carlyle's *Lectures on Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, especially Carlyle's argument that Puritanism, as it was embodied in the actions of John Pym and Henry Vane, was a symbolic transition from political forms that had become merely tradition, outworn semblances, to a new organic embodiment of spiritual truth. Carlyle contends that English Puritanism was a continuation of the progress of the Protestant Reformation and that it looked forward to the French Revolution; together these were three successive stages in the return from “Falsehood and Semblance” to “Truth and Reality.”

Browning's play presents Pym as one of Carlyle's heroes, the individual who bodies forth the new spirit of the age, but his focus of the play is more on Strafford and the tragedy of a soul which is tethered to a

defunct symbol that no longer embodies the truth of the age. Browning depicts Strafford's dedication to the king as an inversion of teleological development, and the Biblical imagery that suffuses the play points to the fact that Strafford continues to worship what in the modern age can only be a false idol.

Strafford recognizes that he is being subsumed by the force of history. Thus when Strafford is betrayed by the king and sentenced to death, he expresses a willingness to die. Yet at the very moment of his death Strafford has a sudden vision of the pain and destruction that will bring about the new symbols that embody the ideas of spirit. Foreseeing the horrors of the Civil War, he cries: "I, that am to die, / What must I see! 'tis here—all here! My God, / Let me but gasp out, in one word of fire, / How Thou wilt plague him, satiating Hell! / What? England that you help, become through you / A green and putrefying charnel." This is for Browning the tragic aspect of the dialectical progress of history: progress is only rendered through conflict, and in its self-destruction and self-renewal, spirit sacrifices individuals to the greater purpose of history.

We see this in Pym's response to his old friend's prophetic vision. He declares coldly, "England,— I am thine own! Dost thou exact / That service? I obey thee to the end." It is Pym's conviction that the will of England is made manifest in his being and therefore he is compelled to subordinate personal connections. This highlights in the drama the tragic space between the individual and the collective good. Clearly Pym is one of Browning's great heroes, as we see in "Charles Avison," but his position

as a hero renders him far less human than Strafford, and when Stafford cries in the last line of the play: "O God, I shall die first—I shall die first" (l. 360), we feel the tragedy of one whose life is sacrificed for the future. May must have been a disappointing month for Browning; Strafford only ran for four nights and many critics declared it to be a disastrous debut. Sadly, Browning never found a receptive audience for his intellectual dramas, but his experience writing these dramas inevitably shaped the dramatic poetry for which he is remembered today.

We hope you will be able to join us for the annual luncheon and for Timothy Donnelly's exciting talk to close out the season.

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