

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, October 16, 2019



Tom d'Egidio: “D. G. Rossetti, Browning, A Pair of Harlots, and the Fleshly School of Poetry”

The Browning Society of New York welcomes you back for a new season of talks and events centering on the lives, works, and influence of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Our Society has run for an incredible one hundred and ten years, and this year we hope to expand the reach of our exciting programs. The New York Browning Society's High School Poetry Competition now includes over one hundred and twenty public, private, and parochial schools in the NYC Area. We look forward to developing further relationships with NYC schools, nurturing poetic talent, and to ensuring the legacy of the Brownings. This year, we will be launching our new website for the Society, which will display newsletters, videos, memos, and photographs. Our Society is also in talks to potentially include evening dates for some of our meetings.

We will kick off the new season's schedule with a presentation by the noted poet Tom d'Egidio. All members and their guests are welcome.

“D. G. Rossetti, R. Browning, A Pair of Harlots, and the Fleshly School of Poetry”

It was on an evening in 1855 London that Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Robert Browning first met on one of Browning's visits from Florence where he resided with his far more famous poet wife Elizabeth.

For most of those present Tennyson's reading of his “Maude” was undoubtedly the highlight of the evening, but the young Rossetti was in awe of the then far less celebrated Browning who read his “Fra Lippo Lippi” to the gathering.

Although this was the occasion of their first encounter in the flesh, they had been in communication with each other ever since the teenage Rossetti came across Browning's anonymous early poem “Pauline” in 1847, deduced its authorship and wrote a fan letter to Browning in Florence asking for corroboration.

Rossetti's astute detective work was possible because he was already one of Browning's few early fans, and his own adolescent

poetic production was very much in imitation of Browning. Nor was it just poetry that Browning inspired in the young Rossetti whose very first watercolor was inspired by Browning's 1844 poem "The Laboratory" when Rossetti was only sixteen.

At a time when Browning's "Sordello" was routinely denounced and ridiculed for its supposed incomprehensibility by Tennyson, Ruskin and other not exactly minor members of the English literary establishment, Rossetti regularly drove his fellow members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, the artistic movement he had largely launched, to the point of abstraction by subjecting them to fifty pages at a time of his passionate recitations of "Sordello."

On the surface there might seem to be much in common to bind Rossetti and Browning together. Both were fascinated by Italy, Italian art, literature and culture, but while Browning lived much of his life in Florence and then Venice, Rossetti, product of a cultured Italian speaking household in London, never set foot in Italy even once.

Both men were young widowers, their wives, both of them Elizabeths, dying within a few months of one another, but while Browning increasingly became a social butterfly following his Elizabeth's demise, Rossetti became a virtual hermit, holed up in the London house he rarely left after the death of his Lizzie from an overdose of laudanum.

Rossetti's poem "Jenny", about a prostitute, appeared as part of his book "Poems" in 1870. In 1872 his good friend Browning sent Rossetti a presentation copy of his new poem "Fifine at the Fair", also about a

prostitute. Rossetti began reading Browning's poem in the presence of his brother William who said he suddenly threw the book across the room, declaring Browning the leader of a huge conspiracy against him, and that the poem was a compendium of insinuations aimed entirely at him.

For the remaining ten years of his life Rossetti never saw or communicated with Browning again, thus bringing one of the Victorian age's great literary friendships to a precipitous end.

Is there in fact a connection between Rossetti's "Jenny" and Browning's "Fifine"? And is there something in "Fifine" that could have legitimately upset Rossetti? While presenting a colorful scenario (illustrated with projections) of the Victorian literary and artistic world, Tom d'Egidio will seek to solve this longstanding literary mystery.

Please also hold the date, November 13th, for our next exciting talk by Michael Polesny, PhD candidate at CUNY Graduate Center, on Robert Browning and T.S. Eliot.

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