

# 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 PM**

Wednesday, November 14, 2018



**“To the Dark Tower: Childe Roland,  
 C.S. Lewis, and The Gunslinger”  
 - James Kepple, Society President**

James Kepple will talk this month about Browning's enigmatic poem “Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came,” a dark vision of the knight's quest that came to Browning in an eerie dream. The meaning of this elusive poem has perplexed many readers, and while I will leave its subtleties for our President to explore, I want to consider in this month's newsletter what significance the Middle Ages had for Browning. Why did he set the psychological dreamscape of Childe Roland in the Middle Ages? How does the medieval inform the modern for Browning? As we will see, Browning saw something in the Middle Ages that he believed explained the essence of the modern condition.

It is well known that the Victorians were fascinated with the idea of the Middle Ages, as seen in Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present*, the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites, Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, and the Gothic Revival, to mention a few examples. Yet, unlike his contemporaries, Browning did not privilege medieval subject matter, undoubtedly agreeing with

this proclamation of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*:

Nay, if there's room for poets in the world  
 A little overgrown, (I think there is)  
 Their sole work is to represent the age,  
 Their age, not Charlemagne's,—this live,  
 throbbing age,  
 That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates,  
 aspires,  
 And spends more passion, more heroic heat,  
 Betwixt the mirrors of its drawing-rooms,  
 Than Roland with his knights, at Roncesvalles.

Browning preferred to grapple with modern questions, and even in his works that are about medieval subjects, such as *Sordello* and *The Return of the Druses*, he tends to explore the inner lives of complex individual figures, placing them in the context of historical phenomena, rather than offering imaginative renderings of mythic and legendary tales. But while Browning did not turn as often to the medieval topics that preoccupied his contemporaries, the idea of the Middle Ages was in fact crucial for his concept of the modern age. To understand the connection that Browning

made between the medieval and the modern, we must turn to his theory of history, which was a theory of history popularized in England by the many English translations of lectures given in Germany by the brothers literary and critics, August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel.

In their influential lectures on literature and history, the Schlegel brothers argued that history was demarcated between Paganism and Christianity. The crucial distinction that the Schlegel brothers made between the classical and the Christian paradigms was grounded in their concept of subjectivity; they believed that the classical human invested soul in the material world so that soul was seen as external to the self, whereas Christianity turned humanity inward to contemplate the transcendence of the soul. They saw the flowering of courtly love as the first embodiment of the modern spirit: women were held as a symbol of divine love, and the medieval code of chivalry dictated external action on the basis of the intuitions of the soul. The Schlegel brothers saw their own age as a continuation of this inward turn. They believed that the external world was a symbol of an inward spiritual reality, just as humanity was the imperfect embodiment of the divine idea.

Browning turns to this idea in his poem “Old Pictures in Florence.” In the speaker’s defense of early Christian painters, he makes a comparison between the classical and the modern worlds that is derived from the Schlegel brothers. The speaker concedes that while classical art perfected the beauty of form, as seen in their sculptures, in focusing on the soul, the modern artist can never perfectly embody the inward life. Yet the speaker, in speaking for humanity at

large, realizes that classical art is only perfect in the context of the finite, whereas the modern is only imperfect in the context of the infinite. This leads the speaker to voice an important facet of Browning’s poetic theory:

On which I conclude, that the early painters,  
To cries of “Greek Art and what more wish  
you?”—  
Replied, “To become now self-acquainters,  
“And paint man man, whatever the issue!  
“Make new hopes shine through the flesh they  
fray,  
“New fears aggrandize the rags and tatters:  
“To bring the invisible full into play!  
“Let the visible go to the dogs—what matters?”

Browning, like the Schlegel brothers, viewed his own contemporary moment as the continuation of the Middle Ages, seeing all speech and action as the attempt to realize the inward life. This for Browning was the very opposite of utilitarianism, which considered the worth of action in the world based upon the calculation of external causes and effects. Browning, therefore, sought to trace actions back to the internal motivations that we might not normally perceive. He delights in tracing the twists and turns of the soul as individuals make choices and take action at critical moments in their lives. As Browning explained in the preface to his drama *Strafford*, his aim was to reveal “action in character, rather than character in action.”

Browning did not always feel the need to turn to medieval subjects to explore the complex vicissitudes of character, seeing the modern condition as a continuation of the turn inward to soul that began in the Middle Ages. Childe Roland is unique in that he compresses the medieval and the modern in a vision that has haunted writers ever since.

James Kepple's talk, "To the Dark Tower: Childe Roland, C.S. Lewis, and The Gunslinger" will examine the impact of Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came." From its influences to its influence, "Childe Roland" is truly a poem that resonates in abundance. Its roots are formed from a Scottish Ballad and Shakespeare's *King Lear*, out of which Browning crafts a treacherous road, leaving a map that leads three adventurers towards the ultimate destination. From the historic past, to the unknown future, the Dark Tower has guided and led our hero Childe Roland, and authors C.S. Lewis and Stephen King, down various paths grounded in Browning's Epic Poem. Let's trace their routes together, onward, to the Dark Tower.

I will be in touch soon with updates about our new website, and plan ahead for our festive winter, as our yearly Browning Celebration is coming soon, on Wednesday December 12<sup>th</sup>! All members are invited to share their favorite Browning poems and holiday cheer!

Also coming soon is a very special performance of "Dear Miss Barrett," a musical on the Brownings, written by Michael Kurek. Please note that this performance will be held on a new date, THURSDAY JAN 17<sup>th</sup> at 1pm.

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