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, February 13, 2019
Xavier High School and Gramercy Arts High School Poetry Reading

This month the Browning Society of New York is pleased to present the original poetry of students from Xavier High School and Gramercy Arts High School inspired by the poetry of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. It is always a pleasure to see a new generation engaging with the Brownings' ideas and bringing their insights into our own day. This leads me in this month's newsletter to think about Browning as a young man and how he interacted with his own literary idols. As we know, the poet that sparked the young Browning's poetic ambition was the radical Romantic poet Percy Shelley, whose poems he had happened upon one day when perusing a box of second-hand books. Browning was entirely enthralled by Shelley, and for some time, to his mother's despair, he followed Shelley by renouncing Christianity and becoming a vegan. Browning would regain his faith in God (and his enjoyment of meat), but the fact that he kept a flower from Shelley's grave his whole life tells us much about his continued devotion to Shelley.

Even though Browning escaped from under Shelley's spell, he continued to define himself in relation to his former idol's poetry. In his 1851 "Essay on Shelley" Browning famously characterized Shelley as the archetypal subjective poet who seeks to embody what he perceives, not in relation to broader humanity but rather in relation to "the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth." He aspires therefore to express "not what man sees, but what God sees—the Ideas of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand." In contrast, the objective poet, who shares the same heightened vision of the subjective poet, seeks "to reproduce things external (whether the phenomena of the human heart and brain) with an immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow me, assumed capable of receiving of profiting by this reproduction." In appealing to "the aggregate human mind" rather than expressing the depths of the individual soul, the objective poet "chooses to deal with the doings of men." For Browning, Shelley embodied a transcendent idealism and an exulted spiritual poetic vision. Browning, then, turns to the figure of Shelley in his poetry in order to

define his own poetic identity in opposition to this notion of the inspired poet-prophet. This is not because Browning does not believe in eternal truths that he sees as embodied in Shelley and his poetry, but because he preferred to explore in his dramatic poetry the difficulties faced by the individual soul in realizing these ideals in the complexities of the real world.

Browning explores this transition in his first published poem, *Pauline: The Fragment of a Confession,* which is widely believed to be one of Browning's most overtly autobiographical poems. The poet-narrator voices Browning's youthful passion for Shelley and reflects upon why it is he had to move away from Shelley to forge his own path. The problem that Shelley poses to the young Browning is expressed by the poet-narrator when he bares his soul to his lover, Pauline. When the poet-narrator describes the journey he has taken from his first intimations of poetic aspiration to his mature poetic stance, he explains that Shelley's poetry set him the impossible task: "To disentangle, gather sense from song: / Since, song-inwoven, lurked there words which seemed / A key to a new world, the muttering / Of angels, something yet unguessed by man." Shelley's song transports the young poet to spiritual truths, but the challenge for the poet-narrator, and for Browning, is whether he can ultimately embody the ideal forms that he follows in Shelley's bewitching song. The poet-narrator is anguished when he faces the real world and finds that no ideal can ever be fully realized, and this precipitates a dark period of disillusion and despair. The more mature poet comes out of this period of darkness, declaring: "I aim not even to catch a tone / Of harmonies he [Shelley] called profusely up." However, although Browning turns away from Shelley's transcendent poetry to the necessarily imperfect world of "men in action," this is not a rejection of Shelley's idealism. The poet-narrator confesses that Shelley's song can still be heard: "A melody some wondrous singer sings, / Which, though it haunt men oft in the still eve, / They dream not to essay; yet it no less / But more is honoured" (ll. 222–225). Rather than renouncing Shelley, Browning makes his poetry an abiding symbol for the transcendent truths that cannot be fully expressed in language, which belongs to conceptual thought, but can be apprehended through the poetic imagination.

We hope you can join us to celebrate these inspired young poetic voices.