

BEVERLY TAYLOR

The Brownings' Correspondence. Volume 15. Edited by Philip Kelley, Scott Lewis, and Edward Hagan. Winfield, KS: Wedgestone Press, 2005. xvi + 432 pp., \$95.00.

LIKE ITS PREDECESSORS IN THE STELLAR EDITION OF THE *Brownings' Correspondence*, Volume 15 is impeccably edited, richly annotated, and carefully documented. Besides all known letters from January 1848 through August 1849 written by Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as well as some addressed to them, it includes excerpts from supporting materials, biographical sketches of important figures among their correspondents or subjects of discussion, and contemporary reviews of the Brownings' poetry. The ninety-six letters in this volume relate important personal events such as the Brownings' taking up permanent residence at Casa Guidi in Florence, the birth of their only child (Robert Wiedeman Barrett Browning, or "Pen"), the death of Robert's beloved mother and his resulting depression, and the holidays in La Spezia and Bagni di Lucca that Elizabeth hoped would lift his spirits. Significant literary events include Elizabeth's presenting the manuscript of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* to Robert, her efforts to publish *A Meditation in Tuscany* (which EBB says *Blackwood's* refused as being "past all human understanding" [136] and which eventually became Part One of *Casa Guidi Windows*), her publishing "The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" in the Boston abolitionist annual *The Liberty Bell*, Robert's publishing his first collected edition of *Poems* (2 vols., 1849), and the London staging of *A Blot in the 'Scutcheon* (a "complete & legitimate success" [182]).

As with the previous volumes of the *Correspondence*, most of these letters were penned by Elizabeth and further

demonstrate that she was one of the great letter-writers of the century—chatty, playful, witty, ironic, learned, keenly observant, and deeply thoughtful. Robert acknowledged her prodigious appetite and talent for correspondence by deferring to her in a note to R. H. Horne: “I would tell you more about our ways . . . but that my wife has the readier pen” (170). Even so, several substantial letters from Robert in this volume command particular interest. One of these confesses to her sisters Henrietta and Arabella that he has prevailed on Elizabeth not to write so many long letters about events in Italy while she recovers from a miscarriage (“taken ill,” as she described her condition to another correspondent [46]). Robert also announces Pen’s birth to his sisters-in-law. Both letters to Henrietta and Arabella reveal that he could be as charming as the epistolary EBB. In describing Pen’s baptism to his sister Sarianna, he expresses how tremendously significant he found Elizabeth’s insistence that the boy be called by the maiden name of his recently deceased mother. He also expresses his severe grief and depression following this bereavement: “I am wholly tired of opening my eyes on the world now,” he sympathizes with Sarianna, who has no opportunity to relieve her own mourning in the kind of travel and diversion available to him (306). Two of Robert’s longer letters to Horne reveal his acute concern to retrieve his youthful letters to Eliza Flowers and her copies of his early poems. Enlisting Horne’s aid in securing these materials and squelching their publication, Robert deplores, “Oh . . . these biography makers!” who would pillage the privacy of even living writers (199), an attitude also espoused by EBB in insisting that her letters to H. S. Boyd be returned to her, not to be published “while I live” (322).

While Robert’s eagerness to suppress his early work and shield his private correspondence from public scrutiny is long familiar, as is his extreme grief following his mother’s death, many of Elizabeth’s letters reveal generally unacknowledged dimensions of her political attitudes and engagement with the cultural currents of her day. Whereas her early biographers and critics often dismissed her views on the Risorgimento as “hysteria” and derided her assessment of Napoleon III as foolish hero-worship, these letters reveal a far more finely nuanced response to the events unfolding in the ferment of ’48. She

delights in the revolutions of that year as “moral earthquakes” in which the “whole edifice of political falsehood is crumbling” (40) and judges that “Enlightened liberal England, with her Jew-bill & anti-chartism, is in ar[r]ears with the civilization & liberty of the rest of Europe” (89). While she opposes aristocratic suppression of democratic principles as “the bitter wrong of primogeniture, & of legislative privilege by birth” (54) and supports the Chartists in England (67), she also critiques the second French Republic as a “government controuled by mobs & sticks” (63) that she associates with communism (54, 66). Although she declares herself and Robert to be fervent “republicans . . . by profession” (49), judges that “*patriarchal*” government leads to absolutism (54), and labels the December 1848 election of Louis Napoleon to the presidency an act of “true king-worship” (203), she predicts that France will fare better by returning to a monarchy (93). Unprepared by their history of “military despotism” to sustain a republicanism that has been “tripped up” by socialism, the French (“childish” republicans), she prophesizes, will choose Bonaparte’s nephew as president because he is “the thing nearest to a king” (105, 174, 146). Expecting a revival of empire in France not because of her infatuation with Louis Napoleon but because of French history and the resulting lack of readiness among its people (“the horrors of popular despotism exceed the terrors of despotism after the old fashion”), she believes in “France, but not in the French republic” (218–19).

Italy, she observes, falters in a different way in its quest for republican government. She initially cherishes high hopes when Florence’s Grand Duke grants a constitution and Italian revolutionaries achieve successes against Austria. She praises the calm and seriousness of Florentine elections, which return moderates and land-proprietors as legislators, in contrast to the crisis and massacre in “poor France,” where, she judges, the bourgeoisie have grown tired of democratic institutions (98–99). When the Austrians return to Florence, however, she attributes the Risorgimento’s failure to a lack of popular will: Italians “have only the rhetoric of patriots & soldiers,” Florentines are “conciliating & affectionate” but lack “*stamina*,” “conscience,” and “self-reverence,” so that Tuscany “here . . . lies, eating ices & keeping the feast of the Madonna” (125).

Although the Tuscan Grand Duke appoints a “high radical ministry” that promises republican change, she knows it will falter (146). She proclaims Mazzini as Italy’s “truest hero & patriot,” but judges that he lacks the wisdom necessary to lead Italy to independence (280). Eventually she despairs, for the time being, of the formation of an Italian republic, for the “instructed are not patriotic, and the patriots are not instructed. . . . [T]here will be deliverance . . . but it will not be now” (324). This limited sampling of her assessments of the quickly moving events in both France and Italy in 1848–49 suggest several aspects of her engagement with European political events of the period that have often been unappreciated by her critics: the consistency of her own values and political principles; her clear grasp of realities that conflicted with her hopes and ideals; her capacity to recognize and accept the differing cultural histories, popular opinions, and practices of different nations and peoples rather than insisting that one form of republicanism must fit all; and her ability to envision long-range progress made in measured increments between setbacks.

While her complex views on the revolutionary events in France and Italy are perhaps the most compelling and revelatory features of this volume, the letters provide lively details relevant to many aspects of the Brownings’ life and times. Elizabeth’s feminism, for example, registers when she praises the greater freedom enjoyed by continental women than by Englishwomen (2) and explains that the French revolution of 1848 prompted her wish for a movement to liberate women. Because “it is a great evil that personal liberty should be restrained by social obstacles—more ruinous to the happiness of individuals, than all the political obstacles in the world,” she declares, women ought to “reorganize their position” (34–35). Elizabeth’s letters also shed light on the Brownings’ religious attitudes, their hatred of narrowness and bigotry, their capacious definition of Christianity and receptiveness to Swedenborgianism and spiritualism. Aware that she is more free-thinking than most Englishwomen of her background, she acknowledges the fluidity of her developing beliefs while refuting her sister Arabella’s fear that she will keep silent about her unorthodox views (12). She also speaks

openly of her liberal social views, for example, her judgment that Fanny Kemble Butler's divorce should not stigmatize her (325). Though in earlier volumes of this edition Elizabeth self-mockingly describes her cowardice in thunderstorms and, more seriously, her adaptation to the limits of her sickroom, letters from this period reveal her exuberant embrace of change, mobility, and the expansiveness of the world stage, as when she thrills that a railroad "is the next best thing to flying!!" (106). Similar effervescence animates her descriptions of people and places. We also share her pleasure in literary gossip: she reports Tennyson's "vexation" over the mostly negative views of *The Princess* (51), with which both Brownings were disappointed (55, 85), and remarks that she has been told that *Jane Eyre* was written by Thackeray's governess (125).

Throughout, her letters convey a rich, complex sense of the Brownings' relationship and their individual characters and personalities, supplying abundant information on their domestic arrangements amid reminders of the material conditions of everyday life in the period. Elizabeth hopes that her sisters will summer in the country to enjoy a "change of air . . . at this horrible cholera-time" (319), worries because cholera rages in the neighborhood of Robert's family (337), and admonishes Arabella to reduce her exposure to disease in her philanthropic work in London's alleys for the Ragged Schools (331). She vividly conveys a sense of how the unsettled military conditions in Italy touch their lives, reporting that even British women in Florence have been compelled by the Austrians to surrender their ornamental "arms" such as jeweled daggers and rusty antique scimitars (287), and that authorities open private letters and kill dogs in the street to keep them from interfering with the Austrian cavalry (294). Punctuating all these details that situate ordinary, everyday life amid the sweep of big political and social currents of the day are tallies of the cost (and sketches) of furnishings for their new home in Casa Guidi, minutiae of new baby clothes, feedings, teething, baby's laughter echoing through their rooms (a counterpoint to the beat of Austrian drums), and the delights of huge watermelons, figs, and peaches, alongside admiration for Robert's surprising paternal involvement in the baby and carefulness with money. Throughout, she

expresses her continuing sorrow over her brothers' coolness since her elopement and her father's implacable rejection. The narrative arc of this volume often reads like a compelling novel focused on immensely likable, interesting characters inhabiting unusually exciting times.

Previous volumes of the *Brownings' Correspondence* have included a series of excellent biographical sketches of people significant in the Brownings' lives and letters; one in this volume has special importance. Lacking a satisfactory biography, the poets' son Pen has long been presented in Browning scholarship as a disappointment to his father and a general failure in life. In less than nine pages the editors here present a much more balanced, detailed picture that suggests not only Pen's failures at Oxford, but also his achievement in painting, sculpture, and architectural restoration; not only the tensions in his marriage to an American heiress, but also the disappointment arising from his father's obstruction of his early love for an innkeeper's daughter; not just his youthful extravagance, but also his mature kindness and responsibility. This account is essential reading for anyone interested in the Browning family and represents a starting point for a much needed full biography of Pen. Other biographical sketches present friends of the Brownings in Florence, Sophia and Henry Cottrell (including information on Charles Tulk, who shared his Swedenborgian interests with the Brownings) and Eliza Ogilvy, the Scottish poet and neighbor of the Brownings in Casa Guidi.

The contemporary reviews of Robert's work collected in the third appendix confirm that by 1848 he was still far from having secured his reputation. Yet several of the positive reviews indicate that he was hardly neglected or universally regarded as unintelligible. James Russell Lowell's lengthy review of *Paracelsus*, *Sordello*, and *Bells and Pomegranates* for the *North American Review*, for example, chastises critics for having failed to recognize Robert as an original mind and a true poet. His earlier poems, Lowell pronounces, evince "the consciousness of wings, the heaven grasped and measured by the aspiring eye, but no sustained flight as yet." Although *Sordello* "is totally incomprehensible as a connected whole," it has a "luminous heart"; *Paracelsus* boasts "many fine passages," and

with the excellent dramas and lyrics of *Bells and Pomegranates* establishes that young Browning “has in him the elements of greatness” (371–72, 382). While American reviewers and audiences often embraced both Brownings more eagerly than did their British counterparts, *Sharpe’s London Magazine* in the same year, 1848, declared that Robert, already “appreciated by the best and worthiest” writers, “*should*” be popular with the broader public as well; a “genius” sadly neglected, he has penned works in *Bells and Pomegranates* “which will live and be honoured as long as our country’s tongue endures” (383, 385). The notices of a London revival of *A Blot in the ’Scutcheon*, five years after its initial unsuccessful staging by Macready, similarly reveal Robert’s improved reception, though several describe the work as better poetry than drama. Reviews of his *Poems* (1849), a collection which omits *Sordello* and *Strafford*, are similarly mixed, with praise from *The English Review* (“all great works, and worthy of serious consideration,” p. 395) balanced by *The Eclectic Review*’s verdict that he was unlikely to achieve widespread popularity (407).

In sum, volume 15 reaffirms *The Brownings’ Correspondence* as an indispensable treasure for scholars and a pleasure for general readers, making wonderfully interesting materials available in wholly authoritative, beautifully produced books. *The Brownings’ Correspondence* sets the benchmark for scholarly editions.

University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill