

Hédi A. Jaouad. *“Limitless Undying Love”*: *The Ballad of John and Yoko and the Brownings*.
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Hédi A. Jaouad is a distinguished scholar known for his expertise on Francophone North African (Maghrebi) literature. Professor of French and Francophone literature at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York, he is the Editor of *CELAAN*, the leading North American journal focusing on North African literature and language. He is also interested in Victorian literature, with particular concentration on Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, on whom he published a previous book, *The Brownings’ Shadow at Yaddo* (2014). However, his current book, *“Limitless Undying Love”*: *The Ballad of John and Yoko and the Brownings*, shows a whole other side to his scholarship, for it links the Brownings to those icons of contemporary popular culture, John Lennon and Yoko Ono. This is a concise, economical little study (132 pp.), but it manages, in brief compass, to be pluridisciplinary, building bridges between poetry, music, and painting. As he modestly proclaims, it shows “his passion for more than one liberal art” (7).

The title, *“Limitless Undying Love,”* comes from a late John Lennon song, “Across the Universe.” Hédi Jaouad reminds us that the titular “*Ballad*” applies to both poetry and music. He compares what he has called 19th-century “Browningmania” to 20th-century “Beatlemania,” both of which spread to North America in what has been popularly described as a “British Invasion.” Lest the reader assume Jaouad is only tracing coincidental parallels, he makes it clear from the outset that John and Yoko actually saw themselves as reincarnations of the Brownings, and consciously exploited the similarities in their lives and careers.

The Brownings offered the classic Victorian love story: a fragile heroine semi-imprisoned by a tyrannical Victorian patriarch, to be rescued by her dashing, handsome Prince Charming. Even for those unfamiliar with their poetry, the story of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning has been immortalized in a play by Rudolph Besier, “The Barretts of Wimpole Street,” which was later made into a film with the great Katherine Cornell in one of her classic roles. Jaouad references as well Agatha Christie’s use of the imprisonment narrative in *Sleeping Murder: Miss Marple’s Last Case* (1976). As he remarks, the couple offered “a modern model of a union based not on beauty or wealth but on equality and mutual respect” (6). Robert promoted Elizabeth’s work, even after her death, but she saw him as the greater poet. She was doubtless correct, but the paradigm of the gifted husband, admiring wife is nonetheless present. For their

putative successors, as well, the public has focused mainly on John's talent, leaving Yoko, for better or worse, in the role of muse or inspiration. John himself, however, like Robert Browning, praised and defended his wife's talents, saying that Yoko was "the world's most famous unknown artist" (59).

Jaouad, however, does give Yoko her due. As the one living member of the two couples, she evidently cooperated with Jaouad's research, and gave him permission to reproduce images of her paintings and photographs, which give the text an impressive specificity and visual appeal.

One of those images provides the cover for Jaouad's text. It is a photo of Yoko, from 2012, her back turned, looking at portraits of Robert and Elizabeth Browning. The portraits, by Gordigliani, sit in a corner of the National Portrait Gallery in London, positioned so that they seem to be facing each other. They are separate, but the hands in each portrait seem to reach out to each other. Yoko's analysis is perceptive: ". . . you don't ever see a picture of both of them together. I think they would have liked one picture together, don't you think? Or was it just me thinking?" (8; emphasis mine). She is the mediator joining the two, and we, the "you," become, in Gerald Prince's term, the *narrataire*, or narratee, in verbal terms, to whom the story is told. Moreover, on the cover the author's name, Hédi Jaouad, is written across the back of Yoko's coat, facing the reader, and identifying him with the "you" left to reconstruct the two relationships. He compares the configuration to Yoko's earlier "Corner Painting," a frame without a painting, "for twin souls yearning to be one" (11). He also wonders if the faceless, back-to-the-camera Yoko is a "blocking" figure, and whether what she is blocking is John's death.

The photograph was intended originally to be the cover for "Double Fantasy," one of their last two albums together before John's violent death. The album title could serve as the photograph title as well. Their other late album was "Milk and Honey," which could refer to their mixed Asian-Anglo marriage. Both albums were inspired by the Brownings' poetry, and the two only half-facetiously referred to themselves as "Bob" and "Liz."

Hédi Jaouad provides some background on both the Brownings and the Lennoxes to highlight their affinities. Oddly enough, Robert Browning seems to have been more in Yoko's position, at least at the beginning of his relationship with Elizabeth. He was initially underrated, and overshadowed by Elizabeth, described as "the best female poet of her age" (though one might cite Emily Dickinson, Emily Brontë, Christina Rossetti). His experimental dramatic

monologues, which were groundbreaking, confused readers accustomed to the more predictably lyrical, classical Tennyson. Elizabeth may have given the most cogent description of his difficult technique (before she actually met him), comparing it to a pomegranate: we must “cut deep down the middle” (33). Both partners were feminists, and supporters of gender equality, like the Lennons after them. Elizabeth’s long poem “Aurora Leigh” still serves as inspiration to the women’s movement.

Elizabeth was six years older than Robert, Yoko seven years older than John. In 1980 John’s, as it turned out, posthumous Christmas gift to Yoko was a portrait and handwriting sample of Elizabeth Browning “framed side by side” (John died December 8, 1980).

Along with a number of perhaps less compelling geographical coincidences – Paul McCartney lived for a time in Wimpole Street, where John visited and collaborated on “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” and John and Yoko lived in Marylebone, where the Brownings were married – Jaouad stresses above all the love story, “A Romance for the Age” (32), which the Lennons may well have tried to emulate. Two poems, one by Elizabeth, the other by Robert, are worked in filigree throughout the text. Elizabeth’s is her Sonnet 43 from *Sonnets from the Portuguese*: “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways,” concluding “and, if God choose, I shall but love thee better after death” (51). This poem was to be echoed by Yoko (72). That transcendence, an assertive belief in human love surviving beyond death, appears most eloquently in Robert’s “Rabbi Ben Ezra”: “Grow old along with me!/ The best is yet to be,/ The last of life, for which the first was made” (87). Hédi Jaouad sets these two poems side by side with Yoko’s pastiche of Elizabeth’s text, “Let me count the ways how I love you” (75), and John’s response, echoing Robert’s poem: “Grow old along with me/ The best is yet to be/ When our time has come/ We will be as one/ God bless our love/ God bless our love” (85).

Elizabeth was 43 when son Pen was born, and Yoko 42 when Sean was born. Both couples were “working partners” and social activists. Both showed some interest in spiritualism, though not particularly Robert. John’s death, in fact, led to a quasi-canonization: for months his “Imagine” evoked tears for a man of peace cut down by a deranged lost violent soul, who was, not coincidentally, carrying the “Double Fantasy” album. Robert’s memorial tributes were worthy, Jaouad notes, of a rock star. Both British artists, the 19th-century poet and the 20th-century musician, had some of their greatest impact in North America. Jaouad, Professor in upstate New York, recounts that a Cornell English Professor, Hiram Corson, was the most

prominent in promoting Robert Browning's work. "Browningmania" led to the founding of Browning Societies, especially in upstate New York: Ithaca, the home of Cornell University, Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, even the sleepy village of Carthage, classically named but the ancient capital of the Phoenicians in Hédi Jaouad's native Tunisia.

This tightly written, rich little book will be of interest to observers of contemporary culture, as well as to scholars and students of the Victorian period, and to poets, artists, and musicians. It is meticulously researched, with informative, substantive end notes and bibliography, and is enlivened by color and black and white photographs and illustrations. It demonstrates cogently that the popular culture of yesterday may become the high culture of today, and that there is no real line of demarcation between them: "attention must be paid" to the ballad winding through all our lives – or, as the Beatles put it, "All You Need Is Love."

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