coexistence of order and fun. The piazzas swell with markets of local arts and crafts run by artisans even on Sundays; crowds stop to enjoy musicians, balloons, pigeons, and children in PIAZZA SAN MICHELE—the site of the forum in ancient Roman “Lucia” (admired by Julius Caesar) that surrounds the church of SAN MICHELE, whose gorgeous green, white, and rose-colored marble facade Ruskin sketched and where Puccini (born nearby) was a choirboy. The passeggiata along the cobblestoned Via Filungo flows thick with giddy and grinning teenagers amidst lumbering matrons in dignified outfits seeking good goods. In the shadows of the low overhanging facades of medieval buildings broken by blasts of MTV rock, the explosive teenagers and the sturdy ladies seem like timeless figures on the currents of history. Sunday Mass in San Frediano’s as celebrated by a stern priest, served by altar girls in surplices and red Conversees, and sung by an especially lively folk choir of young and old, men and women presents small dramas of gender and generational tensions lit with humor. (When, on Pentecost, the priest sent a disapproving frown in the choir’s direction, a few singers giggled.) As Henry James observed in Italian Hours, “I remember saying to myself...that no brown-and-gold Tuscan city could be as happy as Lucchese looked,” [seeming] “fairly to laugh.” Even the heavy lore of its hagiography has a sense of play: when St. Zita smuggled food to the poor it was miraculously changed into flowers so that the servant girl would not get caught by her master. Every year on April 26, the Lucchese remember Zita’s holy con game by filling the PIAZZA SAN FREDIANO with flowers.

Visiting the sick and the imprisoned, finding and feeding the poor, going back and forth to Mass, the peripatetic Zita would have known a number of the splendid twelfth-century churches that Ruskin praises in his introduction to “Darling Sorella’s” ballad: The DUOMO (SAN MARTINO or ST. MARTIN’S CATHEDRAL), consecrated in 1070, has on its facade the finest sculpture and reliquies in the city: Nicola Pisano’s Adoration of the Magi, for example (Ruskin calls it Christ’s Nativity), is a notable work. Inside there are windows of St. Zita and St. Fridigliano, paintings by Ghirlandaio and Tintoretto, and in the north aisle, the VOLTO SANTO ("Holy Image")—famous throughout Europe as the wooden likeness of Jesus supposed to have been carved by Nicodemus, who was present at the crucifixion. Jacopo della Quercia’s TOMB OF ILARIA DEL CARRETTO GUINIGI, in the north transept, is an early Renaissance masterpiece.

For an overview of the city that Francesca and Ruskin admired for “the great fuss” it made “over her little Zita,” the walk along the heights of the massive medieval walls, planted with chestnut and beech trees, is fine. But the most glorious prospect is from the roof garden of the TORRE GUINIGI (the tower next to the Guinigi family palace in Via Guinigi and Via Santa Andrea). The spread of the medieval city and the distant peaks of the Apuan Alps present a panorama of Lucchese that material body and happy soul.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

One wonders how “close to death” (as one scholar puts it) Elizabeth Barrett actually could have been when, approaching forty, she eloped and ran away to Italy with Robert Browning. After a winter in Pisa, they came to Florence in 1847 where they stayed for good and wrote the poems for which both are known. Breaking free from the oppressions of Wimpole Street and embracing Italy in the period of its revolutionary heat made her the woman and writer she became: her passion was for the freedom of love, her theme was human rights. The causes of republicanism in Italy, abolition in the United States, child welfare laws in England, and full humanity for women focus her writings. Though her voice was sometimes cloying, she wrote as a serious social advocate and humanitarian. When George Eliot reread Casa Guidi’s Windows in 1862, she said, “I have lately read again with great delight Mrs. Browning’s Casa Guidi Windows. It contains amongst other admirable things a very noble expression of what I believe to be the true relation of the religious mind to the Past.” That relation is struck in the pages that follow—“We do not serve the dead—the past is past! God lives...” Though the image of her past as captive, dutiful daughter is always at her back, the windows of the mature woman look out on the ardor and possibilities of freedom.

*The name of the Brownings’ home in Florence.
FINE QUESTION HEAVEN-WARD, TOUCHING THE THINGS GRANTED
A NOBLE PEOPLE WHO, BEING GREATLY VEXED
IN ACT, IN ASPIRATION KEEP UNDAUNTED?
WHAT WORD WILL GOD SAY? MICHEL’S NIGHT AND DAY
AND DAWN AND TWILIGHT WAIT IN MARBLE SCORN,*
LIKE DOGS UPON A DUNGHILL, COUCHED ON CLAY
FROM WHENCE THE MEDICEAN STAMP’S OUTWORN,
THE FINAL PUTTING OFF OF ALL SUCH SWAY
BY ALL SUCH HANDS, AND FREEING OF THE UNBORN
IN FLORENCE AND THE GREAT WORLD OUTSIDE FLORENCE.

WE DO NOT SERVE THE DEAD—THE PAST IS PAST!
GOD LIVES, AND LIFTS HIS GLORIOUS MORNINGS UP
BEFORE THE EYES OF MEN, AWAKE AT LAST,
WHO PUT AWAY THE MEATS THEY USED TO SUP,
AND DOWN UPON THE DUST OF EARTH OUTCAST
THE DRUGS REMAINING OF THE ANCIENT CUP.

YOU ENTER, IN YOUR FLORENCE WANDERINGS,
THE CHURCH OF ST. MARIA NOVELLA. PASS
THE LEFT STAIR, WHERE AT PLAGUE-TIME MACCHIAVEL
SAW ONE WITH SET FAIR FACE AS IN A GLASS,
DRESSED OUT AGAINST THE FEAR OF DEATH AND HELL,
RUSTLING HER SILKS IN PAUSES OF THE MASS,
TO KEEP THE THOUGHT OFF HOW HER HUSBAND FELL,
WHEN SHE LEFT HOME, STARK DEAD ACROSS HER FEET,—
THE STAIR LEADS UP TO WHAT THE ORGAGNOS SAVED
OF DANTE’S DEMONS; YOU, IN PASSING IT,
ASCEND THE RIGHT STAIR FROM THE FARTHER NAVE,
TO MUSE IN A SMALL CHAPEL SCARCELY LIT
BY CIMABUE’S VIRGIN. BRIGHT AND BRAVE,
THAT PICTURE WAS ACCOUNTED, MARK, OF OLD.
A KING STOOD BARE BEFORE ITS SOVEREIGN GRACE,
A REVERENT PEOPLE SHOUTED TO BEHOLD
THE PICTURE, NOT THE KING, AND EVEN THE PLACE
CONTAINING SUCH A MIRACLE, GREW BOLD.

"MICHEL" IS MICHELANGELO. HIS STATUES NIGHT, DAY, DAWN, AND TWILIGHT ARE IN THE NEW SACRISTY OF THE CHURCH OF SAN LORENZO.
Named the Glad Borgo from that beauteous face,—
Which thrilled the artist, after work, to think
His own ideal Mary-smile should stand
So very near him,—he, within the brink
Of all that glory, let in by his hand
With too divine a rashness! Yet none shrink
Who come to gaze here now—albeit 'twas planned
Sublimely in the thought's simplicity.
The Lady, throne in empyreal state,
Minds only the young babe upon her knee,
While sidelong angels bear the royal weight,
Prostrated meekly, smiling tenderly
Oblivion of their wings; the Child thereat
Stretching its hand like God. . . .

A noble picture! worthy of the shout
Wherewith along the streets the people bore
Its cherub faces, which the sun threw out
Until they stooped and entered the church door!—
Yet rightly was young Giotto talked about,
Whom Cimabue found among the sheep,
And knew, as gods know gods, and carried home.
To paint the things he had painted, with a deep
And fuller insight, and so overcome
His chapel-lady with a heavenlier sweep
Of light. For thus we mount into the sun
Of great things known or acted. I hold, too,
That Cimabue smiled upon the lad,
At the first stroke which passed what he could do,—
Or else his Virgin's smile had never had
Such sweetness in 't. All great men who foreknew
Their heirs in art, for art's sake have been glad,
And bent their old white heads as if uncrowned,
Fanatics of their pure ideals still
Far more than of their triumphs. . . .

BELLOSGUARDO

I found a house at Florence on the hill
Of Bellosguardo. * 'Tis a tower which keeps
A post of double observation o'er
That valley of Arno (holding as a hand
The outspread city) straight toward Fiesole
And Mount Morello and the setting sun,
The Vallombrosan mountains opposite,
Which sunrise fills as full as crystal cups
Turned red to the brim because their wine is red.
No sun could die nor yet be born unseen
By dwellers at my villa; morn and eve
Were magnified before us in the pure
Illimitable space and pause of sky,
Intense as angels' garments blanched with God,
Less blue than radiant. From the outer wall
Of the garden, drops the mystic floating grey
Of olive trees (with interruptions green
From maize and vine), until 'tis caught and torn
Upon the abrupt black line of cypresses
Which signs the way to Florence. Beautiful
The city lies along the ample vale,
Cathedral, tower and palace, piazza and street,
The river trailing like a silver cord
Through all, and curling loosely, both before
And after, over the whole stretch of land
Sown whitely up and down its opposite slopes
With farms and villas.

Footnote:

For the Literary Traveler

Elizabeth Barrett Browning loved Florence with the same passion she
took for her husband, Robert, and her son, Pen. Each enabled the
eccasies of home and city, an amplitude of interior and exterior space

*Florence is encircled by the hills of Bellosguardo, Careggi, Fiesole, Settignano, and Arcetri.
forbidden in her father's house. "O freedom! O my Florence!" The OLTARNO, where they lived, on the south side of the ARNO, provides a welcome adagio amidst the con fuoco of the tourists in the central city. VIA MAGGIO leads from the PONTE SANTA TRINITA up to PIAZZA SAN FELICE and no. 8 CASA GUIDI (where the couple moved after lodging first in the VIA DELLE BELLE DONNE between PIAZZA SANTA MARIA NOVELLA and PIAZZA SANTA TRINITA). Originally "Palazzo" Guidi until the democratic-minded Mrs. Browning renamed it, the house is marked with a plaque that shows Elizabeth's love for Italy did not go unrequited: "Here wrote and lived Elizabeth Barrett Browning ... whose poems forged a golden ring between Italy and England." Her residence can be visited on Monday and Wednesday afternoons, the decor and furnishings having been restored to the appearance they had in the Brownings' time. Visitors may sit and use the library in Elizabeth's drawing room/study—she had no room of her own—the windows of which face out on the church of SAN FELICE. From the music school on the PIAZZA SAN FELICE the sound of singing, mentioned in her poetry, can still be heard from within the church's pretty interior, where Elizabeth attended services.

Further along the VIA ROMANA (the extension of Via Maggio), leaving the FITTI PALACE behind, is the ANNALENA ENTRANCE to the BOBOLI GARDENS (perhaps the best maintained park in Italy), where the Brownings and Pen often walked (their rent, a guinea a week, included admission to the Gardens), passing the grotto of Adam and Eve; further along, at the end of an avenue of tall hedges, is the charming and secluded ISOLOTTO, a small lake surrounding an island of roses and statues.

At the end of Via Romana, through the PORTA ROMANA, is the uphill turn and narrow road to BELLOSGUARDO, another beautiful hillside neighborhood (like SAN MINIATO AL MONTE and FIESOLE), more accessible by bus (number 42 from Porta Romana) than on foot. It is described in the preceding poem "Bellosguardo," and in Aurora Leigh and was visited frequently by the Brownings, Nathaniel and Sophia Hawthorne, and, in later years, Henry James and Violet Treffus. Florence Nightingale, named after the city of her birth, was born in Bellosguardo.

From the small terrace outside the drawing room windows of Casa

Guidi Elizabeth watched the political demonstrations of 1848 in the piazza and streets below, and as the long poem shows, her sympathies (like those of Margaret Fuller in Rome, who introduced the Brownings' poetry to American readers in her dispatches to the New York Tribune) were ardently republican—Mazzini, Garibaldi, and at first Pio Nono (Pope Pius IX) were her heroes of the dream of a united and independent Italy. Her devotion to progressive politics colored her imagination of Florence's past and its monuments. Thus she imputes her own generosity of spirit to earlier artists: in Casa Guidi Windows, her description of the interior of SANTA MARIA NOVELLA (Henry James's favorite church in Florence) features Cimabue encouraging his own eclipse by Giotto. (GIOTTO'S BELL TOWER, in another part of the city, is, for her, another sign of the divine/human capacity for creative passion.) She also presents the ORCAGNA FRESCOS of scenes from Dante's Inferno and Paradiso in the STROZZI CHAPEL (up the steps in the north transept to the left of the magnificent GHIRLANDAIO FRESCOS in the SANCTUARY) as part of the glorious tradition of republican and artistic Florence. To the left of the church, the GREEN CLOISTERS and the SPANISH CHAPEL (inside the MUSEO) are among the loveliest and most peaceful places in her adopted city.

George Eliot

"There has been a crescendo of enjoyment in our travels," said George Eliot/Marian Evans ("Polly" to her life partner, G. H. Lewes) in a letter of 1860. "For Florence, from its relation to the history of modern art, has roused a keener interest in us even than Rome, and has stimulated me to entertain rather an ambitious project." The project was Romola, a historical novel based on the life of the Florentine Dominican friar Savonarola (1452–1498) who, in fiery sermons between 1491 and 1494, attacked the immorality of Florentines, the power of Lorenzo de' Medici, and the corruption of Pope Alexander VI. For a while Savonarola was something of a religious hero; then the mood changed, and after his excommunication by the