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## Latent Lust in *The Last Ride Together*: A Study in Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis

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Browning is the king of dramatic monologue. One unique feature of this poetic genre is that the speaker unwittingly reveals unsavoury aspects of his own mind and character. One of Browning's most popular poems, *The Last Ride Together*, however, has a monologist who recounts an apparently wholesome episode. But if minutely delved into, his reassuring narrative is likely to show chinks in its armour. Powered by a deconstructive method, a psycho-analytic reading would demonstrate that the speaker's seemingly 'innocent' last ride serves as an act of 'sublimation'. The 'ride' in the poem becomes at once metaphorical of, and substitutive for, the consummation of libidinal desires the monologist constantly tries to suppress. It could also be safely stated that the temporal gap between the lover's present ride and his life beyond where he deposits the fulfilment of his now-thwarted hopes constitutes the 'aporia' of the poem and involves a classic case of 'deferral'. Far from being a naïve final token to be treasured, the proclaimed last ride provides an opening for the 'play' of his latent psycho-sexual desires.

### Introduction:

The Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud (1865 – 1939) had been a tremendous cultural influence during the twentieth century, especially during its first half. Freud's path-breaking work *The Interpretation of Dreams* came out in 1900, at the fag-end of the Victorian period. Subsequently, Freudian theories and ideas were employed to trace novel interpretations of pre-existing as well as newer literary texts. In the 1970s Freud's thought was revised by Jacques Lacan from a linguistic standpoint. It was also during this time that the deconstructionist approach – the strategy employed by the poststructuralist school – was popularised by Jacques Derrida. This approach proposes to read a text against itself, bringing out its inherent self-contradictions. Armed with the weaponry of deconstruction, and paraphernalia of Freudian propositions, this paper endeavours to unearth a psycho-analytic reading of one of the most popular of Robert Browning's poems -- *The Last Ride Together*.

Summarizing Freud's thoughts, M. H. Abrams writes in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*: "The forbidden, mainly sexual wishes come into conflict with the "censor"...but are permitted to achieve a fantasied satisfaction in distorted forms that serve to disguise their real motives and objects from the conscious mind." One crucial aspect of this process is 'sublimation'; Mr Abrams describes it as the power to "shift the instinctual drives from their original sexual goals to nonsexual "higher" goals." It would not be inappropriate to interpret Browning's dramatic monologue *The Last Ride Together* through this psycho-analytic lens. This would generate a reading whereby the 'ride' in the poem becomes at once metaphorical of, and substitutive for, the consummation of libidinal desires. Derridian method also comes handy. The temporal gap between the lover's present ride and his life beyond where he deposits the fulfilment of his now-thwarted hopes constitutes the 'aporia' of the poem and involves a classic case of 'deferral'.

The monologue is underwritten by a rather obvious narrative. The monologist has been in love with his mistress for quite a long time, following which he made an explicit proposal of love which now stands frustrated. Apparently, the speaker coolly accepts the rejection, wishing for a not-so-extraordinary last ride together as a token of memory. However, the contours and nuances of the poem betray that this last ride may not be so 'naive' and 'innocent' after all; it is fraught with sexual tensions and erotic dynamics. Had the mistress given her assent to his overture, the speaker could have given free reins to his 'pleasure principle', to the innate libidinal desires called 'id'. But as the situation stands, the 'reality principle' must creep in, the 'superego' ordains that the social demands of morality and propriety must be respected. The role of 'ego' becomes critical at this juncture. The 'ego', to borrow once again from Mr Abrams, " tries as best as it can to negotiate the conflicts between the insatiable demands of the id, the impossibly stringent requirements of the super-ego, and the limited possibilities of gratification offered by the world of 'reality'." The last ride in Browning's poem not only becomes a mode of limited gratification, but also turns into a fetish which the narrator can keep in his mind substituting the painful rejection of his hope of love. A deconstructive reading would suggest that the very expression "one more last ride" is fraught with tension. Linguistically speaking, it could either be 'one more ride' or 'one last ride'. How can it be "one more" last ride? There can only be "one" last ride, and not "one more" last ride.

One of the first thoughts to strike the speaker's mind, once the wish of a last ride has been granted, is that "the world may end tonight". The death instinct – what Freud calls "thanatos" – will resurface strongly towards the end of the poem. In fact, the poem closes with the wish that the riding continues till annihilation:

"The instant made eternity,--  
And heaven just prove that I and she  
Ride, ride together, forever ride?" (108-110)

The speaker's wishful final thought is that the presumably momentary last ride should be an eternal ride. Jacques Lacan (1901 – 1981), the French Psychoanalyst who attempted to revise Freudian ideas, opines "desire is not a relation to an object but a relation to a lack". As the Oxford Guide edited by Patricia Waugh elaborates: this "relation of being to lack...will inextricably be linked in its purest state (i.e. when no obstacle is placed on its course) to the drive toward destruction – is not the best way to possess your object to destroy it, so that it won't escape you?" In another Browningian monologue 'Porphyria's Lover', the speaker does choke his beloved to death in order to possess her with a finality. Even as the speaker in "The Last Ride Together" does no such thing, he nevertheless wishes for annihilation of the world: "Who knows but the world may end to-night?" (22) The speaker himself must know at the back of his mind that the world is most unlikely to end 'to-night'. So this is an unconscious wish rather than a proposition.

The 'id' and 'pleasure principle' constantly run beneath the surface. The flow of eros is palpable throughout the third stanza. Even the western cloud is "billowy-bosomed". The beloved is now "looking and loving best" to the speaker. How can the beloved "love best" now? After all, she did not return his love. One may think that this "loving" is predominantly physical, as the narrator goes on to say in the concluding line of the stanza:

"Thus lay she a moment on my breast," (33)

The sensual element is obvious. And it is rather surprising because only a few moments back she had rejected his offer of love. In fact, the narrator makes no secret of his physical proximity to her:

“Down on you, near and yet more near,  
Till flesh must fade for heaven was here!” (30-31)

The expression “flesh must fade” suggests that the speaker’s experience is not only physical, but also metaphysical. This juxtaposition of intensely physical and deeply metaphysical experiences suggests the speaker's psycho-sexual surge. The beloved is not cold in her rejection. Not unlike the speaker, she is also passionate at the moment. Noticeably, the ride is yet to commence, and the lover says:

“...your passion drew  
Cloud, sunset, moonshine, star-shine too.” (28-29)

The “Cloud, sunset, moonshine, star-shine” drawn by the beloved evidently belong more to the lover’s mental phenomena than to the physical world. After all, the lover is here recounting his feelings of just a moment – a moment between the beloved’s granting of his wish of last ride and the beginning of the ride. The first line of the fourth stanza would say: “Then we began to ride”. So the entire third stanza is a prelude to the ride and as such equivalent to foreplay.

In stanzas IV to VIII, the Browningian monologist evokes a lot of comparisons to convince himself that his achievement is better compared to those of a statesman, a soldier, a poet, a sculptor and a musician. However, a meagre last ride after a prolonged love is perhaps no better than one line attributed to a statesman or one flag dedicated to a soldier’s sacrifice. More importantly, the sense of accomplishment that the speaker boisterously details in these stanzas is more apparent than real. The speaker's current exaltation is given a lie by his dejected articulation in the very opening stanza:

“Since now at length my fate I know,  
Since nothing at all my love avails,  
Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,” (2-4)

The repetition of ‘Since’ as anaphora shows the speaker’s laboured attempt to come to terms with the disappointing reality. Given this context, the speaker’s present boastful comparisons appear to be mere attempts at consoling himself – a kind of unconscious defence mechanism. He here smarts under rejection. Just a few lines back he has virtually conceded his failure:

"Fail I alone in words and deeds?  
Why, all men strive and who succeeds?" (45-46)

Obviously, somewhere down his psyche he is aware of his creeping sense of unsuccess. What he projects as his brownie points vis-à-vis people from diverse fields, is little more than self-consolatory effort. And, no fewer than five stanzas of this ten-stanza poem are devoted primarily to this consolation. Furthermore, the speaker’s effusions are often invested with ironies. Although the speaker would like to make us believe otherwise, the sculptor’s life-toil for a statue of Venus is quite alike the narrator’s effort to store the moments of this one last experience with his beloved in his memory like a frozen moment of deification. Interestingly, earlier in the poem the speaker had thought himself ‘deified’: “one day more am I deified”

(21), whereas, in reality, he was deifying his mistress and not the other way round. The monologist's jibe at the poet is almost 'meta-poetical' on Browning's part:

“Are you—poor, sick, old ere your time—  
Nearer one whit your own sublime  
Than we who never have turn'd a rhyme?  
Sing, riding's a joy! For me, I ride.” (74-77)

The speaker here includes himself among those 'who never have turn'd a rhyme', and this utterance itself is part of a celebrated poem! The query 'What does it all mean, poet?' (67) is indeed ironical and self-referential.

Each of the five 'consolation' stanzas carries a refrain: "here we are riding, she and I", "I hoped she would love me; here we ride", "I hoped she would love me; here we ride", so on and so forth. In Freudian thought, 'riding' is a symbol of consummation. Even as the lovers in the poem are usually thought to be riding on a horse, it is noticeable that nowhere in the poem has it been clearly hinted at, let alone specific mention, what the lovers are actually riding on. Further, the frequent evocation of the 'ride' invests the ride with a wistfulness, as if, the whole thing is more 'psychological' than 'real'. Here also the description reveals a metaphysical quality:

“We rode; it seemed my spirit flew  
Saw other regions, cities new,” (47-48)

Obviously, new regions and cities cannot be seen in one single ride. The journey is within the mind. The image of flying, like the image of riding, is also a sexual one. In *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation*, Marie Bonaparte writes: "We know that flying, to all races, unconsciously symbolises the sex act...." The language the speaker uses, as it tries to capture his musings in metaphorical ways, often assumes an erotic dimension in its double meaning. For instance, we may take the middle of the sixth stanza for analyses:

“What act proved all its thought had been?  
What will but felt the fleshly screen?  
We ride and I see her bosom heave.  
There's many a crown for who can reach.  
Ten lines, a statesman's life in each!” (58-62)

The line 'What will but felt the fleshly screen?' (59) apparently speaks of inevitable obstructions to worldly success, as it follows the line 'What act proved all its thought had been?' (58). However, this line might also mean hurdles on the way to consummation as it uses the expression 'fleshly screen', and is followed by the utterance 'We ride and I see her bosom heave.' (60) The next line "There's many a crown for who can reach." (61) is a complete sentence in itself, and may be related as much to the succeeding line describing the statesman's life (line 62) as to the preceding line describing the speaker's attention to the mistress' bosom (line 60). In its clever patterning of sentences, the poem thus skilfully negotiates between – to borrow two Freudian expressions -- its 'latent content' – the unconscious desires, and its 'manifest content'—the description of the riding experience.

The lover's unconscious desire rises to the surface with prominence in the last two stanzas of the poem:

“...Had fate  
Proposed bliss here should sublimate  
My being--...” (89-91)

However, this sublimation of being is unavailable to the speaker; what is instead available is a sublimation for the act of desire. The speaker goes on to hope:

“Still one must lead some life beyond,  
Have a bliss to die with, dim-descried!” (92-93)

Is it solid hope or is it yet another instance of defence mechanism on the part of the speaker's unconscious – a ‘deferral’ that fabricates a postponed hope and locates it in the distant future in order to abate the present pain of thwarted love. The speaker would make us believe that the beloved's rejection actually constitutes a prelude to blissful death – a blissful death because it promises fulfilment in the heavenly life. However, there is nothing in the text to suggest that the monologist is an old man or is on the verge of death. In all probability, he is still in his youth in love with the beloved. Hence, drawing hope from ‘beyond death’ is all but an unconscious attempt to repress the present sorrow. Or, could it be that this death is suggestive of something different, as suggested by the succeeding lines? In the Elizabethan age, “die” also meant “consummation”. Does it carry the same meaning for the monologist in the poem of the Victorian poet? What exactly are we to make of the speaker's next utterance:

“...Try and test!  
I sink back shuddering from the quest.”? (96-97)

What is the monologist supposed to ‘try’ and ‘test’? Is the ‘quest’ only metaphysical? Or, is it sexual? Why does he sink back ‘shuddering’? There is a curiously mixed feeling of joy and fear which is not an unusual response to sexual desire. With “eyes upturned” the narrator discerns “life's flower”. Even the expression “fair and strong”(101) suggests sweetness and strength which we find in Andrew Marvell's well-known metaphysical poem *To His Coy Mistress*:

“Let us roll all our Strength, and all  
Our sweetness up into one Ball:” (41-42)

Whereas Marvell with his explicit eroticism uses the word ‘Ball’, the Browningian monologist evokes a similar posture, albeit in a subtle way:

“We, fixed so, ever should so abide?” (104)

The expression 'fixed so' is suggestive of a tight embrace and the following phrase 'ever should so abide' signifies continuation in that posture. The speaker's psycho-sexual journey has now reached its culminating point.

### Conclusion:

Thus there is more to *The Last Ride Together* than meets the eye. What had begun as a seemingly naïve ride, assumes a complexity which remains more concealed than revealed. It is not merely a ride on horse, if it is at all a ride on horse; it is a journey in desire. It is a tale



of schism that leaves the speaker alternately wishful and morose. It is also probably a commentary on the Victorian ethos – an age that was prudish and disallowed straightforward expression of desire. Therefore, masquerades and disguises become all the more necessary. The speaker is constrained to say something other than what he would have liked to say. As a Renaissance painter, Andrea Del Sarto is privileged enough to capture his fluctuating beloved in a painting; the speaker in *The Last Ride Together* can at best turn the last ride into a sublimating experience.

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