

BROWNING'S REJECTED LOVER: "WHY, ALL MEN STRIVE AND WHO SUCCEEDS?"

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Traditionally, rejected lovers are to be pitied, consoled, and, if need be, saved from self-inflicted death. They are more often than not thought of as weak, spineless men, unable to exert any masculinity and still less able to cope with failure in love. Not only are they rejected, but also all too frequently they are dejected. Browning's rejected lovers do not fit into this convenient niche reserved for the infirm and downtrodden. In fact, as William Lyon Phelps says, *Browning's rejected lovers are such splendid fellows that one wonders at their ill luck*¹. It is the purpose of this paper to examine these *splendid fellows* as Robert Browning presents them in three poems: *A Serenade at the Villa*, *The Last Ride Together*, and *Life in a Love*. In these three poems Browning's repudiated suitors are shown in three basically similar situations—being rejected by the women of their choice. All three react to the rejection in a manner much different from what one might expect, and, in so doing, their individuality is exposed. One of them exerts all his efforts in pursuing his love-dream through the life here on earth; one settles for what he can gain here and hopes for ultimate triumph in heaven, and the other one tries to find happiness on earth, fails, and apparently quits, momentarily at least. Each of them, however, as Professor DeVane points out, are examples of *Browning's rejected lover in a characteristic mood*².

¹ WILLIAM LYON PHELPS, *Robert Browning* (Indianapolis, 1932), p. 143.

² WILLIAM CLYDE DEVANE, *A Browning Handbook* (New York, 1955), p. 226.

A brief statement of the content of the poems, here at the beginning, will serve to place the rejected lovers in a definite context and also will demonstrate the similarity of their situations. In *A Serenade at the Villa* the suitor has been serenading his beloved during a dark, storm-threatened night and has met with no success. Much of the poem is a statement of his thoughts as to what she will or will not say in response to his overtures, and her silence is made that much more noticeable. In *The Last Ride Together* the man, after discovering that the Lady does not love him, begs her to take *one more last ride* during which time he contemplates his fate and reveals his character in the process. In *Life in a Love* the rejected man states his intention never to cease trying to win the affection of the woman he loves.

That the serenader loves his lady with all his heart and very deeply is evidenced by his actions. He loves her enough to serenade her *in the darkness thick and hot* with thunder, lightning, and threatening raindrops all round. This kind of love is indeed rare, if not extinct. Only Browning, it may be safely assumed, could prevent this man from at least receiving a reply (or perhaps a glove!) from the lady in the villa. This lover is of the chivalrous breed; he applies all the accepted means to win her love: (Italics added)

IV

"What they could my *words* expressed,
 O my love, my all, my one!
Singing helped the verses best,
 And when singing's best was done,
 To my *lute* I left the rest".

(11. 16-20) ³

This stanza also reveals his attitude toward the love he is experiencing: it is the apex of his life his one, his all. Of all the things important to him this love is paramount.

³ All quotations from the poems are from *The Shorter Poems of Robert Browning*, ed. William Clyde DeVane (New York, 1934).

As the night "wears" on and the expected response from the lady does not materialize, the serenader wonders:

VI

"What became of all the hopes,
Words and song and lute as well?"

(11. 26-27)

At this point he begins to lose some of his attractiveness and becomes a less sympathetic character. His mood becomes that of his surroundings. Hereafter there is no action save his leaving through the gate; he is entirely passive. He retreats into the fortress of his own mind, imagining what his beloved is thinking. First he fancies her saying what he hopes she will say:

— "When life
gropes
"Feebly for the path where fell
"Light last on the evening slopes,

VII

"One friend in that path shall be,
"To secure my step from wrong;
"One to count night day for me,
"Patient through the watches long,
"Serving most with none to see."

(11. 28-35)

This is a statement of what he would prefer to be like for the sake of his lady — friendly, protecting, patient, and serving. But immediately he supposes what she will *not* say — although he has a certain foreboding that she will. He imagines her saying:

"So, the worst has yet a worsel
"When life halts 'neath double loads,
"Better the taskmaster's curse
"Than such music on the roads!

(11. 37-40)

With the absence of the moon, even the smallest star, the fireflies, and the garden voices, he pictures to himself her damning questions,

"That shape be where these are not?"

XI

"Has some plague a longer lease,

"Proffering its help uncouth?"

"Can't one even die in peace?"

"As one shuts one's eyes on youth,

"Is that face the last one sees?"

(11. 50-55)

His worst expectations are realized; the villa remains dark and forelorn. He stands outside looking up at the windows and, turning to leave, he muses,

"How the garden grudged me grass

Where I stood - the iron gate

Ground its teeth to let me pass!"

(11. 58-60)

The two pathetic fallacies in the last lines quoted are indicative of the rejected lover's reaction to this ill-fated love for the lady. Hugh Holman in *A Handbook to Literature* says the pathetic fallacy carries over to inanimate objects the moods and passions of a human being⁴. This is surely true in this poem. But in this case it is carried close to absurdity, thus producing an almost humorous effect. It is this *tinge of melancholy humor which makes it the more pathetic*, said Mrs. Orr⁵. Moreover, Stopford Brooke recognized humor *where... the bitterness of wrath and love together breaks out and is attributed to the garden gate*⁶.

⁴ WILLIAM FLINT THRALL, ADDISON HIBBARD, and C. HUGH HOLMAN, *A Handbook to Literature* (New York, 1960), p. 345.

⁵ MRS. SUTHERLAND ORR, *A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning* (London, 1937), p. 229.

⁶ STOPFORD A. BROOKE, *Poetry of Robert Browning* (New York, 1902), p. 260.

Frances Russell attributes the turn to the pathetic fallacy rather to *his fever of self-pity, brought on by the conflict between spurned love and baffled rage*⁷.

The Last Ride Together has attracted, according to C. H. Herford, a different audience. *Its passion, he avers, is of a rarer and more difficult kind, less accessible to the love and less flattering to the faith of common minds.* And he adds, *This lover dreams of no future recovery of more than he still retains; his love, once for all, avails nothing*⁸. What, then, is there about this man to force him to react the way he does? And just how does he react to his unsuccessful bid to win her affection for life? The first stanza of the poem gives clues to help in the answering of both questions:

"I said — Then, dearest, since 't is so,
 Since now at length my fate I know,
 Since nothing all my love avails,
 Since all, my life seemed meant for, fails,
 Since this was written and needs must be—
 My whole heart r'ises up to bless
 Your name in pride and thankfulness!
 Take back the hope you gave, —I claim
 Only a memory of the same,
 —And this beside, if you will not blame,
 Your leave for one more last ride with me."

(11. 1-11)

The lover is resigned to his fate, and he is able to face reality with a calm and quiet fortitude. He is still able to call her *dearest* and his heart rises up to bless her name *in pride and thankfulness*. By *pride* and *thankfulness* Phelps says Browning means *it is a great honor to be rejected by such a woman* and is *thankful, too, to have known such a wonderful woman*⁹. The man wishes to claim only a memory of his companionship with her and is content to brush aside past hopes —if he can only ride once more with her. The striking character trait revealed in

⁷ FRANCES THERESA RUSSELL, *One Word More on Browning* (Stanford University, 1927), p. 28.

⁸ C. H. HERFORD, *Robert Browning* (Edinburgh and London, 1905), pp. 138-39.

⁹ PHELPS, pp. 146-47.

this opening stanza of the poem is the man's essentially logical and systematic mind; he puts the facts together and comes up with the course of action best suited for his mental well-being. He sounds almost like a philosopher as he says *since... since... since* and then gives the answer logic dictates.

There is one exasperating moment when he does not know whether or not she will even take the last ride with him. But she is not as unreasonable as the serenader's lady. She allows him at least a degree of victory. The ride for him becomes extraordinarily important, and when she accepts, he exclaims:

“ . . .right!
 The blood replenished me again;
 My last thought was at least not vain:
 I am my mistress, side by side,
 Shall be together, breathe and ride,
 So, one day more am I deified.
 Who knows but the world may end to-night?
 (11. 16-22)

For the present he has stopped looking for anything greater in the future and is quite satisfied with what he has: *Thus lay she a moment on my breast* (1.33).

As the ride begins, his *soul / Smooth (s) itself out, a long-cramped scroll / Freshening and fluttering in the wind* (11., 34-36). He refuses to analyze what he has done previously (had-he-done-this or had-he-done-that) to place himself in the situation in which he finds himself. For just as easily, he reasons, things could be worse than they now are, after all, he concludes

V

“Fail I alone, in words and deeds?
 Why, all men strive and who succeeds?”
 (11. 45-46)

Continuing to ride with his beloved, his *spirit flew, / Saw other regions, cities new, / As the world rushed by on either side* (ll. 47-49). He does not think so much about his companion as he does about life in general and the fact of living in particular. Unlike the serenader, who also had failed in *words and deeds*, he is able to see the *other regions*. The serenader had been the hopeful pessimist while the rider is the realistic optimist of the *God's in his heaven* variety. He sees himself in a much better position —enjoying at least a ride with the woman he loves— than the poet, who tells only what he feels; the sculptor, who reproduces only the form he loves; or the composer, who grows *grey / With notes and nothing else to say* (ll. 83-84). Critics have agreed that this is a notable doctrine in the poem, and William Clyde DeVane says *the theme of the poem —that as makers of happiness, life and love, even when love is rejected, are superior to all the arts— is a perennial one with Browning*¹⁰. Furthermore, the serenader reasons:

IX

“Who knows what’s f’it for us? Had fate
Proposed bliss here should sublimate
My being —had I signed the bond
Still one must lead some life beyond,
Have a bliss to die with, dim-descried.”

(ll. 89-93)

He prefers to *sink back shuddering from the quest* (l. 97) and if possible to ride with her into eternity:

“What if we still ride on, we two
With life for ever old yet new,
Changed not in kind but in degree,
The instant made eternity, —
And heaven just prove that I and she
Ride, ride together, for ever ride?”

(ll. 105-110)

¹⁰ DEVANE, p. 238.

The rejected lover of *Life in a Love* (unlike the other two lovers discussed) is both aware of his rejection and hopeful of arriving at a permanently satisfactory solution to it on this earth. He is anxious to lead the role of pursurer throughout life: *While the one eludes, must the other pursue* (l. 7). Significantly, this is not a question to him; it is fact. He is cognizant that this life is at fault, but he attributes it all to Fate.

"But what if fail of my purpose here?
It is but to keep the nerves at strain,
To dry one's eyes and laugh at a fall,
And, baffled, get up and begin again. . .

(ll. 11-14)

Here one may notice a basic difference between the serenader and this repudiated lover: the serenader —baffled— does not attempt to rise above the fact of failure. Also a difference can be seen between his actions and those of the rider: the rider prefers to bide his time and slake his thirst in the heavenly beyond. Frances M. Sim rightly notes that it is the *hope of a lover that his search will be rewarded, that the woman he pursues will cease to elude him*. She adds, with regard to *Life in a Love*, this comment: *But he never despairs: as one hope dies another springs to life —and what if he fail here in this? Life could not be better spent than in pursuit of a living ideal*¹¹.

Perhaps now is the time to examine the three rejected lovers in relation to each other looking at their similarities and differences —all molding together for the whole picture of Browning's rejected lover. All three, it has been noted, are spirited lovers (or, more exactly, suitors) and each goes to great lengths to convince the lady of his choice that he is for her; all three have been given some "hope" by the woman which has led them to suspect at least that their advances will meet with more success than they do. All three, again, express their love in the most romantic terms —only to meet with failure which is hard to explain. The reason these ladies can turn down such men must for-

¹¹ FRANCES M. SIM, *Robert Browning: Poet and Philosopher, 1850-1889* (New York, 1924), p. 66.

ever remain a mystery. The rider asks for little and is satisfied with accomplishing little; the serenader expects much and receives nothing; the man in *Life in a Love* expects much and aims to die trying to get it. The serenader, unlike the rider, does not think of meeting his lady in heaven; he even imagines her saying, *Can't one even die in peace?* (1. 53). The word *die* and the word *peace* are not puns—at least the speaker does not, surely, take them as such. Much different are the lines from *The Last Ride Together*:

"What What if we still ride on, we two
With life for ever old yet new,
Changed not in kind but in degree,
The instant made eternity . . .

(11. 105-08)

While the serenader exhibits self-pity and remorsefulness by his inaction and silence when the villa remained dark, even he does not speak out in a soliloquy of pain, indignation, puzzlement, or helplessness as Browning permits some of his rejected lovers to do. Of this splendid quality of the male rejected lover, Professor Herford says *it is only the masculine lover whom Browning allows thus to get the better of unreturned love. His women have no such "remedia amoris"; their heart's blood will not transmute into the ichor of poetry*¹². Moreover, the serenader controls his temper and does not permit his feelings to overcome his intellect. In this respect the other two fellow losers remain chivalrous throughout their period of "enlightenment"—never failing to exhibit a manly and worthy face to the world. They never resort to a negative attitude toward life.

William Lyon Phelps, forty years ago, commented on Browning's rejected lover, and his words today provide a sterling insight into their nature and bring their essence into focus: *It never occurs to them that the woman is lacking in intelligence because of her refusal; nor that the man she prefers is a low-browed scoundrel. They are chivalrous; they do their best to win. When they lose, they would rather have been rejected*

¹² Herford, p. 139.

by this woman than accepted by any other, and they are always ready to congratulate the man more fortunate than they. And he adds, as a corollary, *They are in fact simply irresistible, and one cannot help believing in their ultimate success*¹³. Robert Browning's Rejected Lovers are indeed splendid fellows, succeeding in the striving, answering positively the question, *Why all men strive and who succeeds?*

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S U M A R I O

Donald Kay examina tres modalidades de lo que llama "el enamorado rechazado" en la poesía de Browning. A través del análisis de tres poemas de ese autor, *A Serenade at the Villa*, *The Last Ride Together* y *Life in a Love*, muestra tres pretendientes que reaccionan de distinta manera frente al rechazo de la mujer amada; los tres, sin embargo, coinciden en una actitud viril y caballeresca.

En *A Serenade at the villa* el enamorado espera inútilmente imaginando las posibles respuestas de su amada a sus requerimientos; cuando esta respuesta no llega, abandona su intento. En *The Last Ride Together* el personaje implora a su amada el favor de su compañía en su último paseo juntos y se resigna a su destino con la esperanza de que su amor triunfará en otra vida. El enamorado de *Life in a Love* es consciente del rechazo de la mujer que ama pero se niega a aceptarlo y continúa persiguiendo su sueño de amor.

El pretendiente de *A Serenade at the Villa* anhela mucho y no consigue nada; el enamorado de *The Last Ride Together* espera poco y se conforma con poco; el de *Life in a Love* ambiciona mucho y se propone morir tratando de obtenerlo. Ninguno de ellos adopta una actitud negativa frente a la vida, los tres se esfuerzan por alcanzar el amor y si sus aspiraciones no son satisfechas, al menos triunfan en luchar sin desmayo, respondiendo así positivamente al interrogante planteado en el título de este artículo.

¹³ PHELPS, pp. 143-44.