

Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

44

Poetry Criticism

*Excerpts from Criticism of the Works
of the Most Significant and Widely
Studied Poets of World Literature*

Volume 44

David Galens
Project Editor



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Poetry Criticism, Vol. 44

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, PC offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by PC supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, PC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a PC volume.

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Each PC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given

at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.

- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
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Linden Peach, "Man, Nature and Wordsworth: American Versions," *British Influence on the Birth of American Literature*, (Macmillan Press Ltd., 1982), 29-57; reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*, vol. 20, ed. Ellen McGeagh (Detroit: The Gale Group), 37-40.

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Laura (Riding) Jackson

1901-1991

(Also wrote under the names Laura Riding Gottschalk, Laura Riding, and Madeleine Vara) American poet, critic, translator, editor, novelist, and short story writer.

INTRODUCTION

Riding is recognized as an original and honest voice in American poetry. She rejected the forms of conventional literature and asserted the need for new aesthetic standards in order to reflect the changing sensibility of the times. Critics note that Riding's poetic and critical work was focused on the importance of truth in her life and her work.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Riding was born in New York City, January 16, 1901. Born Laura Reichenenthal, she adopted the surname Riding in 1926. Her parents encouraged a strong sense of political activism, but she rejected politics in favor of poetry. In 1918 she began attending Cornell University and remained there for three years, dropping out to marry her history professor, Louis Gottschalk. She continued her education at the University of Illinois, Urbana, and the University of Louisville. In the early 1920s she became associated with the Fugitives, a group of American southern writers that included John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. Her poetry was published in their influential magazine, *The Fugitive*, and garnered critical attention. She published her first collection of poetry, *The Close Chaplet*, in 1926. In 1927 she cofounded the Seizin Press with her partner, Robert Graves. Their personal and professional relationship also produced *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), which is recognized as an important work of literary theory and a great influence on the school of thought known as "The New Criticism." In 1942 she gave up poetry, contending that the form was incompatible with truth. She concentrated instead on works of criticism and linguistics. In 1943, after her marriage to Schuyler B. Jackson, she settled on a citrus farm in Florida. In her *Selected Poems* (1970), she republished some of her work and wrote an introduction that elucidated her reasons for renouncing poetry. Until 1926 she signed her poems Laura Riding Gottschalk. Then, during her years with Graves (1926-1939), she was Laura Riding—the name under which she is best known—and finally, after Jackson died in 1968, she called herself Laura (Riding) Jackson. In 1972 she was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in 1979. She died of cardiac arrest September 2, 1991, in Sebastian, Florida.



MAJOR WORKS

Central to Riding's poetry and criticism is the importance of truth in her work and her life. In addition, the limitation of gender roles and the appeal of death are recurring themes in her verse. In early collections, such as *The Close Chaplet* and *Love as Love, Death as Death* (1928), Riding writes about the frustration of being a woman with wide-ranging interest and passions in a repressive, patriarchal society. Thematically, she also touched on the separation between the body and mind as well as conflict between sensory experience and thought. Death—especially suicide—also is a significant thematic concern. For Riding, suicide was the ultimate truth, as death signified a path to knowledge. As her disappointment with language and poetry began to grow, her verse reflected her changing poetic philosophy. *Poet: A Lying Word* (1933) addresses her need to purify language of its ambiguity, to make her verse completely truthful. Stylistically, she invented words, capitalization, distorted syntax, and employed repetition in her poetry. In her final verse before her renunciation of poetry in 1942, Riding explores the relationships between

men and women, the individual and the community, and language and thought. After a hiatus from poetry that lasted decades, Riding published *Selected Poems*. In the preface of the collection, she discussed her poetic philosophy. Since then, a few other collections of her early verse have been published, which have inspired greater attention to her poetry, her life, and influence on American poetry.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Although an important figure, critics have struggled to place Riding within the context of American literature. She has been viewed as alternately modernist, Fugitive, feminist, and a postmodern poet. Because of her renunciation of poetry, as well as her reluctance to have her poems anthologized, commentators maintain that Riding's verse has been virtually ignored by critics. Yet in recent years, there has been a renewed interest in her life and work. Autobiographical aspects of her work have been a specific area of interest, particularly Riding's suicide attempt in 1929, her rejection of poetry, and her influential and productive relationship with Graves as well as other male poets. Several reviewers have called her poetry quirky, self-important, sometimes pretentious, and difficult to understand. Some critics assert that Riding's poems have a limited appeal, and are not really accessible to most readers. Others commend her search for truth and experiments with language. Stylistically, she has been compared to Gertrude Stein, especially for her use of repetition in her poetry. Her influence on other poets, such as W. H. Auden, has been a source of speculation. However, no matter what the critical consensus is, Riding is recognized as a unique and passionate voice in American poetry.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

- **The Close Chaplet* 1926
- **Voltaire: A Biographical Fantasy* 1927
- Love as Love, Death as Death* 1928
- Poems: A Joking Word* 1930
- Though Gently* 1930
- Twenty Poems Less* 1930
- Laura and Francisca* 1931
- The First Leaf* 1933
- The Life of the Dead* 1933
- Poet: A Lying Word* 1933
- Americans* 1934
- The Second Leaf* 1935
- Collected Poems* 1938; revised as *The Poems of Laura Riding: A New Edition of the 1938 Collection* 1980
- Selected Poems: In Five Sets* 1970
- The Poems of Laura Riding* 1986

First Awakenings: The Early Poems of Laura Riding 1992
A Selection of the Poems of Laura Riding 1997

Other Major Works

- A Survey of Modernist Poetry* [with Robert Graves] (criticism) 1927
- Anarchism Is Not Enough* (criticism) 1928
- Contemporaries and Snobs* (criticism) 1928
- Progress of Stories* (short stories) 1935
- Convalescent Conversations* [as Madeleine Vara] (novel) 1936
- Lives of Wives* (novel) 1939
- The Telling* (criticism) 1972
- The Word Woman and Other Related Writings* (essays) 1993
- Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words, and Supplementary Essays* (essays) 1997

*Published under Laura Riding Gottschalk.

CRITICISM

R. P. Blackmur (review date winter 1939)

SOURCE: Blackmur, R. P. "Nine Poets." *Partisan Review* 6, no. 2 (winter 1939): 108-9.

[In the following excerpt, Blackmur discusses Riding's verbal techniques in *The Collected Poems*.]

Nine books of contemporary verse running to over thirteen hundred pages leave one both aghast and agape. It is education by shock; the lesson, even after reflection, confusing, and the value dubious. Not for one's life would one repeat what one thought one had learned. Far better, mouth open and teeth showing, a conspirator caught, to stop at the shock. Let us see why.

Mr. Belitt says it is because you must try to integrate yourself, make of your senses a single faculty and "loose the inward wound to bleed afresh." But his labour at integration ends, in 1938, rather more like vertigo:

*Tranced as in surmise, lost between myth and mood,
 Derelict, decoyed,
 In some astonished dream of sailing. . . .*

Dereliction is an important element in Mr. Belitt's sensibility; it is a function of sleep and dreaming, of a bird and of human stragglers: at any rate we have derelict claws of a singing bird and certain inexplicit stragglers by the surge. One should not make too much a point of it, yet it strikes sharp; that Mr. Belitt's poetry fails of integrity less because it deals with the sentiment of chaos and the moral of the

abyss than because, in so dealing, he prefers the dreamy, the quite somnambulistic state to the waking representation. This is to indulge in the dereliction—the reprehensible abandonment—of poetic duty. He does not say—he does not represent—what he is writing about; he only indicates, and forsakes, what it was that led him to write.

Otherwise he does very well; his words work on each other and carry each other along apace; it is a pleasure, as sleep-walking goes, and at the right remove, to reach his version of vertigo. With the work of Laura Riding we have no such contact, no matter at what remove. Her poems may, as she says in a long preface, be written for all the right reasons, or for more right reasons than anybody else's poetry, and her reasons may be mine as well as hers, and that these reasons are all the reasons of poetry, but I suspect just the same and with good reason that the reason of all these reasons is the reason (buz buz) she does not say once and for all Unreason, and then add, for all the best unreasons that unreason is not not-unreason. Perhaps she really does not not say so. Certainly she does not not say every now and then unreproach unharshed unloving unsmooth unlove undeath unlife undazzle unmade unthought unlive unrebillion unbeautifuls unzoo-logical unstrange unwild unprecious unbull unhurriedness unenthusiasm. Miss Riding is the not star of un no not never nowhere. After page eighty pretty well right through 477 pages she tells us what she it they we you are not, and when she does not tell us directly she tells us even more not clearly by not not indirection. Many pages are not without fifteen forms of the verbal negative; no page is without words which produce negation. We have either:

*There is much that we are not.
There is much that is not.
There is much that we have not to be*

or we have such phrases as "native strangeness . . . Science, the white heart of strangers . . . the lionish landscape of advent." Here meanings beat against each other like nothing but words; we have verbalism in extremis; an end-product of abstraction without any trace of what it was abstracted from. Automatic writing as featured by Gertrude Stein plus an obsession with the *problem* (not the experience) of identity plus an extraordinary instinct of how best to let words obfuscate themselves here combine in the most irresponsible body of poetry in our time. Miss Riding is not derelict; she is jetsam: washed up; and just to the level that *we* are washed up she makes excellent reading.

Robert Fitzgerald (review date winter 1939)

SOURCE: Fitzgerald, Robert. Review of *The Collected Poems of Laura Riding*. *Kenyon Review* 1, (winter 1939): 341-45.

[In the following review, Fitzgerald praises Riding's *The Collected Poems of Laura Riding* for its use of language.]

Of all the contemporary poems I know, these seem to me the furthest advanced, the most personal and the purest. I hope, but hardly believe, that they will be assimilated soon into the general consciousness of literature.

The authority, the dignity of truth telling, lost by poetry to science, may gradually be regained. If it is, these poems should one day be a kind of *Principia*. They argue that the art of language is the most fitting instrument with which to press upon full reality and make it known.

There are several modes of literary revelation. A fine novel makes us aware of fine quotidian truths; an exact work of reason informs us of fine abstract truths. Certain poetry, being noble, passionate and skilled, awakens us to a good admiration and gravity. One might say that in practice Laura Riding attempts to concentrate these modes. "A poem is other name besides poetry is adequate except truth. . . . Truth is the result when reality as a whole is uncovered by those faculties which apprehend in terms of entirety, rather than in terms merely of parts. . . . To go to poetry is the most ambitious act of the mind."

Such complete faith in poetry is rarely professed, even by the few poets who merit the name. The urgency with which Laura Riding professes it is an index of the divided faith of her contemporaries. By the settled prejudice of our time, indeed, her credo is her delusion. But her poems are to the point. They declare her impulse in less doctrinal terms. Explicitly, and of course partially (the date is c. 1927):

But for familiar sense what need can be
Of my most singular device or me,
If homage may be done
(Unless it is agreed we shall not break
The patent silence for mere singing's sake)
As well by anyone?

Mistrust me not, then, if I have begun
Unwontedly and if I seem to shun
Unstrange and much-told ground:
For in peculiar earth alone can I
Construe the word and let the meaning lie
That rarely may be found.

And here also:

Fierce is unhappiness, a living god
Of impeccable cleanliness and costume.
In his intense name I wear
A brighter colour for the year
And with sharp step I praise him
That unteaches ecstasy and fear. . . .

I cannot do what there is not to do.
And what there is to do
Let me do somewhat crookedly,
Lest I speak too plainly and everlasting
For such weathervanes of understanding.

To begin with, then, we have a rejection of familiar ground, unhappiness conceived as insight, concern with what is peculiarly true for the poet and with that alone, a

desire to achieve the best language possible to the poet—and to her in particular—and a logical refusal to adapt it to casual consumption. This is not unique. What is unique is the relentlessness of Laura Riding's performance.

The English language brim-full is her resource, and in that fullness the poetic discoveries of the past two generations are living but not disproportionate elements. In general there is a creator's realization of words as organic, mysterious, idiosyncratic:

How mad for friendliness
Creep words from where they shiver and starve,
Small and far away in thought,
Untalkative and outcast. . . .

But Miss Riding commands the little creatures with severity.

Her severity may be measured by the fact that not more than one or two of the poems describe any earthly landscape. There is little dilation upon local marvels, natural or human; there are few images of sunset or moonrise or men. Sensuousness is intensely intellectualized. The "pinch of glory" remarked by E. M. Forster in the work of Eliot seems all that has been permitted here. Though the poems of the first part were written mostly in America, those of the second part mostly in England, those of the third and fourth parts mostly in Spain, the country throughout is the country of the mind.

Since that country is actually a cosmology, we may enter it via *The Quids*, which makes severe nurseys nonsense out of the philosophy of monads:

The little quids, the monstrous quids,
The everywhere, everything, always quids,
The atoms of the Monoton,
Each turned an essence where it stood,
Ground a gisty dust from its neighbors' edges,
Until a powdery thoughtfall stormed in and out—
The cerebration of a slipperly quid enterprise.

But filling out metaphysical frames with such serious humor is perhaps the least ambitious of Laura Riding's occupations. Her precision in seizing essences makes her something more than a "metaphysical poet"; certainly her conceits are rarely liable to the classic Johnsonian criticism. I should say they invited it—or a modern equivalent of it—only in certain instances where her awareness of the nature of words has led to what seems an excessive reworking of parts of speech:

Her very womb is a man,
And she but a meanwhile.
And the children are but a never. . . .

In her foreword Miss Riding assures us: "Because I am fully aware of the background of miseducation from which most readers come to poems, I begin every poem on the most elementary plane of understanding and proceed to the plane of poetic discovery (or uncovering) by steps

which deflect the reader from false associations, false reasons for reading." To many readers, nevertheless, the plane on which certain poems begin will seem far from elementary; and there are a few poems of such abstruse and apparently tedious structure as to be nearly unreadable without preparation. I believe that this book as a whole provides such preparation; that given the rich state of mind and alertness induced by reading it, Laura Riding's driest bones will show the flash of meaning. None is, I believe, capricious or arbitrary; all are intent economies of statement; and all are informed by a passionate perception that reality—that is, exact mystery, refinement and greatness—is at last the heritage of human intellect.

As I have indicated, Laura Riding's clairvoyance is equalled by her faith. "To live in, by, for the reason of, poems is to habituate oneself to the good existence. When we are so continuously habituated that there is no temporal interruption between one poetic incident (poem) and another, then we have not merely poems—we have poetry; we have not merely the immediacies—we have finality. Literally." Anyone who finds such hopes and such demands forbidding should follow out their meaning in the later poems of this book.

We, and the time-reserved fulfilment
Of our given, taken, uneffected meaning,
Have, by the enigmatic path of time,
Come into knowledge with an innocence
That knits our minds to our occasions
Of a silent sudden—the befalling
And the thought of it together fall

And the heart-stir is the tremble of the scene
As an eye flutters with the bird watched. . . .

I even, to whom the law of instantness
And all-fraught presence is a pulse of the mind . . .
Did refinger with slavish habit of hand
The last and last newspaper, throw my eyes
To the lionish landscape of advent,
Then snatch them from dayglare to nightglow as if—
All looking being now moon-mild,
Sunny astonishment abandoned
For the nimbler heed which exclaims not. . . .

Mary Kinzie (essay date November 1981)

SOURCE: Kinzie, Mary. Review of *The Poems of Laura Riding*. *American Poetry Review* 10, no. 6 (November 1981): 38-40.

[In the following excerpt, Kinzie provides a mixed assessment of *The Poems of Laura Riding*.]

Laura Riding is represented in the Norton because the poems she wrote in the 1920s were admired by the Fugitives, and because her collaboration with Robert Graves on *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) initiated or encouraged innovations in literary interpretation. Empson,

Ransom, and Brooks were all indebted to the Riding-Graves critique; and although her poetry has not found many imitators, at least one poet sympathetic to some of Riding's early techniques of flattening texture with abstractions, joining hard consonant sounds together, effortlessly coining neologisms, and using plain words in delicately twisted syntax, has had an almost incalculable influence on modern poetry. Now whether W. H. Auden stole from Laura Riding or not, it is clear that what in Riding remained an inward and self-revolving technique becomes in Auden a rhetorical method for satirizing the modern temper. Riding was interested in making strange the words for her own story, Auden in judging shared behavior.

With respect to their comrades in art, writers generally fall into two groups, those who praise writers most like themselves (the enclave tendency) and those who are drawn to writers who are least like themselves (the need to protect an enclave of one). Laura Riding belonged to the second group to the extent that she found threatening the experiments with a small vocabulary, incantation, and narrow wordplay of Gertrude Stein—experiments that resembled her own. Both Stein and Riding were repelled by pretty adjectives, Swinburnian settings, and obvious tropes (especially simile), although this fact does not distinguish them from scores of poets at the turn of the century who were fed up with Victorian embellishment. But there was a particularly rabid American wave of modernism in the 1920s that broke with what Hardy called the jewelled Tennysonian line more radically than did Hardy, Edward Thomas, or even Pound. On this wave were cast up e. e. cummings, Riding, and Gertrude Stein, whom Laura Riding called a "barbarian," a writer who worked toward "mass-originality . . . without her ordinariness being destroyed." But in fact, says Riding, Stein is "completely without originality. . . . She uses language automatically to record pure, ultimate obviousness" (*Contemporaries and Snobs*, 1928).

Riding did not go as far as Stein did in humming her language to death, but she was prone to effects only slightly less narcotic:

The little quids, the monstrous quids,
The everywhere, everything, always quids,
The atoms of the Monoton,
Each turned an essence where it stood,
Ground a gisty dust from its neighbours' edges,
Until a powdery thoughtfall stormed in and out—
The cerebation of a slippery quid enterprise.

("The Quids")

'Poor John, John, John, John, John,'
Said the parson as he perched
On the sharp left discomfort
Of John John's tombstone—
John, John, John, John, John.

("Lying Spying")

His luck' was perhaps no luck.
I am a fine fellow.
My good luck is perhaps no luck.

All luck is perhaps no luck.
All luck is luck or perhaps no luck.

("The Lullaby")

What to say when I
When I or the spider
No I and I what
Does what does dies
No when the spider dies
Death spider death
Death always I
Death before always

("Elegy in a Spider's Web")

These excerpts indicate a problem that persists in better poems. Like Emily Dickinson and (to a degree) Christina Rossetti, Riding is essentially a writer of the small *mot*, the epigram, the poem of a few lines. Here is a fine example of what Riding can do when she keeps her circuit small:

This posture and this manner suit
Not that I have an ease in them
But that I have a horror
And so stand well upright—
Lest, should I sit and, flesh-conversing, eat,
I choke upon a piece of my own tongue-meat.

("Grace")

Yet *The Poems of Laura Riding* is composed of poems that average between twenty and thirty-five lines. Since her thought has a short round, most of her poems have to start over again halfway through, giving them that hint of casuistry, of bombast and self-importance, that are inevitable when somebody continues to hold the floor after they have finished talking. Riding lacked that regard for stylistic integrity that even the most eccentric modernist poets like Marianne Moore and e. e. cummings and Pound applied so skillfully in the breaking of it. To break a mold, to raise the pitch of an argument, something must be there to be broken, or broken from.

This background of continuity is what Riding's poems miss. For example, the first stanza of the following poem does all that an epigrammatic poem should do, namely, it charms, it points, it suggests. The second stanza blunders through that established delicacy and reiterates more harshly the same point that was better made in the first stanza; the only new idea added in the second is that of following at a slower rate. While the third stanza, whatever its charm, is of a rhetoric more antique, self-conscious, and childish ("No harm is meant," "the thighs / Are meek"):

Without dressmakers to connect
The good-will of the body
With the purpose of the head,
We should be two worlds
Instead of a world and its shadow
The flesh.

The head is one world
And the body another—
The same, but somewhat slower

And more dazed and earlier,
The divergence being corrected
In dress.

There is an odour of Christ
In the cloth: below the chin
No harm is meant. Even, immune
From capital test, wisdom flowers
Out of the shaded breast, and the thighs
Are meek.

("Because of Clothes")

This poem has three more stanzas, each neutral to the others by virtue of similar disjunctions in sense and tone.

Riding and Graves make an interesting observation in their *Survey of Modernist Poetry* that could be adjusted for the poetry of Laura Riding. After getting rid of form imposed from without, modern poets sought "some principle of . . . government from within." This was (in circular fashion) free verse. Formal metrical poetry had an external government that could endlessly lap the miles of any thematic materials, hence the natural extension of formal poetry to the long poem (the *Aeneid*, *In Memoriam*), which had no need to work at its transitions. A poem like *The Waste Land*, on the other hand, since it refrained from inducing the anticipation of regularly recurring verse patterns, had to forge each transition by hand, moving from theme to theme, mood to mood, on the back of deeply pondered associations and echoes. Therefore, Riding and Graves argue, *The Waste Land* is really just a 433-line short poem. I think this idea can also work in reverse for the poem that has no transitions. Riding's "Because of Clothes" is really a thirty-six-line *Sartor Resartus*, that is, a long work trapped in the wrong short form. Riding uses in poetry material that is never made poetic, and yet the poems are not energetic enough to extend themselves out to their proper length. Her rejection of poetry in 1938, motivated in part by the deterioration of the Graves ménage, may also have been grounded in this fact, that her impulse was not to write poems at all, but the prose discourses and meditations on body, mind, language, and union, which she has indeed written for the past forty years.

Riding has also during this period become her own advocate in quasi-mystical apologies about her place in literature and her meaning for the history of words. The career of this writer has a psychological dimension that is hard to put delicately: she was an arrogant and impatient poet, in many ways juvenile in the estimation of her importance, in her endless poetic divagations about the right kind of pain, the right kind of strangeness, and the right kind of language, and in her repeated challenges to the reader and the lover that they work hard to discover the exact nuance of her meaning:

Come, words, away:
I am a conscience of you
Not to be held unanswered past
The perfect number of betrayal.

It is a smarting passion
By which I call—
Wherein the calling's loathsome as
Memory of man-flesh over-fondled
With words like over-gentle hands.

The smarting passion of Laura Riding has not made much difference to the world of letters, and we cannot help but regret the dead wood in this massive and second-rate oeuvre, from which so often the small gems of precision blink:

I moved the soldier-lusts in you:
Thus did you honour me.

("After Smiling")

Fresh year of time, desire,
Late year of my age, renunciation—
Ill-mated pair, debating if the window
Is worth leaping out of, and by whom.

("In Nineteen Twenty-Seven")

What is to cry out?
It is to make gigantic
Where speaking cannot last long.

("As Many Questions As Answers")

Barbara Adams (essay date 1982)

SOURCE: Adams, Barbara. "Laura Riding's Poems: A Double Ripeness." *Modern Poetry Studies* 11, nos. 1-2 (1982): 189-95.

[In the following essay, Adams delineates the defining characteristics of Riding's Selected Poems.]

I labored, as a poet, to bring the poetic endeavor out from the climate of the mere different in wording into an air of utterance in which the ring and spirit and mental movement of true wording and that of familiar wording coincided into a non-differentiability, a quality of human and linguistic universalness. I think that *Collected Poems* reveals also how my commitment to poetry and my commitment to a universal linguistic solution befitting the general dignity of being human went as far as they could go together.

(Preface, p. 8, *The Poems of Laura Riding*)

In 1940, at the height of her poetic career, Laura Riding renounced poetry, just two years after the publication of one-hundred eight-one of her poems in *Collected Poems*. At the time of her renunciation, Riding was thirty-nine and had returned to her native United States after a thirteen-year sojourn in England, Europe and Majorca with Robert Graves. She had established a reputation as a unique poet and intellectual in the vanguard of modernism. As a critic she had helped to foster New Criticism with a method of close textual reading presented in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), co-authored with Graves.

Before her renunciation, Riding had believed that poetry could apprehend "reality as a whole," and that it was capable of "uncovering truth." Until 1940, she believed

that writing poetry was a "necessary-natural thing to do." After her renunciation, Riding no longer believed that poetry was the medium for truth-telling, so, as an absolutist, she wrote no more poems. She continued, however, to seek a "universal linguistic solution" to the human condition in a gargantuan study of language, "A Dictionary of Rational Meaning," written with her late husband, Schuyler B. Jackson. Only a few parts of this work have been published in literary journals, along with some recent essays, letters and re-prints of a few poems. Following her almost complete withdrawal from the literary world in 1940, Riding's publications declined drastically, as her place in modern poetry slipped from public awareness.

Not until the publication of Riding's *Selected Poems*—about a third of the *Collected Poems*—in 1970 in England and 1973 in the United States did she again begin to receive some critical attention. A BBC broadcast of some of her writings in 1967, a tape recording for the Lamont Library in 1972, and her last published work, a prose "evangel," *The Telling* in 1972, also helped revive interest in Riding's work. The bulk of her poems, however, out of print since 1938, was largely unavailable to interested critics and new readers.

The 1980 edition, *The Poems of Laura Riding*, published in England and the United States, finally makes Riding's poetry available in its entirety to her international audience. This book duplicates the original *Collected Poems*, preface and 181 poems in the same order, and adds a new preface and an appendix containing notes on a poem, a previously uncollected early poem, the original 1938 preface, excerpts from the preface to *Selected Poems*, and excerpts from the Lamont Library tape. Laura Riding has published this new edition of her poetry under the name Laura (Riding) Jackson, the signature she has preferred since 1967. The problem of recognition has been solved by the new title which includes the name by which she is best known, Laura Riding.

Laura Riding's life and art have always been intimately related, bearing out her extremist aesthetics in the very texture and substance of her writing. The poetry, in fact, tells the "story" of the persona's developing self, as Riding explained in the 1938 Preface to *Collected Poems*: "This book begins with my earliest poems, and its arrangement corresponds with the development of my poetic activity. I have omitted those poems which seemed to fall outside the story. . . ."

Like the original collection, *The Poems of Laura Riding* is divided into five parts, the first four of which correspond with events in the author's life from her childhood in New York City, through her years with Graves in England and on Majorca, and ending with Christmas 1937 following the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War which caused her and Graves to flee Majorca. With the outside world as backdrop, the poems actually focus on the author's inner life and her attempts to forge an ideal self in her poetry. The first four parts match "occasions" in her interior life—

"Poems of Mythical Occasion," "Poems of Immediate Occasion," "Poems of Final Occasion" and "Poems Continual." The fifth part, "Histories," falls outside chronological sequence with the whole, but still bears on the life of the poet's mind in three very long narrative poems written in 1921, 1931 and 1933, respectively. The first of these, "Voltaire," was written while Riding attended Cornell where she met and married her first husband, a history instructor, Louis Gottschalk. The second of the *Histories*, "Laura and Francisca," was written during Riding's first year in Deyá, Majorca, and describes her inner and outer life there. The last, "The Life of the Dead," is a severely critical allegory of modern life, written in French with complementary English text and surreal illustrations.

Riding's poems range from seven to several hundred lines, but generally fall into two kinds: a lyric of about thirty to sixty lines, and the long sequence in several parts of a few hundred lines. The imagery often seems abstract and intellectual rather than sensory. The language, however, is precise and demands that the reader create the imagery from the thought. The thought can be difficult, a philosophical concept of states of being, as in this Dickinson-like stanza from "Echoes" (1926):

My address? At the cafés, cathedrals,
Green fields, marble terminals—
I teem with place
When? Any moment finds me,
Reiterated morsel
Expanded into space.

Such expressions of the self in relation to space and time crop up often in Riding's poetry, justifying Auden's claim that she is "the most philosophical poet" of our time.

If there is one word that characterizes a Riding poem it is "self." A number of shorter lyrics examine the self, seeking the "one self," charting the poet's "diary of identity," and discovering a self at war with itself, "the enemy self." As R. P. Blackmur said in 1939, Riding's poetry reveals a woman "obsessed with the problem of identity." As the poet seeks a unified self, three themes weave throughout the poetry, three possible solutions to her inner division: denial of the claims of sexuality; escape into death; and escape into art. The poet hopes to transcend sexuality through an act of will, self-denial. The goal is spiritual chastity, if not actual chastity, as the priestess-like speaker expresses in "The Virgin" (1925):

My flesh is at a distance from me.
Yet approach and touch it.
It is as near as anyone can come.

Yielding to sexual needs only leads to trouble, deception and abandonment. Of her marriage to "Bill Bubble" in the very first poem of the collection, the poet says "I feel like dead." "Not dead but wed," he answers the bride who is soon left alone with the cold comfort of the moon and "Old Trouble," the woman's curse.

In later poems, sexuality and the act of love itself can be perfected by conversion into art. Words transcend the act, poetry triumphs over the flesh in **"When Love Becomes Words"** (1937) in which "a poem upon love" makes one forget the actual kiss and is ultimately "more love than kiss to lips."

The achievement of a self that is perfect, unified and even more real than life is the goal of Riding's poetry. Therefore, death is a kind of perfection she seeks, for it frees the self completely from human concerns and relationships. Riding's obsession with death spilled over from her life into her poetry. A nearly fatal fall from a fourth floor window in 1929 was apparently the culmination of two years' rumination on self-destruction. In 1927, she wrote **"Death As Death,"** comparing death to a comforter soothing away her troubles "like a quick cold hand / On the hot slow head of suicide." The most obvious example, however, of the close relationship between Riding's art and eventual suicidal act appears in **"In Nineteen Twenty-seven,"** a dark meditative soliloquy ominously presaging the jump from a window two years later. In the poem, the poet examines the world of 1927 and finds it deceptive, deformed, and wanting. Examining herself, she finds a serious flaw, a "double ripeness" of self. The conflict lies between the woman who would go with her lover, accepting the cycle of time as it turns from 1927 to the new year, 1928; and the poet who would deny her lover and her own love and literally stop the clock with her own death.

Then, where was I, of this time and my own
A double ripeness and perplexity?
Fresh year of time, desire,
Late year of my age, renunciation—
Ill-mated pair, debating if the window
Is worth leaping out of, and by whom.

Wishing to leave a world peopled with "dressed skeletons," seeing herself as one more "ghostly" inhabitant, the poet who wrote these lines in 1927 reached the crisis in 1929.

Riding recovered from the fall, and, for a time, found inner peace, enabling her to continue to write more poems, stories, two novels, critical essays and to run the Seizin Press with Graves. By 1938, when the **Collected Poems** came out, Riding had fully explored one more solution to the problem of self before her final renunciation of poetry rather than her life. This was the solution through art. **"The Last Covenant"** is the pact the poet makes with truth, inspiring her with the grace to abide in the "unitary somewhere." Like Wallace Stevens, Riding created a fictive heroine to bridge the gap between the real and the imaginary world. In her poems, at least, she came close to perfecting the self, to finding an aesthetic solution to the human condition.

Riding found a voice in her divided self, but where Stevens rejoiced in the supreme fiction created by his imagination which allowed him to incorporate reality in his poetic vision, Riding insisted that the supreme reality was the word-

created self. Ideal and real could not co-habit in peace within her. Thus, for as long as she continued to write poetry, Riding sought to bring forth the perfect self. And this could be achieved only by the suppression, demotion and near-extinction of the flesh-and-blood self who held the pen.

Perhaps the best poem in the collection, one which illustrates the aesthetic solution to the poet's conflict with life, is **"Memories of Mortalities"** (1936), an autobiographical sequence that shows the emergence of Riding's poetic self. Consisting of four hundred fifty-four lines, it is her longest single poem, divided into three chronological parts. As the poem records key experiences in the poet's inner development, we watch in sympathetic fascination as she discards Mother, Father, School and social pressures—layers of superimposed selves which must be jettisoned before she can shape her own identity. The speaker, a wide-eyed innocent, confronts this fictional-seeming world and tries to establish her own reality with her pen. The process is slow and painful, summarized brilliantly in the phrase, "the stuttering slow grammaring of self."

In **"Memories of Mortalities,"** Riding discovered how to manipulate narrative and to avoid literal autobiography by creating intense moments of drama. It is a technique which certainly points towards recent confessional poetry, making use of childhood memory, pseudo-naïve viewpoint, striking outbursts of direct discourse and, always, the I at the center. Moreover, the dramatic element is so strong in the second part, **"My Father and My Childhood,"** that the character of the father stands out in strong relief as if drawn by Dickens. Riding's story of her father resonates with echoes of great tales of character, from Aesop's sly but foolish fox to Robert Lowell's ineffectual, beloved father in *Life Studies*. Even in this portrait, however, Riding keeps her eye on the truth disguised by petty illusions, life's "threadbare fiction," as her father advises:

All is mistrust and mischief.
Bestiality and bestial comfort.
Life is a threadbare fiction
Large the holes and thin the patches.

Passing from snake-mother, fox-father, through sickness and schooling, the poet completes the rite of passage to enter her visionary world with her "internal eye" (I). The poem, then, becomes the agency of a more real, created self, welding imagination to experience. Factual details and autobiography provide vivid imagery, of course, but they serve more importantly as landmarks along the route to show where the poet has been, what she has come through, on her way to achieving her real identity. Looking back at the end of her "memories of mortalities," she can now "go back / And write my story myself":

So I began to live.
It was outrageous,
I made mortal mistakes,
I did not mean to live so mortally.
But something must be written about me,
And not by them.