

CONTEMPORARY MISOGYNY: LAURA RIDING, WILLIAM EMPSON AND THE CRITICS – A SURVEY OF MIS-HISTORY

Mark Jacobs*

Abstract

This essay examines three books: *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, by Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* by William Empson, and *William Empson: Among the Mandarins* by John Haffenden. It shows how and why Laura Riding was the original author of the interpretation of Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, which provided the idea for Empson's understanding of 'ambiguity' which in turn was highly significant to the subsequent development of 'New Criticism'. It examines the history of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* since its first publication in 1927, its treatment by critics and reviewers, and its mistakenly being described as a book by Robert Graves up to the present day as epitomized in John Haffenden's biography. It also indicates that modernist or post-modernist literary criticism from 1927 onwards would have been significantly different had numerous critics, Empson among them, but other poets and authors, too, given more attention to the work of Laura Riding than to Robert Graves.

Two books, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) by Laura Riding and Robert Graves, and William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), which Empson acknowledges was inspired by Riding and Graves's examination of Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 ('Th' expence of Spirit in a waste of shame') in *A Survey*, had a profound and lasting effect on the critical study of poetry long after their first appearance.¹ For example, the Sonnet examination in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* – a book justly famous in its own right – has become increasingly accepted by critics as the starting place, partly via Empson's use of it, of much of what came

* Correspondence to Mark Jacobs, Nottingham Trent University

¹ Laura Riding and Robert Graves (1927) *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (London: Cape); William Empson (1930, 1947) *Seven Types Of Ambiguity* (London: Chatto and Windus).

to be known as the 'New Criticism', a dominant though somewhat diverse theme of criticism for the next several decades and beyond in the practise of close reading of poetry texts, as exemplified by John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren among others, and which still continues today in one form or another.

A Survey of Modernist Poetry is even now frequently read as a primer for early twentieth-century poetics, its first appearance in 1927 opening up modernist poetry to a wider public than just the academic one, as Charles Mundy and Patrick McGuiness point out in their introduction to the new edition of *A Survey* and *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*:

In the 1920s both Riding and Graves were committed wholeheartedly to the cause of poetry, and these books eschew the analytical focus of 'objective' criticism. Partial, subjective and polemical, these are deeply serious works: not criticism or literary history in the conventional sense, but rather written with the passion and force of poetic manifestos.²

But the history of *A Survey*, since its original appearance, has been confusing, if not misleading, because the first-named author on the title page, Laura Riding, was and continues to be ignored by any number of critic-reviewers, who either cite the book as by Robert Graves alone, omitting Laura Riding entirely, or reverse the order of the two names, assuming Robert Graves to be the real author, a misconception which seriously impedes any understanding of both the manifesto and the critical nature of the book.³ Critics and reviewers who reverse the proper order of names in this manner justify the habit by pointing out this is merely accepted tradition, frequently with the rider that it is, anyway, understood that Graves was the real author of the book, Riding the mere amanuensis. Nothing could be further from the truth, and the continued reversal of names increases the confusion.

² Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry and A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, ed. by Charles Mundy and Patrick McGuiness (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2002), p. vii. All subsequent quotations in this essay are taken from the 1927 first edition (London: Cape, 1927).

³ Graves himself contributed to the obfuscation of the book's authorship, first by editing long passages from it and including them in his *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry 1922–1949* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949) as his work, and then by permitting F. H. Higginson, his bibliographer, to list *A Survey* under his major books instead of in a separate category. Continuing to depend a great deal on (Riding) Jackson's work in his post-1940 work (e.g., *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*, 1943), Graves after this date deliberately began to remove, from his publications and reissues, almost all traces of their friendship and collaborative work. See Jacobs and Clark, 'The Question Of Bias: Some Treatments Of Laura (Riding) Jackson', *Hiroshima Studies in English Language and Literature*, Vol. 21, Nos. 1 and 2 (Hiroshima English Department, 1971), 1–29; also at http://www.ntu.ac.uk/laura_riding/index.html (Accessed 1 May 2015).

The two authors themselves pointed out the error of treating the book as by Graves, with Riding as a kind of after-thought, in the Foreword to their second collaboration, *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, published in July 1928, where they give a list of names of journals whose reviewers had got it wrong.⁴

At the beginning of a previous work, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, we [Riding and Graves] carefully described it as a word-by-word collaboration. We did this because it was obvious to us that the vulgarity of a certain type of English reviewer would be encouraged by the combined circumstances that the first author was a woman and that the second was a man whose name was perhaps better known to him than that of the first; and because we were interested to see how far this vulgarity would persist in spite of our statement.

We therefore take a statistical pleasure in listing the following papers which succumbed, through their reviewers, to this vulgarity.

They go on to list seven reviews in newspapers and journals. William Empson himself in his first edition of *Seven Types Of Ambiguity*, in his acknowledgement of *A Survey* and in particular its examination of Shakespeare's Sonnet 129, also omits Laura Riding as the first-named author, a mistake which, after Graves sent his publisher a stiff letter, he corrected as follows, at the head of a long Errata slip inserted in unsold copies, re-acknowledging both 'Laura Riding and Robert Graves's as the authors he was indebted to:

For from Mr. Robert Graves's analysis read from Miss Laura Riding's and Mr. Robert Graves's analysis.

It is regretted that *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* is erroneously referred to as by Mr Robert Graves. It is by Miss Laura Riding and Mr. Robert Graves.⁵

Surprisingly, in the much later revised edition of 1947, he withdrew this early acknowledgement to *A Survey* without explanation and instead, writing between parentheses and mentioning Robert Graves on a different matter, he states: 'I ought to say, in passing, that he is, so far as I know, the inventor of the method of analysis I was using here' (p.iv). As Miranda Seymour has pointed out, Empson possibly took umbrage at a letter Laura Riding wrote to him in 1939.⁶ Seymour asks, 'Did this letter perhaps contribute to Empson's decision

⁴ Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, (London: Cape; New York: Doubleday, 1928).

⁵ This printed tipped-in page, consisting of eighteen corrections of typographical errors and similar items, appeared in the UK, though possibly not in the USA according to Haffenden's note 145 in *William Empson, Volume I: Among the Mandarins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 607.

⁶ Miranda Seymour, 'Robert Graves, Laura Riding and William Empson', *Gravesiana* 2, 2 (1994) (p. 16). It should be pointed out that Miranda Seymour sides with Empson in his

to delete any acknowledgement to Graves or to Riding in the 1947 edition, and all subsequent ones, of his book?’ Empson justified himself nearly a quarter-century later, and then only privately, in a letter to Laura (Riding) Jackson by saying that he never meant to acknowledge *A Survey* in the first place but only Graves’s pre-1927 critical work.⁷

This omission of Riding’s name in Empson’s first edition, and the disacknowledgement of it in his second, has led many scholars of both *A Survey* and *Seven Types* to look to Robert Graves and his work for the continuance and development of the themes and critical methodology of both books in the hope of increasing their understanding. While typical examples of this persuasion, and there are many, often include only one or two name mentions and have the appearance of casual mistakes (although one suspects simple favouritism of Graves over Riding, he being ‘better known’), the case I am about to discuss is John Haffenden’s *William Empson: Among the Mandarins* (2005), which epitomizes the history of critical and scholarly misunderstanding of a continuing history as to which of the two authors, Riding or Graves, was the principal author of *A Survey Of Modernist Poetry*.⁸ In his book, Haffenden offers no fewer than ten mentions of the two authors. In the chapter entitled ‘The Making of Ambiguity’, he could be said to be signalling his conclusions by his name-ordering: his first four mentions are fully and correctly ‘Riding-Graves’s’; the next, in unexplained quotes, is ‘Graves-Riding’; and the remaining five

attempt to remove Laura Riding from the joint authorship; and her view of Riding in her other books is everywhere dismissive of her. See, for instance, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (London: Doubleday, 1995), *inter alia*.

⁷ A correspondence of 1970, quoted by Haffenden, pp. 219 ff. Also in *Selected Letters of William Empson*, ed. by John Haffenden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 432 ff. But see, especially, Elizabeth Friedmann’s fuller account in her biography of Laura (Riding) Jackson, *A Mannered Grace* (2005), pp. 422–423. Friedmann, who was a close friend of (Riding) Jackson in the later years, was given full access to the author’s papers at her home in Wabasso, Florida, as well as to the wealth of library archival material such as that stored in the Cornell University Archive. *A Mannered Grace* offers, as well as the personal story, closely detailed accounts of (Riding) Jackson’s numerous connections with other literary figures of the time, such as Tate, Ransom and the Fugitives, Auden, Eliot, Yeats, Frost and, of course, Graves, as well as those post-1940.

⁸ John Haffenden, *William Empson: Among the Mandarins*, Vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). To this may be added a recent publication, Donald J Childs, *The Birth of New Criticism: Conflict and Conciliation in the Early Work of William Empson, IA Richards, Robert Graves, and Laura Riding* (Ontario: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2013). Professor Child’s book mirrors Professor Haffenden’s in its conclusions regarding Empson and the New Criticism, similarly making Graves’s pre-*A Survey Of Modernist Poetry* books the starting-place, albeit he properly attributes the sonnet analysis as Riding’s.

mentions are unabashed no-quotes variants on 'Graves-Riding'. So Riding is allowed four out of ten but no more. It becomes difficult if not impossible to understand, therefore, how Haffenden arrives at the conclusion, in agreement with Empson, that *A Survey Of Modernist Poetry* was not the 'inspiration' for *Seven Types Of Ambiguity* but that certain 'scrapy' (his word) passages in two earlier, pre-1927, works by Robert Graves were. It was, he leaves the reader to conclude, perfectly correct for Empson not to have acknowledged Riding as co-author. Haffenden, however, although he can at times be refreshingly critical of Empson, either chooses to ignore, or has himself never registered, the possible unjustness of Empson's curious *propter hoc* tactics, in at least two other striking gaps or errors in Empson's arguments.

The background to Haffenden's conclusion is given in a selectively quoted exchange of letters between Laura (Riding) Jackson (her name of later time) and William Empson dating from 1970. Empson complained to Jackson that neither she nor Robert Graves had further developed their work on Sonnet 129 – 'Whyever [*sic*] was it that neither you nor Robert Graves used the technique again, having brought it to such a pitch?' – and Empson offers this to Jackson as part of the reason for his withdrawing acknowledgment of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* in his 1947 edition and thereafter. He insists in his letter that he had, in the original edition, intended to give credit to Graves's earlier, pre-1927 critical work on 'conflict', which he believed contained the original ingredients of the examination of Sonnet 129. Empson puts it thus:

Anyway he [Graves] is mainly concerned in the book [*On English Poetry* (1922)] with the Conflict Theory of poetry, that it is a healing process through the confrontation of opposed impulses. This is the necessary background for a theory of poetical ambiguity, which he was approaching. He had reached it by 1926, with *Impenetrability, or the Proper Habit of English*.⁹

A long passage from the latter book is then quoted by Empson. As it happens, Empson's argument that he intended to refer to *Impenetrability*, dated 1926 but not actually published until March 1927, is not a work from Graves's pre-Riding period (also unnoticed by Haffenden), but from the first intensive year of their collaborations, starting in January 1926, which resulted in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*. The book Empson cites is in fact based on Graves's lectures at the Royal Egyptian University in Cairo when Laura Riding accompanied him and his family during the period in question (including the 'Spring of 1926' referred to by Graves in a letter below). Riding was also busy writing a separate book, *Contemporaries And Snobs* (1928) from which, as the evidence shows, *A Survey*

⁹ Letter of 29 April 1971 in *Selected Letters of William Empson*, ed. by John Haffenden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 432

draws extensively.¹⁰ Furthermore, Riding and her work are twice appreciatively mentioned and quoted within the pages of Graves's *Impenetrability*, as she had also been quoted by him in his two preceding critical books published in 1925 and 1926. The first of these, *Contemporary Techniques of Poetry*, which famously quotes Riding's poem 'The Quids' in full, was published in July 1925, six months before their actual meeting in early January 1926; the second, *Another Future of Poetry*, in July 1926. Graves's previous entirely non-Riding critical work had been *Poetic Unreason*, published in February 1925.

Referring to *A Survey*, William Empson insultingly admits in the same letter (25 August 1970) to Laura (Riding) Jackson:

What I thought about the collaborator [Laura Riding] I do not remember, but I suppose these few pages, so very unlike the rest of the book, seemed to me such an evident further step by the mind of Robert Graves that no collaborator could disagree.

Empson accidentally puts his finger on the problem: 'What I thought about the collaborator I do not remember'. Given the alleged 'difficulty' Riding's work presents for a reader, very few critics or scholars have consulted her books in the Graves context. 'Whyever [*sic*]' Graves did not develop the 'technique' is one thing, but Laura Riding did develop it in every aspect of her work, although it was not a 'technique' for her but a principle of examining each and every word she might employ in a poem (or in prose) for its veracity, a principle which was to culminate in her and Schuyler B. Jackson's book, *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words* (1997) published eighty years later.¹¹ Had Empson or Haffenden, or many another scholar or biographer (Martin Seymour-Smith, Richard Graves, Deborah Baker, Miranda Seymour among these), been familiar with Riding's early work, beginning with her first collection of poems, *The Close Chaplet* (1926), and then moving to such books as *Contemporaries And Snobs* (1928), *Anarchism Is Not Enough* (1928), *Experts Are Puzzled* (1930), as well as the subsequent volumes of poetry and prose, and not least the climactic *Collected Poems* of 1938, they would have seen that the

¹⁰ Laura Riding, *Contemporaries and Snobs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928); also edited by Laura Heffernan and Jane Malcolm (Tuscloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2014). *Contemporaries and Snobs* was published a few months after *A Survey*, in early 1928. The middle section 'New Barbarism And Gertrude Stein' was first published in *transition*, 3 (Paris: June, 1927) 153–168 and used as the 'Conclusion' to *A Survey*, which reinforces both books were composed at the same time. The principles behind *A Survey* are to be found throughout this seldom consulted book, as I indicate. But see also my essay: 'Laura (Riding) Jackson and Robert Graves: The Question of Collaboration', *Gravesiana* (Summer 2010), pp. 331–347.

¹¹ Laura (Riding) Jackson and Schuyler B. Jackson (1997) *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia).

principles at work in *A Survey Of Modernist Poetry* are fully developed and implemented there, just as they are in her post-1940 work, after she famously ‘renounced’ poetry, but where they are still fully in play in her prose as with her poetry, this is also universally ascribed to be ‘difficult’.¹²

Empson mentions in his letter having read Laura Riding’s essay on ‘sex’, ‘The Damned Thing’, which appeared in *Anarchism Is Not Enough*.¹³ He didn’t like the essay, he tells, because of what he took to be its anti-sex stance.¹⁴ Haffenden does not consult the essay in question to verify Empson’s conclusion, nor Empson’s closely-connected recollection in his letter of what Riding and Graves had said about Shakespeare’s attitude to lust as conveyed in one line of the Sonnet:

A bliss in proof and prov’d a very woe’, which you said meant that Shakespeare hated the whole process of this love-affair, even the moments of bodily pleasure – it was all woe together.

This is not what the authors conclude in their careful commentary in *A Survey*. It could be said that Empson, with Haffenden following him, is being decidedly churlish at this point, which a reading of the chapter in question in *A Survey* would show.

Any of us may be forgiven if, being unwise enough to retail a long-unchecked recollection of what a given passage says, we find ourselves in error, even in gross error, in repeating it. But a conscientious biographer should check his subject’s sources in such a case, and, his readers will hope, supply a warning comment or footnote. But with equal injustice to Riding and to Graves, Haffenden’s chapter gives currency to Empson’s travesty of the careful, subtle, vigilant, and thorough Riding–Graves exploration of that line, and of the rest of the Sonnet. In his letter to Laura (Riding) Jackson of 29 April 1971, Empson adds: ‘. . .none of your work has ever seemed to me even capable of retaining my eye on the page.’ This calculated insult is not quoted by Haffenden but he may have taken some licence from it for his personal comments on the style of Laura (Riding) Jackson’s letters when he refers to her letter of 13 December 1970 to Empson as ‘scarcely literate’, an ‘infelicitous letter’, apparently, written

¹² See Mark Jacobs, ‘Rewriting History, Literally: Laura Riding’s The Close Chaplet’, *Gravesiana* (Summer 2012), 150–184; and ‘The Question of Collaboration’ (Note 10).

¹³ *Anarchism Is Not Enough* (London: Cape; New York: Doubleday, 1928).

¹⁴ The essay ‘The Damned Thing’, in fact, is a delineation of the structure of society as it may be tracked through the institution of marriage and its legal frameworks in which sex, and early education in sex, plays a part, and the essay occasionally mocks the exaggerated importance lent to sex by society as a whole.

with ‘unabashed abandon’.¹⁵ Nor does he quote the following extraordinary statement by Empson in his letter to (Riding) Jackson:

The editor [of *Modern Language Quarterly*, September 1966] wrote to me with astonishment saying he had never read such vituperation as Graves wrote to him about Empson, and he had had to write back again and again before he could extract something fit to print. In just the same way, Chatto’s [*sic*] talked to me with awe about the forty-page letters from Graves, forty years ago. But Graves has always been careful to avoid any discussion of the matter directly. ‘Shit on that’ written on a postcard was his answer to my only approach to him long ago; these immense outpourings must always be addressed to some humble functionary. And as soon as the functionary had the nerve to talk back, in a cosy way, there was Graves confessing that he had written the chapter [*A Survey*, ‘Chapter 3, William Shakespeare and E. E. Cummings’] himself. I report this to you, but cannot pretend to understand it at all. It all began with shell-shock from the First War, of course. Very possibly he had plotted to delude you into believing you had done the work, so that my entirely accidental breath of reality has to be resisted crazily whenever it is recalled.¹⁶

To paraphrase this slightly and to put it into perspective, Graves in 1927, it seems, was crazy from ‘shell-shock’ but sane enough to ‘plot’ the ‘deluding’ of Riding into ‘believing’ she had done a piece of work she had not done; yet within three years, he was writing ‘forty-page letters’ to Chatto denouncing Empson for giving the authorship of *A Survey Of Modernist Poetry* to him alone. As Stefan Collini comments in a substantial *Times Literary Supplement* article reviewing Haffenden’s newly published selection of Empson’s correspondence, ‘Where “a fragment of the truth” was in question, in some literary-critical dispute, the later Empson’s desire not to let go of his point could verge on the obsessive, and one or two of the recipients might be forgiven for feeling that it was hard to determine where his much-celebrated “bracing sanity” ended and the green ink began’.¹⁷

¹⁵ Haffenden, pp. 221–222. For readers to determine the literacy or not of the three letters from (Riding) Jackson they can be read at http://www.ntu.ac.uk/laura_riding/letters/selection_letters/index.html (Accessed 23 May 2015).

¹⁶ http://www.ntu.ac.uk/laura_riding/letters/selection_letters/index.html, as above. Both Empson letters are briefly quoted by Elizabeth Friedmann, whose *A Mannered Grace* is the only reliable book about Laura (Riding) Jackson. While it was not available in time to affect Professor Haffenden’s first volume, it is to be hoped that he will consult it for any further edition. As a footnote, Miranda Seymour and Carla Billitteri both appear to have accepted this account of Riding being under a ‘delusion’ – see their various contributions to *Gravesiana* – as, similarly, do Martin Seymour-Smith and R. P. Graves in their respective biographies of Robert Graves.

¹⁷ Collini, ‘Smack up’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 July 2006, p. 3.

Haffenden also quotes one important piece of evidence – which he seeks to undermine with the parenthetic phrase ‘(though perhaps equivocally?)’ and then entirely ignores – which should clinch the matter as to who was mainly responsible for the Sonnet examination. In 1934, Graves wrote an angry letter to the Cambridge scholar Aubrey Attwater (a one-time fellow-Welch Fusilier, mentioned in *Goodbye To All That*) who, he had been told, was spreading the idea that Graves was solely responsible for the work on the Sonnet. Haffenden reports Graves as writing:¹⁸

it is simply untrue that I ever made any such analysis of any particular sonnet. I could not have done so, because it was Laura Riding who originated this exegetic method [. . .] We worked the whole thing out together at great labour and in pursuance of L.R.'s idea, in the Spring of 1926.

Note that January 1926 is the date Riding and Graves met for the first time. Significantly, Haffenden, choosing to bypass this, doesn't report another part of that letter in which Graves vehemently denies that, as Attwater was apparently telling people, he ever carried a small volume of Shakespeare's sonnets in his pocket during the First World War – he had, he said, not even read the sonnets. And the date itself, Spring of 1926, when the two were in Egypt, is important in pinning down the moment Riding and Graves began work on *A Survey* and the sonnet in question.

It goes against the grain, in a book apparently researched so carefully as *Among The Mandarins*, and certainly when it comes to the discussion of the Cambridge hot-house and ferment of literary analysis of the 1920s period, involving I. A. Richards, Charles Ogden, Empson, and many others, including Jacob Bronowski, who not much later was to work with Laura Riding, that Haffenden should choose to discount the Graves-Attwater letter and to pass over much else of a like nature in order to bring himself to agree with Empson's own contradictory conclusions on the inspiration behind *Seven Types*, especially in this, the longest chapter of the book, 'The Making Of Ambiguity'. Graves's Attwater letter is wholly unequivocal with regard to who 'originated [the] exegetic method'. It is this kind of thing Amber Vogel refers to as 'the steady effacement by Graves and others of her [(Riding) Jackson's] part in a thirteen-year-long collaborative association, despite evidence of her authority and activity within it'.¹⁹

¹⁸ Haffenden, *William Empson*, p. 218, as in the book's Index, presumably by a misprint. Aubrey Attwater is referred to as 'the Cambridge don Audrey Attwater'. The letter may be accessed at Nottingham Trent University library archive (the letter to Attwater has never been published).

¹⁹ 'Literary Couplings: Writing Couples, Collaborators, and the Construction of Authorship', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 26;2 (Fall 2007), p. 339.

There is no doubt that the mainspring of, as well as the immediate impetus for, *Seven Types Of Ambiguity* is the critical examination of Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 in *A Survey Of Modernist Poetry* and that the method Empson presents throughout the book evolves from Laura Riding's, and not especially Robert Graves's, intense focus on the pure originality of Shakespeare's genius of concentration on the dynamics of the poem's words, which are untainted by outside influence of any kind, including that of the sonnet form itself. Empson's extension of the method into a full book-length has everywhere close proximity to this original template, even though frequently diverging from, and, one must say, contradicting, its fundamental principles of concentrating solely on the meaning of words. The matter of 'conflict' he raises in Graves's pre-1927 work – which we may agree was a seed, quite possibly noted by, though clearly spurring no authorial energy in, the pre-1928 Empson – is by comparison a minor footnote. Had Empson in his second 1947 edition honoured his first erratum-slip acknowledgment of Laura Riding's presence in the book, or the chapter, which, by his own account, had actually energized his 'masterpiece' (Haffenden's word), or had Haffenden not missed the biographical opportunity of redressing the balance, perhaps some late justice might have been done to Laura Riding. As it is, Haffenden's account misled one reviewer of the book to say:

In his chapter on *Seven Types*, Haffenden patiently clarifies Empson's debts to I. A. Richards and Robert Graves, concluding that the former's emphasis on impulses, balance and equilibrium were less influential on Empson's masterpiece than the latter's argument that the best poetry is the fruit of conflict.²⁰

Typically, here, as has been the case with the majority of reviewers and critics for the past eight or nine decades, both Laura Riding and *A Survey Of Modernist Poetry* are completely lost from sight. As she was obliged to say in 1971, following the interchange of letters with Empson of 1970:

It seems to me appropriate to record that, without public statement of mine, recognition of my intellectually and verbally sensitive hand within the glove of the *Survey* method has been mounting, with perception of its connection, via Mr. Empson's hobby-horse use of it, with the 'New Criticism', which tried to make real horse-flesh of it.²¹

²⁰ 'Hugging an exotic kind of goat', Mark Thompson, *PN Review*, Vol. 32, 166, November–December 2005, p. 31.

²¹ 'The Construction of Seven Types Of Ambiguity', James Jensen, *Modern Language Quarterly* (December 1971), pp. 243–259. This was a letter published in response to a symposium in that journal soliciting responses from Empson, Richards and Graves (September 1966) but to which Laura (Riding) Jackson had not been invited to contribute. See Note 3 above, Jacobs and Clark.

In saying that ‘recognition . . . has been mounting’ she was possibly, or even probably, thinking *inter alia* of comments made to her by Cleanth Brooks during their correspondence (1960–77; at Cornell).²² In a letter of 10 September 1971, for instance, Brooks said, authorizing her to quote him at need:

I have always wondered how much the impulse toward what is called the New Criticism – and in its more extreme forms associated with Empson’s work, some of whose writing is brilliant but much of it is extravagant – came to England from this side of the Atlantic and through your own offices.

Directly pertinent here, as a further confirmation of the actual impetus of *Seven Types Of Ambiguity*, is I. A. Richards, who was William Empson’s tutor at Cambridge. As far back as Spring 1940 (in *Furioso*), a decade after *Seven Types* was published, Richards gave an account of the genesis of Empson’s book, subsequently noted and quoted by various critics, including Stanley Edgar Hyman.²³ In 1966, it was quoted in *Modern Language Quarterly* in the symposium edited by William M. Matchett on *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, based on an original essay by James Jensen:

[Empson] seemed to have read more English literature than I had, and to have read it more recently and better, and so our roles were soon in danger of becoming reversed. At about his third visit he brought up the games of interpretation which Laura Riding and Robert Graves had been playing with the unpunctuated [*sic*] form of ‘The expense of spirit in a waste of shame’. Taking the sonnet as a conjurer takes his hat, he [Empson] produced an endless swarm of lively rabbits from it and ended by ‘You could do that with any poetry, couldn’t you?’ This was a godsend to a Director of Studies, so I said, ‘You’d better go off and do it, hadn’t you?’ A week later he said he was still slapping away at it on his typewriter. Would I mind if he just went on with that? Not a bit. The following week there he was with a thick wad of very illegible typescript under his arm – the central 30,000 words or so of the book.²⁴

If any underlinings were still needed that the sonnet in *A Survey* was Empson’s actual springboard, this 1940 recollection by Richards, quoted by Haffenden, surely provides it, despite what Empson may have said in 1947 or later. And, of course, it bears repeating, Empson himself was quite unequivocal in the erratum slip he placed in the original 1930 edition, at Graves’s insistence, to amend the book’s original acknowledgement, which thus correctly became:

²² Brooks, Cleanth, 5 March 1960–15 June 1977, Box 13, Folder 6.

²³ Professor Haffenden uses this much earlier version of the quotation to be found in *Furioso*, 1/3 (Spring 1940).

²⁴ *Furioso*, Note 24.

Mr. I. A. Richards, then my supervisor for the first part of the English Tripos, told me to write this essay, and various things to put in it; my indebtedness to him is as great as such a thing ever should be. And I derive the method I am using from Miss Laura Riding's and Mr Robert Graves's analysis of a Shakespeare Sonnet

The expense of spirit in a waste of shame

in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*.

But, as we have seen, by 1947, Empson was determined, for whatever reason, to maintain that *Seven Types* had arisen solely from his, Empson's, understanding of Robert Graves's earlier pre-1927 work, as it may be found in *On English Poetry, Poetic Unreason and Impenetrability: Or The Proper Habit Of English*, some of which relate to what Empson describes in one of his letters to Laura (Riding) Jackson as the 'Conflict Theory of poetry'. The 'conflict' involved may briefly be described as contradictory emotions arising from a single experience, such as the mixed horror and fascination of observing a dead body, which Graves had written about in poems of the 1914–18 war, and the resolution of subsequent nightmares or post-war traumatic syndrome as it would be called now. According to Empson's letter to (Riding) Jackson,

these passages [on 'Conflict'], I thought, though they were really very decisive looked a bit scrappy, and when I got round to reading *A Survey Of Modernist Poetry* (1927) I felt that the long treatment of the 'lust in action' sonnet would be the right thing to mention in my acknowledgement. It dealt with a complete poem, as I was by this time trying to do, and it had a cumulative weight and impressiveness.

His throwaway 'when I got round to reading' *A Survey* makes it sound as though it was *after* he had written or begun writing *Seven Types Of Ambiguity*, but according to both Haffenden and Richards, Empson didn't feel the incentive to begin work on such a book until at least 1928, a year after *A Survey* appeared, so he had had plenty of time to read it. Further, Haffenden points out, 'We know that he had read *A Survey Of Modernist Poetry* at the latest by 11 May 1928, because that was when he reviewed a book of criticism, in the *Granta*, that suffered by comparison'.²⁵

The disturbing aspect of all this, to put it at no more than that, is that if scholars like Haffenden (and he is by no means alone), or William Empson himself, had read Laura Riding's work of the period in question – that is, just between 1925 and 1930, when *Seven Types of Ambiguity* was published – credit

²⁵ Even here Empson omits Laura Riding's name, referring to the 'Robert Graves's school of criticism'.

could have been justly given where it was due, that is, to Riding. The evidence makes it clear that Empson was dishonest: he lied about his sources, he lied about his memory. Was this not common-or-garden misogyny? It was she, not Graves – and Graves himself repeatedly averred this – who was responsible for the newly principled critiques formulated in the collaborations in *A Survey* and *A Pamphlet*. Haffenden, for example, like Empson, and any number of other scholars of the last eighty years, appears not to have read any work published by Riding – no book or essay of hers is quoted from by him – and while generally well aware of Robert Graves's work, he somehow misses or passes over Graves's numerous prominent tributes and acknowledgements to Riding (at first, Laura Gottschalk) for her ground-breaking work in poetry and criticism from 1925 on, and for her extensive help in his own work. Had he or Empson before him referred to *Contemporaries And Snobs* while noting it was composed at exactly the same time as *A Survey*, they might have seen any number of passages that are interrelational, and where the former throws light on the latter, including the tough opening paragraph:

There is a sense of life so real that it becomes the sense of something more real than life. Spatial and temporal sequences can only partly express it. It introduces a principle of selection into the undifferentiating quantitative appetite and thus changes accidental emotional forms into deliberate intellectual forms, animal experiences related by time and space into human experiences related in infinite degrees of kind. It is the meaning at work in what has no meaning; it is, at its clearest, poetry [.]

Here 'lust' in Shakespeare's sonnet has its equivalence in 'animal experiences' and the 'deliberate intellectual forms' is the sonnet itself. Or, in such statements as:

The Elizabethan literary sense was capricious and eccentric. It contradicted itself. It was a grotesque but charming combination of coarse exuberance and elaborate refinement. There are uniform eccentricities in Elizabethan poetry because Elizabethan poets were personally alive in an eccentric age, not because, as a mass, they obeyed a contemporary programme. A constant human character runs through all the literature of this period [.]

[.] Poetry is not contemporary poetry. It is not philosophy. It is not even literature. As between literature and life, it is closer to life. But life invents time rather than poetry, a sanctimonious comment on itself, a selflessness. Poetry invents itself. It is nearly a repudiation of life, a selfness. Unless it is this, it is a comment on a comment, sterile scholasticism.

In this instance, a 'repudiation of life' equals the repudiation of lust and the drive behind the sonnet is the seeking to get to something (actual love) beyond it. The

whole of *Contemporaries And Snobs* provides such principles in *A Survey's* scrupulous delineation of what makes a 'genuine' (the authors' word) poet or poem.

Although the principle of the Sonnet explication, which, as has been stated, is a close examination of the separate meaning of each and every word,²⁶ are not adhered to by Empson, who preferred to see what he thought of as an offering of 'ambiguity', every page of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* tackles the nature of 'ambiguity' along the lines he mistakenly took as laid down by *A Survey*, especially so in his Chapter 2 but including Chapter 7 *inter alia* and its reference to 'conflict' theory. Even Haffenden admits that Chapter 2 is 'obviously modelled' on the 'Graves-Riding' [*sic*] analysis of Sonnet 129. Only Chapter 7 introduces the notion of 'conflict' which Empson says he picked up from Robert Graves's earlier work; but the question of 'conflict' is minor stuff in the book, even in Chapter 7, 'scrappy', as Empson admitted and Haffenden echoes, compared with the drawn-out teasing by Empson of 'ambiguity' into ever expanding definitions.

Why, then, sixteen years, after the book's first appearance, should Empson deny that it relied heavily on the method presented in *A Survey*, which it self-

²⁶ In fact, any supposed influence of the analysis of Shakespeare's sonnet in *A Survey* on the close-reading method of the subsequent New Criticism is about nil. Empson and anyone who followed him took from it what they thought they saw rather than what was actually *there*. The focus of the analysis on the sonnet is exclusively on the words and what they mean, which was then and throughout her career the central key to (Riding) Jackson's work from the very earliest of her poems. In *Anarchism*, for instance, published less than a year after *A Survey*, in the opening section entitled *The Myth*, she has this to say:

Words have three historical levels. They may be true words, that is, of an intrinsic sense; they may be logical words, that is of an applied sense; or they may be poetical words, of a misapplied sense, untrue and illogical in themselves, but of supposed suggestive power. The most the poet can now do is to take every word he uses through each of these levels, giving it the combined depth of all three, forcing it beyond itself to a death of sense where it is at least safe from the perjuries either of society or poetry.

Safe, it might be said, from the new critics. As Elizabeth Friedmann points out in *Mannered Grace* (p. 98):

The critical method that William Empson acknowledged in his book on ambiguity was not designed by Riding and Graves as a systematic approach to the poem to be followed in order to produce an 'explication'; rather, it commended serious attention to the poet's words and punctuation for the purpose of determining the poem's intended *meaning* as it is transmitted from the poet's mind to the reader's via the printed page.

Retrospectively and much later Laura (Riding) Jackson and Schuyler B. Jackson in the chapter 'On Ambiguity' in their book *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words* (University Press Of Virginia, 1997) p. 513, describe 'ambiguity', in contradistinction to the Empsonian and New Criticism use of it, as having a 'proper *minor* place in the catalogue of things of a linguistic nature [*my italics*].'

evidently does? Is it because, as he says revealingly in one of his letters to Laura (Riding) Jackson, ‘after the fantastic accusations of Robert Graves, I had to stick to what I believed to be literal truth or I might appear to confess by yielding?’²⁷ That would have been undignified presumably. Perhaps we should accept Haffenden’s suggestion on this. Having referred rather avuncularly to Empson as ‘pompous’, ‘priggish’, ‘self-preening’, he finally puts his thumb on him as ‘Slippery to the point of intellectual imposture’ – which makes it even more curious, of course, that Haffenden should agree with Empson on crucial points.²⁸ The only alternative explanation that comes to mind is that Empson wished to put distance between his book and *A Survey*, partly because, as he noted in the 1947 Preface, ‘I would use the term ‘ambiguity’ to mean anything I liked’, in contradistinction to the *Survey*’s scrupulous exegetical principles of the Sonnet examination, and that this, Empson’s, predilection was compounded by his initial error of omitting Riding’s name from his acknowledgements, which in turn is compounded by his failure to find a development of the treatment in either of the two writers’ work (while professing in any case, it should be recalled, to have read only the one essay on ‘sex’ of Riding’s). Nevertheless, in the 1970 letter to Laura (Riding) Jackson, again quoted by Haffenden, Empson admits his reliance on their work:

but surely, looking at the dates, I must have read it [*A Survey*] before I wrote my book. The analysis uses the idea of ambiguity by syntax, which may need to be made plain by unusual punctuation; I used this in my book a good deal, and it seems quite possible that I derived it from the analysis of ‘lust in action’ [. . .] I grant that I may be in your debt so far.²⁹

This is one of a full handful of comparable concessions quoted by Haffenden, yet Empson determinedly continues to assert he relied on the Graves’s ‘conflict’ theory. As Haffenden points out:

²⁷ *Selected Letters of William Empson*, p. 431.

²⁸ Haffenden, p. 107. Then on Page 217 Haffenden asks ‘why did Empson not credit Laura Riding as co-author of the method. . . The influence of the “Graves-Riding” exegesis of Sonnet 129 is everywhere apparent in *Seven Types Of Ambiguity*’. But on Page 225 we find that, ‘As Martin Seymour-Smith adjudged, the attacks that Riding mounted in various periodicals in her later years “are of no interest, and have no factual value”’; and on Page 228, ‘Empson really must have been telling the truth when he said that such passages in Graves’s first writings (“albeit they looked a bit scrappy”) had indeed inspired his interest in ambiguity’. All Haffenden’s notes to Pages 225–30 (p. 608) are significant in their respective admissions in this context, his quotation of John Carey especially so: ‘It never seems to occur to [Deborah Baker and her book *In Extremis*] that the apparent blackout of Laura’s brain the moment she left Graves may reflect on the supposition that she was the mastermind during their association’ (‘Chasing eternal verities’, *Sunday Times*, 24 October 1993, Section 6, p. 6). Interestingly, Haffenden indexes *A Survey* as by ‘Graves and Riding’, p. 693.

²⁹ *Selected Letters Of William Empson*, ed. by John Haffenden, p. 431.

Of course, it was silly (as he recognized) to give a passing thought at that late date to the evasive and false idea that he might not have read *Survey* before writing *Ambiguity* (it [*A Survey*] was published in November 1927, and Empson had even reviewed it in the *Granta* in May the following year).³⁰

Haffenden might have referred to the Richards' account above, which he elsewhere quotes, for the birth of *Seven Types* should further proof, if any, were needed. He is at least obliged to admit:

as for his [Empson's] claim that he had really meant all along to give thanks for the inspiration provided by passages from the earlier works of Graves – passages that can indeed look a trifle 'scrappy' when plucked out of context.³¹

In endorsing Empson's word 'scrappy', he is pointing to disparate sentences in Graves's pre-1927 work, which mention the idea of social and personal 'conflict' as resulting in a poem of reconciliation of the conflict, the poet acting, thus, as a spokesman for others in a similar situation, a notion directly contrary to all the thematic principles of *A Survey Of Modernist Poetry*. Nor is all of Graves's pre-1926 work based securely on 'conflict' but on how the poem results from the poet's psychological experience (good or bad experience) and how the poet may turn this to his advantage. 'Conflict' is nowhere held up as a poetic *credo*, merely as one kind of experience among many. And yet, by the close of his scrutiny of the *Survey* affair, Haffenden still willingly falls into agreement with Empson, that it was Graves's 'conflict' theory and not the Sonnet 129 method, which was the genesis of *Seven Types*. Empson may well (we may agree) have been able to erect this tenuous 'conflict' theory from a few 'scrappy' sentences in Graves, but that is not what constitutes the nervous system of *Seven Types*. Both Empson in 1947 and Haffenden much later overlook Robert Graves's own statement, in the 'Dedicatory Epilogue' to Laura Riding included in *Goodbye To All That* (1929):³²

... I have not mentioned the *Survey of Modernist Poetry* and the *Pamphlet Against Anthologies* as works of collaboration between you and me, though these ... obviously put much of my own previous critical writing out of account.³³

To make sense of the confusion then, first created by Empson and later prestidigitated by Haffenden, I think had Haffenden read Riding's first single-authored critical book, *Contemporaries And Snobs*, his opinion, in assessing Empson's view, would have been critically and significantly changed, because

³⁰ Haffenden, p. 217.

³¹ Haffenden, p. 221.

³² The 'Dedicatory Epilogue' was removed from the revised 1957 and all subsequent editions in Robert Graves's lifetime.

³³ Graves, Robert, *Goodbye To All That* (Cape: London, 1929), p. 443.

the extension and development of the themes to be found in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* are embedded in that book, and not in Robert Graves's work (earlier or later). Any biographer, whether of Empson or Graves, or any critic, should give close attention to what was perhaps the most important influence upon Graves's life and work generally (that is, post-1940 work as well), as he acknowledges in numerous books in the period between 1925 and 1940 – Laura Riding. It is more than possible that, had Empson (and Haffenden) understood that *A Survey Of Modernist Poetry* was largely governed by the principles of Laura Riding as manifested in her book *Contemporaries And Snobs*, and more importantly that it was her hand at work in the analysis of Sonnet 129 upon which he heavily depended for his methodology in *Seven Types Of Ambiguity*, he would have taken the further step of looking seriously at her work rather than that of the 'scrappy' evidence gathered from Graves's other books. Had he done so, he would have found a number of pages and passages that would have made his understanding of what the collaborators meant when they spoke of the 'meaning' of each word of the sonnet in question having a logical centre, and of there being no question of 'ambiguity' at all, which is the opposite of what the authors intended. Here, for example, in *Contemporaries And Snobs*, is the kind of principle driving-force behind *A Survey* which might have alerted Haffenden (and Empson) to the interconnection of the two books:

The presence of excessive criticism in a time is a sign that it fears its own literature; and overzealous critics are the agents of a compromise between poetry and society. They keep peace by forcing poetry to hide its personal criminalities behind the privilege-walls of literary tradition: they apply pressure only to poetry in the making, never to society. The gospel of contemporaneity is an expression of the mob-fear of the organized society of time against those incorruptible individuals who might reveal life to be an anarchy whose only order is a blind persistence. In the energy of this persistence occur intense flashes, the poetry or lightning of sense. The mob, looking on, reads an official code of revelation. Otherwise it must admit the mind of man to dwell in man: which would be as troublesome as fire in the brain and as shameful as thunder in the stomach. (p. 60)

The following passage is an incisive account of what a 'real' poem should be while it might also be a direct comment on Shakespeare and the sonnet, as it also serves, in the final five lines, as an uncanny description of how her own poetry and other work would come to be viewed in the decades ahead. The interplay and similarity between passages such as this and any number of passages in *A Survey* should be noted, especially, perhaps, in the chapter 'The Making Of The Poem':

If, in spite of the present surquidry of the contemporary mind and the accidie with which the poetic mind is afflicted, it were possible to conceive of the production of a true poem, to what should we look for evidences of its reality? To those inner circumstances which make up the poetic mind and which the poem is the means of externalizing, as the poetic mind is the means of externalizing the poem, which hitherto existed only unto itself. In this mutuality lies the real clue to the double reality of the poem, its truth as a poem, its truthfulness as a demonstration of the poet's mind. For we have now come to the point where it is permissible to talk of the poetic mind as the poet's mind, and of the poet's mind as the only contemporary mind possible in the poem, its incidental reality. The poem itself is supreme, above persons; judging rather than judged; keeping criticism at a respectful distance; it is even able to make a reader of its author. It comes to be because an individual mind is clear enough to perceive it and then to become its instrument. Criticism can only have authority over the poem if the poet's mind was from the start not sufficiently clear, sufficiently free of criticism; if it obeyed an existing, that is, a past order of reality, rather than a present order of reality, that is, the order of things which do not yet exist. How shall this true poem be recognized? By those tests of reality it imposes on the reader; perhaps, then, only by the strength of the hostility it arises and the extents of its unpopularity even with the minority cults, or by its modest contentment with itself and the obscurity to which it is consigned. (p. 60)

Both of the passages quoted above clearly have T. S. Eliot in the cross-hairs as the enemy of the 'genuine' poet, which is evident throughout the first and second section of *Contemporaries And Snobs*.

Empson could, for example, have looked much more closely at chapter seven, 'The Making Of The Poem' in *A Survey* and observed there at length the authors' stipulation that no word in a 'genuine' poem could be replaced by another, nor could be changed, except the particular words the poet chooses to employ, because each word chosen carries its meaning fully and cannot be substituted for any other, and if it could be, then it would not be a 'genuine' poem at all but a prose idea dressed up in verse (they use Ezra Pound's 'The Ballad Of The Goodly Fere' as an example of such prose-verse). Empson might then have gone to Riding's *Contemporaries And Snobs* and its first section, 'Poetry And The Literary Universe', and discovered the subject of the making of the poem and the importance of the exact meaning of words that is covered there in its entirety: from how a poem comes into existence, the relationship between the poet and the poem, how the precise words are selected, and how no other words will do to replace them. This is yet another reason *Contemporaries And Snobs* and *A Survey* should be read side by side.

The implication arises that, had Empson paid full attention to the authors' work on the Sonnet of demonstrating one-word-one-meaning, not only would his critical method have been different but it would have had a direct impact on the development of the so-called New Criticism and its decades-

long aftermath of close reading, as diverse as that group has been. Perhaps it is not too much to say that modernist criticism as it exists, reaching right to the contemporary time of the American group known as the loosely affiliated 'L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E' poets, who show a great interest in the work and practice of Laura Riding, and whom they mistakenly see as a precursor to their own work along with Gertrude Stein, might have arrived at the point of sagacity they aim for had they been led to look directly at her work, rather than being shifted by a kind of sleight of hand into believing Robert Graves was wholly or largely responsible for *A Survey Of Modernist Poetry*, and the critical methodology, most significantly, of close reading which followed in its wake. The Gravesian route, at least, has proved in this respect to be a barren path.