VII

LITERARY MAYHEM
Laura (Riding) Jackson[86]

> "...there is a Mafia-like network of inimicality towards me in England, reaching quite widely into many areas of literary journalism."
>
> Letter May 11, 1972

It has long been recognized that some of the best-known authors writing in English in this century have used as source material the inspirational work of Laura (Riding) Jackson. There is, however, a tendency – generally incorrect – to regard this use of her work as somehow confined to a pre-1940 period, of short duration, after which a writer who is said to be 'influenced' by her is seen as having outgrown the 'influence'. Robert Graves springs automatically to mind, as does W. H. Auden – a well-known case – while others who are known to have relied in a substantial way on her poetic example are Robert Nye, John Ashbery, James Reeves, Norman Cameron, Roy Fuller. Several others have admitted either 'influence' or imitation. Further, a host of writers, major, such as Hughes and Plath, and minor, who take their lead from Robert Graves' mythologising in *The White Goddess*, fail to recognize that that book takes its entire thesis from Laura (Riding) Jackson's work, being a distorted expansion upon her primary thinking on the subject of women's nature, woman as seen from the male

86 Alan Clark has generously given me leave to present this essay, now revised and updated, as my own.

viewpoint especially, and her general thinking on poetry, truth, myth, philosophy, language and other subjects. These writers may also be said to be 'influenced' by her work, albeit unwittingly. From the early 1920s to 1940 – in which year she renounced poetry for reasons of linguistic principle – Laura Riding was greeted by some critics, such as Robert Fitzgerald, as a writer of great distinction and importance. As early as 1924 the committee of the Fugitive group of poets in the United States had recorded their sense of her early work as having 'a substance not often found in contemporary American poetry', and as being 'concerned with profound issues. Furthermore, she has developed her own idiom of expression [. . . .] In 1930 Michael Roberts – who later included a selection of her poems in his *Faber Book of Modern Verse* (1936) – observed that:

> Miss Riding ... is a poet who may be the precursor of a new mental attitude. She has written poems which are valuable whatever our attitude may be [. . .]

She brought to the poetic practice and theory of the day, particularly for those poets she worked closely with but for many others with whom she corresponded as well, a much-needed vision of the roots of poetry's nature and being: roots identified as located in the mind's natural desire for capability of attaining to articulate consciousness of the reality of being, and to express truth by which to live. She saw that human beings would live incompletely unless they succeeded in uniting speech and self in a unity of good existence. Neither truth nor the good existence were metaphysical abstractions for her, to be dangled, as they were

and are, on the tongs of philosophical or critical speculation as unattainables. Poetry she believed the way to solution of incompleteness of human life. Other poets have seen in poetry an exercise of the best in human expressive power, but none besides her, I think, has seen the possibility of a solution in poetry of the human fulfilment of matching commitments to goodness of words with goodness of life; and none worked so hard to make poetry answer to hope placed in it, whatever the hope. Only when she discovered that poetry stopped short of being a practical ground for that unity did she eventually renounce poetry as the solution, turning, instead, after 1940, to a new path to fulfil her hopes based on linguistic principle beyond the long shadow cast by poetry as language's best.

The poetic climate of the first few decades of the century was one of stale disillusionment which braced itself with the expression of a cynical technique of disillusion; into this climate, Laura Riding tried to breathe, with all she wrote, values of wholeness of thinking and being. For her, as she said in the Preface to *Collected Poems* (1938), a poem was 'an uncovering of truth of so fundamental and general a kind that no other name besides poetry is adequate except truth'. She saw poetry as having come to a stage of finality in history where the practice of it became 'more real than existence in time – more real because more good, more good because more true'. Poetry, in her view, offered a practical and immediately attainable final reality of being:

> To live in, by, for the reasons 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.

Her poems demonstrate just how she lived 'in, by, for the reasons of, poems', literally, offering proof positive of her actually living 'the good existence' through the composition of her poems, her life perfectly attuned to them and they to her. The poet, critic and classicist Robert Fitzgerald is one of the few readers of her poems who has grasped this. Reviewing her *Collected Poems* in 1939, he said:

> Of all the contemporary poems I know, these seem to me the furtherest 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.

His cautious hope, all those years ago, is slowly being justified. But from too many literary quarters her work has been and is reviewed with hostility, nearly all of it combined with an utter blankness of understanding as to what she was about, the criticism taking the form of diatribe, not that of close inspection and study – the warp, as it were,

being the critical frustration of not understanding. The early treatments of her by Geoffrey Grigson and Louis MacNeice in *New Verse* – the magazine edited by Grigson from 1933 to 1939 – and that by Hugh Gordan Porteous in Julian Symons' *Twentieth Century Verse*, are of the diatribe sort; while in other quarters her work was disliked (to put it mildly) as taking upon itself too much in what it said of the fundamental issues of poetic practice in its demanding from poets greater concern with, and commitment to, the moral principles inherent in poetry, rather than the poetic technique principles fostered by literary criticism. A typical attitude which arose from personal annoyance with her concern with truth as a necessary standard for poetic word use, word fidelity, is found expressed in a letter by W. B Yeats to Lady Dorothy Wellesley – Yeats was editing his *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* at the time, and refused to include the work of James Reeves in it:

> I wrote today to Laura Riding, with whom I carry on a slight correspondence, that her school was too thoughtful, reasonable & truthful, that poets were good liars who never forgot that the muses were women who liked the embraces of gay warty lads. I wonder if she knows that warts are considered by the Irish peasantry a sign of sexual power?

Since the mid-1940s, the nature of the hostility towards Laura (Riding) Jackson has changed – within the general critical discussion area of her 'influence' or 'discipleship' of her. Increasingly, there have been manifestations of deception and distortion of literary and historical facts wherever her

name appears. The contexts range from certain petty-spiteful slurs on her character, such as can be found in some writings on the Fugitives, as that by Louise Cowan (*The Fugitive Group*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press), to some more broadly antagonistic criticism dealing with the subject of how others have been affected by her work. It is notably in the context of discussion of the work of Robert Graves that treatment of Laura (Riding) Jackson as subject repeatedly fails to square with the ascertainable character of her work. Thus, in Douglas Day's book on the poetry and criticism of Robert Graves, *Swifter Than Reason*, and, as will shortly be seen, Anthony Thwaite's *Contemporary English Literature*, and Martin Seymour-Smith's *Guide to Modern World Literature,* mounting contradictions betoken something more sinister than mere ignorance of Laura Riding's, Laura (Riding) Jackson's work. Professor Day makes as good a starting-place as any. Part Three of his *Swifter Than Reason* is entitled 'Self-Exile to Majorca: The Influence of Laura Riding'; its forty-seven-page span includes two chapters headed 'Poetry of Laura Riding Years'. Day's initial statement, in these chapters, seems unequivocal enough in its caution: 'Without more tangible evidence of the exact nature of Miss Riding's influence [on Robert Graves] it is impossible to determine precisely the extent of that influence.' Two pages further on, however (p.120), speaking of a Riding poem, he moves to a flat denial of 'influence' with:

> [. . .] such lines as these, moreover, so lacking in verbal discipline and rhythmic pattern of any kind, cause one to disbelieve that Miss Riding could have taught Graves, from the earliest days of

> his career a highly skilled technician, much about prosody.[87]

Day next blurs the issue with:

> There are, however, certain aspects of Graves' poetry during this period that probably reflect the practical influence of Miss Riding.

He does not expand upon the difference between the nature of this 'practical influence' and that of the more theoretical 'influence' he earlier found 'impossible to determine', nor upon how either might relate to the teaching or not teaching Graves 'much about prosody'. To these confusions he adds another on page 121, where he notes that two poems by Laura Riding, 'The Quids' and 'The Tillaquils', '*probably prompted* Graves to revive his earlier fondness for the grotesque' [my emphasis]. There are three further observations of Professor Day's that concede the possibility, at least, of Laura Riding's 'influence':

> Page 124: Many of Graves' poems during this

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87 Whether the lines he quotes lack 'verbal discipline and rhythmic control '*of any kind*' is highly questionable:

> The rugged black of anger
> Has an uncertain smile-border.
>
> The transition from one kind to another
> May be love between neighbour and neighbour;
> Or natural death; or discontinuance
> Because, so small is space,
> The extent of kind must be expressed otherwise;
> Or loss of kind when proof of no uniqueness
> Confutes the broadening edge and discourages.

Perhaps Day cannot hear the feminine rhymes and half-rhymes, the consonance and assonance, and the way in which each line comes to a natural "breathing pause."

> period also reflect Laura Riding's fondness for ingenuity and the exercise of wit.
>
> Page 126: There is one other note in Graves' poetry during this third period of his career which seems derived from Laura Riding: a scorn for society in general ....
>
> Page 129: ... we are likely to agree that Laura Riding's influence was a substantial factor in determining the course Graves took at this time in his poetry.

Such self-contradictions are extraordinary in a critic. It may be that Laura Riding's influence was a 'substantial factor' in Graves' poetry – indeed, it may well be that, as Professor Day in his introduction says, 'The influence of Laura Riding is quite possibly the most important single element in his poetic career' – but he refuses to let the matter rest there. His series of see-saw comments finally lands at the negative, confounding the reader with:

> Page 130: We cannot then assume with finality that Miss Riding's poetic techniques or subjects had any very great impact on Graves' practice.

Professor Day feels compelled, however far his later perceptions point him away from it, to return to his original denial. Significantly, he ignores, in his final assessment, the plain meaning of two of Graves' own statements, both of which he quotes in *Swifter Than Reason*. He takes the first quotation from the Foreword to Graves' *Collected Poems* (1938), where Laura Riding is thanked for 'her constructive

and detailed criticism of my poems in various stages of composition . . .' (but Day does not complete the quotation: '. . . a generosity from which so many contemporary poets besides myself have benefited.'). The second statement is elicited from Graves himself by Douglas Day. Another critic had described Norman Cameron and Alan Hodge, who published their poems alongside Graves in a small three-part volume, *Work in Hand*, in 1942, as Graves' 'disciples'. Professor Day reports 'Graves' comment on this; 'They were in fact disciples of Laura Riding's'. One has only to glance through the volumes of the 'critical summary' *Epilogue*, published in 1935, 1936 and 1937 and edited by Laura Riding, in which Graves (as the *associate* editor), Cameron and Hodge appear among the twenty and more contributors, to see clearly just how much of her time was spent in helping others improve their work. Day clearly did not inspect the *Epilogue* volumes.

Another tendency exhibited by Day, bizarrely widespread in the various treatments of Laura Riding by critics, is the use of her early name in a manner which tends or is intended to extinguish sense of the continuance of her actuality as an author still alive. Where there is mention of her in recent decades she is still generally referred to as 'Laura Riding', though the subject itself may be of post-1940 interest, and her name during the later period of her life Laura (Riding) Jackson (she died in 1991). The results of such treatments are ingloriously exemplified by an essay collaboration of James Jensen's, in *Modern Language Quarterly* in 1966, which explores the derivation of William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Mr. Jensen invites three of the four authors concerned – William Empson, I. A. Richards

and Robert Graves – to participate in his argument, but completely ignores the *first-named author* of the source book under scrutiny, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, from which Empson derived the thesis of his book. Jensen presumed 'Laura Riding' (and there are no other presumptions to make) either of no account or dead. He made no attempt to contact her, as we shall see later.

Similarly, other critics, such as Anthony Thwaite in his *Contemporary English Poetry*, continually refer to Laura (Riding) Jackson as 'Laura Riding', and by doing so fix the field of her endeavour in the pre-1940 context, as though after that she ceased to be, either in literature or in life. Like others with minds thus released from all sense of 'Laura Riding' as possessing current human reality, he is predisposed to take liberties with her work; while the real substantial present person of his subject is inevitably blurred. Had Thwaite and the others maintained an awareness of Laura (Riding) Jackson as one committed, whether pre-1940 or in the subsequent four decades, not just to poetry but to understanding and realising, as placed within language's reach, the full potential of human aspiration towards what is wholly good, wholly true, and that she continued to work hard and long for that understanding, and that realisation, after 1940 until the time of her death – as long and as hard as she formerly worked for it in the field of poetry – then their writings on her might have undergone a change for the better, at least, if not for the adequate. Let it be understood here, then, that if I speak, as the context might demand, of 'Laura Riding', there is a same-breath consciousness of Laura (Riding) Jackson whose contemporary reality continued, and is no less than that of Douglas Day, Anthony Thwaite or

Robert Graves, who also continued.

Anthony Thwaite's C*ontemporary English Poetry*: *An Introduction*, was first published in 1957, revised for publication in Britain in 1959 by Heinemann, and then reissued in 1964, thereafter republished to the present day (2024, and is now described 'as selected by scholars as being culturally important'). The book and its treatment of Laura (Riding) Jackson and her work provides an adequate focus for thought on the matter of mis-reporting and misrepresenting critical and historical fact. In the 1959 British edition, the Author's Note speaks of '. . . as close and careful a revision as I can . . .'. Indeed, the narrower factualities – titles, places, dates – are in general accurate and reliable. It is only when Thwaite's treatment of Robert Graves is reached that the reader is given factually inaccurate information; two such occur, conjoined, in the second paragraph of the following passage:

> To Graves, the answer to his neurosis was apparently work: in 1925, for example, he published six books, and eight in 1927. Yet much of what he was doing at this time was fragmentary; though everything he wrote – both in verse and prose – had a tart, individual flavour, there seemed to be little 'body'; many of his poems, in particular, were simply pieces of fancy or whimsy. However, in 1929 he left England to settle in Mallorca (one of the Balearic Islands in the Mediterranean), and from that time on his gifts have grown and matured. His self-imposed isolation from English literary life has left him free to work out his poetic salvation and to take an idiosyncratic view of what everyone else is

> writing. *In Mallorca, too, he met Laura Riding, the American poet*, and collaborated with her in many adventures . . . . [My italics]

Now, this passage immediately follows a quotation from Martin Seymour-Smith's British Council Pamphlet *Robert Graves*; Thwaite appears to have made a count of the items in the bibliography of that pamphlet to arrive at his figure for Graves' publications in 1925 and 1927. Yet, although the 1927 publications include *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* and the 1928 *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, both jointly written by 'Laura Riding and Robert Graves' (the strict order of the two names should be observed and noted – their reversal continues to have serious critical repercussions); Seymour-Smith along with other critics lists them, here as everywhere in his work, as by Robert Graves 'with Laura Riding'), and while Seymour Smith elsewhere in his pamphlet gives the correct date – 1926 – for the meeting of the two writers, Thwaite gives an account – and unwary or uninformed readers are forced to accept it – by which such collaborations could not have become possible until 1929 in Mallorca or even later.

If, in matters of timing with which Thwaite is attempting to deal, 'standard' sources are to be looked for, two at least might be identified in Graves' own writings, readily available for many years before 1957/59: the well-known *Goodbye to All That* (1929), and Graves' *Collected Poems* (1938). In the first, Graves' early presented autobiography, there is a 'Dedicatory Epilogue to Laura Riding', which tells how Nancy Nicholson, Graves' wife at that time, and he '… happening by seeming accident upon your [Laura Riding's] teasing Quids, were drawn to write to you, who

were in America, asking you to come to us ... you forthwith came'; there is also a reference to Riding and Graves 'printing and publishing in partnership as the Seizin Press'. The Foreword to his *Collected Poems* (1938) also records that,

> 'In 1925 I first became acquainted with the poems and critical work of Laura Riding, and in 1926 with herself; and slowly began to revise my whole attitude to poetry. (The change begins halfway through Part II [of *Collected Poems*]'.

The Foreword concludes as I have noted:

> 'I have to thank Laura Riding for her constructive and detailed criticism of my poems in various stages of composition – a generosity from which so many contemporary poets besides myself have benefited.'

Knowledge of the import of such passages as these, and there are many others, should be a requisite for anyone venturing on such comparisons of Laura Riding and Robert Graves as Thwaite and numerous other critics and scholars undertake, such offerings of judgement and 'information' as to how things were between the two poets.

Critics whose confessed cynosure is the Robert Graves of 'what may be called the years in which he emerged into world fame' – a recent phrase of Martin Seymour-Smith's – regularly exhibit their need of such corrective investigation, especially those biographies which followed Graves' death in the 1980s. The need arises, in some part, through a misplaced reliance on Robert Graves and his later editions of *Goodbye to All That* and *Collected Poems*. The revised November 1959 edition of

Goodbye to All That, and all subsequent issues, omit both the whole of the significant 'Dedicatory Epilogue to Laura Riding' and Laura Riding's poem 'World's End', used as the 'introductory motto' in the original edition; her name, in fact, has been completely 'revised' out of the volume by Graves. The case is the same with all Graves' later revisions of *Collected Poems*: in the 1948 edition there is a brief prefatorial acknowledgement reference to her, while in editions after that she is not named at all. As we have seen (page 32 above) with Margaret Konkol's discovery, the 'revising out' of Laura Riding continued to the end of his life.

If information available to Thwaite in Seymour Smith's British Council pamphlet is added to that derivable from the source-passage quoted above, a simple chronology may be constructed. It is given here with a few additional facts in parenthesis:

•(1924, Feb.) Laura Riding's 'The Quids' published in *The Fugitive*

•(1925, early) Robert Graves and Nancy Nicholson 'happen upon' 'The Quids'

(early?) R.G. and N.N. write to L.R.[88]

(July) R.G.'s *Contemporary Techniques of Poetry*

88 A further peculiarity of chronological treatment is concealed in the words I quoted earlier from *Goodbye to All That* (p. 444). It is of Graves' own making, and necessitates the query in my chronology, above, against the date of R. G. and N. N's. first writing to L R. Either that occasion was months after the two 'happened upon' 'The Quids', or Graves is using the word 'forthwith' ('you forthwith came') very loosely. For in his *Contemporary Techniques of Poetry*, published in July 1925 and therefore prepared in earlier months, Graves reprinted 'The Quids' in full, calling it 'a first favourite with me'; yet Laura Riding did not sail for England until December 1925. Students of Graves' accounts of happenings will be familiar with such time-and-circumstance difficulties: he has, for instance, as Sydney Musgrove has pointed out (*The Ancestry of The White Goddess*, 1962) published three conflicting versions of the tale of when and how he came to begin writing *The White Goddess*.

is published which reprints 'The Quids'
(December) L.R. sails for England
(1926, Jan.)'You forthwith came'. L.R. meets R.G. and N.N.
•(1927, Nov.) *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* by L.R. and R.G.
•(1928, Jul.) *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* by
•L.R. and R.G. (plus 'printing and publishing as The Seizin Press' the first Seizin Press book, Riding's *Love As Love, Death As Death*) (1929)
•L.R. and R.G. go to Mallorca (1929)
(November) *Goodbye to All That* by R.G.
•(December) *Poems 1929* by R.G. (the third Seizin book)

. . . all this before Thwaite allows the curtain to rise on the association! Why, in his book, do the facts go wrong there, in the Riding/Graves context? And why do they go so wrong? The rest of this essay will suggest directions in which answers to such questions may be sought. Here, I note how Thwaite's inaccuracies well accord with the general tendency of his treatment of Graves. In this first passage of his, he introduces notions of growth and 'maturity', and of Graves working out 'his own poetic salvation'; only after these things have been lodged in the reader's mind as virtually accomplished by Graves in his 'self-imposed isolation' does Laura Riding's name appear. Even then it does not come as the name of one eagerly and specifically invited by Thwaite as being a new period and lending freshness to the story: instead, the initiation of their association is given the flavour of the accessory, the incidental – it happened, we are told, 'in Mallorca too'. Only after question of Laura Riding's contribution to

the earlier 'growth' of Graves' 'gifts', his work's acquisition of 'body', has been thus obfuscated does Thwaite tell us they 'collaborated in many ventures'. However, the substitution of 'England, 1925-26' for 'Mallorca, 1929', simply of its accurate self, would bring into just perspective the drift of Thwaite's entire handling of the Riding-Graves relationship.

Thwaite's mis-dating is in general accordance with his general purpose of trying to erase Laura Riding from the Graves picture. The second half of his account runs:

> . . . [Graves] collaborated with her in many ventures. Most important of all was the mutual influence of each other's poems and, as is often the case, the work of the less important served as stimulus to the better. Laura Riding's work has never been well known, but I guarantee that if some of her poems were read out to a competent audience, nine out of ten would say that they were by Graves. Yet what is abstract and delicate in Laura Riding becomes concrete and tough in Graves; his poetic tone of voice is wry, ironical, reserved, and yet immensely strong.

The author's intentions may be observed in the contradictory procession of his thought. After he has asserted there is 'mutual influence' – which should refer to a two-way process from which a reader is expected to infer that each of the poets admired the other sufficiently to want to exchange tone, ideas and style – he brings us to the curious proposition that one poet, whose work 'has never been well known, is the 'less important poet', and this while managing to 'serve' (his use of 'served' is not without interest) as 'stimulus' to

the other poet, the 'better' one. Scrutiny of the two notions 'less important' and 'stimulus' helps to focus on Thwaite's manoeuvring. The first is intended to dispose of any inclination to attribute to Laura Riding at least equal rights with Robert Graves in respect of poetic merit, implanting the idea of her inferiority in the reader's mind in preparation for 'Laura Riding's work has never been well known' – a key assumption upon which the whole of Thwaite's text depends. Then, the word 'stimulus' is selected for its covert suggestion of the largeness of stature of the thing stimulated. Not only is it misleading, it enables Thwaite to dampen the suggestion of 'mutual influence'. Next, on this circumventive journey, he arrives at the remarkably obliterative statement that 'if some of her poems were read out to a competent audience, nine out of ten would say they were by Graves'. And we have his 'guarantee' (no less!) for this. No quotations are given, no signs that Thwaite has either read or understood Laura Riding's poems, which he patently hasn't, since a 'competent' audience could easily tell the difference of the work of the one poet from the other. Thwaite, choosing to make Graves the standard, implies in effect that she is the one 'influenced', for it is she who is put to the test and found wanting, not Graves, in the suppositious finding that her poems are no different from Graves'. Thwaite, by 'competent', does not mean 'competent' at all: he means Graves-orientated, as he himself is Graves-orientated. What he is suggesting is that Laura Riding's poems are subsumable in Robert Graves' poems; and such an allegation, he thinks, need not be supported by critical evidence, other than the slyly introduced 'as is often the case', as though the weight of history bore him out.

Thwaite shows his hand further by his concluding

contrast of Laura Riding's 'abstract and delicate' poetry with Robert Graves' 'wry, ironical, reserved, and yet immensely strong' poetry. Superior to the 'competent' audience he speaks of, Thwaite can tell the difference, apparently, between the work of the two poets, but finds the first, Laura Riding, too 'delicate' for his palate, and 'abstract' – 'abstract' means simply that he does not understand her – in contrast to the second, Robert Graves, who is 'immensely strong' and far more to his liking.

As it happens, a word he employs in his description betrays, by its very accuracy, the state of affairs he is at pains to conceal: 'Yet what is abstract and delicate in Laura Riding becomes concrete and tough in Graves'. Surrounded by Thwaite's euphemistic belittlement, the true pertinence of the word 'becomes' is easily lost upon the reader. But as Thwaite might just have possibly known, though he strains to contradict it, from Graves' earlier statements on the subject (later rigorously suppressed by him), what is of one nature in Laura Riding really does become something else in Robert Graves, he being not in fact 'stimulated' but taking whole substance of her thought in attempts to make it his own. Thus comes, through the contortions of prose, something having, albeit quite unintentionally, a ghostly resemblance to the truth.

For, although Thwaite tries to cover it up, to turn it all around in his uncritical desire to see Robert Graves acclaimed, Graves was an old hand at using Laura Riding's work to build his career, having helped himself to it for sixty years. What is natural in her work, though 'abstract and delicate' is a foolish description of it (she can be far tougher, far

more 'immensely strong' than Graves), does indeed become, as we shall see in a moment, 'concrete' in Graves, inasmuch as it is pressed into hard use by him. Thwaite intends the comparison to lead us in quite the other direction, so that if Laura Riding wished to do better she should have taken a leaf from Graves' book and been 'reserved and immensely strong'. The fact is he is only 'reserved and immensely strong' where she or her work is present to stiffen his resolve, and where she is absent, his work can be very flaccid. It is a pity that, by his not quoting a single line of Laura Riding's poems, Thwaite does not offer us the opportunity to make up our own minds.

Given equal weight of attention, Laura Riding's poems are quite distinguishable from Robert Graves', presenting no problem for the reader in identification of authorship: this is so even where Graves imitates or makes variation on Riding themes or linguistic features. For whereas his career is erratic, turning first to this and then to that theme – from country sentiment to war to psychology to mythology (both classical and homemade) – she stays constant, reliant upon her own inspiration, her thought originating in her own mind, not that of current intellectual fashions. For her, poetry was without peer among all the possible standards of categorically defined intellectual endeavour, holding out the promise of a way to use words that would bring thought to its final fullness and distinctiveness, 'looking to an eventual solution in poetry of the universal problem of how to make words fulfil the human being and the human being fulfil words', as she later describes her hope of poetry. In terms of subject matter, her poems exhibit a profound variety, but all manifest a buoyant faith in the possibility of attainment,

within the poetic frame of expression, to a degree of articulateness in which the self speaks with a universal bearing. With Graves, on the other hand, the poems abound in expansive personal connotations, the bearings all curving back upon himself. The basic divergence of her work and his can be defined even where particular poems of each are selected for comparability.

Let us look at an early Riding poem and a late Graves poem in which there are some common subjects of reference: sun, lightness, night, dark. But first to point out that Graves' own use of these subjects of reference is derived from Riding's bringing them in to thoughtful employment in her poems. In the early Riding poem from which I shall quote there is no 'moon' accompanying the 'sun' reference, as there is in the passage from the Graves poem which I shall quote. But elsewhere in Riding poems moon and sun appear in a certain conjunction, as, for example, in 'Disclaimer of The Person', in such lines as –

> I am not the sun which multiplied
> I am the moon which singled [....]

or, in an earlier poem, 'The Tiger':

> Here am I found forgotten.
> The sun is used.
> The men are in the book.
> I, woman, have removed the window
> And read in my high house in the dark [. . . .][89]

Neither sun nor moon here is used for symbolic weight of

89 *Collected Poems* 1938

juxtaposition but is laid in to a purpose: she actually means the sun which multiplies things by the power of its light, fructifying the confusion of life beneath it, and the moon's shadowed world where the effect is diametrically opposite. The difference from this and the Graves poem, 'The Blessed Sun', which I shall quote in a moment, may be simply observed, but first, these lines from the Riding poem, 'How Blind and Bright':

> Light, visibility of light,
> Sun, visibility of sun.
> Light, sun and seeing.
> Visibility of men.
> How blind is bright!
> Night. . .
> No sun, invisibility of sun. . . .
> .....
> All light, all fire, all eyes
> Wrapt in one conference of doubt.
> Eyes not looking out for eyes
> Look inward and meet sight
> In common loneliness,
> Invisibility and darkness.
>
> How bright is blind!

We have here the whole human experience of the life of physical vision, the benefit of physical light, and of common association in this external circumstance, specifically associated with 'men', in which the physical vision is viewed as 'blind', or, to put it another way, the light of day provides a stilted vision. Presented in counter-consideration to this is

the experience of being as not conditioned by the external factor of visibility. Eyes do not seek the external verification but the inward knowing: the self's self-dependent confirmation – a darkness, but of a form of sight, another kind of illumination, of seeing.

Here is the poem by Robert Graves, entitled 'Blessed Sun', from his *Collected Poems* (1975):

> Honest morning blesses the Sun's beauty;
> Noon, his endurance; dusk, his majesty;
> Sweetheart, our own twin worlds bask in the glory
> And searching wisdom of that single eye –
> Why must the Queen of Night on her moon throne
> Tear up their contract and still reign alone?

Here, the experience of sun, seeing, looking and the physical light-world, is presented not with thoughtful consciousness of the human position – of how the sun and moon affect the human – but with flair, merely, of conventional refinements of poetic reference to the scene, a poetic scene of conventionality. And the human position of the 'interior' position is conventionalised into a lovers' amorous twin-ship while the moon is dragged in to make elegant comparison between Sun and Moon and the two human lovers. The emptiness here is not just of thought but feeling.

Similarly, in another playing of Graves with sun-moon poetic ideology, the poverty of his conceptions is more quickly apparent, the lines in their naked artificialness reveal the sense of the poem to be contrived for an effect of intense personal feeling that is not there, in the utterer of

the words.

> The Crane lounes loudly in his need
> And so for love I loune;
> Son to sovereign Sun indeed,
> Courier of the moon.

The majority of Graves' poems in *Poems 1965-1968*, the volume in which these two poems first had their appearance, consist of such poeticised situations for fitting ideas and personal rôles onto them with effects of plausibility. It is useful to weigh what Laura (Riding) Jackson has said on the occurrence in her poems of references to the sun and moon. I reproduce comments of hers made on portions of a long poem of hers, one of the later ones, 'The Signs of Knowledge'. First, the pertinent lines:

> The first sign of the two signs
> Shall be unlove of the sun.
> The second sign of the two signs
> Shall be unlife of the earth.
> And the first with the second sign locked
> Shall be undeath of the moon.

The poem closes with these lines:

> Rubric for the Eye
>
> *See sun-wide, world-long, air-high;*
> *See water-deep and earth-round.*

Then let the eye look whole-impossible,
Look wider, longer, higher, deeper, rounder.
Let the thought sharpen as the eye dulls.
Sun of world, moon of word,
Eye-spilling live of eye, undeath of mind-sight –
Moon-clearly, emptily, full grail aspeak.

In a reading recorded for Lamont Library at Harvard University in 1972 (the quotation is made with her permission, as are all the quotations from the poems themselves),[90] this is how she views her poetic sun-moon characterizations:

> Nowhere should I be taken as speaking by what are called 'symbols'. If, for instance, I say 'the sun which multiplied' or 'the moon which singled', as I do in one poem, I am endeavouring to indicate actualities of physical circumstance in which our inner crucialities are set. My moon may look like the old tired poetical symbol, and I like an old tired poetical romanticist, but I truly meant that the moon's being what it is where it is intervenes in our outer circumstances as a negator of the sun's fostering excessiveness in our regard, both lush and destructive, as a tempering counter-agency, relatively little but near.

The difference between the Riding and Graves treatment of sun and moon in their poems illustrates a fundamental difference in their general functioning as poets. Her sun

90 From a reading recorded for Lamont Library, Harvard University, in 1972; quoted with author's permission applicable to the present sectiion only.

and moon are the real sun and moon as they might affect us in our environing circumstances, our vision of the outer actual world as it might affect inner thought, for example. Her poetic work manifests a sense of function, a commitment to the poet-rôle as involving broad responsibilities of understanding. Graves worked within a narrow framework of self-portrayal, with implications of heroic attitudes, as of courage, and self- humbling candour, to which sun and moon, as symbols, were made to do service. As Michael Kirkham put it, Graves went to her to 'enlarge his poetry, to stiffen it with intellectual authority'.[91] To employ Kirkham's terms further: where Graves' poems are 'subjective', Laura Riding's are 'supra personal'; what is an idea expanded to universality of application in her becomes, in him, 'an expression of violent emotion'. She is never concerned with the mere dramatisation of the character of herself as one caught in ever-varying personal conflict, whereas he is seldom, if ever, anything else. Quite contrary to Anthony Thwaite's view, Laura Riding's poems are always distinguishable from those of Robert Graves.

That Robert Graves was given to converting not only ideas but all sorts of material within reach into writing bearing his authorial stamp, is, in many instances, quite evident without labours of research and study in the large. We only

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91 Pointed out by Professor Michael Kirkham in 'Robert Graves' Debt to Laura Riding', a paper put before a Modern Language Association (U. S. A.) seminar in 1972 and published in December 1973 in no. 3 of *Focus On Robert Graves,* a bibliographical newsletter edited by Dr. Ellsworth Mason. An extensively re-worked essay, in part based on this, entitled 'Laura (Riding) Jackson', was later published in *Chelsea*, no. 33, September 1974. Professor Kirkham is the author of a book, *The Poetry of Robert Graves* (Athlone Press of the University of London, 1969), and an article, 'Laura Riding's Poems' (*Cambridge Quarterly*, Spring 1971). See also the introduction to *Poems: A Joking Word* by Jack Blackmore (Trent Editions: Nottingham 2020).

have to think, for example, of his early adoption of Skelton as a poetic model, his rewriting classical myths and stories, the extensive use he made of source-material in historical novels, of the ubiquitous appearance of 'Sufic' motifs in his verse from the early 1960s (his acquaintance with Sufism proving itself to be, I believe, superficial – a literary affectation). There is much more than is commonly recognised of such 'conversion' in the verbal detail of his work, also. A characteristic feature epitomising this is provided by the striking reappearance of a phrase from R. G. Collingwood's *Autobiography*, 'the dogmas . . . of that putrefying corpse of historical thought . . .' in the 'strong' concluding lines of Graves' 'The Worms of History', in *Poems 1938-1945*: 'The ages of a putrefying corpse'. (As it happens, Michael Kirkham demonstrated for this very poem several derivations of its verbal material and 'historical thought' from that of Laura Riding.)

Here are two particular instances, and another more general, selected from many possible examples, in which Graves plainly used Laura Riding's work as his source. In 1928, in her *Contemporaries and Snobs*, she suggested that one way for the poet to avoid losing self-reliance (ie., common-sense) of thought was to leave the contemporary world to its devices:

> To help pass away the time, while this is happening, the poet with the poetic faculty strapped on his back may play the buffoon, call criticism 'nuncle' and cajole it into a historical accuracy in the dating of poetry . . .

Some twenty years later, in *Seven Days in New Crete*, Graves

was to write:

> It seems to me that a late Christian poet was committed in the name of integrity to resist, doubt, scoff, destroy and play the fool . . .

The second example is one to which Laura (Riding) Jackson herself drew attention in her essay in *Denver Quarterly* entitled 'Some Autobiographical Corrections of Literary History'.[92] (Readers are advised to go to this essay for enlightenment on just what and how much Graves has 'taken' – Laura (Riding) Jackson's word—from her work for use in his own.) One of the examples she gives there is from the sequence 'Fragments', which is to be found in her now rare, Seizin Press book, *Poems*: *A Joking Word* (1930):

> Here is escape then, Hercules, from empire:
> Where Zero the Companionable
> Consoles unthinkable lusts.

Compare this with Robert Graves' poem, 'To Ogmian Hercules', published in his *Poems 1965-1968*, which Laura (Riding) Jackson quotes; it begins:

> Your labours are performed, your bye-works too;
> Your ashes gently drift from Oeta's peak.
> Here is escape then, Hercules, from empire.

So much for Graves' frequently vaunted boast of poetic independent mindedness. Referring to this and much of a

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92 *Denver Quarterly* 'Some Autobiographical Corrections of Literary History', 8 (4), Winter 1974, pp. 1-33

like nature, Laura (Riding) Jackson has commented:

> Robert Graves in his poetic professionalism was, is, ever, like the novelist, the story or special-feature writer, on the lookout for material. But the material sought, needed, is not just idea, subject, theme, upon which to base a poem: it has got to be verbal material, the word-seed in it, verbally extensive stuff.

The following conversation in *Epilogue* on 'Poems and Poets' was conducted between Laura Riding and Robert Graves, with Graves tending to confine himself to the putting of questions. Early on he comments:

> . . . I have always had a blind but obstinate will to discover a consciousness of this quality [a consciousness of final quality of mind] and a realist's conviction that it was to be found in my time, and a painful frankness with myself that it was not my consciousness, and a physical intuition that it would be a woman's. And the process of elimination points to you, with a fantastic kind of logic.

And a little further on he continues:

> To you the problem of poetic scope presents no difficulties. You are able, by orderly definition, to reduce to the status of idiosyncrasies large fields of specialist activity . . .

And he then proceeds to such questions as the two which follow:

> Could you give me a simple clue to your method of graduation?

and:

> By what principle can one learn to live and think poetically?

It is indeed odd that the abundance of this kind of material in the *Epilogue* volumes can be completely overlooked by Graves' critics and biographers. Even such an extensively and scholastically researched pamphlet as *The Ancestry of the White Goddess* by Sydney Musgrove, not all of it weighted in Graves' favour, manages to ignore such evidence.

A long study would be required to unravel all the implications of what the word 'influence' means when applied to the effect Laura Riding had on Robert Graves. At the present time, when question arises as to how things stand between the work of the two writers, there is to be found, in nearly every case, a tangle of contradictions at the centre of which Robert Graves can be found to have actively untied the threads. He has deliberately and assiduously unpicked the name of Laura Riding from his literary record, as Margaret Konkol points out. I have already given a few instances of this in his revisions to *Goodbye to All That*, and the prefaces to the editions of his *Collected Poems*, but there are more and there is worse.

Detailed accounts were given by Laura (Riding) Jackson in *Denver Quarterly*. Graves, for example, belittled the rôle she played in the collaborative (a 'word by word collaboration' according to the prefaces of both books) *A Survey of*

Modernist Poetry and *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, by referring to the former as essentially his, and, with both, relegating her to the addendum status of a parenthetic '(with Laura Riding)', as though something of an afterthought. In his *The Common Asphodel* – its subtitle is 'Collected Essays on Poetry 1922-1949, by Robert Graves' – about two hundred of a total of 329 text- pages are occupied by work actually written in collaboration with Laura Riding or under her close editorship; but that significant fact is overlaid by the technique of subordination of her name and part in all this work that Graves employed in the formation of the book. In presenting the material of the two collaborative books (*A Survey* and *A Pamphlet*) in abridged amount and with much free modification, Graves stated in his introduction that Laura Riding gave her 'permission'. Laura (Riding) Jackson denied, in her *Denver Quarterly* article, that Graves' had her permission for these uses of the collaborative material. Some indication that Graves' claim failed to pass scrutiny elsewhere is provided by the fact that *The Common Asphodel*, unlike virtually every other substantial work by him, has never found a publisher in the United States. Nor has it been reprinted in Britain. For some reason, the book's original publication, in 1949, was not undertaken by his usual publishers; it appeared from Messrs. Hamish Hamilton, who publish no other work by him. This 'common asphodelling', as we may label it, has persuaded unwary later authors to refer to the collaborative Riding-Graves books as by Robert Graves '(with Laura Riding)'. Two of dozens of examples may be found, one in the entry under 'Graves' in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* and another in *The Story of English Literature* by Ann Tibble. Mrs. Tibble, though she is by no

means the first to do so, goes one step further by stating that in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* 'He [Graves] was probably the first to recognise the greatness of the poetry of Gerald Manley Hopkins'. Such errors have built Graves a reputation as a canny-eyed if eccentric critic. A study of Laura Riding's critical work would quickly show his critical ideas as second-hand.[93]She is correctly identified on the book's spine and title-page as the first-named author, much of the book's text and its principles being drawn from her *Contemporaries and Snobs* which she was at work on in the same year, 1927. Graves, we might well legitimately say, was her 'amenuensis', an insult previously applied by critics and reviewers to her.

Another of Graves' descriptions from the Introduction to *The Common Asphodel* is that of *Epilogue* as 'an annual which we [Laura Riding and Robert Graves] edited between 1934 and 1936 and which commanded increasing inattention in literary circles. But Graves is described as 'Assistant Editor' on the title-page of *Epilogue I*, and as 'Associate Editor' on those of Epilogue *II* and *Epilogue III*. Had Graves actually been the editor of *Epilogue*, or even co-editor, the apparent wit and modesty of his comment might have been in place. As it is, he is being modest at another's expense, for the editor of *Epilogue* was Laura Riding – and it is patent that every detail of that remarkable periodical is hers in conception and marked by her presiding care. His declaration that *Epilogue* 'commanded increasing inattention' designedly minimises the importance to him in his use of it in later years. He even gets the dates wrong. *Epilogue* appeared in 1935, 1936 and 1937.

93 See 'Contemporary Misogyny: Laura Riding, William Empson And The Critics –A Survey Of Mis-History', Mark Jacobs, *English*, 2015, vol. 64 no. 246, pp. 222–240

But he goes even further than this. In *The Common Asphodel*, and later in the Penguin and American editions of *The Crowning Privilege*, he presents *as his own* an essay on Nietzsche. This essay is by Laura Riding and first appeared in *Epilogue I* under the initials 'M.V.', which refer to 'Madeline Vara', a pseudonym Riding employs elsewhere in her books (see, for example, *Convalescent Conversations* and elsewhere).[94] He also misrepresents, in the same manner, what pertained to her part in material used in his introduction to the *Collected Poems of Norman Cameron*, where the quotations from Cameron's letters are reprinted as though addressed to him. In actual fact, the letters were addressed to Laura Riding; Graves' appears to have drawn his texts of them, without acknowledgment, from her book *Everybody's Letters*.[95] There, the letters are addressed to 'Lilith' and signed 'Cyril' – pseudonyms for Riding and Graves respectively. Graves not only omitted to mention that Cameron was, rather than a friend of his, a close friend especially of Laura (Riding) Jackson's, from the latter days of his Oxford student-life and, over a decade afterwards, that she helped him with his poems, as also with his book of translations of Rimbaud. Graves also attempted to instill the notion that her and Cameron's association was short-lived by referring to an alleged quarrel a 'painful quarrel' – between them that led to Cameron's abandonment of a plan to take up residence in Majorca. In the concluding paragraph of her essay in *Denver Quarterly* Laura (Riding) Jackson commented:

94 Miranda Seymour in her biography *Robert Graves* alleges the name was a 'house name' used by everyone. It was not, as a glance at Riding's other work would have quickly shown. (Henry Holt & Co;1995).

95 *Everybody's Letters*, Collected and Arranged by Laura Riding, with [a Foreword and] an Editorial Postscript.-London: Barker, 1933.-253p.

> Not only is the tale all wrong, by its being the single narrative reference to myself in the biographical critical editorial introduction, it is a perfect flip of elimination from the record, with just enough hinted to leave an unpleasant impression of what was a long, large, sustained, serious friendship. Mr. Graves did not tell when Norman Cameron decided to go back to England, he gave me his house, with and for love, and that when I in 1940 gave to Mr. Graves my share of Majorcan property jointly owned but held in my name, I added this particular possession of mine. I think no single characterization would serve for what I have been here, finally, describing. And it, for all its complexity, is but a patch of the stuff of this article; and it is itself but a small pattern of behind-the-scenes autobiographical realities, in the great bibliographical and literary-historical theatre.

Such misdescriptive habits of Graves' are epitomised by the statement he provided about himself to the editors of *Arena* (Ireland), a small magazine that ceased publication after its fourth number, in which issue the following 'information' about Graves was given:

> Tells the editors he once ran a magazine for three numbers, and that each copy is now worth £10.

And by his reiterated description of Laura (Riding) Jackson's husband, Schuyler B. Jackson, in private and public, as an 'American farmer'. Jackson did engage in farming. He was also known to Graves as the Poetry Editor of *Time* magazine in 1939, when they met. Laura (Riding) Jackson's

personal comment on this was made available to me:

> Robert Graves knew that Schuyler Jackson was, besides being engaged in farming, a book-critic for *Time* for a number of years, and that he was also its poetry-editor in the particular period of his personal acquaintance with him. Before that period, Schuyler Jackson had, in 1938, reviewed in *Time* the *Collected Poems* of Laura Riding, and also Mr. Graves' *Collected Poems* of that time.

Laura Riding and Schuyler Jackson were married in 1941, when Schuyler Jackson was still writing for *Time*. Something other than ignorance accounts for this ascription of exclusive 'farmer' identity.

Awareness of the key part played by *The Common Asphodel* in the misleading a generation or two of readers dims the comic aspects of the professed puzzlement of Graves' followers on the master's failures, since 1949, to produce more criticism of *Common Asphodel* quality. Yet the comedy is there, grim and pathetic both. Martin Seymour-Smith took up a representative advocate stand in his British Council pamphlet in 1956:

> 'The critical strength of *The Common Asphodel* as compared with the lack of care often displayed in *The Crowning Privilege* leads one to hope Graves will someday devote his energies to a comprehensive survey of English poetry.'

In 1970 Seymour-Smith modifies this passage by substituting 'leads one to hope' the sober revision 'led many to hope'. It should be noted as well that wherever Seymour-Smith

refers to the two Riding-Graves collaborations, he reports them as by Robert Graves 'with Laura Riding', whether in his critical writings or his bibliographical appendices or his biographical writing. In addition, going beyond either Day or Thwaite in his bibliographical reporting, he describes other collaborative work of theirs in the same manner, using the same technique of subordination in her regard, although in all such collaborative enterprises Laura Riding is verily the first-named author.

Thus, the authorship of their translation of a book by George Schwartz, *Almost Forgotten Germany,* is represented as by Robert Graves 'with Laura Riding'; and he also refers to The Seizin Press as founded by, and *Epilogue* as edited by, 'Robert Graves and Laura Riding'.

Seymour-Smith's lack of critical stance where Laura (Riding) Jackson is concerned is revealed in various comments of his on her where his judgements may be seen as purposefully derogatory and as verging, at times, on the libellous, whether in main Riding or in main Graves contexts. His reference to her 'genius' for example, which like other flattery of his attempts to lend credibility to his adopted stance as an authority on her work, combined with adjectives such as 'fascinates', 'fascinating' (I quote), in his ineffectual striving to pin down her work, need to be carefully scrutinised alongside other comments, remarks, references, of his, to appreciate the manner in which he brings down the scales heavily to give a prejudiced account of her and her work to his readers. In *The Review*,[96] for instance, she is

96 Seymour-Smith, Martin, 'Laura Riding's 'Rejection of Poetry.' *The Review*, 23 (1970), 10-14. This issue was devoted to reviews of Laura (Riding) Jackson's *Selected Poems* under the title *The White Goddess* and includes essays by Geoffrey Grigson and Roy Fuller. An interesting correspondence followed in subsequent issues between (Riding) Jackson and the authors.

called 'parenphrenic' by him; in his *Guide to Modern World Literature* he informs the reader of her 'Jehovah complex' and, without naming them, her 'personal peculiarities; and, in his *Who's Who in Twentieth Century Literature*, she is allegedly, although in quotation marks, 'paranoid' and, without quotation marks this time, 'hebrephenic' [sic]. None of these attributions is given justification in textual examination or critical exegesis aimed at bringing readers to an understanding of her work. The only reason that I can see for their existence in an account, an 'examination', a brief evaluation, of Laura (Riding) Jackson's career, is concentrated antagonism. They are absurd when associated with tribute to her 'genius'. Whatever the subject upon which Seymour-Smith undertakes to write, he will find space to refer to her work in order to misconstrue, misinterpret and malign her to his readers. In his book, *Sex and Society*, for instance, he refers to and quotes from early work of hers, particularly her essay, 'The Damned Thing' in *Anarchism Is Not Enough*, part of the discourse of which is upon the sexually generated distinctions between men and women. Although, as usual, he praises her work in loose, general terms, thus presenting his credentials as an 'authority' on her, the gist of his commentary is concentrated in his remark that 'the force of her message fails', though he nowhere makes clear what her message is; as he also evinces nowhere an understanding of, or even a reading acquaintance with, later work of hers in which she presents her thinking on woman-man relations, as in her short and long stories of the 1920s and 1930s, her historical novel on the Trojan war, the admired *Four Unposted Letters to Catherine*, the *Epilogue* volumes, her essays, or, especially, her book *The Telling*. It is an altogether startling experience, then, to discover the con-

clusions to his own thematic arguments in *Sex and Society* are coincident at crucial points with her own conclusions in 'The Damned Thing', even despite her 'tragic limitations', which he is at pains to emphasise. I have chosen two passages of Seymour-Smith's, from two separate productions of his, to illustrate the mechanics of his thinking which eventually lead to the mendacity of his later work in the biography of Robert Graves in 1982. The first is found under the heading 'Laura Riding' in his *Guide to Modern World Literature*.[97] It begins with a description of her general geographical movements and gives biographical details such as might be drawn from standard sources. He then describes her writing career between the years 1926 and 1941:

> From 1926 until 1941, in England, Mallorca, Rennes (France) and finally America, she was associated with Robert Graves (*q.v.*), with whom he published a number of books and pamphlets. The Fugitives awarded her a poetry prize and made her an honorary member of their group; she was highly enthusiastic and devised schemes to publicise their work. Soon after she published her *Collected Poems* (1938) she came to the conclusion that . . . .

'Rennes' is incorrect: Laura (Riding) Jackson lived in Brittany for a while, but not in Rennes. She did not 'associate' with Robert Graves from '1926 until 1941' but until 1939; nor did she publish any pamphlets with him but only a good-sized book where that word figures in

97 *The Guide to Modern World Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, 1973; new edition 1 Jan. 1985).

the title. From the rest of Seymour-Smith's commentary readers are forced to deduce that (Riding) Jackson's entire independently produced work between 1926 and '1941' – and there is a considerable amount of it, and of substance – was the accumulation of her poems into collected form in 1938, all else, pictured as an unspecified number of 'books and pamphlets', being the mere by-product of her being the associate of Robert Graves. In the geographical movements described, she might well be viewed as the follower of Robert Graves and his work, which is Seymour- Smith's intention. Nothing else, it is indicated, remains to be told, except that once (just when is not revealed – it was 1924 [98]) she was awarded a 'poetry prize'. In his reference to her 'enthusiasm' he has seized upon an account in Louise Cowan's book on the Fugitives that, Laura (Riding) Jackson has recorded, in some as yet unpublished writing, misrepresents her in the matter to which the word refers, and in every other matter. Nowhere in the quoted portion of Seymour-Smith's book, or in the rest of his writing, is there any mention of Laura Riding's editorial work or fictional writing in the period covered; the only book named is her first book, *The Close Chaplet*, which she published under her first authorial name, Laura Riding Gottschalk. Seymour-Smith makes it seem that not only the collaborative 'books and pamphlets', but the whole of her work, indeed, the whole of her life from '1926 until 1941', might be written of as by Robert Graves '(with Laura Riding)'. But, of course, '*q.v.*' Robert Graves, under whose name the collaborative books appear! The only

98 *The Fugitive* 1922 to 1925.[1]:13. Edited by Robert Penn Warren, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, and Allen Tate, included Laura Riding on the editorial mast-head in final editions, and was a major school of twentieth century poetry in the United States.

other claim on memory given her by this chronicler besides that of being associated with Robert Graves, is her earlier 'association' with the Fugitives, this depicted by the belittling 'enthusiasm' and the reduction of her Fugitive status to that of, just, an 'honorary' member of the group. She was indeed first made an honorary member of the group. But her name, Laura Riding Gottschalk, appears with the names of the other members of the group of poets who composed the editorial committee of *TheFugitive*, from March 1925 until December 1925, she is welcomed in its pages as a 'regular and participating member of the Fugitive group', and her name is listed on the masthead of editors. Of this fact, and of the warm praise accorded her work in the pages of *The Fugitive* after her first appearance there, Seymour-Smith chooses to remain ignorant.

My second quotation comprises extracts drawn from Seymour-Smith's *Who's Who in Twentieth Century Literature*, from the alphabetically listed passage, 'Laura Riding'.

> She and Robert Graves (q.v.) were associated – in London, then Mallorca, then Rennes(Brittany) and finally Trenton (near Princeton, USA – as editors and collaborationists [*sic*] *(A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, 1927; rev. extracts, by Graves only, contained in Graves' *The Common Asphodel* (1949) between 1926 and 1939 Her influence on Graves' personal life was crucial but he borrowed nothing from her poetic procedures she impressed some of the Fugitives by her almost naive enthusiasm. She founded (with Graves) the Seizin Press[99]

99 The Seizin Press when it was founded was registered in *The London Gazette*, 5 October, 1928, as a company under Laura Riding's name, not Robert

> (they, but mostly she, edited the three volumes of the miscellany *Epilogue*, 19357) . . . . As to her poetry, at its weakest it is somewhat Steinesque (q.v.)[100] and rambling: she betrayed some signs of envy of Gertrude Stein's reputation . . . . She continues to publish and to proselytize: the reader is forced to consider the presence of some miraculously controlled 'paranoid' or 'hebrephenic' [sic] condition. She has always had devoted disciples but those discipleships have usually come to an end, and always her (public) statements have relegated [sic] blame – sometimes at quasi-cosmic [sic] level – to the other party.

When he lists a few of her books at the end of this passage, he does not include either *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* or *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, obviously to avoid the unfortunate necessity of having to record them as 'by Laura Riding (with Robert Graves)'. Instead, we learn only that, as 'editors and collaborationists' (I remind readers, *en passant*, that Graves never had equality of status as editor with Laura Riding), they produced *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* in, so to speak, a parenthetic side, and that 'rev.' extracts are to be found in *The Common Asphodel*. What, it has to be asked, is this piece of information doing here, in a commentary supposedly devoted to Laura Riding? Why does Seymour-Smith not mention that the 'Conclusion' of *The Survey* is reprinted in 'rev.' form in Laura Riding's

Graves.

100 But see *"Hospitality to Words": Laura Riding's American Inheritance and Inheritors*, a dissertation by Philip John Lansdell Rowland, Royal Holloway, 5. Rowland makes conclusive distinctions between Riding and Stein in Riding's favour, as also between Riding and Emily Dickinson and John Ashbery.

Contemporaries and Snobs from which it was taken for use in *The Survey*? Or that the whole of *A Survey* is based on the principles of *Contemporaries and Snobs*? Quite clearly, his remarks here, and the one further down on Graves and her 'influence' on him, that he 'borrowed nothing from her poetic procedures', are gratuitous introductions designed to reinforce established impressions that the major ideas, both in general and those in particular to poetry, and the content and procedure of his poetic writing after 1925, are of genuine Graves orientation, while at the same time minimising her earlier authorial status and achievement.

The statement that she is 'Steinesque' and betrayed 'signs of envy of Gertrude Stein's reputation' reveals not only the perverse intent of Seymour-Smith to derogate the poetic work of Laura Riding but also his lack of understanding of the work of both authors. It is pure malice to argue 'envy' of Gertrude Stein: there is no ground for such an argument other than the ground of ignorance. In the 'Conclusion' of *The Survey* and in the larger, more detailed essay from which this 'Conclusion' is drawn in *Contemporaries and Snobs*, and elsewhere in Laura (Riding) Jackson's writings (including that of later time), there is but impersonal studious critical treatment of Gertrude Stein, and where the treatment is personal, it shows fondness. In fact, Laura (Riding) Jackson was undoubtedly the first to have truly understood what Gertrude Stein represented in the literary landscape of the twentieth century, giving her solid praise in her critical evaluation of her work.

I cannot attempt here to comment on all Seymour Smith's slurs and mis-characterisations, particularly of recent times, but only show how these took root early on in his and others', writings on the subject of Laura (Riding) Jackson.

His book, for example, *Robert Graves: His Life and Works*, illustrates the extraordinary lengths he will go to in order to malign her work and herself personally. Simply to cover what it presents would require an essay longer than this one. But by what has been shown thus far, such critical prejudice as his discredits itself with any honest-minded reader as marks of an incapability by Seymour-Smith of writing disinterestedly on his subject.

But over and above this, there is a need of protesting the terms of his commentaries, his use of derogation to avoid real critical issues; and, particularly, his amateur's use of psychological journalese for insinuations presented as needing no factual verification; and a protest at the lies, deceits, distortions, to be found scattered about in his writings, which otherwise have gone entirely unchallenged. What Laura (Riding) Jackson has done in the writing-courses of her lifetime suggests no appropriate background for such defamation. She has pursued her work with concentrated fidelity to the objective of putting her best into it, and given generously, as the record shows, of her best to many others – both to their work and in its publishing. She awakened late, as she has told *The Denver Quarterly*, to the presence of a long-persisting spreading activity of insinuations about her, centrally of Robert Graves' fosterings. She has reported how she has found herself obliged to divert a good deal of her time and energies to endeavours to correct the record as to her life and work, to counter the falsifications to which they have been subject within the channels of pseudo-critical comment and gossip of the literary world, one which even yet has to come to grips with a basic understanding of the meaning, intention and direction of her work. She wrote of the literary world in *Denver Quarterly*:

> Depravity, in the human world at large, keeps issuing from its quarters into the open by vents of common identity with its like in that large, and the entirety undergoes some continual dissipation in the total atmosphere, which may or may not keep ahead of what is now called, horribly, 'input'. In the quarter of the human world known as the literary world, there are no vents for depravity of performance, there is not even a category so denoted: all is sanctified under the name 'literary'.

One cannot but think of this description in considering Seymour-Smith's activity in that world as an 'authority' on Laura (Riding) Jackson and Robert Graves.[101]

Long ago I thought it appropriate to present to Laura (Riding) Jackson this report of Seymour-Smith's treatment of her in his published writing in those decades. The very strong position I have assumed as to it, from time to time, seemed in possible danger of being taken to speaking for her. She recorded for me some particular observations as to facts concerning her, misrepresented by Seymour-Smith, and some general observations on his behaviour in her regard, and I quote from these latter by her permission:

> In Martin Seymour-Smith's behavior in my regard I distinguish three ruling factors with which I have reason to feel intimately acquainted. In the early 'sixties he initiated a correspondence with me: he wished help from me with a book on my poetic work of which he had written a good deal. I

101 His so-called 'authority' gave licence later to such as T. S. Mathews slanderous *Jacks or Better* (Harper & Row 1977).

learned from a copy of a book of poems of his that he sent to me that he possessed an intensely energetic will to hit sure marks of idea and statement in poetic, and in literary and intellectual, functioning generally, but I could not see any actual ball of objective employed in the movement as a point of concentration for his driving energies, or any distinct objective-target, any previsioned consummation of energy expenditure. I put this impression aside, and devoted much care of attention to the correspondence. It was of long duration. In it there was much expression of high respect for my work, the poetic work in particular, and my thinking generally. Of the latter he aimed at becoming an explainer. He confessed to regret for not having come 'first' into contact with me despite early preoccupation with my poetic work. The view of Robert Graves conveyed surprised me. I came to feel uncertain of his adherence to the project he proposed, and eventually withdrew from communication with him. The first of the three factors to which I have referred is, energy in intensive supply, without aiming at use of it in a finally serious way. His action-style seemed rambling, talk-feverish. The second factor is related to the first as affecting his sense of the other person – the other has little human reality for him. Then, there is a factor deriving from the first two. From weakness in motivating inner concern of aim he depends on something to which to attach himself for orientation, the external point of attachment serving loosely as external and internal point of departure

for his functioning on his literary 'own'.

As time passed, he sought out me and my work as a point of attachment. When I retreated from him he bounded back to the Graves attachment, maintaining it as a literary-world convenience and for using against me all the representations kept on the boil in that quarter. 'Genius' is one of the words flung into that defamatory brew to give it a savour of 'generosity' and 'reasonableness' – to deny me all claim to signal regard would make the brew patently one of sheer spite, which it is. Martin Seymour-Smith's additions to the brew's ingredients are wild shots, unequal to the home stuff in its appearance of having some veritableness, but, adding to that lot, they take on for the unenlightened, unsuspecting, a character of veritableness. As to what has passed in the home-quarter, in the keeping of that brew on the boil, I give this sample. I have it on record as a preserved letter from an English person of literary associations that, in response to what he wrote of laudatory comment on my poetic work to a literary agent, identified as the sister of Ted Hughes, this person had responded with a 'Yes', in inclination towards agreement, adding, 'but how can one regard it as 'good' after hearing all those tales about her that Alan Sillitoe has brought back from Majorca [where he had been visiting Robert Graves]?' Mr. Seymour-Smith's description of me, in one of his spurious biographical accounts of my life and work, as having 'disciples' to whom 'always her (public) statements have relegated

> blame sometimes at quasi cosmic level' – reeks of the emanations of impotent rage from a person who knows no better way to counter the effect on his self-respect of his failure to win my respect for what must have been in his mind a 'disciple' position towards me. I have never viewed any who proffered friendship to me as friends to my work as 'disciples' of mine. The word in my regard is an invention of Robert Graves' of the time after my termination of our association: being a 'disciple' of mine put a different light on his takings from my work and thought. In the case of that 'discipleship', I made the end, and without relegating blame to him for having ended it.

To restate my main theme in brief: the problem of critical evaluation in the Graves-Riding relation is not resolvable in terms of 'influence', nor even of 'plagiarism'; nor is the answer that the Riding to be found in Graves is just a 'phase' or 'transitory period' (two descriptions used by Day) that Graves went through – unless this be intended to comprise a phase or period ever renewing itself, conveniently, in self-repetition. From nowhere in the sphere of literary interests in which court-paying to Robert Graves became quite long ago professionally desirable– the sphere in which Thwaite, Seymour-Smith, Richard Graves, Miranda Seymour[102] and others do their biased writing on Laura (Riding) Jackson – could we expect to be given any kind of acknowledgement that Graves has been engaged in putting Laura (Riding)

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102 See Graves, Richard Perceval (1990). *Robert Graves: the Years with Laura* (1926–1940). Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London; Seymour, Miranda *Life on the Edge*, Doubleday, 1995

Jackson's work and its teachings to use in his own work. Nevertheless, the actuality, as she herself was compelled to characterise it in *The Denver Quarterly*, is *appropriation*.

An indisputable demonstration of what she means occurred in the September issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* in 1966. Clearly, Laura (Riding) Jackson did not see the article in question until sometime later, for in a letter published in that magazine in December 1971, she protests against it, referring to it as a concerted 'manhandling' of her by the author, James Jensen, and the other contributors. I have noted above that this article, which examines the origin of William Empson's book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity,* was accompanied by commentaries solicited from William Empson, I. A. Richards and Robert Graves, these being given opportunity to say their say on the subject, but not Laura (Riding) Jackson, who, 'mishandled' by Messrs. Jensen, Empson and Graves (Richards made no reference to her), was herself left in ignorance of the article's procedure. Graves, in his contribution, in the form of a letter, puts on a pious show of reproaching Jensen and Empson, not for their specific derogatory comments on 'Laura Riding', but for their 'unchivalrousness' in quoting 'our joint works as if simply mine' – he who had treated them as really such! – and, for good measure, he cites Douglas Day as another culprit, although Day wrote *Swifter Than Reason* with plentiful help and advice from Robert Graves on the subject of Laura Riding, the extent of Day's use of it redounding later to Graves' embarrassment. Having established his own credentials of 'chivalrousness', Graves proceeds to outstrip the others in misrepresentation:

> I was, I believe, responsible for most of the

> detailed examination of the poems in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* – for example, showing the complex implications of Sonnet 129 before its eighteenth-century re-punctuations; Laura Riding certainly for the general principles.

Laura (Riding) Jackson, in her letter of protest at this composite assault, wrote:

> According to this magnanimous certitude, my contribution is essentially a matter of fifteen lines; but 'general principles' might among equally fair-minded people win me credit for – perhaps double (!) the worth of an ordinary (detailed) examination line. 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, via Mr. Empson's hobbyhorse use of it, with the 'New Criticism', which tried to make real horseflesh of it.

Any scholar of integrity will and can, if she or he pursues the issue of the Riding-Graves collaborations, agree that Laura (Riding) Jackson's is a just account,[103] and that the analysis of Sonnet 129 is hers, not Graves'. Similarly, the critical follow-through of the collaborative books is not to be found in Graves' books but in Laura (Riding) Jackson's – in such works as *Contemporaries and Snobs*, *Anarchism Is Not Enough*, *Experts Are Puzzled*; and her work in the *Epilogue* essays and elsewhere; and the 'general principles'

103 See Note 5.

are given literal fulfilment in her poems, not his. Those who investigate Laura (Riding) Jackson's work in its full range will find it not difficult to see through Graves' airy attempt to reduce the extent and quality of her contributions to *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* and they will discover how profoundly far-reaching those principles are. A straight comparison of her essay 'The Idea of God' in *Epilogue I* and *The White Goddess* will, of its simple self, give the game away.[104] Graves, in his letter to *Modern Language Quarterly*, was not performing an isolated act, a simple yielding to the blandishments of Jensen and Empson: his appropriatory statements lead to the heart of the Graves' strategy of combining utmost possible use of Laura (Riding) Jackson's work with utmost appearance of gallantry by patronisation, along with utmost possible effort to cast the subject of her into his shade.

In its restlessness, the critical world appears to have exhausted the possibilities of teasing ever yet more meaning from T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, James Joyce and the like, and to be ever busy at finding new material to keep its tracks from rusting completely. In the absence of new figures of *recherché* popularity, Robert Graves has been something to be going on with. The sheer amount of what flowed from his pen has kept the machinery of critical and biographical literary interest in action. Yet the commentary is mostly conventional and monotonous: it exhibits not so much reluctance to scrutinise the launching stages of the Graves

104 What Graves took from Laura (Riding) Jackson is widespread right to the end of his published work. A straight comparison of 'The Idea of God' and *The White Goddess* will reveal much to interested scholars of his procedures, although it is a mere part of the whole. Another readily available comparison would be *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* (1943) with her essay 'The Exercise of English', *Epilogue* II, Spring 1936, upon which the book is based.

rocket (so to speak), to question the later manufactured appearances – as an apparent unawareness, where there is not unwillingness, that there is something of the kind calling to be done. In particular, critics engaged on writing on Graves' work seem to become hypnotised by the spell of his magic in making 'Laura Riding' disappear. They do so without struggle: if the created illusion is given authority, it is so easy to follow the Graves line. The effects spread far and wide, rippling into the corners of even the most ephemeral commentary of the times, until the formulations are hardened into a rigid, crusty acceptance of common falsity.

Every year, from the first appearance of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* up to the present, has brought its many instances of the attributing to Robert Graves what properly belongs, in terms of the order of names at the very least, but in terms of work also, to Laura (Riding) Jackson. A scattering of examples illustrates this. Thus, David Bromwich in a review in *The Times Literary Supplement*, speaking of William Empson as the 'genius' of the New Criticism, quotes *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* as by 'Graves and Riding'. Again, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, we have Professor William H. Pritchard agreeing with a review of a book of Yeats criticism he edited that 'a place should have been found for Robert Graves, and if I had known about it would have included the hilarious Graves-Riding treatment of 'Innisfree' [sic] in *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*.' Similarly, Frederick Grubb in *The New Statesman*, in a 'tribute' entitled 'Odd Man Not Out: Graves at Eighty', quotes 'Graves and Riding' as saying that art should not 'react into satiric or actual primitivism', Graves again accorded pride of authorial place, Riding something of an

afterthought, in an article which actually quotes from the book in question, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*. An instance of Graves misleading others without overt responsibility on their part also occurs in this article. Grubb refers to Graves as the addressee of the Norman Cameron letters as found in Graves' introduction to Norman Cameron's *Collected Poems*: '. . . from Norman Cameron . . . he [Graves] gets an answer – 'I'm in disfavour with the director for wearing that red jersey you gave me.' Examination of the letter as it was originally printed in Laura Riding's *Everybody's Letters* reveals that it ends with the question 'How is Hubert?' (i.e., Robert): so its addressee, and thus presumably the donor of the jersey in question, was undoubtedly Laura Riding. Had Grubb known this, he would not have chosen to focus on these particular words to enliven his article..105

So far has this reversion of names lodged itself in 'critical' minds, that we get this from Kingsley Amis in a review of Martin Seymour-Smith's book on Robert Graves in *The Observer*:

> Intellectually, [Laura Riding's] effect on him might have been disastrous [...] if it had been less superficial. They collaborated on two influential books about poetry which would seemingly have been much the same without any contribution from her.'

Such instances, extracted from a very large quantity of possible

105 Examination of the letter as originally printed in *Everybody's Letter*s (pp. 50-51) reveals that it ends with the question 'How is Hubert?' [i.e., Robert]: so its addressee, and thus presumably the donor of the jersey, was undoubtedly Laura Riding. Had Grubb known this, he would not have chosen to focus on those particular words.

examples, illustrate how writers who bring Graves into literary mention abet him with his never relaxed strategy of trying to rid himself of Laura (Riding) Jackson as a crucial literary fact in his career, whether because critics default in due attentiveness to simple evidence at hand, or do not press themselves to look for simple substantiations.

This essay has been calling attention to an unjust state of affairs – some readers might think it better described as infamous. Whatever the adjective, the extent to which the situation has been maintained by private, as well as public, statements of Graves' own, is illustrated by a slight passage quoted in a Sotheby's catalogue of modern literature. This has Graves telling a correspondent in 1943 (!), evidently apropos Laura Riding's poem 'Though in One Time': ... I think [her use of] 'bewilderment' picks up the thought of my poem of 'Pure Death, written a few months beforehand .... ' So far as it is possible to establish, the Graves poem was indeed published earlier than the Riding. In the absence of precise datings of compositions the matter might have had to rest there, sense of the intrinsic unlikeliness of the indicated 'pick up' notwithstanding. However – at the risk of taking Graves' private claim of one-word influence more seriously than it deserves: it can as it happens be demonstrated that, if we are to regard the word 'bewilderment' as poetic trove, it was one of the earliest pieces of such to roll downstream (to anticipate a figure I use below) from Laura Riding to Robert Graves. It will be remembered that, by Graves' own account, his attention was first drawn to the work of Laura (Riding) Jackson (Laura Riding Gottschalk as she was then) by her poem 'The Quids', printed in *The Fugitive*.

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Accuracy need demand no more space or energy than inaccuracy, but identifying and correcting even 'straightforward' inaccuracies may take much of both – and can rarely undo harm done. I amplify this commonplace with the observation that the critics I have chosen to concentrate on – and there are others, of like disposition – have made inaccuracy something grimmer than a minor offence by using it in the service of a treatment of Laura (Riding) Jackson that vies with Graves' own in purposefulness. There is not so much a warping of the truth, in their accounts of the relations between the two, as, in reality, no truth at all. There was no 'mutual influence', to quote Thwaite: influence went all one way, from Laura (Riding) Jackson downstream to where Graves was drawing off – as he never stopped drawing off – as much as his reservoir could hold. She was not a 'stimulus' for Robert Graves, except where he imitated or made variations on her themes and use of language: he tried and tried to write like her, but he could not pull it off, try as he might. If critics do their work thoroughly, there can be no danger of confusion.