

Classic Poetry Series

Laura Riding
- poems -

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Laura Riding(January 16, 1901 – September 2, 1991)

an American poet, critic, novelist, essayist and short story writer.

Early Life

She was born Laura Reichenthal in New York to a family of Austrian Jewish immigrants, and educated at Cornell University, where she began to write poetry, publishing first (1923–26) under the name Laura Riding Gottschalk. She became associated with the Fugitives through Allen Tate, and they published her poems in *The Fugitive* magazine. Her first marriage, to historian Louis R. Gottschalk (1899–1975), ended in divorce in 1925, at the end of which year she went to England at the invitation of Robert Graves and his wife Nancy Nicholson. She would remain in Europe for nearly 14 years.

Poetry: Association with Robert Graves

The excitement stirred by Laura Riding's poems is hinted at in Sonia Raiziss' later description: 'When *The Fugitive* (1922–1925) flashed down the new sky of American poetry, it left a brilliant scatter of names: Ransom, Tate, Warren, Riding, Crane.... Among them, the inner circle and those tangent to it as contributors, there was no one quite like Laura Riding' ('An Appreciation', *Chelsea* 12 1962, 28). Riding's first collection of poetry, *The Close Chaplet*, was published in 1926, and during the following year she assumed the surname Riding. By this time the originality of her poetry was becoming ever more evident: generally she favoured a distinctive form of free verse over conventional metres. She, Robert Graves, and Nancy Nicholson were based in London until Riding's failed suicide attempt in 1929. It is generally agreed that this episode was a major cause of the break-up of Graves's first marriage: the whole affair caused a famous literary scandal.

Thereafter, until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, Riding and Graves lived in Deià, Majorca, where they were visited by writers and artists including James Reeves, Norman Cameron, John Aldridge, Len Lye, Jacob Bronowski, and Honor Wyatt. The house is now a museum. *Progress of Stories* (1935) would later be highly esteemed by, among others, John Ashbery and Harry Mathews. Between 1936 and 1939 Riding and Graves lived in England, France, and Switzerland; Graves accompanied Riding on her return to the USA in 1939.

Riding and Graves were highly productive from the start of their association,

though after they moved to Majorca they became even more so. While still in London they had set up (1927) a private press (the Seizin Press), collaborated on *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) (which inspired Empson to write *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and was in some respects the seed of the New Criticism), *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (1928), and other works. In Majorca the Seizin Press was enlarged to become a publishing imprint, producing inter alia the substantial hardbound critical magazine *Epilogue* (1935–1938), edited by Riding with Graves as associate editor. Throughout their association both of them steadily produced volumes of major poetry, culminating for each with a *Collected Poems* in 1938.

Graves and Riding left Majorca in 1936 at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. In 1939, they moved to the United States and took lodging in New Hope, Pennsylvania. Their changing relationship is described by Elizabeth Friedmann in *A Mannered Grace*, by Richard Perceval Graves in *Robert Graves: 1927–1940, The Years with Laura* and by T.S. Matthews in *Jacks or Better* (1977; UK edition published as *Under the Influence*, 1979), and also was the basis for Miranda Seymour's novel *The Summer of '39* (1998). In 1939 Riding and Graves parted, and in 1941 she married Schuyler B. Jackson, eventually settling in Wabasso, Florida, where she lived quietly and simply until her death in 1991, Schuyler having died in 1968. The vernacular "cracker" house in which they lived has been renovated and preserved by the Laura (Riding) Jackson Foundation.

According to Graves' biographer Richard Perceval Graves, Riding played a crucial role in the development of Graves' thoughts when writing his book *The White Goddess*, despite the fact the two were estranged at that point. However, on reviewing the book after publication Riding was furious, saying: "Where once I reigned, now a whorish abomination has sprung to life, a Frankenstein pieced together from the shards of my life and thoughts."

Renunciation of Poetry; Later Writings

In about 1941 Riding renounced poetry, though it would be fifteen to twenty years before she would feel able to begin explaining her reasons and exploring her unfolding findings. She withdrew from public literary life, working with Schuyler Jackson on a dictionary (published posthumously in 1997) that would lead them into an exploration of the foundations of meaning and language. In April 1962 she read "Introduction for a Broadcast" for the BBC Third Programme, her first formal statement of her reasons for renouncing poetry (there had been a brief reference book entry in 1955). An expanded version of the piece was published that year in the New York magazine *Chelsea*, which also published "Further on Poetry" in 1964, writings on the theme of women-and-men in 1965

and 1974, and in 1967, *The Telling*.

The 62 numbered passages of *The Telling*, a 'personal evangel', formed the 'core part' of a book of the same title, thought by some to be her most important book alongside *Collected Poems*. Writings and publications continued to flow throughout the sixties, seventies, and eighties, as Laura (Riding) Jackson (her authorial name from 1963–64 onwards) explored what she regarded as the truth-potential of language free from the artificial restrictions of poetic art. 'My faith in poetry was at heart a faith in language as the elementary wisdom', she had written in 1976 ('*The Road To, In, And Away From, Poetry*', Reader 251). Her later writings attest to what she regarded as the truth-potential contained in language and in the human mind. She might be regarded as a spiritual teacher whose unusually high valuation of language led her to choose literature as the locus of her work.

Two entire issues of *Chelsea* were given over to new writings by her, *It Has Taken Long* (1976) and *The Sufficient Difference* (2001). Publication of her work has continued since her death in 1991, including *First Awakenings* (her early poems) (1992), *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words* (1997), *The Poems of Laura Riding, A Newly Revised Edition of the 1938/1980 Collection* (2001), and *Under The Mind's Watch* (2004). The most recent books to appear are *The Failure of Poetry, The Promise of Language* (2007), *On the Continuing of the Continuing* (2008), and two volumes of her collected autobiographical writings, published as *The Person I Am* (2011). Her works have been published in France, Germany, Spain, Denmark, Poland, and Brazil.

In Due Form

I do not doubt you.
I know you love me.
It is a fact of your indoor face,
A true fancy of your muscularity.
Your step is confident.
Your look is thorough.
Your stay-beside-me is a pillow
To roll over on
And sleep as on my own upon.

But make me a statement
In due form on endless foolscap
Witnessed before a notary
And sent by post, registered,
To be signed for on receipt
And opened under oath to believe;
An antique paper missing from my strong-box,
A bond to clutch when hail tortures the chimney
And lightning circles redder round the city,
And your brisk step and thorough look
Are gallant but uncircumstantial,
And not mentionable in a doom-book.

Laura Riding

The Poet's Corner

Here where the end of bone is no end of song
And the earth is bedecked with immortality
In what was poetry
And now is pride beside
And nationality,
Here is a battle with no bravery
But if the coward's tongue has gone
Swording his own lusty lung.
Listen if there is victory
Written into a library
Waving the books in banners
Soldierly at last, for the lines
Go marching on, delivered of the soul.

And happily may they rest beyond
Suspicion now, the incomprehensibles
Traitorous in such talking
As chattered over their countries' boundaries.
The graves are gardened and the whispering
Stops at the hedges, there is singing
Of it in the ranks, there is a hush
Where the ground has limits
And the rest is loveliness.

And loveliness?
Death has an understanding of it
Loyal to many flags
And is a silent ally of any country
Beset in its mortal heart
With immortal poetry.

Laura Riding

The Quids

The little quids, the million quids,
The everywhere, everything, always quids,
The atoms of the Monoton—
Each turned three essences where it stood
And ground a gisty dust from its neighbors' edges
Until a powdery thoughtfall stormed in and out,
The cerebration of a slippery quid enterprise.
Each quid stirred.
The united quids
Waved through a sinuous decision.

The quids, that had never done anything before
But be, be, be, be, be,
The quids resolved to predicate
And dissipate in a little grammar.
Oh, the Monoton didn't care,
For whatever they did—
The Monoton's contributing quids—
The Monoton would always remain the same.

A quid here and there gyrated in place-position,
While many essential quids turned inside-out
For the fun of it
And a few refused to be anything but
Simple, unpredicated copulatives.
Little by little, this commotion of quids,
By threes, by tens, by casual millions,
Squirring within the state of things—
The metaphysical acrobats,
The naked, immaterial quids—
Turned inside on themselves
And came out dressed,
Each similar quid of the inward same,
Each similar quid dressed in a different way—
The quid's idea of a holiday.

The quids could never tell what was happening.
But the Monoton felt itself differently the same
In its different parts.

The silly quids upon their rambling exercise
Never knew, could never tell
What their pleasure was about,
What their carnival was like,
Being in, being in, being always in
Where they never could get out
Of the everywhere, everything, always in,
To derive themselves from the Monoton.

But I know, with a quid inside of me,
But I know what a quid's disguise is like,
Being one myself,
The gymnastic device
That a quid puts on for exercise.

And so should the trees,
And so should the worms,
And so should you,
And all the other predicates,
And all the other accessories
Of the quid's masquerade.

Laura Riding

The Simple Line

The secrets of the mind convene splendidly,
Though the mind is meek.
To be aware inwardly
of brain and beauty
Is dark too recognizable.
Thought looking out on thought
Makes one an eye:
Which it shall be, both decide.
One is with the mind alone,
The other is with other thoughts gone
To be seen from afar and not known.

When openly these inmost sights
Flash and speak fully,
Each head at home shakes hopelessly
Of being never ready to see self
And sees a universe too soon.
The immense surmise swims round and round
And heads grow wise
With their own bigness beatified
In cosmos, and the idiot size
Of skulls spells Nature on the ground,
While ears listening the wrong way report
Echoes first and hear words before sounds
Because the mind, being quiet, seems late.
By ears words are copied into books,
By letters minds are taught self-ignorance.
From mouths spring forth vocabularies
To the assemblage of strange objects
Grown foreign to the faithful countryside
Of one king, poverty,
Of one line, humbleness.
Unavowed and false horizons claim pride
For spaces in the head
The native head sees outside.
The flood of wonder rushing from the eyes
Returns lesson by lesson.
The mind, shrunken of time,
Overflows too soon.

The complete vision is the same
As when the world-wideness began
Worlds to describe
The excessiveness of man.

But man's right portion rejects
The surplus in the whole.
This much, made secret first,
Now makes
The knowable, which was
Thought's previous flesh,
And gives instruction of substance to its intelligence
As far as flesh itself,
As bodies upon themselves to where
Understanding is the head
And the identity of breath and breathing are established
And the voice opening to cry: I know,
Closes around the entire declaration
With this evidence of immortality—
The total silence to say:
I am dead.

For death is all ugly, all lovely,
Forbids mysteries to make
Science of splendor, or any separate disclosing
Of beauty to the mind out of body's book
That page by page flutters a world in fragments,
Permits no scribbling in of more
Where spaces are,
Only to look.

Body as Body lies more than still.
The rest seems nothing and nothing is
If nothing need be.
But if need be,
Thought not divided anyway
Answers itself, thinking
All open and everything.
Dead is the mind that parted each head.
But now the secrets of the mind convene
Without pride, without pain
To any onlookers.

What they ordain alone
Cannot be known
The ordinary way of eyes and ears
But only prophesied
If an unnatural mind, refusing to divide,
Dies immediately
Of too plain beauty
Foreseen within too suddenly,
And lips break open of astonishment
Upon the living mouth and rehearse
Death, that seems a simple verse
And, of all ways to know,
Dead or alive, easiest.

Laura Riding

The World And I

This is not exactly what I mean
Any more than the sun is the sun.
But how to mean more closely
If the sun shines but approximately?
What a world of awkwardness!
What hostile implements of sense!
Perhaps this is as close a meaning
As perhaps becomes such knowing.
Else I think the world and I
Must live together as strangers and die—
A sour love, each doubtful whether
Was ever a thing to love the other.
No, better for both to be nearly sure
Each of each—exactly where
Exactly I and exactly the world
Fail to meet by a moment, and a word.

Laura Riding

With The Face

With the face goes a mirror
As with the mind a world.
Likeness tells the doubting eye
That strangeness is not strange.
At an early hour and knowledge
Identity not yet familiar
Looks back upon itself from later,
And seems itself.

To-day seems now.
With reality-to-be goes time.
With the mind goes a world.
With the heart goes a weather.
With the face goes a mirror
As with the body a fear.
Young self goes staring to the wall
Where dumb futurity speaks calm,
And between then and then
Forebeing grows of age.

The mirror mixes with the eye.
Soon will it be the very eye.
Soon will the eye that was
The very mirror be.
Death, the final image, will shine
Transparently not otherwise
Than as the dark sun described
With such faint brightnesses.

Laura Riding

Yes And No

Across a continent imaginary
Because it cannot be discovered now
Upon this fully apprehended planet—
No more applicants considered,
Alas, alas—

Ran an animal unzoological,
Without a fate, without a fact,
Its private history intact
Against the travesty
Of an anatomy.

Not visible not invisible,
Removed by dayless night,
Did it ever fly its ground
Out of fancy into light,
Into space to replace
Its unwritable decease?

Ah, the minutes twinkle in and out
And in and out come and go
One by one, none by none,
What we know, what we don't know.

Laura Riding