

“Hospitality to Words”:
Laura Riding’s American Inheritance and Inheritors

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Philip John Lansdell Rowland, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Abstract

This thesis situates the work of Laura Riding in an American tradition of “hospitality to words” extending from Emerson and Emily Dickinson through Gertrude Stein to John Ashbery and contemporary language-oriented writing. The theme is introduced in terms of her linguistic and spiritual ideal of home as a place of truthful speaking, related in turn to her identity as an American writer who renounced the craft of poetry in mid-career.

First, Riding’s poetry is “hospitable” in ways akin to Dickinson’s, broadly characterized by Riding’s term, “linguistic intimateness.” There are similarities in their word-conjunctions and styles of poetic argument, as well as their ideas of poetry as “house of possibility” and spiritual home. Riding’s work is then compared with that of her older friend of the late 1920s, Gertrude Stein. The chapter details the shift in Riding’s critical view of Stein; then focuses on the similarly “homely” characteristics of their prose writing and poetics, with particular reference made to Riding’s “Steinian” poems.

The central chapters clarify Riding’s conception of truth and related questions of authority, history and responsibility. Chapter 4 explains her poetic vision of “the end of the world” as the introduction to a new world and potentially a new home, and chapter 5 extends the account to include her post-poetic work, *The Telling* compared to her earlier, collaborative *The World and Ourselves*.

These concerns are then related to Riding’s poet-inheritors. Her acknowledged influence on John Ashbery is explained in terms of his “celebration” of the “failure” that Riding came to find in poetry; and the work of language-oriented writers including Carla Harryman and Lisa Samuels is shown to develop her critique of poetry’s truth-telling properties further. Finally, the thesis reflects on their thoroughly de-familiarizing “hospitality to words” in relation to the broader tradition described.

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Abbreviations

- A* *Anarchism Is Not Enough*
- CS* *Contemporaries and Snobs*
- FA* *First Awakenings: The Early Poems*
- PLR* *The Poems of Laura Riding*
- RA* *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words*
- SMP* *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*
- SP* *Selected Poems: In Five Sets*
- T* *The Telling*
- WO* *The World and Ourselves*
- WW* *The Word 'Woman' and Other Related Writings*

Chapter 1

Introduction

Few writers have insisted on the self-sufficiency of their work as strongly as Laura (Riding) Jackson—to the dismay of many an admiring critic. She considered any “purpose not to see [her] work as a whole” to be misleading, even “ill-willed,” and reportedly asked, in breaking off communication with the author of the first book on her work, why “interpretations and explanations were necessary at all. Were her words not good enough in themselves?”¹ As Christopher Norris has pointed out, this meant that for (Riding) Jackson “the only honest or answerable way of respecting her original intentions” was “*commentary*—and preferably detailed, line-for-line commentary.” “Argued *critique*,” on the other hand, would inevitably distort her “unique particularities of thought and style,” privileging the critic’s frame of reference over the precisely articulated body of work itself.² Accordingly, her response to criticism was almost invariably (and meticulously) corrective, and has justly been characterized as “a prevailing disapproval of anybody whose interest in or admiration for her writing is expressed in terms other than those which she herself condones.”³ Or as John Ashbery pithily puts it: “Laura Riding was what we would call today a ‘control freak.’”⁴ More to the point, she was “adamant about controlling her meanings” (Lisa Samuels) even if that meant exclusion from the canon and a marginal place in literary history.⁵ By suppressing her poems for several decades after the publication of the *Collected* in 1938, later allowing their re-presentation only on

¹ (Riding) Jackson’s words are from *FA*, xvi. Joyce Piell Wexler relates how (Riding) Jackson “broke communication with” her, upon reading a draft of her book, in *Laura Riding’s Pursuit of Truth* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1979), xii.

² Christopher Norris, “An Exchange: Laura (Riding) Jackson and Christopher C. Norris,” *Language and Style* 19, no. 2 (spring 1986): 211.

³ K.K. Ruthven, “How to avoid being canonized: Laura Riding,” *Textual Practice* 5, no. 2 (summer 1991): 253.

⁴ John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 101–2.

⁵ Lisa Samuels, *Poetic Arrest. Laura Riding, Wallace Stevens, and the Modernist Afterlife* (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1997). The quoted phrase is from a longer version of her dissertation abstract, available in 1999 on the Laura (Riding) Jackson homepage, <http://www.unc.edu/~ottotwo/partner.html>.

condition that she had “leave to tell why there are no more” (*SP*, 16), she deliberately contributed to their neglect.

Her career may thus be seen as something of a lesson in “how to avoid being canonized.” In 1991, the year of her death, more than fifty years after the publication of her *Collected Poems* and over a decade after their return to print, it still seemed, according to K.K. Ruthven, that there was “no Laura Riding industry in academic circles, nor even the prospect of one”—a state of affairs which cannot be explained only by her uncompromisingness.⁶ Over the past twenty years or so, this has begun to change, with a proliferation of essays on her work, two biographies, and the appearance of several long-out-of-print and previously unpublished books by (Riding) Jackson herself. But the scarcity of book-length studies of her work allows the impression that she is a “figure almost everybody connected with literary studies has heard of but nobody feels obliged to read” to linger yet.⁷ The reasons for this are complex, as Ruthven has explained,⁸ but have principally to do with (Riding) Jackson’s resistance (maintained posthumously by her Board of Literary Management) to her work’s being subsumed under categories such as “women’s poetry” and “feminist writing”; and with the tendency among critics to focus more on autobiographical aspects than close reading of her work. The lack of sustained academic interest may also, I would add, be due to unfashionably “adamant” characteristics of the writing itself. Its didactic tone is hard to miss, but I am thinking as much (and more positively) of the poems’ typically pared-down, tightly controlled style of argument, and concomitant density of thought—a paradoxically “difficult” straightforwardness.⁹

It might seem odd, then, to suggest that her work has much to do with “hospitality to words” (the title of one of her poems). “Hospitality” suggests inclusiveness and tolerance; welcome extended to friends and strangers alike. One

⁶ Ruthven, “How to avoid being canonized,” 253.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁸ See also Jo-Ann Wallace, “Laura Riding and the Politics of Decanonization,” *American Literature* 64, no. 1 (March 1992): 111–26.

⁹ Riding herself acknowledges this “difficulty,” but defends her poems against the charge of obscurity, claiming: “I begin every poem on the most elementary plane of understanding and proceed to the plane of poetic discovery (or uncovering) by steps which deflect the reader from false associations, false reasons for reading” (*PLR*, 484).

might sooner think of the “intellectual hospitality” found in Ashbery’s perhaps no less difficult but far more popular poetry, with its broad allusiveness, wide openness to interpretation, and generally affable, conversational tone.¹⁰ Wouldn’t (Riding) Jackson’s “adamant” stance and style confront the critic with a more daunting, inhospitable terrain?

Her work poses a particular challenge to critical assessment, as I shall later explain. But “hospitality” need not mean mere “accessibility” (nor, in Ashbery’s case, an equivalent, “one-size-fits-all” indeterminacy);¹¹ and besides, being hospitable *to words* suggests a more rigorous and austere intellectual enterprise: that of articulating or furnishing, however sparsely, the mind’s home. Hospitality also implies a host, who may be welcoming on her own terms, which may well prove (as was the case in Riding’s circle during the 1920s and 30s) too demanding for most. Nevertheless, one would expect home to be homely, a place of plain speaking, and (Riding) Jackson does argue for her poetry’s “expression-familiarity.” But she also makes a point of distinguishing it from “mere homeliness or simplicity of idiom”:

There is in my poems a very large degree of expression-familiarity. But the critical response to them was in the whole somewhat like the response to candour or confidingness when it is one-sided: while there is no law against such a thing in poetry, and even, ideally, expectation of it, the practice of it (of course I am talking of linguistic intimateness, not mere homeliness or simplicity of idiom) is an oddity, and mine excited much suspicion, considerable hostility, even some derision.¹²

Clearly, the “practice ... of linguistic intimateness” implies more truthfulness and gravity of purpose than “mere homeliness ... of idiom.” However, elsewhere in her post-poetic writing, as Joyce Piell Wexler has noted, (Riding) Jackson “uses the term ‘homely’ with approval”¹³—a notable instance being her claim, in *The Telling*, that “it is, indeed, a homely Subject: there has never been natural room for professionals, with *this* subject” (*T*, 64). Wexler seems to suggest that (Riding) Jackson’s “approval”

¹⁰ Geoff Ward mentions Ashbery’s “intellectual hospitality” in his preface to the second edition of *Statutes of Liberty: The New York School of Poets* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2001), ix.

¹¹ In a 1988 interview with John Tranter, Ashbery called “Soonest Mended” his “One Size Fits All Confessional Poem.” The transcript was published in *Jacket 2* (1998), <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/jaiv1988.html>.

¹² “An Autobiographical Summary,” *PN Review* 20, no. 5 (May–June 1994): 30. According to Elizabeth Friedmann’s introduction, “this ... was probably written in the mid-1960s.”

¹³ Wexler, *Laura Riding’s Pursuit of Truth*, 151.

of the term was something of a turning point in her thought; in fact, (Riding) Jackson had, several decades earlier, written approvingly of the “homeliness” through which woman “expresses her compulsion to wholeness: the whole is interior, is internal” (*WW*, 62-63). This sense of homeliness as characteristic of spiritual “wholeness,” which informs her poetic and post-poetic projects, epitomizes the “hospitality to words” to be explored in this thesis. But I shall also use the term to refer to the “merely” homely, which as well as describing often-overlooked aspects of (Riding) Jackson’s diction and style, may signify a falling-short of true “linguistic intimacy,” a deceptive homeliness of partial truths.

The poem, “Hospitality to Words,” concisely expresses this ambivalence:

The small the far away
 The unmeant meanings
 Of sincere conversation
 Encourage the common brain of talkers
 And steady the cup-handles on the table.
 Over the rims the drinking eyes
 Taste close congratulation
 And are satisfied.

Happy room, meal of securities.
 The fire distributes feelings,
 The cross-beam showers down centuries.
 How mad for friendliness
 Creep words from where they shiver and starve,
 Small and far away in thought,
 Untalkative and outcast.

(*PLR*, 70)

The scene described is homely—the conversation “sincere,” the “feelings” warmly “distribute[d]”—but the speaker sounds sceptical of the ease with which the “common brain of talkers” draws “encouragement” from “the unmeant meanings” of words (which are, accordingly, “mad for friendliness”). Drinking in the intoxicating spirit of conversation, the talkers’ “eyes / Taste close congratulation”: their vision too easily “satisfied,” minds too quick to accommodate “the unmeant meanings.” Meanwhile, words “themselves”—words which would more fully *mean*—still hunger, “Small and far away in thought / Untalkative and outcast.”

This less than “happy” conclusion does, however, imply a “hospitality to words” beyond that described: a distantly apprehended, as yet unrealized “home” of wholly meant meanings—of words rescued from their “outcast” condition. This

would be a place of truthful speech, as opposed to “talk” of the kind critiqued also (and at greater length) in “The Talking World,” towards the end of which Riding anticipates the speaking of those who yet “show the space where truth is, / Who are the place with the words identical” (*PLR*, 205). Soon after, however, she leaves off, claiming, “more of talk I cannot talk / Except I talk speak mingled” (206). In this way, only the promise of “speak mingled” hospitality to words is made, its realization rather imperiously withheld until such time as we are truly prepared to “listen”: “And you would then attend, / Nor complain that I speak solitary” (*ibid.*). Effectively, the question of whether poetry can fulfil that promise is left open. For (Riding) Jackson, this question—the problem intimated by poems such as these—was resolved by her “renunciation” of poetry in mid-career and subsequent practice of a plainer, more homely quality of speaking. Whether or not one agrees, her renunciation raises a crucial question of consistency, to which I shall now turn, before contextualizing my approach and giving a fuller presentation of my theme.

i. The Question of Consistency:

Riding’s Renunciation of Poetry and “American-brand Immediacy”

Born Laura Reichenthal in New York City in 1901, Laura (Riding) Jackson is still more widely known by the name she adopted officially in 1927 and used in most of her poetic, critical and fictional writing of the late twenties and thirties: Laura Riding.¹⁴ She had previously published as Laura Riding Gottschalk, acknowledging her first husband’s name, which was, however, inked over on the title page of her first collection of poems, *The Close Chaplet* (1926), following their divorce in 1925. The beginning of the post-poetic phase of her career coincided with her second marriage, in 1941, to Schuyler B. Jackson (himself a former poet), with whom she collaborated on what was to become their magnum opus, the posthumously published *Rational Meaning*. However, her career did not resume publicly until 1962, when she gave a reading of some of her poems, along with an explanation of her renunciation, for the BBC. From then on, she mostly used the authorial name Laura

¹⁴ Riding also used the pseudonyms Madeleine Vara and Barbara Rich; the former for some of her contributions to the journal she edited, *Epilogue* (1935–7); the latter for the novel she co-authored with Robert Graves, *No Decency Left* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932).

(Riding) Jackson, so giving a carefully qualified sense of her former poet-identity.¹⁵ Critics have tended to refer to her either as such or as Laura Riding, regardless of whether they are speaking of the poetry or her later work. As Carla Billitteri notes, “there is not yet a convention in place for referring to Riding/(Riding) Jackson by name when discussing all phases of her career.”¹⁶ An admirer of her stories, Harry Mathews, having “an intense and impersonal sense of allegiance,” avoids complication by referring to her simply as “Laura.”¹⁷ In this study, “Laura Riding” will predominate because I am concerned chiefly with her poetry and other work of that period. But for the sake of accuracy, and sometimes to avoid confusion, I shall speak of (Riding) Jackson when referring to the post-poetic writing specifically or to the whole extent of her work.

Whether Riding’s many name-changes “point,” as Ruthven suggests, “to the by now well-documented crisis posed for feminine subjectivity by masculine nomenclature,” or simply to a remarkable readiness to start over (to “wipe the slate clean”), they are characteristic of a career that was marked by turning points.¹⁸ These include, most notably, her move to England in 1926, which led to a thirteen-year, highly productive literary partnership with Robert Graves; and, upon her return to America and the demise of that relationship, her post-poetic attempt to build what she and Jackson came to call “a new foundation for the definition of words.” (The closely collaborative nature of these relationships may be seen as an outward manifestation of her “hospitable” approach to work.) The notorious circumstances surrounding these turning points have become the stuff of literary legend: Riding’s suicidal attempt to disentangle herself from her relationships with Graves, his wife Nancy Nicholson and Irish poet Geoffrey Phibbs, by falling from a high window of

¹⁵ Some of her published correspondence is signed “Laura Jackson” and she published as Laura Riding (Jackson) in *Art and Literature* 6 (Autumn 1965), which reprinted her story “A Last Lesson in Geography” along with a “Sequel of 1964.”

¹⁶ Carla Billitteri, *Language and the Renewal of Society in Walt Whitman, Laura (Riding) Jackson, and Charles Olson: The American Cratylus* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 165.

¹⁷ Harry Mathews, *Immeasurable Distances* (Venice, CA: The Lapis Press, 1991), 110.

¹⁸ Ruthven, “How to avoid being canonized,” 253. The phrase “wipe the slate clean” is from Robert Graves’s and Alan Hodges’ assessment of Riding in *The Long Week-end* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971; first pub. Faber and Faber, 1940). They write that Riding “wip[ed] her slate clean of literary and domestic affiliations with America” when she came to England in 1927, and that she did so “once again” upon returning to the U.S. and “surprisingly rediscover[ing] her American self” (196–197).

Graves's flat in 1929; and a decade later, her assumption of control over Schuyler Jackson's household, which led to his wife Katherine's nervous breakdown and hospitalization. Unsurprisingly, these episodes loom large in accounts of (Riding) Jackson's life, in biographies, memoirs, even novels: from her own *roman à clef*, *14A*, published in 1934, to Miranda Seymour's version of the "summer of '39," *The Telling*, published in 1999 (not to be confused with (Riding) Jackson's earlier work of that title).¹⁹

But the most significant change in the course of her writing itself was undoubtedly the decision, made around 1940, not to write or publish more poetry, on the grounds that it "obstructs general attainment to something better in our linguistic way-of-life than we have" (*SP*, 16).²⁰ This radical shift seems all the more remarkable in view of her prolific output and passionate commitment to poetry up to that point. As (Riding) Jackson acknowledges in the opening sentence of the preface to *Selected Poems: In Five Sets* (1970), the first instance of her allowing a large body of her poems to return to print: "My history as one who was for long a devout advocate of poetry, and then devoutly renounced allegiance to it as a profession and faith in it as an institution, raises a question of consistency" (11). Clearly this is where she would wish consideration of her work to begin, and it is important to note her immediate stress upon the notion that she *was* consistent in her "devoutness": an encompassing, indeed "religious" allegiance, in view of which her turning away from poetry may be seen as a step towards the further "uncovering of truth," rather than a "private-life" crisis, merely.²¹ From this perspective, the idea of the turning point

¹⁹ Miranda Seymour, *The Telling* (London: John Murray, 1998), published in the U.S. as *The Summer of '39* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999). The fullest, if hostile, first-hand account of that episode is in Tom Matthews's memoir, *Jacks or Better: A Narrative* (New York: Harper Collins, 1977), published in the UK as *Under the Influence: Recollections of Robert Graves, Laura Riding, and Friends* (London: Cassell, 1979). See also Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: 1927–1940, The Years with Laura* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1990). For accounts more sympathetic to Riding, see Elizabeth Friedmann, *A Mannered Grace: The Life of Laura (Riding) Jackson* (New York: Persea, 2005), 439–442, and James F. Mathias's review of *Under The Influence*: "The Dolt of Dionysus," *PN Review* 6, no. 6 (July–August 1980).

²⁰ Although she did not begin to explain her renunciation, in print, until much later (notably, in a BBC radio programme broadcast on April 1, 1962), according to (Riding) Jackson, her resolve was firm by 1941. See Elizabeth Friedmann, *A Mannered Grace*, 534. But as Friedmann notes, "the earliest surviving indications so far found of her changing view of the character of poetry are in letters she wrote to anthology editors in 1948 and 1950" (389).

²¹ (Riding) Jackson describes her former "devotion to poetry" as "religious" in her introduction to *The Poems of Laura Riding* (xxx). She writes of her "uncovering of truth" in the

may itself, paradoxically, be seen as emblematic of her extraordinary *commitment* to the project of truth-telling: “a movement which is at the same time a holding to a constant,” as John Nolan has suggested.²² Or, to shift the focus: it was poetry’s promise of “hospitality to words” which enabled both Riding’s faith in the genre and her abjuring it.

It is nonetheless tempting to characterize Riding’s poetic “silence” post-1938 as the tragic loss of an original poetic voice, due to her overreaching idealism. If, as John Crowe Ransom suggested with great prescience in 1924, Riding tried “to put more into poetry than it will bear,” it would seem that she was doomed to failure.²³ Indeed, if her suicide attempt of 1927 had not, astonishingly, failed, her career would have seemed to presage that of her friend Hart Crane, leaving her work perhaps as clearly in the *Romantic-Modernist* line. But to characterize her renunciation of poetry as a surrendering to the ineffable, or a mystical preference for silence, would be quite inaccurate.

Riding neither disowned her poems nor lost her voice. In fact, much of her post-poetic writing is given over to continuing critique (critique begun in her poems) of poetry, and she continued to rate them as “things of the first water as poetry” (*SP*, 16). Although she renounced the “craft” of poetry, its “creed” remained her central concern (*SP*, 11), her investment in language becoming all the more rigorously ethical. Riding’s claim, in the preface to *Collected Poems*, of adherence to the “right reasons” for “going to poetry” (*PLR*, 484) becomes in the post-poetic work a more egalitarian ideal of the good as truth available through speaking without recourse to the “wisdom-professions”—poetry counted among them. For “it, too,” she believes, “presupposes a silent laity! The virtue poetry has of conceiving itself as the voice of the laity is lost in the professionalism of the voicing” (*T*, 65).

“Original 1938 Preface”: “A poem is an uncovering of truth of so fundamental and general a kind that no other name except poetry is adequate except truth” (*PLR*, 484). In the preface to her *Selected Poems: In Five Sets* (1970), she notes: “Those who know my poems ... have for the most part (as the indications go) shrugged off my change of view of poetry as exhibiting an inconsistency so bizarre as to be explicable only in private-life terms” (*SP*, 492).

²² John Nolan, “‘That Being Be Well Spoken’: *The Telling* and After” (paper presented at the “Laura (Riding) Jackson and the Promise of Language” symposium, Cornell University, October 8-9, 1998).

²³ John Crowe Ransom, as quoted in Robert Graves, *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves*, ed. Paul O’Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 162.

This shift in her thought, which aligns it more closely with an Emersonian tradition of “self-reliance,” is anticipated by her conception of her work as poet. As (Riding) Jackson writes of *Anarchism is Not Enough* (originally published in 1929): it is “concerned with the placing of poetry, the poet, and centrally & most importantly, the nature of the person who seeks to treat of main things of being, in thought & expression from a position of self-reliance as against reliance upon definitions of things delivered from socially constructed or philosophically systematized frames of authority” (*A*, Appendix II, 261-2). If this bespeaks a characteristically American individualism and confidence in starting afresh, it is significant that (Riding) Jackson even came to see her relation to “the English tradition”—specifically, it was “the English poetic *ideal*” that interested her—in terms of her “American-brand immediacy.”²⁴ This “immediacy” is an ideal condition of being always, as she says of herself, “prompt in my responses of feeling, in the American manner of treating what is immediately there as personally immediate” (*PLR*, xliii)—a claim which may help clarify the title of the second group of poems assembled for the *Collected*: “Poems of Immediate Occasion.” But as in Emerson, such emphasis points beyond mere individualism (self-reliance as an end in itself) to community of human being. In *The Telling*, she entreats the reader: “Do *you* speak, and *you* . . . making our subject less mine, more yours . . . less yours, more ours. And we shall then be not merely as of the same room, but, in real meaning, of the same Subject, and Soul. I yearn, more than that I do better, that we do better” (*T*, 43). Lisa Samuels’s statement that Riding’s “version of individual authority is an absolute spiritual imperative, compared to which the more common Western ideology of personal liberty is a temporal shadow” (*A*, xxxi) is as true of *The Telling* as *Anarchism*.

For all her utopian yearning, there is, in (Riding) Jackson’s “testing of the possibilities of consistency” with respect to the “sacred poetic motive” (*SP*, 12), a more pragmatist “element of demystification.” This is shared with fellow American modernists Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens who, in the words of Jonathan

²⁴ See Laura (Riding) Jackson, “An Autobiographical Summary,” *PN Review* 20, no. 5 (May–June 1994): 33. Her interest in the English poetic ideal is reflected clearly in her first published critical essay, “A Prophecy or a Plea,” in which she embraces Francis Thompson’s idealism in particular. As worthy of note, however, is her reference to Whitman in support of her claim that true poets must exercise a “vigorous idealism” (*FA*, 278). Moreover, as Lisa Samuels points out in her introduction to *Anarchism is Not Enough*, “Emersonian self-reliance was not her only ideal; Whitmanesque contrariness was every bit as important” (*A*, xxxix).

Levin, “retain a strong conception of a sacred energizing spirit, even as they remain skeptical of the vocabularies, theological or otherwise, that would describe that spirit.”²⁵ Such scepticism—including (Riding) Jackson’s sense of the continual need for us to “do better”—corresponds with Emerson’s where, for instance, he writes:

A man’s wisdom is to know that all ends are momentary, that the best end must be superseded by a better. But there is a mischievous tendency in him to transfer his thought from the life to the ends, to quit his agency and rest in his acts: the tools run away with the workman, the human with the divine.²⁶

In a sense, this is precisely (Riding) Jackson’s point about poetry, in which, she claims with almost puritanical severity, “all effort is expended in problems of craft” at the expense of “the sacred poetic motive,” the “craft tying the hope to verbal rituals that court sensuousity as if it were the judge of truth” (*SP*, 12). She believes that this unavoidable tendency results in “the backing-away of poets of better-than-average conscience from extreme testing of the possibilities of consistency in the poet-rôle” (*ibid.*). The fuller implications of these claims will be explored in later chapters, but it should be clear from the start that it was the professionalism of poetry—the “total display” of which “crackles with mere “craft-individualism”—that Riding came to repudiate, not the integrity of the original “poetic motive” or the “truth-potentiality of words” themselves (*PLR*, xxxii).

Nevertheless, the notion of “failure” will recur in this study, not only with respect to poetry’s failing her, but also with respect to her more positive claim that an “original poem” is “a model, to the reader, of constructive dissociation: an incentive not to response but to initiative” (*A*, 114). This is seen to entail, crucially, the idea of the pursuit of truth as *necessary* failure insofar as no “static, perfected, final object” can be produced.²⁷ While my main focus is on Riding’s poems, I also aim to show that they warrant consideration in light of her later work—that the poems themselves call to be read under the sign of their “failure.” In exploring this

²⁵ Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, & American Literary Modernism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 14. The phrase “a strong element of demystification” is also Levin’s.

²⁶ *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry*, Joel Porte and Sandra Morris, eds. (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2001), 87.

²⁷ Here I am echoing Lisa Samuels, who points out that “the paradoxical status of the pursuit of truth and the writing of poetry as processes that lead necessarily to failure—since neither produces a static, perfected, final *object*—is noted in many nonstandard modernist critical texts” (*A*, li, emphasis elided). Gertrude Stein’s “Composition as Explanation” (which Riding would have read) and William Carlos Williams’s prologue to *Kora in Hell* are noted as examples (lxx).

hypothesis, I make a case for a tradition of “hospitality to words” extending from Emily Dickinson, through Gertrude Stein, to John Ashbery and poets associated with or influenced by Language poetry. My consideration of her work in this American, broadly speaking modernist line is contextualized by the central chapters of the thesis (4 and 5), in which Riding’s conception of truth and related questions of authority, history and responsibility are considered more on her own terms. For all the “American-brand immediacy” of her work, and in view of the fact that she “was, indeed, an American poet,” ultimately her “sense of the further” implies “the leaving-behind of the uncertainties of particular or composite identity.”²⁸ But before introducing this idea of home (as identity transcending “the uncertainties”) more fully, my approach needs situating in relation to the broader critical reception of her work.

ii. The Critical Reception of Riding’s Work: An Overview

The 1970 *Selected* appeared under the prestigious auspices of Faber and Faber, and since then the revival of interest in Laura Riding has been slow but sure. Her inclusion in *Poems for the Millennium*, *World Poetry*, *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, *The Harvill Book of Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* and *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* indicates growing mainstream recognition of her poems, particularly after her death in 1991.²⁹ As for her writings in prose, recent years have seen the first publication of

²⁸ Note also her concluding remark on being “indeed, an American poet”: “None of this spells me as American, but neither does it spell me as non-American.” For these remarks, see *PLR*, xliii. Carla Billitteri puts (Riding) Jackson’s qualified assertion of her Americanness helpfully in perspective: “The Americanness so prominent in Whitman’s project becomes attenuated in (Riding) Jackson’s, while retaining its rhetorical force as a reminder of the desire for a more perfect society. To achieve this society no longer requires a specifically American language, but language is still the essential element.” See Billitteri, *Language and the Renewal of Society*, 114. (Riding) Jackson’s comment on her “sense of the further” appears on the back cover of the paperback edition of *The Poems of Laura Riding* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986).

²⁹ *Poems for the Millennium*, vol. 1, ed. Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris (Berkeley, LA and London: University of California Press, 1995) includes “Elegy in a Spider’s Web.” Rothenberg presented a more substantial selection of Riding’s poems in his earlier anthology *Revolution of the Word: A New Gathering of American Avant-Garde Poetry 1914-45* (Boston: Exact Change, 1974). The fourth edition of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, Jon Stallworthy (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1996) includes “The Wind Suffers” and “Ding-Donging.” *World Poetry*, ed. Katharine Washburn, et al. (New York and London: Norton, 1998) includes the early poem “Summary for Alastor.” *The Harvill Book of Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (London: Harvill Press, 1999), edited by Michael Schmidt, the publisher of Riding’s work at Carcanet Press, includes eight of Riding’s poems. Cary Nelson’s *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (New York and Oxford:

her post-poetic magnum opus, *Rational Meaning*; several books of previously uncollected or unpublished essays, including *The Failure of Poetry*, *The Promise of Language*; her two-volume literary memoirs, *The Person I Am*; as well as the long-overdue republication of *Anarchism is not Enough*, selected *Essays from 'Epilogue' 1935-1937*, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, and *Contemporaries and Snobs*.³⁰ While her work, poetic and other, is not nearly as widely recognized as that of other “pioneering modernists,”³¹ the variety of appraisal it has received is striking. The fact that she wrote “in ways antithetical to institutional projects” seems to have left her work open to diverse classification.³² Or as (Riding) Jackson puts it, laconically: “I have had, I have, queer things said of me” (*PLR*, xliii), citing Allen Tate’s description of her as “an ‘international’ poet who ‘happens to write in English.’” Other claims she would have considered “queer” include Kenneth Rexroth’s view of her as a great neglected modernist akin to the French “Cubist” poet Pierre Reverdy, in effecting a “revolution . . . aimed at the syntax of the mind itself,” and W.H. Auden’s similarly grand description of her as the “only living philosophical poet.” Others since have suggested kinship with Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Derrida.³³ Robert Graves described her as “a perfect original,” and

Oxford University Press, 2000), includes Riding’s “Elegy in a Spider’s Web,” “Helen’s Burning” and “The Wind Suffers.”

³⁰ *The Failure of Poetry*, *The Promise of Language*, ed. John Nolan (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007); *The Person I Am: The Literary Memoirs of Laura (Riding) Jackson* (in two volumes) ed. John Nolan and Carroll Ann Friedmann (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2011). *Essays from 'Epilogue' 1935-1937*, ed. Mark Jacobs (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001); *A Survey of Modernist Poetry and A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, ed. Charles Mundy and Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002); *Contemporaries and Snobs*, ed. Laura Heffernan and Jane Malcolm (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2014).

³¹ In concluding her essay on “Laura Riding’s Essentialism,” Susan M. Schultz suggests that “new readings of Riding’s poetry (of which there are now many) should restore her work to its rightful place among that of the pioneering modernists, Eliot, Pound, Crane, Moore, and others.” Susan M. Schultz, *A Poetics of Impasse in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), 77–78.

³² Lisa Samuels, *Poetic Arrest. Laura Riding, Wallace Stevens, and the Modernist Afterlife* (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1997): dissertation abstract, longer version (as note 5).

³³ Kenneth Rexroth, “The Cubist Poetry of Pierre Reverdy,” in *World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth*, ed. Bradford Morrow (New York: New Directions, 1987), 253. Rexroth goes on to make a useful distinction: the “restructuring of experience” in Riding and Reverdy is purposive not dreamlike, and hence it possesses an uncanniness fundamentally different in kind from the most haunted utterances of the Surrealist or Symbolist unconscious” (*ibid.*). Riding comments on Auden’s description of her in the preface to her *Collected Poems* (*PLR*, 487). Harry Mathews suggests that Riding and Nietzsche share the “longing to purify language to make it fit for

a younger English poet for whom she was a mentor, Robert Nye, has praised her poetry as quite simply “unmatched in English literature.” Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, called her “a damned bad poet.” W.B. Yeats’s criticism of “her school” as “too thoughtful, reasonable and truthful” typifies a kinder, if condescending, view of her as naïve.³⁴ By contrast, leading Language poets have claimed her as precursor, and America’s best-known poet of radical scepticism, John Ashbery, has acknowledged Riding as one of the “three writers who most formed my language as a poet” (along with “the early Auden” and Wallace Stevens).³⁵

Within this rather bewildering range of reception, three main “schools” can be distinguished. The first takes an Anglo-centric view of her importance, foregrounding her association with Graves. The second consists largely of (Riding) Jackson’s closest friends at the time of her death in 1991, including former members of her Board of Literary Management (which ceased to exist in 2010, its responsibilities being passed to Cornell University).³⁶ Their commentary has tended to be less critical than corrective, especially of the distortions of criticism biased towards Graves. The third school of (Riding) Jackson criticism is more American-oriented, and unafraid to read her “against the grain,” as Charles Bernstein put it to

truth-telling”; see *Immeasurable Distances* (Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1991), 111. Lisa Samuels suggests that Riding, like Wittgenstein, “is involved in a continuous search for the means of truth” and “combines sober earnestness of purpose with mercurial and sometimes playful language” (4, li). Julia Fiedorczuk, in “A Home of Words: Laura (Riding) Jackson’s *The Telling*,” finds kinship between *The Telling* and Derrida’s “late writings, focused on ethics.” See the Nottingham Trent University Laura (Riding) Jackson website, http://www.ntu.ac.uk/laura_riding/scholars/117612gp.html.

³⁴ Graves’s assessment of Riding appears in *The Long Week-end*, 196–7. For Robert Nye’s comment, see his “Letter to a Professor of English,” *PN Review* 17, no. 4 (March–April, 1991): 58. For Woolf’s, see *A Reflection of the Other Person: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, 1929–1931*, vol. 4 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1983): 329. As Deborah Baker points out, “Woolf’s remarks are made all the more unfortunate by the fact that she had published two volumes of Riding’s poetry” (*In Extremis*, 171). The Yeats quotation is from *Letters on Poetry from W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley* (Oxford University Press, 1940), 69.

³⁵ See John Bernard Myers, ed., *The Poets of the New York School* (Philadelphia: Graduate School of Fine Arts, 1969), 29. For Ashbery’s later thoughts on her influence, see chapter 6. Among leading Language poets, Charles Bernstein has taken a particular interest in (Riding) Jackson, the earliest sign of which is his essay, “The Telling,” dating from 1977, collected in *Content’s Dream* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), 340–42. On the basis of which, Jerome McGann suggests that Bernstein, “who stands at the center of so much contemporary experimentalism, has clearly accepted the terms in which Riding set the problem of poetry” (*Black Riders*, 135).

³⁶ In 2007, the members of the Laura (Riding) Jackson Board of Literary Management were: Alan J. Clark, Elizabeth Friedmann, William Harmon, Mark Jacobs, Robert Nye, James Tyler, Joan Wilentz and John Nolan. See editor Nolan’s acknowledgments in Laura (Riding) Jackson, *The Failure of Poetry, The Promise of Language*, vii.

participants at the Laura (Riding) Jackson Symposium held at Cornell University in 1998.³⁷ These critics tend to foreground Riding's modernist preoccupation with the word as such, reading her work also as stimulus to experiment in writing of their own. (Many in this group are themselves poets.)

The approach of the first school tends to be based upon a selective reading of her earlier work, fastening upon her and Graves's impatience with some of the work discussed in their *Survey of Modernist Poetry*, as well as that book's influence on William Empson's and New Critical procedures of close reading. This approach tends to lead to Riding's being depicted as a significant, if eccentric, *anti*-modernist—a characterization that has perhaps more to do with Graves. However, the tendency simply to diminish her importance has been more typical. Empson's failure to acknowledge Riding as co-author of *A Survey* in the preface to the first edition of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is a famous case in point, and in the foreword to *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, Riding and Graves list seven newspapers and journals in which the authorship of the *Survey* was attributed to Graves alone.³⁸ The assumption that she is "the less important poet" has often been taken for granted; and a patronizing, "upper-notch" bias (to borrow an epithet Riding (Jackson) applies to Graves) is sometimes apparent: from lamentably dismissive, off-the-mark journalistic comments such as Patrick French's description of her as a writer of "ornate mythological poetry and dippy essays," to Anthony Thwaite's treatment of her work solely by way of contrast with Graves's (and its masculine, "English" virtues), in *Contemporary English Poetry: An Introduction*. There he claims: "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."³⁹ Graves-oriented

³⁷ Bernstein's introduction to *Rational Meaning* is a case in point, where he goes "against the grain of a work that insists that its contribution is precisely its non-comparability" (*RM*, x).

³⁸ Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), 7–8; also: *A Survey of Modernist Poetry and A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (2002), 155. Elizabeth Friedmann states that Empson "forgot" to acknowledge Riding a co-author of *A Survey*, but John Haffenden's biography of Empson shows that the latter's acknowledgement of Graves alone may well have been intentional, in light of Empson's later claims that certain passages in Graves's pre-*Survey* critical writings initially inspired his thoughts on ambiguity. Unfortunately, Empson did not clarify his reasons for not acknowledging Riding until the 1970s, by which time a bitter correspondence between the two had already been initiated by Riding. See Haffenden, *William Empson Volume I: Among the Mandarins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 216–29.

³⁹ (Riding) Jackson refers to "the Graves order of upper-notch Anglo-Saxon romanticism" in her foreword to *The Word 'Woman'* (13). Patrick French's description of Riding is from his review

approaches tend to ignore the post-poetic work and focus on her relationships with and influence on those writers (mostly British, mostly male) with whom she associated during the late 1920s and 30's, some of whom contributed, under her close editorship, to the journal *Epilogue*: James Reeves, Norman Cameron, Harry Kemp, and of course Graves among them. The case for such influence rests largely upon biographical accounts of her personal magnetism and sway over some of these poets collaboratively and personally, while more specific attention may be directed to Ridingsque cadence and concision in the poems. Graves's image of "the strong pull of her bladed mind," in his poem "Of Portents," neatly suggests these emphases; and many of the poems by other contributors to *Epilogue* bear witness to it.⁴⁰ While, as Mark Jacobs and Alan Clark suggested in 1976, "it has long been recognized that some of the best-known authors in this century have used as source material the inspirational work of Laura (Riding) Jackson," such recognition has probably not been broad enough:

There is, however, a tendency—generally an incorrect one—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 recovered. Names such as W.H. Auden, Robert Graves, James Reeves and Roy Fuller spring to mind. Further, a host of minor and not so minor writers today, taking their lead from Mr. Graves' mythologizing in *The White Goddess*, fail to realize that that book takes its direction from Laura (Riding) Jackson's work, its detailed thesis being a distorted expansion of her primary thought on the subject of woman's nature, and woman as seen from the male viewpoint; these writers also may be said to be 'influenced'.⁴¹

The Graves-oriented school of Riding criticism clearly has some biographical basis, but its narrow range of reference and patriarchal tendencies are limiting. For instance, the most likely explanation for the misguided characterization of Riding's poetry as "ornate and mythological" is Graves's "mythologizing" in *The White*

of Miranda Seymour's biography of Graves in the *Independent Weekend* newspaper, July 8, 1995. See also Anthony Thwaite, *Contemporary English Poetry: An Introduction* (Heinemann, 1959, reissued 1964), quoted and critiqued by Jacobs and Clark in "The Question of Bias: Some Treatments of Laura (Riding) Jackson," *Hiroshima Studies in English Language and Literature*, vol. 21 (1976), online at the Nottingham Trent University website, http://www.ntu.ac.uk/laura_riding/scholars/58471gp.html.

⁴⁰ A good example is John Cullen's poem, "Sun and Story," which appeared in *Epilogue* I (page 9) and bears some striking points of resemblances to Riding's poetry—her "With the Face" most noticeably. Cullen came to *Epilogue* through Jacob Bronowski (who was part of Riding's and Graves's circle in Mallorca during the early thirties), having been a contributor to Bronowski's magazine *Experiment* (1928–31).

⁴¹ Jacobs and Clark, "The Question of Bias" (as note 39).

Goddess, which, in (Riding) Jackson's view, "exploited my thought and writing on the subject of women most massively and concentratedly ... [with] great padding of mythological and ethnological lore" (*WW*, 10-11). If anything, Riding's poetry seems spare, austere, stripped down to essentials, in comparison with Graves's (or indeed, many of her contemporaries); and when, in her *Collected Poems*, she categorizes some of her earlier poems as of "mythical occasion," she uses the word "mythical" in a sense that has more to do with "postponement of self" in the past (to borrow the title of a poem from that section) than myths or legends. Besides, one could argue that biographically there is as good a case for considering Riding's association with Gertrude Stein as with the less adventurous poets of the Riding-Graves "school." The assumption that personal relationship necessarily results in a more significant degree of influence or stimulus is itself questionable: poets influenced by her writing alone may never have been personally put off by what many of those who met her perceived as her "disagreeable arrogance."⁴² But perhaps the most serious problem with confining consideration of her work to a purported school of Riding and Graves is the failure to address what Jerome McGann calls the "challenge of Laura (Riding) Jackson"—a failure in view of which, he argues, contemporary writers "risk being seen—not least of all by themselves—as trivial, attendant lords and ladies."⁴³

The second "school" of (Riding) Jackson criticism tends to be corrective of the first: it emphasizes that her poems are quite clearly distinguishable from Graves's, makes large claims for her importance, and aims to expose the bias and inaccuracies in mistaken or ill-intentioned treatments of her life and work. In the British contingent, Jacobs, Clark and Michael Kirkham have made major contributions, giving detailed accounts of Graves's debt to her work and drawing attention to inconsistencies in other critics' accounts of it—matters largely beyond the scope of this study, although certain aspects of Riding's and Graves's collaborations will be taken into account. Of particular importance are Jacobs's and Clark's article, "The Question of Bias: Some Treatments of Laura (Riding) Jackson," and Kirkham's essays on "Robert Graves's Debt to Laura Riding" and "Laura Riding's Poems."⁴⁴

⁴² Julian Symons (speaking from experience) in his review of Joyce Piell Wexler's book *Laura Riding's Pursuit of Truth*, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, July 25, 1980: 825.

⁴³ Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 134.

The Laura (Riding) Jackson Archive at Nottingham Trent University, established several years ago by Mark Jacobs, is a growing, online resource, featuring essays by scholars sympathetic to her work. Among the Americans, Sonia Raiziss (who featured large parts of (Riding) Jackson's work in the magazine *Chelsea*), William Harmon (editor of *Rational Meaning*) and Elizabeth Friedmann (co-editor of the early poems of Laura Riding and authorized biographer) have been significant proponents of (Riding) Jackson's intentions. (Given those intentions, vis-à-vis her renunciation of poetry, it is hardly surprising that few of these commentators are poets.) As members of her Board of Literary Management, one of their main aims was to ensure that any republication of her poetry included the acknowledgement that (Riding) Jackson "renounced, on grounds of linguistic principle, the writing of poetry: she had come to hold that 'poetry obstructs general attainment to something better in our linguistic way-of-life than we have.'"⁴⁵

Also worthy of note is the way in which (Riding) Jackson's diction is echoed in the commentary of some of these critics. For instance, when we read in Mark Jacobs's "centennial preface" to *The Poems of Laura Riding* that "it became clear to her that the practice of poetry is fundamentally misleading, a fundamental mistake, in the ever-persistent and pressing human endeavour to arrive at a complete state of knowledge of human existence within the entirety of being called 'the universe,'" it would be easy to believe that (Riding) Jackson herself was being quoted (*PLR*, xviii). Similarly, his and Clark's readings of her poems are exemplary of the method recommended by Riding and Graves in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, where they suggest that "to smoke out the meaning" of a poem that "really does mean what it says" (Riding's "The Rugged Black of Anger" being given as an example), "all we can do is let it interpret itself, without introducing any new associations or, if possible, any new words" (*SMP*, 147). Consider Jacobs's and Clark's commentary on these lines from "How Blind and Bright" (*PLR*, 11): "Eyes looking out for eyes / Meet only seeing, in common faith, / Visibility and brightness." Hardly even venturing into paraphrase, they explain: "The visibility which the sun gives, here, is thought of

⁴⁴ Michael Kirkham, "Robert Graves's Debt to Laura Riding," *Focus on Robert Graves*, no. 3 (December 1973); "Laura Riding's Poems," *Cambridge Quarterly* 5, no. 3 (spring 1971): 302–308.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, *The Harvill Book of Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (London: Harvill Press, 1999), 727.

as directing the vision of man outwards to what is visible to the eyes, so that what is seen is only other eyes, seeing similarly and meeting ‘in common faith’.”⁴⁶ This is not to denigrate their just emphasis upon “the profound sense ... behind” many of her poems, that she really “*means* what she says,” nor to suggest that she was an entirely naive “believer in the metaphysics of presence.”⁴⁷ My purpose is rather to indicate the challenge posed by her poetry for explication of the sort that Jacobs and Clark attempt, as well as their high regard for the post-poetic writing.

The third field of view upon Riding’s work is more American in orientation. Poet-critics and theorists including John Ashbery, Charles Bernstein, Barrett Watten, Lisa Samuels, and Susan M. Schultz, have claimed profound interest in or affinity with (Riding) Jackson’s poetics and post-poetic writing, without granting as much authority to her belief that the practice of poetry is a “fundamental mistake.” These writers tend to focus on her modernist and proto-postmodernist exploration of the possibilities of “literal” truth-telling. In *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism*, Jerome McGann describes how, “in the contemporary poetry scene, poetry is once again placed at the center of language by an argument that has constructed a theory and practice of ‘poetry’ out of key elements of Riding’s ideal of ‘prose.’”

The argument grounds itself in an understanding of language as the practice of the forms of arbitrary signification. All aspects of language (or writing) are materialized ... Indeed, author and audience are themselves exposed as functions of language, coded beings and sets of activities. When “poetry” is seen as the linguistic mode that calls attention to the activities of these codes, its truth-telling power appears in a new way. The physique and apparitions of poetry do not become, as they were for Riding, truth’s obstacles and distractions. They become, rather, truth’s own “tellings” and eventualities.⁴⁸

The implication is that Riding, despite having “exposed” the apparitional “truth” of poetry in poetic practice, confined herself in terms of her “argument” to the dominant cultural and historical conception of poetry, tied to the trappings of “verse.” Later in this study I consider some examples of contemporary poets who have pursued the avenues that (Riding) Jackson opened up. McGann’s argument provides a useful starting point in “recover[ing] Riding as one of the founders of a

⁴⁶ Jacobs and Clark, “The Question of Bias” (as note 39).

⁴⁷ Jenny Turner writes that “Riding the poet had been a true believer in what Derrideans call ‘the metaphysics of presence’” in her review of Deborah Baker’s biography of Riding, *In Extremis*, in the *London Review of Books* (March 10, 1994): 7.

⁴⁸ McGann, *Black Riders*, 140.

tradition that is only now coming to the fore, one whose proponents include John Ashbery and Language poets, all of whom—like her—relinquish the muse.”⁴⁹

iii. *The Scope of the Thesis*

In effect, this thesis mediates the views of the second and third schools of criticism described above, but a caveat as to scope also needs stating. The chapters that follow are not meant to provide a comprehensive overview of Laura Riding’s work—what she calls “an exegetical stock-taking” (*FA*, xv)—but aim to engage with it more closely, in ways that will, it is hoped, help illuminate the whole. Some parts of her corpus that might seem to invite scholarly research are left relatively unexplored. Few references are made, for instance, to her second major post-poetic work, the lengthy, posthumously published *Rational Meaning*, coauthored by her husband, Schuyler Jackson. As well as being unmanageably large (for a thesis of this scope), it was unpublished when the poet-inheritors that I want to consider were writing their seminal works. *The Telling*, on the other hand, was pivotal for Riding’s readership in that it introduced the range and style of her post-poetic project, while uniting her thought up to that point; as well as being that which, in (Riding) Jackson’s view, “breaks the spell of poetry” (*SP*, 15). As Charles Bernstein puts it in his introduction to *Rational Meaning*, *The Telling* is not only “Laura (Riding) Jackson’s great philosophical work on the limits of poetry and the possibility for truth-telling,” it is also, helpfully, more “evocative and concise” (*RM*, xvii). I also concur with Michael Schmidt’s view of *The Telling* as “the end of her poetic *oeuvre*”—given, as is the case in this study, that our concerns are confined “primarily to the theme of poetry, its limitations and renunciation.”⁵⁰ In (Riding) Jackson’s own words, *The Telling* “is descended from” her renunciation of poetry (*T*, 66).

At the other end of her work’s trajectory, a book that may seem to receive scant attention here is *First Awakenings: The Early Poems*. While several of these very early poems are discussed in some detail in chapter 4, my principal focus is on the more mature body of poetry collected in *The Poems of Laura Riding* (2001): a corrected version of the 1980 edition which was, itself, the first reissue of the original *Collected*

⁴⁹ Susan M. Schultz, *A Poetics of Impasse*, 78.

⁵⁰ *The Telling* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2005), ix.

Poems of 1938—the poems that (Riding) Jackson saw as “comprehensively defin[ing] ... the essential sense and spirit of the work” (*FA*, xv). In this respect, my approach is in line with (Riding) Jackson’s intention, granting that the “progressive consistency” of the *Collected Poems* is of greater significance than “critical historicizing,” as she puts it, “over poetic texts ... excluded from the collected representation of my progression ... with particularistic dwelling on revisions, verbally minor, incidental or quantitatively substantial, with intent of ‘research’ for historical tracing of my work’s development” (*ibid*). To try to get at the “essential sense” of the work also seems fitting in view of the likelihood that her poems are still more widely known for their “difficulty” than their clarity, coherence or “consistency.” Several examples of Riding’s revisions and omissions will be given, and it is important to note that she was careful to omit “those poems which seemed to fall outside the story” of “the development of [her] poetic activity” (*PLR*, 491). But my aim is more to draw attention to what (Riding) Jackson calls the “on-and-on sense-clarification” (*FA*, xv) of the poems she chose to collect, in the belief that they are so consistently concerned with their own “creed” as to call the point of a reductive “stock-taking” startlingly into question.⁵¹ I dwell especially on the poems in which she explores the bounds of poetic possibility—those that anticipate her renunciation of poetry. These tend, as (Riding) Jackson points out in “Excerpts From A Recording (1972), Explaining the Poems,” to have been written “past the half-way mark, historically, in my poems, and up to a last phase,” and are placed mainly among “Poems of Final Occasion” and “Poems Continual.” In these poems, she says, “I am much preoccupied to make personally explicit the identity of myself poet and myself one moved to try to speak with voiced consciousness of the linguistic and human unities of speaking,” adding, “I am restive insofar as this [latter] identity is only an implicit principle in my poetic speaking” (*PLR*, 496). Close attention will be paid to the poems in which this “restiveness,” or “straining of effort to achieve compatibility” between “creed and craft” is apparent (*PLR*, 493). My decision to use *The Poems of Laura Riding* as my primary source, rather than the original poem-collections published between 1926 and 1935, reflects my tendency to

⁵¹ (Riding) Jackson speaks of the “division between” the “creed and craft” of poetry in *SP*, 12–13. She explains the “mistakenness of a historicizing, an exegetical stock-taking of my poetic writing in its documentary bulk” in *FA*, xv.

read them with an eye not only to their “progressive consistency,” as (Riding) Jackson recommends, but also to points of continuity with her post-poetic work. Moreover, the *Collected Poems, Selected Poems: In Five Sets* and *Poems of Laura Riding* have been by far the most widely available volumes of Riding’s poetry, not least for the “inheritors” discussed in later chapters of this thesis.

These tactics of seeming exclusion make it possible to harness the wide range of work referred to in the comparative sections of this study, while my focus on the poems of Riding’s that explore the boundaries of her project should also serve to highlight her contribution to *innovation* in modern American poetry. She is still perhaps best known as Graves’s “first muse,” and for her expatriate years in Europe.⁵² But as (Riding) Jackson reminds us, she was “indeed, an American poet,” one who even came to see “Americans as having had fall to them a responsibility . . . to define human nature” (*T*, 74)—a claim which recalls Auden’s provocative suggestion, in his essay on “American Poetry,” that “to some degree every American poet feels that the whole responsibility for contemporary poetry has fallen upon his shoulders, that he is a literary aristocracy of one.”⁵³ That (Riding) Jackson felt such a weight of responsibility is borne out by her belief that “no poet before me has gone to the very breaking-point . . . in extreme testing of the possibilities of consistency in the poet-role” (*SP*, 12), a claim which would necessarily diminish the value of finding connections with work of different style and scope. According to Wexler, “apparently no one—except her husband—has contributed to her knowledge of human selfhood,”⁵⁴ and John Ashbery, having once been “taken to task” for stating that he had been influenced by her, reflects that he is at least “in good company” in that respect.⁵⁵ More seriously, he acknowledges that while “it is every poet’s dream

⁵² According to Elizabeth Friedmann, Randall Jarrell was “the first to expound [the] theory” that Riding was Graves’s first muse (“the White Goddess incarnate, the Mother-Muse in contemporary flesh”) in *Yale Review* 45 (1956). See Friedmann, *A Mannered Grace*, 404.

⁵³ W.H. Auden, *The Dyer’s Hand* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 366. For a fuller account of (Riding) Jackson’s view of the Americans and the English “in relation to the comprehensive ‘ourselves’ to which [*The Telling*] is addressed,” see *The Telling*, 73–75.

⁵⁴ Wexler, *Laura Riding’s Pursuit of Truth*, 155.

⁵⁵ Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 117.

for his or her own words to supplant possible criticism, poetry being in itself a kind of criticism,” this is “never more so than in the case of Laura Riding.”⁵⁶

Accordingly, the question of her work’s extraordinary resistance to “critical application” (and I am referring less to (Riding) Jackson’s protestations than to the “consistency” of the work itself) seems a suitable place to begin to redress a state of affairs where it may well seem that “literary criticism does not yet have a vocabulary in which to conceptualise the peculiar sorts and patternings . . . to which [(Riding) Jackson’s] life and work give shape.”⁵⁷ Consideration of this challenge, in what follows, will also help to further introduce the “homely” orientation of her work and the closely related theme of “hospitality to words.”

iv. Homeliness and the Idea of Home

Many commentators have pointed up the critical difficulty of dealing with work that coheres—or “stimms,” to borrow Riding and Graves’s more expressive word—as much as hers.⁵⁸ As Robert Nye has said, with bolder emphasis: “Of all the writers I can think of, Laura Riding’s work is without doubt the least suitable to this kind of reduction. Her poems are one poem . . . [Her] genius is a whole, poems and prose . . . A single identity of utterance.”⁵⁹ Paul Auster also finds that “her poems ask to be read not as isolated lyrics, but as interconnecting parts of an enormous poetic project,” while Kenneth Rexroth goes so far as to claim that “the discoveries of Laura Riding’s subtle ear escape analysis.”⁶⁰ We also have, of course, the counsel of (Riding) Jackson herself—admonishing, in this instance (her preface to *First*

⁵⁶ Ibid, 105.

⁵⁷ Jenny Turner, “Laurophobia,” *The London Review of Books* (March 10, 1994): 7–8.

⁵⁸ Riding and Graves, *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), 122.

⁵⁹ Robert Nye, “Letter to a Professor of English,” 57.

⁶⁰ Paul Auster, “Truth, Beauty, Silence,” in *Groundwork* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 138. Kenneth Rexroth’s comment is quoted on the back cover of the Persea edition of Riding’s *Selected Poems: In Five Sets*. See also *A Rexroth Reader*, ed. Eric Mottram (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972). A paper that was to be presented by Michael Kirkham at the “Laura (Riding) Jackson and the Promise of Language” symposium, 1998, is also worthy of note, for its title suggests that he would go so far as to propose “The Impossibility of Interpretation” of her poetry.

Awakenings: The Early Poems), Joyce Piell Wexler's "ill-willed purpose not to see the work as a whole," and cautioning:

Not even good-willed purpose to see in the whole could be safe from going astray in the ramifications of exegetically thorough attention either to my *Collected Poems* as a body of poetic particularities, the mastering of them expected to be generally illuminating critically and personally, or to the composite bulk of both units of quantity arbitrarily construed as constituting my poetic work in the whole. (*FA*, xvi)

I take issue with some of Wexler's and others' "personal readings, especially distorted for critical application" (*FA*, xvi) in chapter 4, but clearly some preliminary thought, as to how to do justice to the unusually integrated character of her poetic project, is warranted.

(Riding) Jackson's use of the word "mastering," in the quotation above, is particularly significant. It refers back to "possibilities of distortion in the analytical singling out of particulars for clues to general matters of significance" and implies a rejection of criticism that does not risk the difficulties of engaging with the "general matters of significance" bespoken by the "work as a whole" (*FA*, xvi). She resists "the composite bulk" of her poetry (including the poems in *First Awakenings*, as well as omitted poems from books preceding the *Collected*) being "arbitrarily construed as constituting [her] poetic work in the whole," because that would diminish the value of the *Collected*'s "progressive consistency with itself," as well as the continuities between her earlier and later thought. She does not, however, exclude the possibility of more welcoming, *hospitable* response, providing considerable encouragement for it elsewhere.

In one of the supplementary sections of *The Telling*, "Extracts from Communications," she commends her friend's having "made my words welcome—put no barriers between them and yourself ... between yourself and the unknown, no divisions into familiar and strange" (*T*, 111-2). This kind of response would not involve treating (Riding) Jackson's words as "gospel" (59), but a "hospitality to words" based on an open stance towards the "unknown." For what is to be known, according to (Riding) Jackson, is in fact "something already possessed" (111), a spiritual "remembering-enterprise" for which "we need our purest curiosity" (26). Her hope is not to close "true distance" between "the outreaching margins of readers' thought and mine," but to offer "the possibility of companionship" by initiating an exchange (177). Jerome McGann's suggestion that this "should go some

way towards eradicating the idea that the post-poetical Riding has been seeking a transcendental ground of truth”⁶¹ is an argument I extend to her poetic work in my critique of her perceived “pursuit of truth” in chapter 4. For now, I want simply to draw attention to the “homely” terms in which she invites a responsive “seeing in the whole,” while resisting being, as it were, “wrapped up” as a whole:

If my words have the intonation of importunate appeal to your ears, let this be with you neither against me nor for me. I do not urge you to take my say for yours; I propose that you seek in yourselves remembrance of the Before, and tell what you find, and believe your words. How can we altogether believe the say of others unless we can believe our own? (*T*, 50)

This has an evangelical urgency about it, but as Donald Davie recognizes, the tone is more that “of one who pleads to be heard, asking ‘Please, is it not so with you also?’”⁶² Even the core-text of *The Telling* is punctuated by anxious, sometimes self-deprecating asides:

I do not like it that I caution and counsel so much, here, rather than only tell my story of us. This is to speak louder than story-speaking, in which we are as in the same room with one another. ... But in all that I say, of storying or cautioning or counselling kind, I yearn to do better! (43)

Her plea for community of speaking becomes even more impassioned and insistent: “Do *you* speak, and *you* ... making our subject less mine, more yours ... less yours, more ours. And we shall not be merely as of the same room but, in real meaning, of the same Subject, and Soul. I yearn, more than that I do better, that we do better” (ibid.). To say, then, that (Riding) Jackson invites a “homely” or “hospitable” approach seems almost an understatement. She wants readers to welcome her “telling” as far as possible on its own terms, even while taking up “the story of ourselves” *for themselves*. This reciprocal “hospitality to words” poses a problem for criticism because what it most requires is “innocence” and trust.⁶³

“Trust in words, and the sense of obligation to them” is fundamental to (Riding) Jackson’s post-poetic vision of home. The following passage, from *Rational Meaning*, is particularly suggestive of what a genuinely “hospitable” engagement with words might mean:

⁶¹ McGann, *Black Riders*, 127.

⁶² See [Donald Davie], “An Ambition Beyond Poetry,” *Times Literary Supplement* (February 9, 1973): 151–2.

⁶³ “Failure to capture [the memory “of a before-oneself”] is but failure to pursue it with sufficient innocence” (*T*, 26 & [25]).

Trust in words, and the sense of obligation to them, and the sense of need of them—the three components of the spontaneous response that people have to words—belong to the encounters that occur between minds reaching for words to use and the existing supply ever close at hand by the foresighting magic of human community (the crucible of the cosmic validity of human minds). These encounters, in which words are accepted for use, are taken as given, constitute what may be called a quasi-material relationship with words. In it, people “find themselves,” humanly. The words are things with which they feel at home. (*RM*, 82-3)

Here the idea of “home” serves to convey ideas that would otherwise come across as merely vague. To borrow the terms George Lakoff and Mark Turner use to describe their concept of “image-schema”: “home” is “skeletal and schematic” enough to be “mapped,” like an image, onto “abstract target domains that themselves do not inherently contain images”:⁶⁴ “cosmic validity,” for example, or “people ‘finding themselves.’” In the above quotation, as in the earlier one from *The Telling*, “being of the same room” is the underlying metaphor, conflated with the idea of home as “nature.” This allows (Riding) Jackson to insist that the encompassing, if incompletely recognized, “Subject” is *given*, by “natural” authority, and that it therefore belongs more rightly to “the laity” than “professionals” (*T*, 64-65).

Accordingly, she sees our task as being to establish linguistic values, or bearings, pertaining not “narrowly to possibilities in ‘writing,’ but to the plain—the universal human-possibilities in word-use” (*T*, 69). She wants us to stay as close to home as possible: “to begin to tell the story of ourselves without the intermediation of patron-doctrines, themselves fear-exacting, between our fear-of-truth and ourselves” (*T*, 32-33), regardless of possible “intonations of importunate appeal to [other] ears.” But then, at no point in the progress of her work is “professional” cultivation of “craft” taken more seriously than “creed.” She is outraged, for example, by Dorothy Sayers’s taking her “Personal Letter, with a Request for a Reply” to task for its “bad style” when the matter at hand is of no less seriousness and urgency than *The World and Ourselves* (in 1938)—a response Riding attributes to “the person suffering from the disability of being a writer (to the exclusion of being a feeler or thinker).”⁶⁵ Less combatively, she avers of *The Telling*: “I did not approach the making of [it] from a point of decision as to what its diction ought to be ‘like’”

⁶⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 97.

⁶⁵ *The World and Ourselves* (London: Seizin Press and Constable, 1938), 30.

(*T*, 68). Again, her approach speaks to the American tradition of individualism and self-reliance. However, her constant striving for “purity of motivation in word-choice” (*T*, 68–9) distinguishes her somewhat, in this regard, from precursors such as Emerson, Whitman and Dickinson, her vision being more strictly linguistic (as opposed to theological, transcendental or ecstatic).

(Riding) Jackson’s project is also “homely” in being feminine-oriented. In an early essay, “The Passing of the Historical Miasma,” she declares: “Whether a woman is a sexual figure, or a mother, or a mind rather than a bodily person, there is an inevitable homeliness about everything she does” (*WW*, 62). Indeed, the terms in which she develops her idea of woman’s “homeliness” could also characterize her entire poetic enterprise, in its bid to “bring ... the universe indoors”: “To woman the whole universe is, ultimately, an indoor place; it is her work to bring it all indoors. ... It is in her homeliness, her indoorness, that woman expresses her compulsion to wholeness: the whole is an interior, is internal” (*WW*, 62–3). The model of feminine “inclusion” that she goes on to describe may likewise be read as a critique of her own poetic project. For although *The Word ‘Woman’* was not published until 1993, its contents were written during the early to mid-thirties, when her faith in poetry was still “religious.”

Healing, correction, cleaning, tidying, *order* are all homely operations. And the method of all these operations is inclusion: the emphasis is not on what is cast out in the course of the operation but on what is kept in, made part of the whole. (That which is cast out is the unreal, as dirt has no reality, being that which cannot be integrated.) (*WW*, 63)

Similarly, to reach “that level of existence which is poetry ... to explore reality as a whole, to be not merely somewhere but precisely somewhere in precisely everywhere” (*PLR*, 487)—to be finally *at home*—may be understood as involving considerable effort of “healing, correction, cleaning, tidying, *order*.” Given her “indoor” conception of “the universe,” the personal “compulsion to wholeness” and the “tremendous compulsion” behind the act of “going to poetry” may be seen as nearly identical. The apotheosis of Riding’s poetics conceives poetry as a state of “continuous habituation” to “incidents” in “the good existence”:

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. (*PLR*, 413)

This passage exploits several metaphors for poetry that derive from the idea of home: as literalness, finality (through the metaphor of home as return), and habituation. The final condition of poetry is seen as a state of being in which the poet maintains an unwaveringly truthful use of words; whether she is engaged in writing a poem is (literally) “incidental.” Similarly, *The Telling* envisions a “speaking domestication of human beings in their Subject”—the difference being her view that this “domesticated” condition “cannot be more than symbolically realized in poetry” (*T*, 66).

As in *The Telling*, with its insistence on “the sphere of our subject as our personal sphere” (61), “The Passing of the Historical Miasma” concludes with an uncompromising rejection of the patriarchal notion of “home” as “an outdoor abstraction”: for “when [man] ignores the character of the difference and makes himself a generality in which woman is included as a particularity, there is no resultant whole, only a large outdoor abstraction—as abstract as quantitatively large; and the notion of ‘home’ becomes, accordingly, a sentimental privacy” (*WW*, 63). The later writing develops this line of thought by striving to dissolve these inside/outside oppositions and “divisions into familiar and strange.” For instance: “We say, in part-knowledge, that the spirit is within us. But how within? Not as if the lodger, and we the vessel, but as the whole, which cannot be outside the part (*T*, 24); “As to the spirit—the nature, and the working of the spirit, its being ‘within’ not as if the lodger and we the dwelling-place, but as the whole, which cannot be *outside*” (*T*, 108). Passages such as these indicate the limits of the idea of home as “dwelling-place,” “vessel,” etc., which is, in a sense, precisely the point: that “home” should be neither a “sentimental privacy,” *merely* homely, nor “strange.”

In my next chapter, I explore the ways in which Riding works at these limits through a strangely homely poetic language akin to that of Emily Dickinson, a poet in whom the younger Riding took a particular interest. Riding’s poetry is seen as “hospitable” in several ways akin to Dickinson’s, broadly characterized by the term, “linguistic intimateness.”⁶⁶ An introduction to Riding’s view of Dickinson is followed by consideration of Dickinsonian wit in Riding’s poems, particularly those in which she treats of death with startling familiarity. I go on to discuss the similarities in their

⁶⁶ (Riding) Jackson, “An Autobiographical Summary,” 30.

word-conjunctions and styles of poetic argument, as well as their ideas of poetry as “house of possibility” and spiritual home.⁶⁷

Riding’s work is then compared with that of her older friend of the late 1920s, Gertrude Stein. While acknowledging significant points of divergence between their projects, I suggest that Riding’s poetry and prose, at its most experimental, bears more resemblance to Stein’s than that of any other contemporary. Riding published essays on Stein as early as 1927, and as late as 1986, by which time her assessment had become considerably more severe. Chapter 3 details this shift in Riding’s critical view of Stein, then focuses on the similarly “homely” characteristics of their prose and poetics, with particular reference to Riding’s *Four Letters to Catherine* and “Steinian” poems. In criticism to date, only passing attention has been paid, on the whole, to their literary relationship. This chapter sets out a more generous account of Stein’s significance for Riding.

Chapter 4 explains her poetic vision of “the end of the world” as the introduction to a new world and potentially a new home. The apocalyptic vocabulary of her poems has often been misinterpreted to fit the notion of her “pursuit of truth” as an object of knowledge. This chapter counters such readings by drawing attention to the positive sense in which she often refers to “death,” and the unitary conception of truth insisted upon in her poetic and critical writings of the thirties. Ultimately, Riding’s vision is optimistic, concerned with integration rather than fragmentation: further to the end of history lies the prospect of being at home in a truthful, genuinely hospitable relationship with words. However, her starkly paradoxical assertions regarding *knowledge* of truth raise corresponding questions of authority and responsibility. These are explored more fully in chapter 5, which extends the account to include *The Telling*, compared to her earlier, collaborative *The World and Ourselves* (1938). My aim is to clarify the conception of history and “the new time” envisioned in the earlier and later phases of her work. While “immediacy” and “finality” remain crucial to her stance towards history, in *The Telling* the idea of responsibility as “covenant” comes to the fore. Accordingly, I chart lines of development between *The Telling* and poems dealing with questions of conscience, covenant and ties of responsibility implied by the idea of home.

⁶⁷ See Dickinson’s poem beginning “I dwell in Possibility,” in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 466.

These concerns are then related to several of Riding's American poet-inheritors: innovative poets whose concerns are significantly prefigured by hers. Chapter 6 is focused on John Ashbery, a quintessentially postmodern poet whose playfulness and relativist stance may seem at odds with Riding's urgency and seriousness, but who has nevertheless named Riding as an important influence. I explain her "influence" in terms of his "celebration" of the "failure" that she came to find in poetry, paying particular attention to early-to-middle period poems in which he reflects with some urgency on the "truth" and scope of poetry. Other poems, particularly later ones, are seen as more resigned to, even at home in, "celebrating failure."⁶⁸ In these respects his work is "hospitable to words," both in its concern for the truth-telling promise of poetry and in its playful celebration of the "merely" homely.

Chapter 7 extends the line of inheritance to include poets associated with or writing in the wake of Language poetry. The work of Carla Harryman and Lisa Samuels in particular is shown to develop (Riding) Jackson's critique of poetry's truth-telling properties, without subscribing to the essentialist terms of her renunciation. Harryman follows (Riding) Jackson's lead in turning to prose, and Samuels has written extensively on Riding, acknowledging her as "tutelary spirit" and "mentor."⁶⁹ The poetic work of both, I suggest, demonstrates Riding's theory of the poem as "a model of constructive dissociation." Which may not sound very "hospitable," and yet, in the remarkable extent to which their writing, like Emily Dickinson's, takes "the mind to be [the poet's] dwelling place," inviting the reader to collaborate closely in the construction of meaning, it is so.⁷⁰ In reflecting on their thoroughly de-familiarizing "hospitality to words" in relation to the broader tradition described, the thesis comes full circle, showing how contemporary American poetry continues to plough the fertile ground of Riding's poetic inheritance.

⁶⁸ The phrase "celebration of failure" is from Riding's poem of that title (*PLR*, 135).

⁶⁹ Samuels acknowledges Riding as "tutelary spirit" in *Poetic Arrest*, x. Barrett Watten mentions Riding as "mentor" in his blurb for Samuels's collection of poems, *The Seven Voices* (Oakland, California: O Books, 1998).

⁷⁰ Suzanne Juhasz, "The Landscape of the Spirit," in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Judith Farr (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 137.

Chapter 2

“Linguistic Intimateness”: Riding and Emily Dickinson

(Riding) Jackson, reflecting on the “very large degree of expression-familiarity” in her poems, notes that by this, she does not mean “mere homeliness or simplicity of idiom,” but “linguistic intimateness.”¹ This would have to do with what she elsewhere calls “purity of motivation in word-choice” (*T*, 68-9), but “intimateness” also gives a sense of being at home in “a quasi-material relationship with words” (*RM*, 83). In this chapter, I argue that Dickinson’s poetry bespeaks such “intimateness” in a number of ways coincident with, and so prefiguring, Riding’s. Rigorously *linguistic*, as opposed to “merely” homely, this intimateness is enacted through their bold, if seemingly “slant” treatment of philosophically challenging themes such as truth, death, and God.² If poetry embodies a striving to be more at home in the dwelling-place of language, there is every reason to try to come to terms (to become, as it were, more intimate) with the more “difficult” words. In Dickinson’s terms, “success” requires a somewhat “circuitous” approach, involving the use of what David Porter calls “strangely abstracted images”: images that are both abstract (language-centred, or “linguistic”) and homely (“intimate”).³ The main focus of this chapter is this stylistic similarity between the two poets; especially the way in which, in Riding’s poetry, such imagery is bound up with Dickinsonian argumentative structure. The focus will then widen to a thematic consideration of the characteristic ways in which Riding and Dickinson subvert conventional expectations in their use of the metaphor of “home,” as it affects descriptions of the scope of their poetry. But the chapter will begin by examining the most apparent, or at least, most remarked-upon point of resemblance between these poets: “moments of sharp

¹ “An Autobiographical Summary,” in *PN Review* 20, no. 5 (May-June, 1994): 30.

² “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” is poem no. 1263 in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). Subsequent references are given by poem number in parentheses in the main body of the chapter.

³ See David Porter, “Strangely Abstracted Images,” in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Judith Farr, ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 141–148. Dickinson’s phrase “success in circuit” occurs in the second line of poem 1263: “Tell all the truth but tell it slant - / Success in Circuit lies.”

wit [in Riding's poetry] that remind us of Emily Dickinson."⁴ Particular attention will be paid to such "sharp wit" in poems concerned with "death," for both Dickinson and Riding are most boldly "intimate" in their treatment of that most final and ungraspable idea of home.

While I hope to indicate the importance of Dickinson's work in situating Riding in an American modernist tradition, my intention is not to make a comprehensive case for Dickinson's influence, based on Riding's reading of, and response to, contemporary editions of Dickinson's poetry. Elizabeth Friedmann has already gone a considerable way towards making that case, in an essay published in the magazine *Delmar* in 2002. There she analyzes the annotations made by Riding in her copy of *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Martin Secker, 1928) in relation to Riding's thought at that time, particularly as expressed in *Though Gently* (1930).⁵ Some relevant points uncovered by that research will be outlined here, but most of what follows will be concerned with "linguistically intimate" aspects of diction, style and theme—in Dickinson's case, with reference to the most accessible reading edition of her poems, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by R.W. Franklin; and in Riding's, to the versions she intended as primary, namely, *The Poems of Laura Riding*. Riding was of course familiar with Martha Dickinson Bianchi's, rather than Franklin's, edition of Dickinson's poems, but I would like to emphasize affinity rather than influence in trying to gain a clearer sense of the kinship between the two poets, with their "distinctive sensibilities."⁶

Although a number of critics have commented suggestively, there has thus far been little detailed analysis of the Dickinsonian characteristics of Riding's poetry, Friedmann's article being the most comprehensive essay on Riding and Dickinson to date, and that of somewhat different scope, being concerned primarily with the symbols used in *Though Gently*. But what of Riding's own perspective on Dickinson? The evidence clearly indicates that Riding had doubts about Dickinson's

⁴ Paul Auster, *Groundwork* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 138.

⁵ This issue of *Delmar* (*Delmar* 8, Winter 2002) includes the first reprint of the complete text of *Though Gently* (previously published by The Seizin Press in an edition of 200 copies) and a number of responses to it. All further references to *Delmar* will be to this issue.

⁶ Friedmann, in *Delmar*, 68.

achievement. She was critical of the perceived “‘littleness’ of Dickinson’s poetic endeavors.”⁷ Indeed, as Friedmann points out, “the words ‘little’ and ‘littleness’ appear in Riding’s marginalia a total of seven times, and other adjectives such as ‘delicate,’ ‘silly,’ and ‘scatterbrained’ are also present. At the end of Dickinson’s poem “This is my letter to the world,” Riding wrote the words ‘confused identity.’”⁸ Friedmann also notes that “by 1937 ... Riding had begun to see Emily Dickinson as practicing ‘a sort of fastidious beachcombing,’ observing: “The words do not arise from the subject; the subject is made the frailest of excuses for collecting pretty words.””⁹ This view is not far removed from the assessment (Riding) Jackson gave in a letter to her publisher much later, in 1981: “Emily Dickinson took shelter linguistically and otherwise in privacies of statement; released in publication they remained that. Whatever I have said in a poem is said straight out into the general air.”¹⁰

On the other hand, as Friedmann suggests:

In Emily Dickinson, Laura Riding seems early to have recognized a poetic consciousness uncorrupted by the demands of the Zeitgeist or of any established literary society. As emanations of her “personal reality” Dickinson’s poems expressed a simplicity and sincerity far removed from what Riding considered the “false intensity” of H.D., the “higher snobbism” of Edith Sitwell or the “intellectual debauchery” of T.S. Eliot, all of whom came under severe criticism in Riding’s critical writings of the time.¹¹

Riding seems to have admired Dickinson’s “simplicity and sincerity” while regretting her evasions, or “privacies of statement,” which she may well have found, along with

⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 68. It is tempting to wonder whether Riding’s emphatic downgrading of Dickinson in the 1937 essay had anything to do with Allen Tate’s arguing for Dickinson’s greatness in an essay, “Emily Dickinson,” which was first published in 1928 but also appeared in his collection of *Reactionary Essays* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons), published in 1936. Having been on bad terms with Tate by the time she left America for England at the end of 1925, Riding might have been particularly disposed to contradict his view of American 19th-century literature.

¹⁰ From a letter to Michael Braziller dated Feb. 26, 1981, in the Cornell collection. Quoted by Friedmann, in *Delmar*, 79. It is worthy of note that the shift in Riding’s view of Dickinson’s work from what Friedmann describes as her “early, mildly respectful view” to her later “more precise and critical evaluation” is closely paralleled by her similarly changing, if more fully and publicly stated opinions on Gertrude Stein’s work—see chapter 3.

¹¹ *Delmar*, 67.

Graves, rather “excruciating.”¹² Accordingly, when she speaks, in the 1937 essay, written with James Reeves for *Epilogue III*, of “homeliness” with regard to Dickinson’s poetry, she associates it with “sentimentality” and, presumably, a tendency towards such “privacies of statement.” They suggest that Dickinson “was remarkable in discovering . . . most of the mannerisms which made the Georgians popular: fastidiousness of diction—the choice of words singular in their context, and in themselves pretty words; slightness of content; and the form of sentimentality which consists of treating big things in a small way.”¹³ But then, Riding’s poetry is itself notable for the “fastidiousness” of its diction, and I would suggest that Dickinson’s poetry was a starting-point for Riding in a conception of poetry that was also intimate in its engagement with “big things.” The kinship between them is to be found largely in their linguistically intimate, strangely homely use of poetic language.

i. “Count Death Not Necessarily Logical”: Dickinsonian Wit in Riding

Like Dickinson, Riding shows that “generalizations, abstractions, made particular in a particular voice, can be poetry,”¹⁴ and it is with the most philosophically recalcitrant of subjects, death, that both of these poets concern themselves with surprising frequency, startling familiarity and strikingly similar wit. The instances considered in what follows will exemplify the way in which—as Deborah Baker aptly puts it—Riding “juggles and juxtaposes the homely and the universal with nimble wit.”¹⁵

Both Riding’s and Dickinson’s treatment of the subject of death typically involves deceptively homely scenarios that unfold in metaphorical terms of the body, illness and pain. The poem that is most reminiscent of Dickinson in this respect, even perhaps alluding to “Because I could not stop for Death - / He kindly stopped for me” (479), is “Then Follows.” It was apropos of this poem that Auster made the

¹² Graves wrote, in a letter to *The Listener* (17 October 1934) responding to Geoffrey Grigson’s likening Riding to Dickinson: “As for Emily Dickinson, she was a woman who brooded on the mystery of things in an excruciatingly private way and then tried fatalistically to score the ephemeral melodies of her fancy for the penny-trumpet of American lyricism.” Quoted by Friedmann in *Delmar*, 67.

¹³ *Epilogue III*, 186–7. Quoted by Friedmann in *Delmar*, 68.

¹⁴ Archibald MacLeish, quoted by Porter, in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 143.

¹⁵ Deborah Baker, *In Extremis* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1993), 176.

remark already quoted on Dickinson's "sharp wit." In the poem's opening "account of meeting 'by chance' God,"¹⁶ the speaker emphasizes the "chance-like" nature of this "meeting" and the inevitability of its being seen, by "the living," as "an interval" rather than a meeting as such. At the same time, the plain diction and matter-of-fact tone invite a literal reading. In spite of appearances, the poem seems to say, this should be taken literally:

Then follows a description
Of an interval called death
By the living.
But I shall speak of it
As of a brief illness.
For it lasted only
From being not ill
To being not ill.

It came about by chance—
I met God.
'What,' he said, 'you already?'
'What,' I said, 'you still?'
He apologised and I apologised.
'I thought I was alone,' he said.

(PLR, 174)

The "I" is of particular interest here. The speaker claims to have stood at the cusp of life and death, to understand the language of "the living" well enough, but to prefer to explain herself in her own, more detached—or "post-carnal" (PLR, 209)—terms, according to which "death" becomes "brief illness," and life, presumably, "the old routine / Of being, thank you, not ill" (175). Whether she is supposed "actually" to have died is left unclear. Effectively—and this is the way in which the rhetoric chimes with Dickinson's—the speaker claims to have privileged insight into "the experiential 'reality' of extinction itself," although this is described more as if it were merely casual acquaintance.¹⁷ Poems of Dickinson's such as those beginning "'Twas just this time, last year, I died" (344), "I heard a Fly buzz - when I died" (591), "I am alive - I guess" (605), "I felt my life with both my hands" (357), "The World - feels Dusty / When We stop to Die" (491), "Because I could not stop for Death - / He

¹⁶ The "account..." is (Riding) Jackson's own description, as given in her "Reply" in *English* 31 (spring 1982): 89.

¹⁷ Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "[Im]pertinent Constructions of Body and Self: Dickinson's Use of the Romantic Grotesque," in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 124.

Kindly stopped for me” (479), and “I died for Beauty - but was scarce / Adjusted in the Tomb” (448) are well-known cases in point. The irony and humorous elements of the bizarre in the fantasies described in these poems elevate them above the merely morbid or macabre. When, for instance, in “I died for Beauty - but was scarce / Adjusted in the Tomb,” a corpse in “an adjoining room,” “who died for Truth,” strikes up conversation, the wit is disturbingly humorous, and the clinical precision of words like “Adjusted” and “adjoining” heightens the sense of cool detachment from the grotesqueness of the scene described. This critical distance has the effect of enhancing rather than lessening the horror (no fantasy, after all) of the prospect of the “adjustment” to death ending, inevitably, in extinction of identity, with “the Moss ... reach[ing] our lips - / And cover[ing] up - Our names -.”

Riding began to claim insight into “experiential ‘reality’ of extinction itself” early on in the progress of her poetry. Shades of “Then Follows” may be seen in the early poem “Did I Not Die?” which is short enough to quote in full:

Did I not die yesterday, when—
Who asks?
I ask.
I am alive, then.

Why was I not still?
Another could have as easily
Proceeded with my story.
Haven’t I had my fill
Of human glory?

Where is God?

Must I wait until
God has had his fill?

(*FA*, 22)

The echoes, in Riding’s opening stanza, of Dickinson’s “’Twas just this time, last year, I died” (344) and “I am alive - I guess” (605) can be clearly heard, but the point I wish to stress is that in both poets’ work we encounter a persona who has died and yet, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff puts it, “retains the ability to talk!”¹⁸ In Dickinson, as Wolff points out, this takes the form of a “carefully modulated ... use” of the “popular mid-nineteenth century mode, the ‘Romantic grotesque,’” which Mikhail

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

Bakhtin describes as “a reaction against ... official, formalistic ... authoritarianism.”¹⁹ Wolff goes on to quote:

Unlike the medieval and Renaissance grotesque, which was directly related to folk culture and thus belonged to all the people, the Romantic genre acquired a private “chamber” character. It became, as it were, an individual carnival, marked by a vivid sense of isolation.²⁰

The notion of the isolated self as a claustrophobic “chamber” for the enactment of psychological drama is a “grotesque” variant on the metaphor of house as home, and the “body parts scattered throughout” Dickinson’s poetry, as Wolff notes, are another aspect of her use of this mode. Riding’s “meeting-God drama” can in turn be read as a careful modulation of the Dickinsonian Romantic grotesque.²¹ (The longer poem “The Life of the Dead,” with its grotesque, surreal illustrations, for which the poems are “highly artificial ... textual frames” (*PLR*, 417), takes grotesquerie in more satirical direction, though it lacks the first-person, “dead” speaking subject that gives “Then Follows” its Dickinsonian character.)

Wolff’s description of the voice that characterizes this persona is apt: “In such work,” she writes, “the voice is methodical and matter-of-fact—apparently rational and proceeding with an almost scientific precision. Such poetic postures capture principally the odd configuration of each individual’s mortal state ...”²² Similarly, Riding’s speaker says of her “meeting-God drama,” “Here was an awkward moment / Worthy of my awkwardness at last”: she is equal to the occasion, but awkward on account of her being still, strictly speaking, among “the living,” merely “not ill”:

‘Are there any more of you?’ he said,
Tears in his eyes, but politely.
‘As many as you care to meet,’ I said.
Tears falling, he said politely,
‘I can’t wait, but remember me to them.’
(*PLR*, 174)

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 123–5.

²⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 37. Quoted by Wolff in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 123.

²¹ The phrase “meeting-God drama” is (Riding) Jackson’s, from her “Reply”: 88.

²² Wolff, in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 125.

Dickinson's personae are similarly "polite," showing the same "laconic restraint" that Archibald MacLeish identifies with the "extraordinary mastery of tone" seen as crucial to the success of her poems generally.²³ In "I died for Beauty," the conversation goes as follows:

He questioned softly "Why I failed"?
 "For Beauty", I replied -
 "And I - for Truth - Themselves are One -
 We Brethren, are", He said -

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night -
 We talked between the Rooms -
 Until the Moss had reached our lips -
 And covered up - Our names -

(448)

By contrast, the close of Riding's conversation with "God" in "Then Follows" leads not into extinction but to the "I's" mock-courteous reaffirmation of itself: "Yes, there has been an interval / Generally described as death. / Thank you, I am now as I was" (*PLR*, 175).²⁴ Riding is as suggestive as Dickinson of the possibility of death's being experienced as a phase of consciousness.

Riding announces the conviction that death need not be "count[ed] ... logical" in an early poem, "The Contraband," first published in 1925:

Life, then, like feet may profit from this philosophy,
 Discover the free will,
 Count death not necessarily logical
 But one choice out of many.

(*FA*, 251)²⁵

The premise of this "philosophy" holds true for many of her poems concerned with death, not only those which employ a tone akin to Dickinson's. Indeed, the notion that it is not "necessary to 'die' to experience death" plays a significant part in the later development of her poetic and critical project, as we shall see more specifically

²³ Quoted by David Porter, in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 143.

²⁴ Riding uses a similar, mock-homely tone in continually shifting the onus onto the reader, in gestures of closure—only to thwart those gestures, by way of going on. "Perhaps you had better be going," she keeps wondering; then, "Perhaps we had all better be going. / Perhaps I have not made myself plain"; finally deciding, "Perhaps we had better not be going. / Perhaps I had better write another poem" (*PLR*, 176–179).

²⁵ First published in *The Calendar of Modern Letters* 2, October 1925, 92–3.

in chapter 4.²⁶ Dickinson's reverence for "The Overtakelessness of Those / Who have accomplished Death" (894) seems to set the tone for Riding's positive conception of death, while the arresting, seemingly awkward neologism, "Overtakelessness," displays a distinctly "Ridingsque" concision. And it would be hard not to hear echoes of Dickinson's "My life closed twice before it's close" (1773) in Riding's ideas of "Second-death" (*PLR*, 128) and "dying twice" (*FA*, 61). Riding's exhortation to "count death ... one choice out of many" also puts one in mind of her suicide attempt of 1929, and her preoccupation with death may well seem as obsessive (some might say, morbid) as Dickinson's—while on the contrary, as both poets would have wished to stress:

By homely gifts and hindered words
The human heart is told
Of nothing -
"Nothing" is the force
That renovates the World -

(1611)

ii. "Amazing Sense / Distilled":

Dickinsonian Argument and Word-Conjunctions in Riding

Despite the logic-defying premises of some of their poems, a rigorous style of argument, coupled with unpredictable word juxtapositions and conjunctions, have widely been recognized as salient characteristics of both Riding's and Dickinson's poetry. Judith Farr's view is representative: "On the one hand," she points out, "Dickinson is a poet who likes to begin poems with theses that remind us that her father and brother were lawyers—"This was a Poet - It is That" (446); "Prayer is the little implement" (623)—and who characteristically develops her lyrics with an internal logic that inexorably follows the laws of premise, development and conclusion. If logic is masculine, 'Uncle Emily,' her *nom de lettre* in letters to nephew Ned, nevertheless adopted it."²⁷ Such logic serves the poetic purpose of astonishing us with unexpected sense:

²⁶ *Essays from Epilogue*, 176. Riding goes on: "And the more actively death is experienced in life—the more precisely co-incident its accent with the life-accent—the less significance it has as a physical event" (*ibid.*).

²⁷ From her Introduction to *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), 15. There is an incidental suggestiveness about the fact that Dickinson's father

This was a Poet -
 It is That
 Distills amazing sense
 From Ordinary Meanings

Riding (as poet in the late 1920s) would surely have concurred with this premise, as indicated, perhaps, by her underlining of the lines “Much madness is divinest sense / To a discerning eye” (620) in her book of Dickinson’s poems, in 1929.²⁸ From “amazing” to “divinest sense” is only a small step, and the ability to “distill” such sense may well entail the “madness” of poetic enthusiasm.

On the other hand, Farr reminds us, if “obliquity and syntactical disruption” are seen as feminine, then the example of Dickinson points up the final inadequacy of such distinctions (likewise, one might add, any tendency to associate the “universal” with the masculine, as opposed to the “homely” with the feminine). Broadly speaking, such obliquity can be seen as having to do with Dickinson’s famous exhortation to “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” (1263), but more specifically, such slant truth-telling is manifested in her use of images “so abstract,” as David Porter has written, that “they have given up their sensuous immediacy to pure meaning,” “drained” to the point where “imagery” hardly seems the appropriate term.²⁹

Similar claims could well be made of Riding’s poetry. As Paul Auster has said: “Laura Riding gives us almost nothing to see, and this absence of imagery and sensuous detail, of any true *surface*, is at first baffling. We feel as though we had been blinded. But this is intentional on her part, and it plays an important role in the themes she develops. She does not so much want us to see as to consider the notion

and brother were lawyers and that Riding’s father was a political activist—one thinks especially of Riding’s active commitment to her “creed” (*SP*, 11–12), both on and off the page.

²⁸ See Friedmann, *A Mannered Grace*, 136. Friedmann goes on to relate Dickinson’s lines to the more immediate crisis in Riding’s life, by suggesting that “in order to understand” Riding’s suicide attempt, “it is necessary to attempt to discern the ‘divinest sense’ of Laura’s ‘madness.’ To do so, one must take into consideration the proposition that the ‘defiantly intelligible’ universe that Laura Riding as a poet was attempting to create was a universe that recognized the primacy of eternal values over incidental physical passions” (ibid.). In the realm of “amazing” or “divinest” poetic sense, “much madness” may well be the outward form of a “defiant intelligibility.” Deborah Baker, in her biography of Riding, *In Extremis*, inexplicably misquotes Dickinson’s lines (which have no variants) in this way: “Pure madness is the finest sense,” as well as inaccurately describing Riding’s book of Dickinson’s poems (now held at Cornell), *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Martha Dickinson Bianchi (London: Martin Secker, 1928) as “Emily Dickinson’s collected poems” (111).

²⁹ David Porter, in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 141.

of what is seeable” (particularly as in the poem “Benedictory,” which Auster goes on to quote).³⁰ Auster helpfully identifies the following traits as “essential Riding: the abstract level of discourse, the insistence upon confronting ultimate questions, the tendency toward moral exhortation, the quickness and cleanness of thought, the unexpected juxtapositions of words.” In what follows, we shall see how such unexpected juxtapositions and conjunctions of words are essential means of clinching the argument of Riding’s poems, and consider the extent to which the modes of argument and imagery involved are Dickinsonian in the ways indicated above.

In Riding, “argumentational structure” is bound up very closely with imagery. As Michael Kirkham suggests, “The imagery *is* the poem, the poem’s thought. Its introduction is direct not oblique; correspondences are laid out plainly if concisely.”³¹ Thus it is unusually difficult to restate the poem’s themes in terms other than its own. Kirkham’s description of Riding’s argumentative “plot” in “three parts” corresponds to Farr’s case for Dickinson’s presenting her “theses” by following “the laws of premise, development and conclusion”:

first a cryptic statement of the thought, using the basic elements of the poem’s imagery—like a closed bud; then a gradual unfolding of the thought’s intricacies; finally ... a rounding-back to the original general statement, further reduced to its essentials and set in a life-context of the widest coverage.³²

Within this framework, Riding characteristically works out the implications of her thought to the point where the poem’s imagery almost ceases to seem figurative at all. Kirkham’s analysis of the exemplary poem, “Afternoon” (*PLR*, 34), is revealing in this regard:

The imagery is not really metaphorical: it provides, rather, particular instances of a general reality, and word and thought are more nearly identical. It is as though the poet has set out to convince us that one word, ‘afternoon,’ contains the central experience of the poem, seen within a certain order of meanings and values: preliminary statements are made with the word; there follow demonstrations of its sense-range; and, finally, the word is used in a logical

³⁰ Auster, *Groundwork*, 139.

³¹ Michael Kirkham, “Laura Riding’s Poems,” in *The Cambridge Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 3 (1971): 306.

³² *Ibid.*

formulation that makes it—packed now with all it *can* say—identical with that experience.³³

Riding's later linguistic concerns spring directly from such poetic procedure; and there is a parallel in the progression of Dickinson's poetic practice. As Kamilla Denman has pointed out, in the later work (after about 1863): "Dickinson's assault on language takes the form of redefining words rather than the disruption of syntax through punctuation. Many poems fall under the rubric of definitional poems, beginning for example, with the words 'Love is,' 'Time is,' 'Power is,' or 'Risk is.'"³⁴ The effectiveness of Riding's definitional approach, as "Afternoon" demonstrates, depends upon the key word or words being "seen within" a "certain order of meanings and values." The poem's opening definition is strangely circular and therefore seems "cryptic" or oblique, even while making perfect sense on its own terms:

The fever of afternoon
Is called afternoon,
Old sleep uptorn,
Not yet time for night-time,
No other name, for no names
In the afternoon but afternoon.

(PLR, 34)

Its very recalcitrance as a definition of "afternoon" is key to the sense the stanza makes, for "afternoon" is defined principally in terms of a certain *failure of naming*, of which "afternoon" is representative. Paradoxically, "Afternoon" bids to render itself "identical with experience" having started from the premise, on the one hand, of the identity of the word "afternoon" with experience of it, and on the other, of the non-identity of word and thought (more generally) *within* that experience. Because "afternoon" excludes all "other names"—in ways explained in stanzas two and three—it cannot really "talk," let alone "speak" for itself; and yet its "meaning" persists. The poem is thus an anguished yet fastidious and calmly controlled attempt to articulate, and thereby understand, the meaning of "afternoon," even while

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Kamilla Denman, "Emily Dickinson's Volcanic Punctuation," in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 200. Another variety of definitional poem is exemplified by poem 576, which begins: "The difference between Despair / And Fear, is ..."

arguing for the ultimate futility of the attempt.³⁵ The claim that there is “No other name, no other names / In the afternoon but afternoon” contradicts the lines leading up to it, which define “afternoon” as “Old sleep uptorn” and “Not yet time for night-time,” while the near-rhyming line-endings in the opening stanza, from “noon” to “torn” to “time” to “names” and back to “noon,” reinforce the sense of indefiniteness. To some extent, however, the first two lines of the poem have already given the game away, by substituting “the fever of afternoon” for “afternoon” in the attempt at straightforward definition. Provisionally, the word “fever” serves to define “afternoon,” although the speaker proceeds as though the reverse were the case. For at stake is the thesis that “no other name” holds.

That this difficult thesis convinces is due, as Kirkham points out, to the “fastidious exactitude” with which the “verbal patterns . . . spell out . . . these thought-relations.”³⁶ This is made possible, to no small degree, by the semantic roles of “after” and “noon.” The idea, voiced as the poem nears its conclusion, is created out of a “Wakeful suspension” of existence, a consciousness of “afternoon” that exceeds its normal time-bound definition. Thus it becomes possible to say: “More afternoons divide the night.” At the same time, the poem relies on the normal time frame for its use of terms such as “night-time” and “evening,” while another kind of logic applies in the line “Supper and bed open and close,” where “supper and bed” are imagined as enclosed spaces, or rooms.

The main thrust of the poem’s internal logic is brought to conclusion in the final line, with the content of the poem’s opening statement being modified by the addition of only one word. After the sun’s lateness “comes the quick fever, called day. / But the slow fever is called afternoon.” Such “slow fever” anticipates “Death as Death,” a poem of more “immediate occasion,” where the idea is brought to crisis in the image of “Death like a quick cold hand / On the hot slow head of suicide” (*PLR*, 83).

³⁵ “To ‘talk,’” as Kirkham suggests, “in the sense it has in the poem placed immediately after this one, ‘The Talking World,’—is to ‘speak mingled,’ to speak in the separateness of individuality, and not with the singleness of truth; thus, here, it is the plurality of ‘mouths’ that converts speech into talk and renders talking powerless to prevent the recurrence of time’s fever” (305).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 306.

In Dickinson's poetry, "Noon" is used in ways that resonate significantly with Riding's "Afternoon." Dickinson's biographer, Richard B. Sewall, traces her "long-time fascination with the phenomenon of noon" to her reading of Ik Marvel; in particular, a section of his *Reveries* (1850) called "Noon":

The noon is short; the sun never loiters on the meridian, nor does the shadow on the old dial by the garden, stay long as XII. The Present, like the noon, is only a point; and a point so fine, that it is not measurable by grossness of action. Thought alone is delicate enough to tell the breadth of the present.³⁷

Sewall argues that "Noon," for Dickinson, "became a token of the instantaneous, arrested present which is timelessness, or eternity, or heaven, when all accident, or "grossness," is discarded and there is nothing but essence."³⁸ Sewall cites the poems beginning "There is a Zone whose even Years" and "A Clock stopped" (both of which have a Ridingsque ring to them), and another poem that is apposite with respect to the quotation from Marvel is "I see thee better - in the Dark" (442), for its use of "Meridian": another scientific or mathematical term, like "Circumference" or "Zone." Compare the following lines:

What need of Day -
To Those whose Dark - hath so - surpassing Sun -
It deem it be - Continually -
At the Meridian?

with the poem (1020) quoted by Sewall:

There is a Zone whose even Years
No solstice interrupt -
Whose Sun constructs perpetual Noon
Whose perfect Seasons wait -

Whose summer set in summer, till
The centuries of June
And centuries of August cease
And consciousness - is Noon.

Dickinson uses "Noon" as if it were a precise form of measurement; at the same time it is immeasurable, or "Degreeless," as in "A Clock stopped" (259). Dickinson's "Noon" surpasses the "wakeful suspension" of Riding's "Afternoon." Nevertheless, the cadenced phrasing, use of repetition, reconfiguration of temporal categories (as

³⁷ Richard B. Sewall, "Emily Dickinson's Books and Reading," in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 48.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

in “The centuries of June / And centuries of August”), grammatical and syntactical parallelism, and clear, concise resolution of Dickinson’s poem anticipate Riding’s characteristic use of the same techniques.

The zest with which both poets subvert temporal norms is often apparent in their unexpected juxtapositions and conjunctions of words. Sometimes these involve not just the turning of categories inside out, as in “centuries of June”—and in poem 114, “centuries of noon,” even—but also “the transposition of classes of words by simple appropriation.”³⁹ Adverb becomes noun, for example, in “hours of soon and soon” (in “Afternoon”), “the all the time” (in Riding’s poem “All The Time”), “an Until - ” (in Dickinson’s poem “The Service without Hope”); while Riding’s poem-title “The Wind, The Clock, *The We*” (my emphasis) “gives distinct body” to identity much as Dickinson’s line, “The Daily Own—of Love” (426) does “to possessiveness.”⁴⁰ “Hours of soon and soon” could well be read as an extension and subversion of the Emersonian “insistence . . . upon the Now” which Dickinson echoes in the line “Forever - is composed of Nows” (690) and to which she returns repeatedly with “Noon.”⁴¹ However, even in the context of the single line, “The sun is late by hours of soon and soon” (*PLR*, 34), the grammatical transgression serves the meaning by enacting the wait implied by the sun’s lateness, as well as through the phonetic closeness of “soon” and “sun.” The line also parallels “Wakeful suspension between dream and dream” in rhythm and near rhyme, as well as in meaning, for how better to describe the mingled sense of expectation (“soon and soon”) and disillusionment (“between dream and dream”) than as “Wakeful suspension”? In short, for Riding as for Dickinson, “form/class experimentation is a particularly effective and metaphorical form of compression.”⁴² Overall, however, Riding’s experimentation is less “disruptive,” as she tends to combine given words (often words used in or related closely to the poem’s opening statement of thought) in new compound forms that can still be used grammatically. This allows the poem’s “order of meanings and values” to be maintained and reinforced, by virtue of the very

³⁹ Cristanne Miller, in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 173.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁴¹ The phrase “insistence . . . upon the Now” is Sewall’s, in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 47.

⁴² Cristanne Miller, in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 173.

“freedom” with which, in her own words, she “dispensed with the literary conventionalities of poetic idiom” (*PLR*, xxix).

A key means of achieving such sudden, unexpected sense is “the unexpected juxtaposition of words” identified by Paul Auster as characteristic of “essential Riding.”⁴³ Auster cites the phrase “giddy homelessness,” from the poem “The Why of the Wind.” If the phrase itself comes as “unexpected,” this is not because it suddenly descends upon the poem as if from nowhere but because it effects such a precise consummation of accumulated sense. Although “The Why of the Wind” is not divided neatly into three stanzas as is “Afternoon,” it does conform more or less to the Dickinsonian “thesis” paradigm: from the opening “statement of the thought” (which concerns “ourselves” and thought itself: “wondering,” “knowing,” “understanding”), to the development and qualification of the thought, signalled by a “But when”; to the “rounding-back” to “ourselves” with more explicit and wide directives as to “What we are and are not” and what we should “learn better.” Like “Afternoon,” the poem is characteristic in building, propositionally, from a platform of generalization. Here are the last two stanzas (of four):

When the wind runs we run with it.
 We cannot understand because we are not
 When the wind takes our minds.
 These are lapses like a hate of earth.
 We stand as nowhere,
 Blow from discontinuance to discontinuance,
 And accuse our sober nature
 Of wild desertion of itself,
 And ask the reason as a traitor might
 Beg from the king a why of treason.

We must learn better
 What we are and are not.
 We are not the wind.
 We are not every vagrant mood that tempts
 Our minds to giddy homelessness.
 We must distinguish better
 Between ourselves and strangers.
 There is much that we are not.
 There is much that is not.
 There is much that we have not to be.
 We surrender to the enormous wind

⁴³ Auster, *Groundwork*, 138.

Against our learned littleness,
 But keep returning wailing
 ‘Why did I do this?’

(PLR, 330)

My contention that the “unexpected juxtaposition” is in fact more a matter of unexpected *precision*—“amazing sense”—is based on the large extent to which the phrase “giddy homelessness” is anticipated and followed through in the poem. In the first of the above stanzas, the sense of giddiness is implicit in the image of our minds “run[n]g] . . . wild,” futilely “blow[n]” by the wind, maddened, even. “Giddy” derives from the Old English *gidig*, insane (literally, “possessed by a god”) and can also mean “flighty,” which relates, in yet another sense, to our “flee[ing] . . . to what we are / And accus[ing] our sober nature / Of wild desertion of itself”—fleeing and desertion leading to a homelessness of sorts. When “we are not,” that is, when “our minds” are “taken” from us, we are displaced (“We stand as nowhere”), reduced to “vagrancy” (meaning “wandering,” at root), left on the verge of dispossession and even exile from “ourselves,” given the conceit of a “traitor” entreating the “king” who is his own “sober nature.”

These scenarios of accusation and betrayal, with their embedded sense of homelessness as self-negation and estrangement, help explain that other arresting phrase, “a hate of earth.” Not only does accusation often entail hate; in these “lapses like a hate of earth,” we disown our common ground. The metaphors of straying and “return” are extended through the poem’s closing lines, which describe our seeming inability to come to terms with “the wind” as if the very “return” to ourselves (in “our learned littleness”) were subject to that same inability to understand—now as to the *cause* of our straying: “We keep returning wailing / ‘Why did I do this?’” “The Why of the Wind” both describes and proscribes the “Why” of its title: “We cannot understand because we are not / When the wind takes our minds.” This statement would make no sense if it weren’t informed by the underlying idea of home, understood as “our minds” not “taken” from ourselves: a mapping which forms the metaphorical ground upon which the poem’s propositions are built.

The stark generalizations of the poem’s final stanza exemplify what Auster calls “a tendency toward moral exhortation”: “We must learn better / What we are and are not. / We are not the wind”; and “There is much that we are not. / There is much that is not. / There is much that we have not to be.” The inclusive reach (or

overreach) of these propositions through layer upon layer of negative predication is such, however, that their function seems more provocative than didactic: designed to prompt or challenge readers to think for themselves about what is and is not—not from an imagined God-like vantage, but in terms of our ultimate sense of ourselves. This sense is reinforced by the directive (from the same stanza): “We must distinguish better / Between ourselves and strangers,” which anticipates the point made early in *The Telling*: “We wait, all, for a story of us that shall reach to where we are. We listen for our own speaking; and we hear much that seems our speaking, yet makes us strange to ourselves” (10). Complementarily, the close parallelism of the lines, based on repetition and grammatical and syntactical similarity, privileges their cumulative rhetorical effect over their content as distinct propositions. “There is much that we are not / ... that is not / ... that we have not to be”: this may not seem to amount to much, but it does serve to lay bare a significant limit of the poem’s argument—significant, not least, in its converse bid to uncover the implied “much” that we *are*, that *is*, or that we *might be*. At the same time, the stark, anaphoric structure of these concluding lines calls attention to the broader oppositions in the poem’s discourse: “distinguish[ing],” for instance, “between ourselves and strangers,” “homelessness” and “home.” As we’ve seen, the poem fleshes out these abstractions impressively, but also strips them down to their barest meanings, so calling its own scope into question. Such questioning complicates the poem’s overt didacticism, confronting us with a paradox intrinsic to the very concept of didacticism: he who attributes it lays himself as open to the charge. As Wittgenstein puts it: “Doubting and non-doubting behaviour. There is the first only if there is the second.”⁴⁴ Didacticism is a matter of “behaviour”—manner and intent: a rhetorical matter. “The Why of the Wind’s” didacticism is rooted in the risk that it takes; like the speaker of the highly rhetorical “Poet: A Lying Word,” it would have us “see through” its discursive “wall” at “no other season’s height” (*PLR*, 234). To recall Auster: “She gives us almost nothing to see ... We feel as though we had been blinded.” The reader faces a “wall” that is to be “seen through,” or not at all, much as, in Dickinson, the “drained” imagery and stark generalizations involving

⁴⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 46e.

abstractions like “Circumference” often demand an unusually large, “all-or-nothing” conceptual leap.⁴⁵

On the other hand, the poem’s forcing the issue, so acknowledging the “failure” implicit in such all-or-nothing risk, invites scrutiny; and indeed, some of the very titles of poems and poem-collections lend support to the view that the reasons for the break with poetry are anticipated by the poems themselves—“stepping-stones on the path that led ultimately to a realization of what poetry cannot do” (as Friedmann puts it): “Celebration of Failure,” “Come, Words, Away,” “Poem Only,” “Poet: A Lying Word,” “There Is No Land Yet,” “Nothing So Far,” *Poems: A Joking Word, Twenty Poems Less...*⁴⁶ Finally, of course, she went further than this, coming to see even such modernist-heroic “failure” as tantamount to “scaring away failure” in “poem-success,” and turning to prose “to reacquire,” as Jerome McGann puts it, “the ground of the possibilities of truth-telling, that is, ‘those common risks of language, where failure stalks in every word.’” But Riding’s pressing on us with unexpected suddenness the expectation of our not distancing ourselves from what she has to say (in expectation of “intimateness”) is as characteristic of her poetry as her later writing in prose. Indeed, in the former the tension is often greater, given the awareness of the risk of failure entailed in poetry’s aesthetic “pretensions to power and completeness.”⁴⁷

We hardly need to be told, for example, “We are not the wind.” Accordingly, we *are* being told that we need not look for clues to the significance of “the wind” except at the poem’s level of discourse. Thus we are led to assume that this rhetorical appropriation by the mind’s eye of a phenomenon usually apprehended by the senses is absolute; that is, our experience of it as a physical entity need not interfere with its conceptual use in this instance. And if this outright appropriation of “the wind” seems rather to overreach itself in expectation of making sense, then semantically, it succeeds, given the tentative terms proffered at the very beginning of the poem: “We

⁴⁵ See, for instance, lines in poems 601 (“When Cogs - stop - that’s Circumference”), 890 (“Circumference without Relief”), 930 (Each Age a Lens / Disseminating their / Circumference”), 1067 (“Let ... a Circle hesitate / In Circumference”), 1297 (“The Billows of Circumference”) and 1636 (“Circumference thou Bride of Awe”).

⁴⁶ Friedmann’s words appear on the flyleaf of *First Awakenings: The Early Poems*, which she edited.

⁴⁷ McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 126.

have often considered the wind, / 'The *changing whys* of the wind" (PLR, 329, my emphasis). From the outset we are led to conceive of "the wind" as that which by its very nature escapes the grasp of our comprehension, and as we've seen, the poem's development underlines this: "When the wind runs we run with it. / We cannot understand because we are not / When the wind takes our minds."⁴⁸ Or as the second stanza emphasizes, so as to clarify in advance the more general idea that "we are not," how can we expect to "understand" (even though it seems there is nothing "to do, but to understand") when our minds are "wind-infected"? The metaphor of "infection" is prefigured by the many references in the first stanza to our "health," whether "ailing or well": "the rhythmic-fickle climates / Of our lives with ourselves." The way in which this last image compresses the twin conceits of the "weather" and "our health" typifies the metaphysical, quasi-diagnostic (later prescriptive) nature of Riding's poetic argument.

In ways such as these the poem coheres even while exploring the very concept of incoherency epitomized by "the wind." To the extent that the poem's bold rhetoric succeeds, it does so more by virtue of such semantic consistency—the astonishingly close and dynamic relationship, or "amazing sense," sustained between its terms—than the conclusiveness of the argument. The tone of finality makes the question of whether such speaking qualifies as truth-telling or mere didacticism a more subjective matter than many readers might be prepared to accept. But the bid for universality is rooted more in a close "indwelling" in language at the very "limits of meaning and the limits of our forms of trying to mean" (as Charles Bernstein has put it) than in the explicit truth-claims put forward by the poem.⁴⁹ For all its difficulty, the argument of "The Why of the Wind" bespeaks a confidence that even such abstractions may be brought inside, humanly housed, by virtue of "our rootedness in language." The notion of such "indwelling" again recalls the homely, "linguistic intimateness" that Riding shares with Dickinson.

⁴⁸ Again, *The Telling* expresses this conviction in strikingly similar terms: "But the nature of our being is not to be known as we know the weather, which is by the sense of the momentary. Weather is all change, while our being, in its human nature, is all constancy (63).

⁴⁹ Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), 228. The word "indwelling" is borrowed from Bernstein's introduction to *Rational Meaning* (RM, xviii).

But what does such intimateness have to do with Dickinson's exhortation to "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" or Riding's strikingly similar resolve, as stated in her poem "In Nineteen Twenty-Seven": "And what there is to do / Let me do somewhat crookedly, / Lest I speak too plain and everlasting / For such weather-vanes of understanding" (*PLR*, 126)? As Friedmann has pointed out, Dickinson's words were "not published until 1945, and so ... could not have been known to Riding" when she wrote the above lines. And I would agree that "Riding's arguing with herself (against herself, it might be said) the case for speaking 'somewhat crookedly' is not easily comparable to Dickinson's 'slant' truth-telling," in that Riding's propositions are, characteristically, more cleanly cut—as Graves's memorable image of "the strong pulling of her bladed mind / Through [the] ever-reluctant element" of "Time" suggests.⁵⁰ Riding's is generally a "straight" diction, as is her characteristic sentence-structure, and we have seen how rigorously her exposition of ideas tends to cohere; one might say that her poems cut fewer "semantic corners," or are less disjunctive, than Dickinson's.⁵¹ On the other hand, a certain "slant" is of the very nature of poems like "Afternoon" and "The Why of the Wind," as their point of view is far from being in the "real" world, rooted more in the "peculiar earth" of the poet's linguistically intimate attempt to "construe the word" (*PLR*, 43). As Lisa Samuels has noted, while Riding "hoped that poetry might solve [the] problem" of—in (Riding) Jackson's words—language's "not working" in "liveness of *meaning*" (a classic modernist "problem," one might add), she also (Samuels argues) "anticipated from her earliest writings its ultimate failure to do so" (*Anarchism*, xlv-xlvi). In this respect, Samuels goes on to suggest, the slant of Riding's truth telling may be understood as a Dickinsonian striving for "success in circuit."

Tell all the truth but tell it slant -
 Success in Circuit lies
 Too bright for our infirm Delight
 The Truth's superb surprise
 As Lightning to the children eased
 With explanation kind
 The Truth must dazzle gradually
 Or every man be blind -

(1263)

⁵⁰ Friedmann, in *Delmar*, 78. Robert Graves, *Complete Poems*, vol. 2, Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, eds. (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), 63.

⁵¹ The phrase "semantic corners" is from Kirkham, 303.

As (Riding) Jackson comments, looking back on *Anarchism Is Not Enough*: “I try to surround the truth that I am trying to enunciate by nearly surrounding it as nearly communicable: I don’t try to surround it as entirely surroundable for complete statement because I am afraid that my terms of statement might be fed by readers back into the area of conceptual classification” (*A*, 257). While she strove for more “complete statement” of truth in her poetry, an awareness of the impossibility of completely “surrounding” the truth and consequent recourse to the tactic of “nearly surrounding it as nearly communicable” are major themes of her poetry. As “The World and I” concludes: “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” (*PLR*, 198). In this respect her approach to truth, her mode of truth telling, is circuitous in Dickinson’s sense. Moreover, a similarly “slant” approach is implied by Riding’s original 1938 Preface to her *Collected Poems*, where she claims that in each poem she

assumes the responsibility of education in the reasons of poetry as well as that of writing a poem. Because I am fully aware of the background of miseducation from which most readers come to poems, I begin every poem on the most elementary plane of understanding and proceed to the plane of poetic discovery (or uncovering) by steps which deflect the reader from false associations, false reasons for reading. (*PLR*, 484)

Riding depicts “most readers” as being rather like “the children” in Dickinson’s poem, to whom “The Truth’s superb surprise” must be “eased / With explanation kind.” Indeed, the image of the poet’s proceeding gradually, “by steps which deflect the reader from false associations,” could well be seen as a somewhat circuitous means of “explanation.” But whereas Dickinson sees the need for “circuit” in the naked truth’s being “Too bright for our infirm Delight,” Riding blames “the background of miseducation from which most readers come to poems,” a difference which indicates her more didactic stance, as well, perhaps, as her greater ambition for poetry.

“The Wind, The Clock, The We” brings together the themes discussed thus far in this section. Even the poem’s quirkily inclusive, grammatically deviant title is reminiscent of Dickinson. The poem has to do with coming through madness, through “feverish” consciousness of self in time, and with the prospect of making finally, calmly, hard-won sense. Beginning by asserting that “The wind has at last got into the clock” (*PLR*, 191), the poem postulates a resolution of madness that comes

with release from dualistic consciousness of time—release, one might say, from the “wakeful suspension” of “Afternoon,” from the uncertainty of the “changing whys of the wind,” with “Time” now “become a landscape / Of suicidal leaves and stoic branches ... And the minutes given leave to die.” Whereas “nothing in [the] horrors” of “afternoon” (such as “The clock-ticks hear[ing] / The clock-ticks ticking back) “moves to swallow,” now we find “the clock ... devouring itself,” “self-choked falsity,” and “The wind at last got into the clock, / The clock at last got into the wind, / The world at last got out of itself” (191)—these last lines illustrating “the way,” as Kirkham puts it, “that, while the shape of the thought stays the same, the thought grows rapidly in inclusiveness”⁵²—until, “at last,” the speaker claims to have arrived at literal sense-making, a linguistic intimateness un-vexed by “The wind’s boldness and the clock’s care”:

At last we can make sense, you and I,
You lone survivors on paper,
The wind’s boldness and the clock’s care
Become a voiceless language,
And I the story hushed in it—”

(192)

But this is a paradoxical, almost post-linguistic intimateness that is envisioned, a speaking from within a “voiceless language,” and the poem has little further to go from here, ending on an ambivalent, questioning note:

Is more to say of me?
Do I say more than self-choked falsity
Can repeat word for word after me,
The script not altered by a breath
Of perhaps meaning otherwise?

(ibid.)

The question may also, however, be read as rhetorical, expressive of satisfaction in achieved oneness with words through overcoming (“choking”) of “falsity,” as if, having mastered the “madness”—life’s “idiotic defiance of it knew not what”—Dickinsonian “divinest sense” can now be made. Or as Dickinson claims elsewhere: “A Word that breathes distinctly / Has not the power to die” (1715), a notion which may well put us in mind of (Riding) Jackson’s demand for “liveness of meaning.”

A representative example of such modernist striving for revitalized meaning, one which highlights both affinity and difference between Riding and Dickinson, is

⁵² Kirkham, 306.

Riding's "Rubric for the Eye," the concluding stanza of "The Signs of Knowledge." Given the context of (Riding) Jackson's comment as to how she "assumed the character of a modern ... in becoming a poet in the century's first quarter of poetic modernism" (*PLR*, xxix), I shall quote the stanza as it appears in her collection of 1933, *Poet: A Lying Word*.

Let the thought sharpen as the eye dulls
Of sharpening on newsights old.
Let the thought see, let the moon be familiar.
Sun of world! Moon of word!
Eye-spilling live of eye! Undeath of mindsight!
Moonclearly, emptily, full grail aspeak!⁵³

The rhetoric of these lines relies very much on the peculiarity of diction centred in arresting word-conjunctions and coinages such as "Moonclearly," "mindsight" and "Undeath," the component parts of which have already been used a number of times in the poem. Chiefly, however, it depends upon these elements being compressed into boldly minimal images, for instance, "Sun of world! Moon of word!" and paradoxical collocations such as "newsights old." This forces us to read each word and its constituent parts strictly in relation to one another—afresh, but in closed terms, as it were. The words are organized into sets of correlatives and antitheses—thought/mind, sharp/dull, eye/see/sight, new/familiar/old, familiar/clear, sun/moon/world, undeath/live, full/empty/spill/grail, word/speak—from which the reader must elicit sense-connections, building up the impression of an almost auto-telic linguistic model of the kind proposed as genuinely modernist by Riding and Graves where they claim that "all we can do is let [the poem] interpret itself" (*SMP*, 147).

Nonetheless, as Cristanne Miller says of Dickinson, "juxtaposing words that do not function together in normal usage creates a kind of parataxis, for which the reader must work out the appropriate relationship."⁵⁴ Whereas, in Dickinson (as in Miller's instance, "The Daily Own - of Love // Depreciate the Vision - ") "the discourse of the poem indicates the direction these reconstructions of meaning and syntax should take, but ... does not clarify the ambiguity altogether,"⁵⁵ Riding

⁵³ Laura Riding, *Poet: A Lying Word* (London: Arthur Barker, 1933), 46.

⁵⁴ Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 173.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

minimizes this risk. We have looked at some ways in which Riding's "idea images" resemble Dickinson's, but it would be less apt to suggest that Riding "float[s] out" such figures as "unattached trope[s] in free linguistic orbit," as in the case of Dickinson's image, "No Furrow on the Glow," near the end of poem 895—which, as Porter points out, offers no clues as to "what kind of furrow" and "what kind of glow."⁵⁶ That is, the unexpected "coupling" of Riding's imagery is rarely "illogical."⁵⁷ Riding tends to avoid Dickinsonian experimentation with uninflected verbs (as in the case of "Depreciate"), inflection being a particularly important means, as Miller notes, of "mark[ing] the context, and thus generally the direction and boundaries, of a verb's predication."⁵⁸ Likewise, she is sparing in her use of word-class transposition, the only instance in the above quotation being "live of eye." In Riding's plain, and in that sense homely, diction, "richness and precision of meaning are achieved," as Kirkham points out, "without adjectival pageantry."⁵⁹ I would, however, stress that the stylistic unlikeness between Riding and Dickinson comes to define itself on grounds that are shared. As Deborah Baker has suggested, both wrote in a "metaphysical idiom" that "provided a vehicle" for their "spiritual intensity and boldness." This idiom is also homely, not only in its "intimateness" with language *per se* but also insofar as it serves both poets in exploring the idea of home, to which I shall now turn.

iii. The House of Possibility: Poetry as House and Home

Given the centrality of "home" in Dickinson's famously reclusive life, it is hardly surprising that the word occurs with notable frequency in her poetry—a total of eighty-six times.⁶⁰ The topic could well invite consideration of historical and biographical factors, but in what follows we shall be concerned with her poetic

⁵⁶ David Porter, in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 144.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁵⁸ Cristanne Miller, in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 174.

⁵⁹ Michael Kirkham, "Laura Riding's Poems," 307.

⁶⁰ This number is based on *A Concordance to the Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. S.P. Rosenbaum (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1964), 358–9. "The basic text for this concordance is the 1958 second printing of the three-volume variorum *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, published by Harvard University Press" (xvi), ed. Thomas H. Johnson.

treatment of the idea of home and its pointing, like Riding's, to linguistically intimate dwelling in language and truth.⁶¹ As Judith Farr has commented, "it is Dickinson's language, her words, that must always hold the center of any study. She claimed that 'A Word that breathes distinctly / Has not the power to die' ... What distinguishes her as a poet are the sharp intensity, the vivid (or living) distinctness, the essential justice and rich frugality of her language."⁶² Indeed, these distinguishing features could equally well serve to describe Riding's poetry, and as indicated in the preceding section of this chapter, such "rich frugality" (unornamented, plain, yet condensed in meaning) is an aspect of the homeliness of both poets' language. But this is a homeliness very much of the mind (however unexpectedly sensuous their descriptions of what Dickinson calls "the foliage of the mind"), and as Farr observes of the following poem of Dickinson's, "Her subject here is the intellect or imagination that is a sacred home or 'tabernacle' for all images and ideas ... Our respect for the verbal authority of this poem can be complete, even without enhancements provided by history, linguistic theory, or biography."⁶³

Talk not to me of Summer Trees
 The foliage of the mind
 A tabernacle is for Birds
 Of no corporeal kind
 And winds do go that way at noon
 To their Ethereal Homes
 Whose Bugles call the least of us
 To undepicted Realms

(1655)

Riding is no more a "nature poet" in the conventional sense than Dickinson in the above lines. On the other hand, Riding tends to avoid suggestion and celebration of the sacred and "ethereal," insisting, rather, on poetic vision as expressive of "a sense of life so real that it becomes the sense of something more real than life" that is nonetheless very much part of the immediate business of living (*CS*, 9). Her impulse is more often to demystify the "mist" in which truth, as she sees it, is all-too-

⁶¹ The importance of the idea of home in Dickinson studies can be seen from Jean McClure Mudge's *Emily Dickinson and the Image of Home* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1975) and Domhnall Mitchell's *Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), chapters 2, 3 and 5 in particular.

⁶² *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 17.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 18.

often enshrouded (*PLR*, 264). Nevertheless, Riding's and Dickinson's shared insistence on the mind's capacity to apprehend and articulate truth in distinctly breathing words, without recourse to "talk" of outer things such as "Summer Trees," is at least as striking as the divergence in their development of that fundamental idea.

Thus, for Dickinson, home *is* the "House" of "Possibility":

I dwell in Possibility -
 A fairer House than Prose -
 More numerous of Windows -
 Superior - for Doors -

The concision of this opening is deceptive: as the extended metaphor of the poem unfolds, it invites increasingly open, flexible interpretation of this figure for—apparently—Poetry. With "chambers ... Impregnable of eye" and an "everlasting Roof" bounded by "the Gambrels of the Sky," it is implied that the dweller in this limitless house of possibility enjoys the privilege of mystical insight. On the other hand, these images also suggest a vertiginous shift in perspective, and with the subsequent mention of "Visitors," a suggestion of haunting:

Of Visitors - the fairest -
 For Occupation - This -
 The spreading wide my narrow Hands
 To gather Paradise -

(466)

Despite the mood of mystical euphoria, a striking feature of this house is its austerity—emptiness, even, for it is a rhetorical figure that advertises itself as such and in the end collapses in on the *possible* act of revelation of which it ("This") is a demonstration: the poet's "spreading wide [her] narrow Hands." "To gather Paradise" channels, but also complicates, the symbolic meaning of this image, as the shadowy figure of the poet takes her place at the site of "Possibility," the poem ending with "narrow hands" still "spread wide" (as the incomplete gesture of punctuation indicates)—whether in *expectation* of "gathering" or in the very act of "gather[ing] Paradise" being left unclear.⁶⁴ At the same time, the speaker's resolve upon this "Occupation" and the sense of openness in her expectation of visitors (of which the final dash is perhaps most expressive) are suggestive of rootedness and hospitality, aspects of homeliness. But from the start, the speaker has seemed almost

⁶⁴ In another poem (1144), Dickinson describes "Paradise" itself as a house: "that old mansion / Many owned before."

to protest too much, and as a house of *possibility*, this home is inevitably, to some extent, founded on or near a condition of homelessness, impermanence or instability. This sense of “home-in-homelessness” is particularly pronounced in American writing of the period, given the country’s vastness, diversity and recent history of pioneering settlement. We are often reminded that home is constituted as much by what is shut out as what is taken in. But unlike Thoreau, who sought refuge in the woods near Walden Pond, Dickinson insists, as she puts it, on “surpassing ... Material Place” (407); and so, in a sense, she has greater need of “visitors.”

Accordingly, the trope of haunting is widely employed by Dickinson. A notable instance that subverts the metaphor of house as home and “produces,” as Domhnall Mitchell puts it, “a defamiliarization of accepted categories, a confusing of subject-object relations,” is poem 407, which begins thus:⁶⁵

One need not be a Chamber - to be Haunted -
 One need not be a House -
 The Brain has Corridors - surpassing
 Material Place -

Far safer, of a midnight meeting
 External Ghost
 Than it’s interior confronting -
 That cooler Host -

Again insisting on the mind as dwelling-place “of no corporeal kind” (“surpassing / Material Place”), the poem’s “confusing of subject-object relations” centres on the figures of “Host” (a figure of the “interior”), and Visitor—*not* the “External Ghost” of Gothic convention, but, more disturbingly close to home, “one’s a’self”:

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
 The Stones a’chase -
 Than unarmed, one’s a’self encounter -
 In lonesome place -

Ourself behind ourself, concealed -
 Should startle most -

As Mitchell points out, “the reference to the ‘Host’ in the second stanza reverses the normal logic of haunting ... suddenly, the *self* (and not the ‘other’) is a tenant or perhaps even an interloper in a chamber of her or his thoughts.”⁶⁶ Much as the

⁶⁵ Domhnall Mitchell, *Emily Dickinson: Monarch of Perception*, 50.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

speaker of poem 303 grounds herself in the House of Poetry/Possibility while foregrounding its literal *impossibility*, so too this poem “dramatizes ... the tensions or contradictions of its opening line, where the speaker defines herself in opposition to a “chamber” but nevertheless depends on the chamber to undertake that definition.”⁶⁷ Riding employs a similar strategy in defining her sense of “post-carnal” self in relation to the world, as we shall see shortly.

Judith Farr aptly describes Dickinson’s dramatization of the life of the mind as “description of sublime entertainments,” taking the following poem as an exemplary case:

Alone, I cannot be -
 For Hosts - do visit me -
 Recordless Company -
 Who baffle key -

They have no Robes, nor Names -
 No Almanacs - nor Climes -
 But general Homes
 Like Gnomes -

Their Coming, may be known
 By Couriers within -
 Their going - is not -
 For they’re never gone

(303)

Dickinson’s description of these sublime entertainments is riddled with paradox and ambiguity. The idea of home as a metaphor for the speaker’s transcendent self is destabilized by the second line’s play on the Scriptural and literal meanings of “Hosts.” These hosts, akin to the “Visitors” in her “House of Possibility,” are also insubstantial: uncluttered by attributes, “transcend[ing] sex, time and place,” as Farr puts it (the comparison to gnomes a homely, humorous touch in view of Dickinson’s signing off as “Your Gnome” in letters to Higginson.)⁶⁸ Nor does the mention of “Couriers within” much clarify things, as the usual role of couriers is to go *between*. Perhaps their role is to signify a certain thrilling of the senses, a reawakening at the “Coming” of these visiting “Hosts” who are in fact “never gone”—in renewed

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ As noted by Farr, in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 11.

awareness, that is, of their never having gone. In Dickinson's "interior," the usual roles of "Visitor" and "Host" (sometimes, "guest") are subverted—so frustrating the oppositions underlying the notion of home as a locus of self.⁶⁹ From the perspective of Riding's view of the scope of poetry, the Dickinsonian "I" who dwells in this "interior" realm of Possibility may be seen as being "precisely somewhere in precisely everywhere" (*PLR*, 487).

But where Dickinson defers revelation with a turn to the sublime and ecstatic (leaving truth, as Riding might see it, in "privacies of statement"), Riding urges our immediate coming-to-our-senses, out of "secrecy of heart" (*PLR*, 241).⁷⁰ Revelation for her is more a matter of "uncovering" truth than "gather[ing] Paradise" or the ineffable. She is concerned with demystification, with dispelling the mist, to adapt a metaphor from "The Last Covenant," in which even "Heaven" is described as "the mist, thoughts left unthought." Disclaiming "those pledges / Which between man and heaven held / By rapt contrivance" (*PLR*, 265), the poem argues instead for decisive clarity and the need not to promise but simply to "Choose, therefore, to be now, or then" (276). Of course it would be true to say that Riding "defers" her "revelation" too. But here we are more concerned with the poems' differing *gestures*.

It is not written in what heart
 You may not pass from magic plenty
 Into the straightened nowadays.
 To each is given secrecy of heart,
 To make himself what heart he please
 In stirring up from that fond table
 To sit him down at this sharp meal.
(*PLR*, 241)

⁶⁹ Riding plays more freely with these sorts of oppositions in many of her stories: "In the End," for example, "brings the outside inside" with its remarkable thesis: "The end of the world was that there was no sky. There came to be no sky! Of the sky only the moon was left. And the moon was as the inside of the world, which now had no outside. ... And everything which was in the world now was in the house. And there was no outside. ... The world was a house" (*Progress*, 295). As for Dickinson's "guest": an instance that is noteworthy for its conflating "host" and "guest" is poem 1754, the first stanza of which reads: "He was my host - he was my guest, / I never to this day / If I invited him could tell / Or he invited me."

⁷⁰ Dickinson's "turn to the ecstatic" is sometimes also described in terms of "Transport," and "ecstasy." Poem #178, for example, begins: "To learn the Transport by the Pain -/ As Blind Men learn the sun!" and as Dickinson writes to T. W. Higginson: "I find ecstasy in living" (*The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson and Theodora Ward (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 342a).

The focus here, as in “The Last Covenant,” is upon trials of “Possibility” plainer than Dickinsonian “magic plenty,” granting the individual’s ability to choose “what heart he please” and “what defeat he will,” given all that “is not counted” in truth’s “sharp” shock to the “private” self: “It is not counted what large passions / Your heart in ancient private keeps alive” (PLR, 242). Riding is vigilant of the risk, as described in another poem, that even “dying frenzy / Makes new dwelling-charm” (PLR, 211). What *is* “written,” as it were, is for us to discover for ourselves, in light of the poem’s negative epistemology, or “uncovering.”⁷¹

Similarly, the prophecy, promise and commitment suggested by the title, “The Last Covenant,” and implied by the poem’s tone of certainty, is tempered by its suspicion of “Man’s private humour of things unplain . . . thoughts left unthought” (PLR, 265). Such scepticism is so thoroughgoing as to call the very terms of the title into question, reminding us that this is a poem “continual” rather than “final,” and that its covenant should be “lasting” as well as “last.” Acknowledging that this may well leave us asking, “And what remains? . . . And in that world?” the speaker assures us that “in that world . . . The count is homely: / These are not nameless multitudes” (PLR, 268-9). But the only answer that the poem offers plainly and positively is “Truth”: “Truth remains, by which a world remains” (268). Insofar as the assurance of homeliness stands in for an answer that can be framed only negatively (“These are not nameless multitudes”), it points to a difficulty intrinsic to truth telling in prophetic mode. The closing lines of “Death as Death” put this problem succinctly:

The prophetic eye,
Closing upon difficulty,
Opens upon comparison,
Halving the actuality
As a gift too plain, for which
Gratitude has no language,
Foresight no vision.

(PLR, 83)

The vision of the possibility of literal truth-telling (of speaking, here, of “death as death”) proves to be “a gift too plain” for understanding, given the prophetic eye’s need to “open,” continually, “upon comparison,” in “clos[ing] upon difficulty” from which only paradox can deliver the speaker. Death as death is self-cancelling, both as a cancellation of the speaker’s self and as a self-cancelling definition of “death.”

⁷¹ I am thinking here, again, of Riding’s definition, in the original preface to her *Collected Poems*, of a poem as “an uncovering of truth” (PLR, 484).

But this condition of homelessness is taken, in Riding's poetic project, as the ground for "post-carnal" home building, a new locus of identity—albeit one, as the poem "I Am" puts it, of "perfect contradiction." The speaker defines herself in opposition to "a world as was a world" (the world of "King Habit") while also depending on it for "proof."

Where then, fellow citizens
Of this post-carnal matter,
Is each the next and next one,
Stretching the instant chain
Toward its first-last link,
The twilight that into dawn passes
Without intervention of night,
Time's slow terrible enemy?

.

That I live—let me be a proof
Of a world as was a world,
And accept it, King Habit,
From my mouth, our mouth.

But where, where?
If I have so companioned?
Here, here!

The same not-here I ever held,
And be it yours, and I yours,
Out of my mouth until
You tire of the possession
And, falling prone, relinquish
The stale breath of stubbornness.

Then will this still be here,
Here, here, the proved not-here
Of perfect contradiction—
Here where you visited on me
The individual genius, paradox.
(PLR, 209-10)

The "homeless" self stands at the threshold of "home": the idea of home is realized in the perfectly contradictory idea of being both *here* and *not-here*. Similarly, the speaker of "The Signs of Knowledge" speaks of a state of "unlife" from which one may "learn":

Oh, have you vanished from yourself
Nor seek old where-to-be nor new?

Oh, do you break in scatter-self and stay-self,
In wander-world and stand-mind?

Then have you unlife, and then learn
Undeath of moon has come on you,
The moon-grail clears and wholes,
An emptiness whole-shines at eye-thought.
See whole then: these are the signs.

(PLR, 232–3)

Riding's paradoxical word-choices and neologisms indicate her urgent sense of the necessity for a suspension of opposites, a ground of "perfect contradiction," if reconciliation in truth is to take place. This "emptiness whole-shin[ing] at eye-thought" may be seen as a corrective to the "prophetic eye's" compulsion to continually "open upon comparison," as described in "Death as Death."

Having resolved the questions it raises by pinning them down to a paradoxical sense of place, "I Am" goes on to employ the metaphor of home-as-a-safe-refuge, so as to express the potential for "continuity" (of an ongoing sense of self in time):

I, out of your stopped mouth, our mouth,
Will spin round continuity,
Winding the thread me round
To keep these other years safe
Always and always while you haunt
The windows that might be here,
Looking for sign of elsewhere—

(PLR, 211)

Thus "haunting" plays a part in this "post-carnal" life; but in a reversal of normal logic, *life* haunts the after-life, "Looking for sign of elsewhere." Dickinson herself famously employed the trope of haunting in a letter to Higginson, to describe her very conception of Art: "Nature is a Haunted House—but Art—a House that tries to be haunted."⁷² Riding might have disagreed, aiming for greater clarity in her own poetic art, but she also worries over "grow[ing] ghostly" (PLR, 16) and is intensely aware of her "script" being haunted by "breath / Of perhaps meaning otherwise" (PLR, 192). Indeed, her receptivity to the risk of such "failure" is the crucial link between the poetic and post-poetic phases of her work.

We have looked in this section at the ways in which Riding and Dickinson press at the limits of the idea of a dwelling-place or "House"—the word immediately becomes more abstract thus capitalized—to explore the possibility of spiritual

⁷² *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, 459A.

homeliness. Their development of the idea tends to diverge where Dickinson's poetry becomes otherworldly, fascinated with the seductions of the Unknown, and Riding's strives for literal, final truth telling. But like Dickinson, Riding uncompromisingly "took the mind to be her dwelling place," often, fittingly, using "domestic figurative correspondences to describe it," and so insisting on "linguistic intimateness," above all.⁷³ It is an austere homeliness, more demanding than cozy, distinctively American in its "Puritan emphasis on the scrutiny of 'Meanings'" and "the instinctive tendency to internalize" experience.⁷⁴ The effect of such scrutiny and internalization is that both poets, as Allen Tate claims of Dickinson, seem to "speak wholly to the individual experience."⁷⁵ As a result, for all their "success in circuit," directness is the lasting impression their poetry leaves. Both, in their different ways, sought "mastery of the world by rejecting the world," as Tate puts it, Dickinson by "going upstairs and clos[ing] the door,"⁷⁶ Riding by refusing to admit the zeitgeist, or historical "time-sense," into her poetry (or at least by defining her poetics on the basis of denial of its importance).⁷⁷ Their insistence on confining themselves to home in "linguistic intimateness" aligns their work with the modernist "linguistic turn," a tendency that is even more marked in the work of Riding's contemporary, Gertrude Stein, whose work will be considered in relation to Riding's in the next chapter.

⁷³ Suzanne Juhasz, "The Landscape of the Spirit," in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 137.

⁷⁴ Geoff Ward, *The Writing of America* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 57.

⁷⁵ Allen Tate, "Emily Dickinson," in *Essays of Four Decades* (Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books, 1999), 298.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁷⁷ In *Anarchism Is Not Enough*, she goes so far as to describe the "just conclusion" of the "unreal self" as "social disappearance" (75); and the "self-in-language" (Lisa Samuels's term) that initiates this disappearance encapsulates the notion of "linguistic intimateness." In her introductory essay to *Anarchism Is Not Enough*, Samuels writes: "Riding's self-in-language 'denies reality' rather than making up a world within or 'behind' reality because it is not *oneself* ... but the self itself that she wants to sing" (A, xxviii).

Chapter 3

Riding and Gertrude Stein: A Qualified Admirer

If an innovative aspect of Dickinson's "linguistic intimacy" is her paring down of poetic language, Gertrude Stein takes the same tendency to a starker, modernist extreme. Riding effectively mediates the "line" between her predecessors in this respect. Her poetry could well be characterized as a synthesis of Dickinson's pithy style of argument and Stein's insistently repetitional phrasing; of the former's abstracted imagery and the latter's etymological transparency. Stein in particular caught, and held, Riding's critical attention—more so, indeed, than any other contemporary; and for a relatively short but crucial time in Riding's life, she was an important friend and personal mentor. The warmth, sharpness and considerable extent of Riding's writing on Stein are indicative of the impetus she gained, despite the need she later felt to differentiate her project from that of her former friend.

Their acquaintance began, at Riding's instigation, in May 1928, 1929 seeing the publication of Stein's *An Acquaintance with Description* by Riding and Graves's recently founded Seizin Press.¹ Riding would have been reading Stein closely from at least 1926, when her first collection of poems, *The Close Chaplet*, and Stein's *Composition as Explanation* were both published by the Hogarth Press.² In June 1927, Riding's essay, "The New Barbarism, and Gertrude Stein," appeared in *transition*; it also formed the basis of the last chapter of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), as well as being expanded into the most substantial chapter of her first book of criticism as sole author, *Contemporaries and Snobs* (1928).³ Although their personal association

¹ According to Eugene Jolas in his unpublished memoir, "Man from Babel," after a visit to the offices of *transition* in May 1928, and then lunch, "Laura Riding and Robert Graves asked me if I could arrange a meeting with Gertrude Stein, which I did." See Elizabeth Friedmann, *A Mannered Grace*, 119–20. Friedmann suggests that "Laura Riding's first meeting with Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas probably took place on Tuesday, May 22, 1928, in their art-jammed apartment at 27 rue de Fleurus" (120). Further references to Stein's *An Acquaintance with Description* (London: Seizin Press, 1929) will be to the text as included in the more widely available *A Stein Reader*, Ulla E. Dydo, ed. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), hereafter cited in the text as *UD*. *An Acquaintance with Description* was the second Seizin publication, the first being Riding's own *Love as Love, Death as Death* (1928).

² Further references to Stein's *Composition as Explanation* (London: Hogarth Press, 1926) will be to the text as included in *A Stein Reader*, hereafter cited in this chapter as *UD*.

³ Laura Riding, "The New Barbarism, and Gertrude Stein," *transition* 3 (June 1927): 153–168. *Contemporaries and Snobs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928)—hereafter cited in the text as *CS*.

lasted for little more than two years, for Riding it was intense. “Thinking to Gertrude [*sic*],” she wrote, through Graves, from her hospital bed in May 1929, “has kept me alive in the worst hours. . . . Anyone else who wants to be here with me as Robert is must discover in herself or himself an out-of-the-windowness. Gertrude does not have to; she was never inside the window. Tell Gertrude I love her.”⁴ No less significantly, the first letter she herself wrote after surgery on her broken back was to Stein.⁵ Little more than a year later, however, in a letter of November 1930, Riding put an end to their correspondence, on account of Stein’s having failed to reply to her and Graves’s anxiously enquiring letters (“Robert said surely Gertrude ill but I said to hope not”).⁶ According to Elizabeth Friedmann, Stein may have taken offense at teasing comments in an earlier (and notably “Steinesque”) letter from Riding, who, having heard nothing for several months, proposed a clean break: “Well you apparently are not going to say anything . . . If you don’t care how we feel, to keep it from being unpleasant you ought to say something unpleasant. . . . if not all right I promise not to write again not even about the weather *certainly not*.” Thus Riding left the door ajar for Stein to make amends, but having invested more of herself and her writing in the relationship, clearly she wished to establish exactly where they stood, while Stein seems to have been content simply to let things drop.

By all accounts, Riding and Stein were extraordinarily charismatic figures, and both moved influentially in cosmopolitan literary and artistic milieux abroad during their most productive years—in Deyá, Majorca, and Paris, respectively.⁷ (Riding) Jackson notes in a late essay that Stein came to be associated with “quasi-divinity in literary lore,” but Riding, too, gained a reputation for attracting (if, often, later repelling) “disciples,” particularly during the nineteen thirties.⁸ There has even,

⁴ Friedmann, *A Mannered Grace*, 142.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁶ For an account of Riding’s break with Stein, see Elizabeth Friedmann, *A Mannered Grace*, 169-71. See also, for an account casting Riding in a less favourable light, Deborah Baker, *In Extremis*, 193-4.

⁷ The period during which Riding was most productive and influential was, more precisely, from 1927, the year of her establishing the Seizin Press in London with Robert Graves, to 1936, the year of their fleeing Majorca, at the encroachment of the Spanish Civil War.

⁸ Laura (Riding) Jackson, “The Word-Play of Gertrude Stein,” in *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, ed. Michael J. Hoffman (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986), 240–60. In the second addendum to this

according to Deborah Baker, “grown a jungle of excited comment over whether Laura Riding suffered from the illusion that she was God”; while Riding herself, in *Epilogue*, “identified Stein as God”—a notion she later explained away by saying that “this was in very serious play with the possibilities of extreme statement.”⁹ Be that as it may, it is safe to say that both Riding and Stein have come to be seen as notably assertive and “oppositional female modernists,” to borrow a phrase Lisa Samuels uses to describe Riding and “another, relatively neglected and hard-to-label modernist writer, Mina Loy.”¹⁰ From a broader perspective, their unwavering self-belief and rejection of systematized frames of reference reflects the American tradition of individualism, particularly an Emersonian refusal of authority and emphasis on self-reliance. Free from any sense of obligation to divine or political authority, both strove for linguistically purified word-use—a characteristically modernist emphasis that also reflects the acuteness of American concern, since the country’s first New World settlement, with “the material and constructive nature of language.”¹¹ In their writings, this concern is manifested in an extremely abstract but seemingly childlike simplicity, which astonishes in ways reminiscent of Dickinson’s starkly metaphysical yet intimate poetic language. Although Stein’s fluid, often slippery writing descends more from “the Emerson of philosophical flux and flow,”¹² as well, of course, from her teacher William James’s phenomenological approach to psychology, both she and Riding emphatically claimed to speak plainly in their writings—so much so that the unexpected plainness may well seem difficulty. Insisting on meaning exactly what they say (contrary to the ironical and allusive Eliotic vein of poetic modernism), both demanded only that the reader attend fully

essay, she writes: “Gertrude Stein has actually won for herself the status of a figure of at least quasi-divinity in literary lore” (260).

⁹ Baker, *In Extremis*, 285-6. Riding’s reference to Stein as God appears in *Epilogue* I, 9. Her later explanation of the comment appears in *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, 260.

¹⁰ Lisa Samuels, “Creating Criticism: An Introduction to *Anarchism Is Not Enough*,” in *Anarchism Is Not Enough*, ed. Lisa Samuels (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), xxxiv.

¹¹ Ian F.A. Bell, “Introduction: Tony Tanner on American means of writing and means of writing America” in Tony Tanner, *The American Mystery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xiv.

¹² *Ibid.*, xvi.

to their use of words in the given context: a strictly “linguistic intimateness,” to recall (Riding) Jackson’s term.¹³ In this sense, and bearing in mind that neither embraced her Jewish heritage, we reach, in their writings, an end of the Puritan line, with purification of language taking precedence over religious concerns. If, as Geoff Ward puts it, “words were the medium through which Emerson’s Americans were to grant themselves permission: to risk themselves in experiment, to start life again from scratch, forgiven by the next and more intense instant; to dethrone all authority; to love themselves; to *be*,” the writings of Riding and Stein are exemplary.¹⁴

For Stein, such “linguistic intimateness” was almost mathematically strict. In the characteristically didactic-sounding “How Writing is Written” (1935), she explains:

While I was writing I didn’t want, when I used one word, to make it carry with it too many associations. I wanted as far as possible to make it exact, as exact as mathematics: that is to say, for example, if one and one make two, I wanted to get words to have as much exactness as that. When I put them down they were to have this quality. The whole history of my work, from *The Making of Americans*, has been a history of that.¹⁵

In fact, Riding—“more than any other critic to this point [1928],” as Michael Hoffman points out—had already understood, and applauded, this aspect of Stein’s achievement. In so doing, she depicts Stein’s writing as wiping the slate clean, restoring the possibility of “direct communication” by using language “to record pure, ultimate obviousness”:

She makes it capable of direct communication not by caricaturing language in its present stage—attacking decadence with decadence—but by purging it of its discredited experiences. None of the words Miss Stein uses have ever had any experience. They are no older than her use of them . . . The design that Miss Stein makes of them is literally abstract and mathematical because they are etymologically transparent and commonplace, mechanical but not eccentric. (*CS*, 189)

¹³ “An Autobiographical Summary,” in *PN Review* 17, no. 4: 30.

¹⁴ Geoff Ward, *The Writing of America* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 65.

¹⁵ Gertrude Stein, *How Writing is Written*, vol. 2 of *The Previously Uncollected Works of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Robert Hass (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974), 157.

In Stein's terms, such writing has "completely its own time," an ideal of formal autonomy that Riding also espoused and claimed to have achieved in her poems.¹⁶

But her praise is for Stein's

courage, clarity, sincerity, simplicity. She has created a human mean in language, a mathematical equation of ordinariness, which leaves one with a tender respect for that changing and unchanging slowness that is humanity and Gertrude Stein. Humanity—one learns this from Gertrude Stein but not from contemporary poetry—is fundamentally a nice person; and so is Gertrude Stein.¹⁷

Significantly, however, Riding's emphasis is upon the "respect" Stein's extraordinary "ordinariness ... leaves one with," rather than the work's accomplishment as *poetry* (a word still held in highest regard by Riding at that time). Nowhere, in fact, does Riding refer to Stein simply as "poet"; instead, she is seen as an important "artisan of language."¹⁸ For all its admirable simplicity, Stein's writing was always, for Riding, also "barbaric," an expression of the "mass ... time-sense" (*CS*, 142). Its virtue lay in its expressing this sense more literally and sincerely than other "barbaric" modernists. Riding deliberately differs, in this respect, from T.S. Eliot, whom she quotes on Stein: "If this is the future, then the future is, as it very likely is, of the barbarians. But this is the future in which we ought not to be interested" (*CS*, 156). But Riding is interested in Stein's work for the clarity of its rendering of the barbarism of the present age: Stein's words "are no older than her use of them, and she is herself no older than her age conceived barbarically" (*CS*, 189). In articulating the barbaric conception of her age so "obviously," Stein brings it to light, and potentially, an end.

In its negative aspects, Riding's ambivalence tacitly draws upon Wyndham Lewis's harsher assessment of Stein, as put forward in several chapters of *Time and Western Man*, published in 1927. Riding and Lewis were aware of each other's work and met several times on friendly terms. A poem of hers was published in *The Enemy*

¹⁶ See, for instance, Riding's claim for her poem "The Rugged Black of Anger": "All we can do is let [the poem] interpret itself, without introducing any new associations or, if possible, any new words" (*SMP*, 147). Stein's phrase appears in *Gertrude Stein: Writings and Lectures 1911–1945*, ed. Patricia Meyerowitz (London: Peter Owen, 1967), 107. Hereafter cited in the text as Meyerowitz.

¹⁷ *Contemporaries and Snobs*, 194–5.

¹⁸ Steven Meyer, "An Ill-matched Correspondence: Laura Riding's Gertrude Stein," *Raritan*, vol. 19, no. 4 (spring 2000): 159–170.

(which “surprised her,” according to Friedmann). Riding even invited Lewis to submit “something short (not critical)” to the Seizin Press, though this never materialized.¹⁹ As *Anarchism Is Not Enough*, published in the same year as *Contemporaries and Snobs*, makes clear, Riding was drawn to Lewis’s attitude towards contemporary society and shared his sense of the issues, particularly his vigorous critique of the “Time-mind,” but she rejected the “systematic” nature of his response—his “advocating a system [or “vocabulary”] to take the place of the system which certain aspects of James Joyce’s work, say, represent to Mr. Lewis.” This tendency she conceives as the “unreal projecting itself realistically, organizing itself,” where it ought to be kept pure and autonomous (*A*, 62). Her individualism, in this sense, is absolute: “I think this system should indeed be attacked in so far as it is a system and in so far as it is necessary for a preservation of integrity. I do not think it should be replaced. I want the time-world removed and in its place to see – nothing” (*ibid.*). Underpinning this argument is the idiosyncratic, if not paradoxical, claim that “the individual is an *unbecoming*” (*A*, 74), constituted in a movement “away from reality” and the dictates of history: “a sort of social disappearance” (75). Lisa Samuels aptly describes this notion of the individual as “a *personalism*,” to be distinguished from “self-absorption or self-satisfaction” and “practical individualism as it is often understood in America.” Samuels goes on to make the important point that Riding’s “version of individual authority” is not merely based on a denial of socio-historical reality, but “is an absolute spiritual imperative, compared to which the more common Western ideology of personal liberty is a temporal shadow” (*A*, xxx).

Lewis’s thought is more politically oriented, but at the heart of his attack on Stein’s work is his view of her as a “time-child.” That is, he sees in her work merely a reflection of the “child-cult” of the time (“from Sir James Barrie to Charlie Chaplin”). “But *the child* with her,” Lewis claims, “is always overshadowed by the imbecile.”²⁰ There is an element of this charge in Riding’s view of Stein’s “barbarism,” which is a curious mixture of the dismissive and admiring: “No one but Miss Stein,” she claims provocatively, “has been willing to be as ordinary, as simple, as primitive, as stupid, as barbaric as successful barbarism demands” (*CS*, 183). On

¹⁹ See Friedmann, *A Mannered Grace*, 114–116.

²⁰ Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1993), 60.

the face of it, this would seem to amount to little more than claiming that the modernist establishment “had it coming” and got what they deserved in Stein. At the same time, there is an element of homeliness, via simplicity and primitivism, in Stein’s “barbarism” that clearly appealed to Riding (while Lewis simply bemoaned “the monstrous, soggy *lengths* of primitive mass-life”), and I will argue that Stein’s use of language to “mean nothing but what it means through her using of it” (*CS*, 192) provided a useful model, or mode of writing, for Riding to work within to some extent, to her own, more spiritually ambitious ends. Unlike Lewis, Riding was prepared to claim that “nothing that has been said . . . should be understood as disrespectful to Gertrude Stein” (*CS*, 194). Indeed, some of Riding’s own work, as we shall soon see, characterizes or purports to resolve the “longing” that Lewis sees as symptomatic of “the cult of the child”: “to refresh, rejuvenate and reinvigorate a life that, it is felt, has grown old and too unsimple, and lost its native direction.”²¹

On the other hand, despite her sympathetic interest and attribution of quasi-“mystical” insight, Riding makes no suggestion of spiritual *reorientation* in her discussion of Stein, again drawing on the terms of Lewis’s critique: “Their author is a large-scale mystic, she is the darling priest of cultured infantilism to her age—if her age but knew it” (*CS*, 189). If Stein’s work ultimately failed, in Riding’s view, to transcend the zeitgeist, her enthusiasm suggests that she nevertheless saw it—unlike that of most of her contemporaries—as a necessary apotheosis, showing “the new barbarism” for what it was, and so clearing the way for the “genuinely modernist” poetry (*SMP*, 158) that Riding herself would write.

Riding’s account of her own poetry’s “clarity, sincerity, simplicity” implies a corresponding “purging . . . of discredited experience,” but not so much by emptying words of “experience” as reorienting, or re-educating, the reader in their simple, “right” usage. She portrays her method as no less lucid than Stein’s, even as somewhat “mathematical” in its logically rigorous, gradual manner of proceeding by “deflecting the reader from false associations,” but in guiding the reader onto the plane of “poetic discovery” and “uncovering” (*PLR*, 484), she would hardly have it seem “commonplace” or “mechanical.” Hers is ultimately a poetics of revelation rather than experimental “design.”

²¹ Wyndham Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled*, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrock (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), 162.

As Riding explains—or rather, asserts, for her argument is circular—in the Preface to her *Collected Poems*, where she makes her fullest reply to “the charge of obscurity” (PLR, 485):

I begin every poem on the most elementary plane of understanding and proceed to the plane of poetic discovery (or uncovering) by steps which deflect the reader from false associations, false reasons for reading ... No readers but those who insist on going to poems for the wrong reasons should find my poems difficult; no reader who goes to poetry for the right reasons should find them anything but lucid. (PLR, 484)

So sure is she of the lucidity—the *explanatory* (as opposed to merely evocative, symbolist, or otherwise “literary”) nature—of her compositional procedure, that she concludes: “The frequent complaint about the unreadability of my poems is so much evidence that they cannot be read for the wrong reasons” (489). The “right reasons,” on the other hand, are “all the reasons of poetry” (485–7), that is, “learn[ing] about [its] complete and precise scope”; and crucially, it is “wrong,” she argues, to look for the reasons of poetry “outside oneself” (487). In keeping with this emphasis upon self-reliance and poetry as its own most proper subject, she hopes for readers who will be “equal companions in poetry” (488)—such hope of companionship being a homely strand of her idealism throughout her career. Thus, unsurprisingly, she objects to W.H. Auden’s implying that her “muse is, presumably, Philosophy, as his is Politics” (which would imply dependence or elitism on her part) and mocks T.S. Eliot’s having “made himself a tailor’s-dummy muse of Religion” (487). She goes on: “The nineteenth-century lament was: ‘Where is the Bard?’ The twentieth-century version is ‘Where is the Muse?’ In America: ‘Where is the Myth?’—in other words, let us invent new reasons of poetry” (487–8).

Gertrude Stein’s work, by contrast, partook of no such “dishonesty” (487), and perhaps the “out-of-the-windowness” that Riding ascribed to Stein personally had partly to do with Stein’s having left behind, or not having succumbed to, such “dishonest” reasons of poetry. Even in her later, more hostile view of Stein, (Riding) Jackson acknowledges her “sincerity,” as opposed to Eliot’s believing “too little—too little for sincerity—in himself” (thus, his “wan bravados eked out as with second-hand elegances from rummage-shops of literature and learning”).²² The

²² *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, 253. With such rhetorical flourishes as “wan bravados...” Riding reminds us that she has not lost her flair as poet-provocateur, despite her renunciation of poetry.

virtue of Stein's work is its being "out in the open. There is no behind-the-scenes conspiring, no literary make-up, or costumery employed: this is something enacted on the general floor of the time, not in the theatre of Criticism."²³

Thus there is scope, it would seem, for the reader to be an "equal companion" in Stein's work; or at least, the promise of such companionship is implicit in it. In this respect, it may be seen as fundamentally democratic, in the American tradition reaching back (beyond any "twentieth-century" worrying over "The Myth") to what D.H. Lawrence memorably describes as the Whitmanesque "message" of "true democracy, where soul meets soul, in the open road."²⁴ Both Riding and Stein envision an unsentimental meeting of souls on the open road of language stripped bare of "costumery" (made, in that sense, homely).²⁵ Likenesses in diction and style will be the main focus of what follows, while the fundamental divergence between their projects will come increasingly into focus as the chapter proceeds. While I would hold that if any modernist contemporary can be singled out as having influenced Riding's style of writing in poetry and prose, it is Stein, my delineation of points of resemblance between them will ultimately serve to highlight the distinctive qualities of Riding's work—as one would expect to be the case with any major poet.

The first of the sections that follow will be concerned with the similarly homely aspects of their styles of prose writing and their corresponding emphases upon compositional immediacy and intimate reader-writer relationship. The didactic yet personal tone of their lecturing and "letter writing" modes will be discussed in light of Riding's poetics as expressed in her prose writings of 1930, *Four Unposted Letters To Catherine* and the Preface to *Poems: A Joking Word* in particular.²⁶ I shall then turn to Riding's "Steinian" poems in order to clarify the question of Stein's influence and the extent of their affinity, focussing on points of stylistic resemblance. Stein's use of repetition and "literally abstract ... etymologically transparent" word-use

²³ Ibid., 254.

²⁴ D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London: Penguin, 1971), 186.

²⁵ "An Autobiographical Summary," in *PN Review* 17, no. 4: 30. As we saw in chapter 2, it was principally the element of "costumery" in Emily Dickinson's poetry to which Riding objected.

²⁶ See *Narration: Four Lectures by Gertrude Stein*, intro. Thornton Wilder (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), 54–55.

serves, I will suggest, as a homely starting-point and linguistically intimate mode that Riding makes her own, principally in order to explore the theme of identity. The third and final section of the main body of the chapter will argue that, different as the argumentative thrust of Riding's poetry often is, both writers, in their effort to speak plainly, express an acute awareness of what Riding came to see as the "failure-that-is-success of poetry."²⁷ But where Riding foregrounds struggle or "pain" in striving for lasting sense and spiritual reorientation through poetry, Stein tends to bring out her "pleasure" in the text's production, content to "use everything" and "begin again and again" in a "continuous present," in the play of *différance*.²⁸

i. Homeliness and Letter Writing

While Riding's *Four Unposted Letters* are addressed "to Catherine," they are prefaced by a wry but playfully affectionate "Letter to Gertrude Stein."²⁹ The letter appears to explain in what sense the letters to Catherine are "unposted," but is more teasingly enigmatic:

Dear Gertrude.

The function of Opinion is to be that which does not get posted. Hating Opinion and loving All That Gets Posted as you do, you must applaud my not posting these letters, however you deplore my writing them.

Love,

Laura

Riding may be emphasizing that she is not aiming for the kind of impersonality that she associates with Stein's work. If the "function of Opinion is to be that which does not get posted" in the sense that opinion is, by definition, subjective and provisional, "All That Gets Posted," may, by contrast, be understood as that which bears the stamp of artistic finality, ready to be "received" by the reader. Riding's representation of the *Four Letters* as "opinion" thus serves to highlight her homely intent in writing them, not only in their being addressed to a child whom the writer knows personally,

²⁷ "Poetry and the Good," *PN Review* 18, no. 4 (March–April 1992): 21.

²⁸ See "Composition and Explanation," *UD*, 497–499.

²⁹ Laura Riding, *Four Unposted Letters to Catherine* (New York: Persea Books, 1993), 7. Hereafter cited in the text as *FLC*.

but also in their offering a point of view, as opposed, say, to a poem. “All That Gets Posted” also suggests the idea of publication as “making public,” again underlining the personal, “private” nature of the *Letters*, as well, perhaps, as referring to Stein’s prolific output. Whatever Riding wished precisely to convey, her letter serves to acknowledge her debt to Stein and at the same time indicates that in the *Four Letters* she will also be marking out her own position.³⁰

Despite being addressed to eight-year-old Catherine, the “thoughtful and sensible” child of Nancy Nicholson and Robert Graves, the *Letters* are “unposted” also in the sense of their being written more for the sake of author herself, as she eventually admits: “I’m writing like this more for my sake than yours, because knowing about the muddle is irritating, while writing to you reminds me how knowing about it can be a protection against it and so amusing rather than irritating” (*FLC*, 62). Lewis might have argued that Riding’s need to “remind herself” in this way is symptomatic of the “cult of the child” inasmuch as it enacts a “longing to refresh, rejuvenate and reinvigorate” (a similar case could be made as to Riding’s long poem of 1931, *Laura and Francisca*, in which the child Francisca plays an important role as Riding’s “anti-narcissus”); while her stance vis-à-vis “the muddle” recalls her insistence, in *Anarchism*, on criticizing “the system” only “in so far as it is necessary for a preservation of integrity.” Arguably, her resorting to terms as homely and simplistic as “the muddle” in making self-protective sense of the world points to a limitation on the part of the writer, since the book is clearly meant to be taken more “seriously” than, say, *Alice in Wonderland*. Indeed, (Riding) Jackson herself, in a Postscript to the *Letters*, admits that she optimistically made herself “cosier than was warranted” with her subject, “Virtue,” though for most readers this is part of the book’s charm.³¹ The “infantilism” of style, I would suggest, is one way in which Stein’s influence is apparent (despite Riding’s awareness of the charge against Stein on this score).

³⁰ Several years later, Stein’s own *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937) effectively reciprocated the gesture, with respect to Riding’s earlier *Everybody’s Letters* (1933), although by that time they were no longer corresponding with one another. Riding’s likely influence on Stein in this respect, and more broadly in arousing Stein’s interest in the epistolary genre, has, until recently, not been acknowledged. See Logan Esdale, “Gertrude Stein, Laura Riding and The Space of Letters,” in the *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 29, no. 4, summer 2006, 99–123.

³¹ According to Friedmann, “even such usually hostile critics as Herbert Palmer called it “charmingly and lucidly written ... full of downright truths and wisdom” (*A Mannered Grace*, 157).

This is most apparent in the homely, if didactic, familiarity of tone. Riding's adoption of the stance of counsellor or adviser enables her to address the reader, via the child-persona of Catherine, directly and familiarly. The concerns, however, are very much Riding's own: knowing, thinking, poetry and truth. Style and subject matter are closely intertwined. Even the headings of each of the *Four Letters* echo the style of self-reflexive commentary with which Stein punctuates her lectures; compare, for instance, Riding's "Second Letter: To Continue To Begin With" with Stein's "And so to begin again to go on."³² But the resemblance is most striking with regard to the presentation of argument in bold, broad terms such as "knowing everything about everything" (*FLC*, 11), "knowing everything about yourself" (13), and how "grown-ups often get knowing everything about everything mixed up with doing things" (18), when the matter is really quite simple: "Knowing everything about everything is being yourself and also, because you belong to everything, being everything as well" (18). People, on the other hand, "who are not entirely themselves" and so "can't know everything about everything ... try to make up for [it] by doing things" (23). Such inessential, or un-simple, "doing" is paralleled by "learning-laziness," which merely "repeats what already is": "a person being everything except herself, a person roaming idly about everywhere" (47).

Accordingly, Riding counsels Catherine:

Always remember that learning is a bridge between doing and thinking, that it is nothing in itself and that it has no meaning, that is, no value, either as doing or thinking. ... it is good because it makes it clear that there are the two different things doing and thinking. ... it can also be bad because it can be wrongly understood as a mixture of doing and thinking and wrongly considered better than either doing or thinking by itself ... (46)

These mixed-up modes of doing and learning together give rise to "the muddle," with regard to which Riding claims, with "cosy" optimism: "But once you know that there is a muddle it is easy to be simple yourself" (53).

To take a comparable passage, with respect to both style and subject matter, in Stein's writing:

No matter how complicated anything is, if it is not mixed up with remembering there is no confusion, but and that is the trouble with a great many so called intelligent people they mix up remembering with talking and listening, and as a result they have theories about anything but as

³² "What is English Literature," in Meyerowitz, 34.

remembering is repetition and confusion, and being existing that is listening ... intelligent people although they talk as though they knew something are really confusing, because they are so to speak keeping two times going at once.³³

Here, Stein's "remembering" is analogous to Riding's "learning"; and her "talking and listening" to Riding's "thinking." Stein similarly stresses the need to simplify and avoid getting caught up in "theories about anything" (comparable to Riding's "learning" as "not knowing everything about everything, but only knowing everything about the muddle").

Stein's fundamental concern with "being" (as opposed to merely "remembering") is another shared preoccupation, with particular bearing on their poetics. For instance, in "Portraits and Repetition," Stein describes the immediacy of her writing in terms of "talking and listening at the same time": a state of complete being, or self-presence, in which there is "no element of remembering," and so, contrary to appearances, "no element of repetition" (or repetitiousness):

I say I never repeat while I am writing because while I am writing I am most completely, and that is if you like being a genius, I am most entirely and completely listening and talking, the two in one and the one in two and that is having completely its own time and it has in it no element of remembering. Therefore there is in it no element of confusion, therefore there is in it no element of repetition. Do you do you do you really understand.³⁴

In *Four Letters to Catherine*, Riding similarly conceives of the poem as a time of *being* entirely:

But making a poem is like being alive for always ... A good poem, then, or any good thinking thing ... would be good because of what it was, not because of what it *did* ... For if you are able to make a poem, it doesn't seem a wonderful thing to do, it seems just a necessary-natural thing to do.
(*FLC*, 31–2)

Riding is at pains to emphasize that poetry is not a willed effect of self: it would not be good "because of what it *did*." In this sense, poems are not so much *by* you as *happen* to you (are "just a necessary-natural thing to do"); or as the Preface to *Poems: A Joking Word*, her collection of the same year, puts it: "to write these poems ... I

³³ Meyerowitz, 106.

³⁴ Meyerowitz, 107. Stein's "Portraits and Repetition" was first published as one of her *Lectures in America* (New York: Random House) in 1935.

had only to feel doom”—a notion that, in turn, recalls *Anarchism's* idea of the individual as *unbecoming*.³⁵

Stein makes a closely related point in “Composition as Explanation” where she says, “naturally no one thinks, that is no one formulates” during the making of the composition “until what is to be formulated has been made” (*UD*, 497). The implication that thoughts arise non-dualistically, by themselves, as it were, rather than in linear sequence, contrasts with the notion of the uncreative, essentially repetitious “element of remembering,” or as Riding has it, “learning-laziness,” which merely “repeats what already is.”³⁶

In *Narration*, published in 1935, Stein describes the non-duality of “adult letter writing.” Such writing does not “overwhelm” but allows for fluid, intimate relationship between writer and audience, dissolving “inside” and “outside” dualities:

the audience is not a diffused one ... and it really is the only time in writing when the outside and the inside flow together without interrupting ... It is the one time when writing for an outside does not make the inside outside or the outside inside, it is a diffusion but not a confusing, it is really a kind of an imitation of a marrying of two being one, and yet being two presumably as much as anything.³⁷

Linda Reinfeld clarifies Stein’s idea in terms that highlight the resemblance to Riding’s poetics, explaining that adult letter writing “is not the effect of a self but the rescue of self from selfsameness, the dispersion of person in time ... Adult letter writing dissolves borders instead of breaking them.” In *Anarchism Is Not Enough*, Riding similarly resists the notion of poetry as “the effect of a self,” insisting on the primacy of the “unbecoming,” or “individual-unreal.” There is also correspondence between adult letter writing’s “rescue of self from selfsameness” and Riding’s conception of poetry as expressed in the Preface to *Poems: A Joking Word*, where she describes the writing of poetry as an “escape from escaping”: that is, an escape from “my life by itself” which “would be nothing but escaping, or anybody’s.” Thus both

³⁵ The quotation from the Preface to *Poems: A Joking Word* (London: Cape, 1930) appears on page 9.

³⁶ *Unposted Letters*, 47.

³⁷ *Narration*, 54–55. The homeliness of this vision of writing as a kind of oneness, or “marriage,” of inside and outside, writer and audience, could even seem to anticipate (Riding) Jackson’s post-poetic ideal of unity in which “divisions into familiar and strange” are dissolved (*T*, 112).

Riding and Stein envision “the dispersion of person” without loss of identity, in both senses of that word: as shared (“two being one”) and as individuating (“and yet being two presumably as much as anything”).

The Preface to *Poems: A Joking Word* is perhaps as Steinian as anything Riding wrote in prose, in its doggedly plain yet convoluted striving to make things “plain,” and her notion of “doom” may well be understood as a “rescue of self from selfsameness”:

Doom is where I am and I want to make this plain because I know there are people to whom it can be plain ... They are where I am in case I should need to be reminded where that is. Of course I don't need to be reminded, but they are there all the same. And when all the same doesn't mean in case it means all the more. All the more is Gertrude, to begin with, and Len, to end with, and in between all the more ... And by doom I don't mean the destruction of me. I mean making me into doom—not my doom but doom. Made into doom I feel made. I also feel making. I feel like doom and doom feels like me.³⁸

Although Riding's assertions are comparatively clipped, her debt, even perhaps indirect tribute, to Stein is reflected in the narrow terms in which the statements are made and developed and the frank, assertive, first person mode of address. Like Stein in lectures such as “Composition as Explanation” and its sequel “Portraits and Repetition,” Riding is at pains to clarify exactly what she means, without, as far as possible, introducing new terms into her argument—or only very sparingly. Compare, for instance, the above passage with the following, from “Composition as Explanation”:

Writing and painting and all that, is like that, for those who occupy themselves with it and don't make it as it is made. Now the few who make it as it is made, and it is to be remarked that the most decided of them usually are prepared just as the world around them is preparing, do it in this way and so if you do not mind I will tell you how it happens. Naturally one does not know how it happened until it is well over beginning happening. (*UD*, 495)

Much as Riding is quick to remind us that, while she is grateful for Gertrude's and Len's being “there” for her, they serve principally to help her come to a fuller understanding of what “doom” and “all the more” mean, Stein says, “so if you do not mind I will tell you how it happens” not merely out of mock-deference, but also to argue for the putting aside of preconceptions in attempting to understand how

³⁸ *Poems: A Joking Word*, 10.

such composition “happens”; how it is made “as it is made.” Stein wants us to respond to her “explanation” as “composition,” in its artistic immediacy, as does Riding in her self-involved, almost confessional and yet curiously impersonal preface. The effect is similar to that created by Stein in *The Making of Americans* (first published in 1924), of “embracing the reader as though in a private, collaborative enterprise.”³⁹ Similarly, Riding’s “want[ing] to make this plain because I know there are people to whom it can be plain” is comparable to Stein’s: “I do this for my own sake and for the sake of those who know I know it.”⁴⁰ The Steinian manner in which Riding’s preoccupation with identity and making herself plain is enacted in the poems themselves will be examined in what follows.

ii. Riding’s “Steinian” Poems

As we have seen, both Riding and Stein would have their work abide in a time-of-writing free of historical “time-sense”: in Stein’s words, “the writing having completely its own time.”⁴¹ To this end, simplicity of word-choice and the use of repetition are crucial. Critics on Riding who have commented on resemblance between her poems and Stein’s writing tend to stress divergence of the kind Joyce Wexler summarizes thus: “While Stein wanted to break down the historical associations of words to make language a neutral medium like paint or stone, Riding wanted to destroy the personal associations of words to make language a medium for the universal.”⁴² But in highlighting this contrast (often rather simplistically, as in the overstated impulse to “destroy,” in this case), the extent to which Riding employed techniques similar to Stein’s has tended to be ignored; notably Riding’s use of Steinian repetition to insist on “saying” as the locus of identity. In what follows, I aim to take these factors more into account.

The provocatively titled, “Poet: A Lying Word,” Riding’s only poem in prose, demonstrates the implications of Riding’s critique of Stein’s “literally abstract” word-

³⁹ As described by Ulla Dydo, in *UD*, 21.

⁴⁰ *The Making of Americans* (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1995), 289. The passage quoted is also in *UD*, 55.

⁴¹ Meyerowitz, 107.

⁴² Wexler, 59.

use. By confessing its complicity in the poetic lie of “flesh”—its “flesh-seeming[ness]”—the poem attempts to wipe the slate clean and begin again:

Does it seem I ring, I sing, I rhyme, I poet-wit? Shame on me then! ...
And haste unto us both, my shame is yours. How long I seem to beckon
like a wall beyond which stretches longer length of fleshsome traverse: it is
your lie of flesh and my flesh-seeming stand of words. Haste unto us both! I
say, I say. This wall reads “Stop!” This poet verses “Poet: a lying word!”
(*PLR*, 237)

The poem’s “literal” abstraction derives from its striving to tell “the tale” (*PLR*, 235) of the struggle to “escape from the human horizontal plane,” rather than creating a “mathematical ... perpendicular” of the kind exemplified by the passage Riding quotes from Stein:

And after that what changes what changes after that, after that what changes
and what changes after that and after that and what changes and after that
and what changes after that. (*UD*, 499; cited in *CS*, 193)

Riding describes this passage as “a self-pursuing, tail-swallowing series of words ... so automatic that it is even inexact to speak of Miss Stein as their author: they create one another” (*CS*, 193-4). “Poet: A Lying Word” performs a more deliberate “tail swallowing,” disowning its author (“This poet verses ‘Poet: a lying word!’”) and aiming for utter semantic transparency (“I am a true wall: you may but stare me through”). The speaker would start afresh, from “the page before the first page only,” from which she “reads”:

This once-upon-a-time when seasons failed, and time stared through the wall
nor made to leap across, is the hour, the season, seasons, year and years, no
wall and wall, where when and when the classic lie dissolves and nakedly time
salted is with truth’s sweet flood” (*PLR*, 238)

Particularly worthy of note is Riding’s choice of phrase in “the classic lie,” recalling her interpretation of Stein’s notion of the “classical” in “Composition as Explanation”:

Contemporary composition which may be in sympathy with the classicism of
contemporary criticism must nevertheless in practice react against it;
composition cannot go on if it tries to be self-consciously same. (*CS*, 198)

“Poet: A Lying Word” epitomizes this practice in its naked, prose determination to revitalize poetry by letting “the classic lie dissolve and nakedly time [be] salted ... with truth’s sweet flood.” As Riding puts it in “Come, Words, Away,” the poet would have her words “center the utter telling / In truth’s first soundlessness” (*PLR*, 139); whereas Stein’s words, while “utter” in their starkness, are radically de-

centered, given up to time's flow. Thus, paradoxically, they "create duration but make it absolute by preventing anything from happening in the duration" (*CS*, 193).

Repetition is crucial in creating this kind of "duration." In "Come, Words, Away" and "Poet: A Lying Word," Riding uses repetition to incantatory effect, repeatedly intoning the title-phrase in the former case, and in the latter, reiterating key words and phrases in a seemingly desperate bid to make herself plain. The repetition is tempered, however, by considerable use of rhyme and near-rhyme, as well as many phrases of equal length, which have the effect of setting up a poetic tension within the flat prose, as though it were constantly on the verge of breaking into verse—a tendency which it is the poem's declared intent to resist. Putting a paragraph from the poem (*PLR*, 235) into lineated form indicates this tendency:

And the tale is no more of the going:
 No more a poet's tale of a going
 False-like to a seeing. The tale
 Is of a seeing true-like to a knowing:
 There's but to stare the wall through now, well through.

The experiment in versification also shows how some of the sense of urgency is lost, with the loss of the press of the prose.

Throughout the poem, the most frequent, insistent and Steinian of the repetitions is "I say, I say," on which note the poem emphatically closes. This closing declaration is foregrounded by the extremely long, convoluted preceding sentence, which is in quotation marks (quoting, supposedly, from "the page before the first page only"). The repetition of "I say, I say" also draws weight from the contrast with "I ring, I sing, I rhyme," and "beckon," all of which, by contrast, merely "seem." It also stands in opposition to "lying." The ninth paragraph summarizes the implications of such saying: "I say, I say, I am, it is, such wall, such poet, such not lying, such not leading into. Await the sight, and look well through, know by such standing still that next comes none of you" (*PLR*, 235). The speaker would have the act of saying sufficient unto itself, identical with being and self: a "self-in-language," to borrow Lisa Samuels's term (*A*, xxviii). Thus the poem highlights the problem of language and identity with which Riding's most Steinian poems, to which I shall now turn, are concerned.

Surprisingly, Wexler discusses only one example of Riding's poems based on repetition, the last of the "Echoes," or "Fragment" (as it appeared in *Poems: A Joking Word*):

What a tattle-tattle we.
 And what a rattle-rattle me.
 What a rattle-tattle-tattle-rattle we-me.
 What a rattle-tattle.
 What a tattle-rattle.
 What a we.
 What a me.
 What a what a
 What a
 What

(PLR, 69)

This poem illustrates the very points made by Riding and Graves in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* about Stein's use of repetition with "the effect of breaking down the possible historical senses still inherent in the words"; likewise, "the infantile jingle of rhyme and assonance (*SMP*, 285). But in the case of this "echo" (for all its "fragmentariness"), Riding's word-use is mathematical in the sense that each word is used as a unit to be added to or subtracted from, as if in a process of elimination, until all that is left is the sole remaining essential element, neither interrogative nor final.

A longer poem of Riding's, perhaps the one that owes most, stylistically, to Stein's example is "Elegy in a Spider's Web," or "What to Say When the Spider," as it was more elliptically titled in *Poems: A Joking Word* (1930). Written during the author's convalescence from a back injury the likes of which had rarely been witnessed by those who repaired it, the poem struggles to resolve the speaker's precarious sense of self, proceeding in a Steinian "self-pursuing, tail-swallowing series" of lines down the page, like a ragged spine.⁴³ The frequent line-breaks foreground the dogged repetitions and syntactic deviations as the poem presses on in a single long stanza. The effect is of an almost "infantile," insistent, literally painstaking thought-process. The repetition also involves elements of word play (though the speaker sounds deadly serious throughout), as in the shifts, for example, between "does" and "dies" near the beginning of the poem.

⁴³ According to Friedmann, Riding's "surgeon Dr. Lake is said to have observed to the others in the operating theatre: 'It is rare that one sees the spinal cord exposed to view—especially at right-angles to itself'" (*A Mannered Grace*, 144).

What to say always
 Now and always
 What to say now
 Now when the spider
 What does the spider
 The spider what dies
 (PLR, 86–7)

As well as evoking the monotony of physical pain that informed or occasioned its composition, the “Elegy” is a characteristic attempt by Riding “to define [the] poem’s meaning ever more closely.” In this case, however, the problem of entanglement in the spider’s web, which frustrates the attempt to mean ever more closely, is manifested in a breakdown of language suggestive of a corresponding breakdown of self. The resulting open-endedness, or lack of resolution, aligns the poem more closely with Stein’s style.

The spider who when
 What to say when
 Who cannot cease
 Who cannot
 Cannot cease
 Cease
 Cannot
 The spider
 Death
 I
 We
 (PLR, 88)

While the pared-down language of this poem would have—to recall Stein’s words—“completely its own time,” the saying itself, as the elliptical lines above indicate, leads into a kind of limbo, where meaning can only be clutched at: “What to say when / Now before after always.” The dilemma, “Or if I say / Or if I do not say,” is no real alternative—unless, perhaps, the poet is prepared, as Stein is, to more nearly “exhaust” her words of meaning, so that they can be used more playfully or “automatically,” freed from self.⁴⁴ Riding and Graves see this as “the only possible explanation of lines like the following,” in which the words are “ideally automatic,” with “one word or combination of words creat[ing] the next”:

Anyhow means furls furls with a chance chance with a change change with
 as strong strong with as will will with as sign sign with as west west with as

⁴⁴ Riding’s closing comment on Stein, in *Contemporaries and Snobs*, is notable in this regard, for she suggests that Stein “might seem more intelligible if it were possible to read her as many authors,” rather than one. (CS, 199).

most most with as in in with as by by with as change change with as reason
 reason to be lest lest they did when when they did for for they did there and
 then. Then does not celebrate the there and then. (*SMP*, 286).

Steinian critics have an alternative “explanation” for this kind of writing, of course. Ulla Dydo, for example, views Stein’s experimental works as “taking language apart” such that “every word is turned, examined, and tossed about in composition.” However, her justification of interest in terms of the writing’s allowing us to “discover the world in words we had never known until she used them,” is strikingly similar to Riding’s view of Stein’s words as “no older than the use she makes of them.” For Dydo, such use of language enriches rather than exhausts the possibilities of meaning. Nor, presumably, did Riding and Graves find it entirely exhausting, given their willingness to publish Stein’s *Acquaintance With Description*, which uses language similarly. Doubtless the growth of interest in concepts such as indeterminacy and the “free play” of signifiers, with the advent of post-structuralist literary theory in the nineteen-seventies, has served Stein well, enabling late twentieth-century critics to find her writing more meaningful and less “automatic” than Riding and Graves did.

Riding’s “Elegy” incorporates such slippage of meaning, but less in the spirit of play than of trying to find coherence. Thus it reads as a monologue that is continually interrupting itself, questioning, trying to clarify or catch up with itself. To speak, as one reviewer has, of “three distinct speaking voices” goes too far in trying to “disentangle” a web that is not meant to be disentangled; the poem is, after all, an “Elegy *in* a Spider’s Web.”⁴⁵ There are, however, moments where the thought seems to come clear before recapitulating the earlier terms of the interrogation:

How thorough death
 Dead or alive
 No matter death
 How thorough I
 (87)

Such moments are akin to those described by John Ashbery in his 1957 review of Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation*: “moments when we emerge suddenly on a high plateau with a view of the whole distance we have come” and are “reward[ed]” for our

⁴⁵ Robert Fraser, “Between Fable and Cryptogram,” *English*, vol. XXX, no. 136 (spring 1981): 84–86.

“perseverance.”⁴⁶ Not that Riding’s “Elegy” sounds any final note of optimism, as the absence of question marks throughout leads us to expect. The poem tails off in a blankly interrogative way, with “time” and “death” and the speaker still entangled in the spider’s web: “What time death always / What to say then / What time the spider” (*PLR*, 89).

Ashbery speaks also of “the almost physical pain with which we strive to accompany the evolving thought of one of [Henry] James’s or Gertrude Stein’s characters,” a comment which could also apply to the experience of reading Riding’s recalcitrant “Elegy.”⁴⁷ Another notably Steinian poem of Riding’s, “Beyond,” tackles pain head on, attempting to define it. Like “Elegy in a Spider’s Web,” the poem is grouped among those “of immediate occasion,” having first appeared in *Poems: A Joking Word* as “Here Beyond.” Concerned solely with the intractability of pain, the poem uses repetition to attempt to describe precisely that which it defines as “impossible to describe,” building on that negative premise to create a minimal, “abstract and mathematical” and “etymologically transparent” semantic structure. The principal effect of the repetition is to incorporate pain in the poem, at the literal (“almost physical”) level of reading, while leaving it unseizable:

Pain is impossible to describe
 Pain is the impossibility of describing
 Describing what is impossible to describe
 Which must be a thing beyond description
 Beyond description not to be known
 Beyond knowing but not mystery
 Not mystery but pain not plain but pain
 But pain beyond but here beyond

(*PLR*, 131)

“Beyond description,” pain is ineffable and yet “not mystery,” and yet again, “not plain but pain”—the slippage from “pain” to “plain” noticeably resembling Stein’s style of word play. The repetition of the last word of a phrase or clause to begin a new one (“describing / Describing”; “beyond description / Beyond description; “not mystery / Not mystery; “but pain / But pain ...”) is also characteristic of Stein, as in the passage cited by Riding and Graves to illustrate the manner in which “one word or combination of words creates the next.” Confounding the attempt to adequately

⁴⁶ John Ashbery, “The Impossible,” in *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, 106.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

describe and so distance it, pain effectively “describes itself” (as “the impossibility of describing / Describing what is impossible to describe” suggests), leaving the sufferer dislocated, both “here” and “beyond.” Thus the poem succeeds in describing abstractly, with “mathematical” precision, its own failure to evoke the actual, intensely “immediate” ground of personal experience from which it springs. Its treatment of the topic of pain in terms of “description” is characteristic of Riding’s tendency to treat of universal yet intensely personal modes of experience, such as pain, love and loss, within a linguistic frame of reference. This tendency parallels Stein’s preoccupation with description, narration, paragraphs, sentences and other aspects of “how to write.” Whether or not Riding would have written “Beyond” in the same way, had she not been familiar with Stein’s work, is a moot point, but it is reasonable to suppose that the poem owes something to Riding’s keen interest in Stein at the time of its writing.

Several other poems of Riding’s, most of them collected first in *Poems: A Joking Word* and later grouped among “poems of immediate occasion,” show a lesser, but still significant, degree of affinity with Stein’s style, particularly in their use of repetition. “Advertisement,” a lighter poem in letter-writing mode, parodies the officious language of business advertisements so as to suggest the difficulty of pinning down identity. It may not be one of Riding’s best poems, but is characteristic in its questing for the compatible partner whose identity complementing hers will allow hers to be itself. (In this respect, the officious language makes the problem of identity seem less serious, and less homely in intent, than it is for its author.)

Respond in person.
 Inquire within.
 Frankness or secrecy
 Need not apply.
 No correspondence about what I mean.
 No branch establishments.

(PLR, 118)

Wit aside, this can even be seen as anticipating the homeliness of *The Telling*, with its hope of “arriving at our ultimate identities, selves that Agree” (*T*, 56). As in “What a tattle-tattle we,” repetition serves to critique the inadequate, essentially repetitious “what,” though in keeping with the topic of the advertisement, the speaker quickly shifts her concern to “who”:

For twenty-six years, six months, seventeen days,
 Have studied what for what,
 Spoken of what to what,
 Am now tired of what
 And know not what
 For all the what have read or written
 Since was who.
 What is what is what.

 Would like now to know who.
 Am who:
 Would be obliged to be informed of others.

(118)

Allowing “who” and “what” to function not only as relative pronouns but also as proper nouns, Riding narrows and emphasizes the terms of her argument. “Am just plain who / Who would respectfully inquire,” she claims mock-courteously, closing as “yours most sincerely / who,” in a manner reminiscent of Dickinson’s:

I’m Nobody! Who are you?
 Are you - Nobody - too?
 Then there’s a pair of us!
 Don’t tell! they’d advertise - you know!”⁴⁸

In Riding’s poem, however, it is the speaker herself who advertises; one is not led to believe that her “who” is a “nobody.”

“All The Time” is another poem that is syntactically disjunctive in ways reminiscent of Stein (as well as e.e. cummings, another poet discussed in Riding and Graves’s *Survey*). It is also remarkable among Riding’s shorter poems for being more enigmatic than rigorously argued, despite the concision and somewhat curt tone.

By after long appearance
 Appears the time the all the time
 Name please now you may go.

By after love time and she knows
 And he says rose
 Unless unless if not.

Or if if sometimes if
 How like myself I was
 Among the salt and minutes.

(PLR, 134)

⁴⁸ *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge, Mass., and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), poem no. 260.

Here the disjunctive syntax, repetitions and absence of punctuation allow for greater concision than would be possible within conventional sentence structure. In particular, the repetition of conjunctions (“Unless unless”; “if if ... if”) and the grammatical word class transpositions (“By after long appearance”; “the all the time”) give the poem a Steinian ring. These effects, however, also create the impression of the poem’s bordering on a breakdown of coherence, again, suggesting an inability to pin down identity precisely. The teasingly elided statements describe a sense of self, and self in relationship, now remote, as indicated by the switch from present to past tense and third to first person in the final stanza. The speaker seems almost surprised that she was, “sometimes,” herself, despite disillusionment with “long appearance” and romantic entanglement. The conception of self as distinct from the world of “appearance” and officious language (“Name please now you may go”; “How like myself I was”) is characteristic of Riding, the echoes of Stein deriving more from the experimental aspects of the poem’s style. Again, it seems that what Riding gained from her reading of Stein was an awareness of new possibilities of freedom in word-use, rather than a wish to pursue Stein’s project.

“Disclaimer of the Person,” the last of the “poems of final occasion,” tackles the theme of identity more directly, reflecting on what it means to “say myself” in particular. In this case, the Biblical account of creation provides the template that the poem subverts. While the extensive use of repetition and minimal lexis is Steinian, the very deliberate unfolding of the poem’s argument is characteristic of Riding:

I say myself.
 The beginning was that no saying was.
 There was no beginning.
 There is an end and there was no beginning.
 There is a saying and there was no saying.
 In the beginning God did not create.
 There was no creation.
 There was no God.
 There was that I did not say.
 I did not say because I could not say.
 I could not say because I was not.
 I was not because I am.
 I am because I say.
 I say myself.

(*PLR*, 251)

Seemingly “beginning again and again,” the thrust of the argument is to prove the proposition, “I say myself,” within the given set of terms, before rounding back to

the opening statement. The speaker then readdresses it in the mode of catechism (a mode also used in the first of the poems in the group, “As Many Questions As Answers”), emphasizing identification of self with saying in the “now”:

I say myself.
 What is now?
 Now is myself.
 Now is when I say.
 What am I?
 I am what I say.
 Who am I?
 I am I who say.
 Where is now?
 Now is where I am.
 Where am I?
 I am in what I say.
 What do I say?
 I say myself.

(*PLR*, 252–3)

Effectively, this circular argument elaborates on the simpler refrain of “Poet: A Lying Word”: “I say, I say.” Stein is similarly fond of making statements such as “This which I say is this,” but she never brings the matter to such an anxious, final crux; her emphasis is more on the “this” (the reflexive statement itself) than the “I” (the self).⁴⁹ Stein avoids such finality because the “now” always, finally, takes precedence: “I wish simply to say that I remember now” (*SIM*, 183). Stein’s line (also a stanza) seems more like a gesture of contentedness in simply saying, while Riding wants, more agitatedly, to *mean*—finally. Their different emphases, in this respect, are the focus of the section to follow.

iii. “This is not exactly what I mean”: Two Views of Language and Writing

Riding and Stein share a homely preoccupation with making things plain; that is, they are often explicitly concerned with meaning what they say. Although Riding aspired to a model of the poem as self-explanatory, she also saw that its capacity to “interpret itself” is significantly failed of as it is achieved.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Gertrude Stein, *Stanzas in Meditation* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994), 183. Hereafter cited in the text as *SIM*.

⁵⁰ In *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, Riding and Graves suggest that “to smoke out the meaning of a poem [Riding’s “The Rugged Black of Anger” being used as an example] that really does mean what it says, all we can do is let it interpret itself, without introducing any new associations or, if possible, any new words” (147).

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?
 (PLR, 198)

Given the seeming impossibility of reconciling “the world” and “I,” the speaker concludes that the difficulty of “meaning” exactly is met by what Riding came to see as poetic “failure-that-is-success”:

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.
 (PLR, 198)

Thus the painfully narrow gulf between “world” and “word” is emphasized in an admission of the poem’s failure to make them “sure ... of” one another as “exactly” as “I” can be present to myself, “the world” to “itself.” The poem’s success is seen to depend on the exactness with which—the exact manner in which—it falls short of meaning exactly.

Accordingly, Riding resorts increasingly to “paradoxing truth” (PLR, 180) in making good her “escape from escaping” (to recall the preface to *Poems: A Joking Word*). Although paradox is often crucial in clinching the concision of her poems, it is also counterproductive in setting a limit, an extreme of unresolved ambiguity stretching meaning to breaking point in its matrix of contradiction. In this respect, her use of paradox is closely related to the “unexpected juxtaposition of words” discussed in Chapter 2, in driving readers to the very limits of their “verbal resources ... contriving to achieve both starkness and a sometimes almost unbearable verbal richness,” as Robert Fraser has put it.⁵¹ Fraser’s example, a stanza from “The Talking World,” is representative:

Talk is the whole of truth less talk.
 Talk is a war on truth by talk,
 And a peace with talk by truth.
 In talk truth and talk make peace—
 As an enemy forgives an enemy
 For being not like to him.
 (PLR, 205)

⁵¹ Fraser, 85.

The metrical order of these lines reflects an orderliness of purpose, to elucidate the proposition, “Talk is the whole of truth less talk” with a stringency that is at odds with the principle of pleasure in the “prolonged” or “continuous present” of the writing process to which Stein’s writing tends to adhere.⁵² Not that I mean to suggest that the above lines are not intellectually satisfying and in that sense pleasurable, but nor do they express the self-contentment of these lines from Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation* (composed in 1932):

I wish now to wish now that it is now
That I will tell very well
What I think not now but now
Oh yes oh yes now.
What do I think now
I think very well of what now
What is it now it is this now
How do you do how do you do
And now how do you do now.
This which I think now is this.

(*SIM*, 145)

The terms of Stein’s “argument” are as restricted as Riding’s; likewise, her stanza provides no frame of outside reference. Both poets want to mean exactly what they say. But in Stein’s stanza, there is no striving for argumentative depth, no significant development of a thesis conducive to a sense of “almost unbearable . . . richness.” It is wholly self-referring, as the final line emphasizes, anticipating statements made several stanzas later: “I have not come to mean / I mean I mean . . . How could one extricate oneself from where one is” (*SIM*, 152).

Riding’s stanza, on the other hand, develops its thesis on the basis of three pairs of opposing terms (war and peace, talk and truth, whole and less), combined and “tried” propositionally, to yield the final analogy (by the simplest of shifts: war-enemy, peace-forgiveness). A radical adjustment to the stanza’s generalized discourse may be required of the reader, but the argument is developed straightforwardly, each statement clarifying the larger definition of “truth” in relation to “talk.” The premise that “talk is the whole of truth less talk” is paradoxical but also unexpectedly simple, implying that “talk” leaves only the husk of truth. The

⁵² In “Composition as Explanation,” Stein describes how a “prolonged present,” in early works such as *Three Lives* became “more and more complicatedly a continuous present” in *The Making of Americans*, and “more definite” in her writings after that (Dydo, 498–499).

“verbal richness” of the stanza derives from the cumulative sense of an as-yet-unfulfilled linguistic and moral potential.

Contrastingly, the sets of antitheses from which Stein’s stanza draws momentum (wish/think, now/how, tell/well, that/this) function more at “surface” levels of rhythm and rhyme than on a semantic basis. Consequently, they seem more spontaneous, less effortful—if careful, due to elements of syntactical and grammatical deviance (relatively unpronounced in this instance). This is not to say that Stein does not frequently take the more effortful or anxious aspects of her experience into account—as in the following instance, again from the *Stanzas*—but these are treated mostly as contingencies warranting renewed delight in language. Although the stanza is brought to a conclusion of sorts, attention is focussed more on the thought *as it occurs* than on what it might, ultimately, amount to:

I am trying to say something but I have not said it.
 Why.
 Because I add my my I.
 I will be called my dear here.
 Which will not be why I try
 This which I say is this.
 I know that I have been remiss
 Not with a kiss
 But gather bliss
 For which this
 Is why this
 Is nearly this
 I add this.
 Do not be often obliged to try.
 To come back to wondering why they began
 Of course they began.

(*SIM*, 183)

Although the stanza begins by positing the same problem with which Riding’s poem “The World and I” begins (“This is not exactly what I mean”), it demonstrates rather than deals decisively with its implications, succumbing to a series of “infantile rhymes” in the process. The flatly stated “why” of the second line could serve as a question or as a mild exclamation of surprise, and is echoed in the third line’s repeated “I” and “my,” setting the pattern for the “excessive” rhymes that follow. Riding’s “The World And I” consists only of one stanza also, and its movement from proposition to development to conclusion is not dissimilar, structurally, to Stein’s. The latter’s conclusion, however, is much less momentous, almost dismissive

or surprised: “Of course they began.” It is also inconclusive in that it is unclear who “they” are: perhaps the words she was “trying to say” at the beginning of the stanza?

Everywhere in experimental writing such as *Stanzas in Meditation* is evinced a fascination with movement or instability in language, or “difference,” anticipating Derrida’s *différance*. Such works reflect upon and rejoice in the slipperiness of meaning, the way our “trying to say something” never quite succeeds but summons more words to sweep us along. Effectively, Stein exploits the “difference” between “world” and “word” that Riding strives to resolve. *An Acquaintance with Description*, published in 1929 by Graves and Riding and the clearest indicator of Riding’s endorsement of Stein’s work, is an exemplary text in this respect, proceeding very much in terms of “difference”; indeed, the word occurs in it with remarkable frequency. Ulla Dydo points out that the title of this piece “makes description sound familiar and intimate” (homely), but “acquaintance” also suggests a degree of formality, or distance, that is evoked by the abrupt, flat opening sentence (and paragraph): “Mouths and Wood” (*UD*, 505 & 504)—as if these words are cards dealt out as at a “reading” (a notion suggested in part by the mention of “Queens” in the subsequent sentence). But the feeling of intimacy soon comes to the fore in expressions of “delight” at the naturalness and clarity of what is seen and described:

It is not needing blue having artificially leaves and connecting as stems it is never theirs by right by right winding it later might not make not so nearly nearly white and white and while which is just as naturally as every letter. This makes them say delighted. This makes them say delighted. To be liking liked like it like if like like to like like and often often where it is. It is there just there where I am looking. Very clearly expressed. (*UD*, 514)

Such “acquaintance” delights not so much in representing what is seen—“out there,” as if seen through the transparent window of the text—as in articulating awareness of seeing itself. Dydo suggests that we keep in mind Stein’s teacher William James’s distinction between “knowledge-about” and “knowledge of acquaintance,” the latter understood as (in Dydo’s terms) “the sense of indivisible what-ness based on sensation” (*UD*, 504). Where Riding prays that her words “Come ... away to miracle / More natural than written art” (*PLR*, 134), Stein’s project is precisely (as the title of one of her essays indicates) to celebrate writing *as written*. The essence of her “written art” is “delight,” which as an expression of “knowledge of acquaintance,” is “based on sensation.” As long as she “never derid[es] anything ... there can always be a difference” (*UD*, 518), and then there can always be writing and—insofar as writing

is always writing *about*—“description.” By continually taking such “difference” into account, by “always beginning again and again and again” as Riding puts it, Stein’s work contrives to “keep everything different and everything the same” (*CS*, 193).

Always the same.
Not as to delight.
An acquaintance with description.
(*UD*, 519)

In the same way that Stein’s acquaintance is *with* description, her *Stanzas* are, significantly, *in* meditation: “I have felt this which I like. / It is more then. / I wish to say that I take pleasure in it” (*SIM*, 165). This dynamic provides even itself with sufficient basis for inclusion, though it is often tempered by or played off against an austerity that somewhat resembles Riding’s own critique of poetry’s sensuousness: “They should not easily delight” (*SIM*, 202). “Melody [and “beauty,” she later says] should always be a by-product it should never be an end in itself.”⁵³ Nevertheless, Stein is more in the business of “gather[ing] bliss,” and the *Stanzas* are peppered with light-hearted comments such as Stanza LXXXIII of Part V: “Thank you for hurrying through” (217).

Despite the “mathematical” extremes to which Stein’s writing goes, as (Riding) Jackson sees it, “there is no score. The movements on the board do not add up.”⁵⁴ If Riding keeps score by “refining and updating” her words’ “histories,” Stein tends rather to refresh our experience of the words she uses. Her *Stanzas* themselves address the anticipated charges of whimsicality, over-fussiness or superfluosity:

I have been thought to not respect myself
To have been sold as wishes
To wonder why and if and will they mind
To have it as it is and clearly
To not replace which if they as they do
Can they content can they be as content
For which they will if even be it mine
Mine will be or will not be mine
Rather than mine and mine.
(*SIM*, 193–4)

Even if one is not wholly convinced by this as a “defence,” one may yet admire the eloquent simplicity of the first two lines (particularly the phrase “sold as wishes”) and the artistic purity of the quest “To have it as it is and clearly / To not replace.” In the

⁵³ Meyerowitz, 118–9.

⁵⁴ *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, 249.

closing statement of *Stanzas*, Stein bows out with an admission that is akin to the thought expressed in Riding's poem "The Courtesies of Authorship," that if her words fail to be met with welcome, she may at least rest safe in the knowledge that, as Riding puts it, "you may choose freely / Between my book and your eye"

(*PLR*, 173):

I call carelessly that the door is open
Which if they can refuse to open
No one can rush to close.
Let them be mine therefor.
Everybody knows that I chose.

(*SIM*, 217–8)

iv. "As Many Questions As Answers": Concluding Remarks

As we have seen, Riding's critical response to Stein's work was provocatively ambivalent from the start. The note of tongue-in-cheek affability in Riding's early praise of Stein's literalness and sincerity later, however, became a scathing dismissal of "the perversity of what she did," as her late essay "The Word-Play of Gertrude Stein" makes clear.⁵⁵ (Riding) Jackson's fundamental criticism is her belief that Stein's "words are not for the uses of any sort of spiritual reorientation," since "their reality is that of a realism of disavowal of all but a phenomenological reality in them."⁵⁶ In this respect, her reading of Stein had not much changed, in that the only "spiritual" orientation Riding had previously found in her work was that of "cultured infantilism to her age" (*CS*, 189). Notwithstanding, Riding could, in her early Stein criticism, happily declare that "nothing that has been said ... should be understood as disrespectful to Gertrude Stein" (*CS*, 194). By her late essay on "The Word-Play of Gertrude Stein," her generosity extended only as far as an acknowledgement that Stein's own generous, if tragically misdirected effort was not ill-intentioned, but symptomatic of the crisis of the age:

Perhaps everyone up to the time of her self-deification was-is to blame, for the great emptiness that had accumulated in human self-knowledge—which Gertrude Stein tried to fill with herself for everyone's edification.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, 259.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁵⁷ *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, 260. (Riding) Jackson did, however, continue to speak warmly of Stein's charismatic integrity in conversational speech, "the even-tonedness of which made

This underlines a point Riding had in fact made as early as 1935, in *Epilogue*, where she describes “the Steinian gospel” (in terms of which Wyndham Lewis would have approved) as one of “second childhood: the human consciousness is cheerful even in its oldness, its intellectual bankruptcy.”⁵⁸ While the late essay represents a further, retrospective widening of the gap between herself and Stein, it would be misleading to suggest that (Riding) Jackson’s view of Stein’s work undergoes an abrupt or radical turnaround.

Accordingly, (Riding) Jackson rejects the suggestion of affinity between her work and Stein’s in no uncertain terms:

My poetic work has been here and there in the past—and is even occasionally in the present—spoken of as having likenesses to the verbal doings of Gertrude Stein. This is critical purblindness in regard to both. Gertrude Stein and I were at opposite poles in our view of the linguistic functions and of the spiritual significance of humanness.⁵⁹

Daunting, and characteristic of (Riding) Jackson’s refusal to accept the validity of *any* outside frames of reference, as this is, it is not only a reminder of her strong, even “compulsive” individualism,⁶⁰ but also, more bracingly, her expectation that we will rise to the challenge of her work at its most ambitious, in its bid to speak sufficiently for itself. She wants her work to be taken as personally and sincerely as she herself meant it. This very insistence is an aspect of the homeliness that I wish to stress: the sense, as expressed in *The Telling*, that “it is, indeed, a homely Subject” (*T*, 64), one that calls for “companionship.”

In literary criticism to date, appraisal of the question of Stein’s influence on Riding has tended to be scant and dismissive, the general consensus of opinion being that there is no more than “superficial resemblance” between the two.⁶¹ Robert

hearers feel they were listening to words that were of inner and outer speaking ... words integrated by their speaker in their utterance with her very flesh.”

⁵⁸ *Essays from Epilogue*, 26.

⁵⁹ *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, 244.

⁶⁰ Joyce Piell Wexler speaks of Riding’s “compulsive individualism” in the introduction to *Laura Riding’s Pursuit of Truth*, xii. Although Wexler acknowledges that “speculation” as to “the psychological sources for her tenacity ... is inevitably tentative,” she nevertheless claims that such speculation “illuminates the world of Riding’s poems” (*ibid.*).

⁶¹ The phrase “superficial resemblance” is Robert Fraser’s. See his review of the Carcanet edition of *The Poems of Laura Riding*, “Between Fable and Cryptogram,” *English* (spring 1981): 85.

Fraser rightly, if rather vaguely, locates the resemblance in the “spare, uncluttered” style of their work but claims, “there the affinity ends.”⁶² Mary Kinzie finds it in “the experiments with a small vocabulary, incantation, and narrow wordplay,” adding, sardonically: “Riding did not go as far as Stein did in humming her language to death.”⁶³ Barbara Adams considers the matter at greater length than most, but without referring to examples of Stein’s poetic writing, only to theories put forward in *Composition as Explanation*, as quoted and discussed by Riding in *Contemporaries and Snobs*. Adams’s rather dismissive characterization of Stein’s “self-indulgent liberties in accidental meanings” and of *Tender Buttons* (Adams’s only reference to a particular work of Stein’s) as “a whimsical experiment in purifying words of stale associations” is typical of the generalized and reductive nature of her treatment of Stein.⁶⁴ While the contrast she draws between Stein as “an optimist who saw hope in everyday language” and Riding as “an elitist perfecting language through self” is suggestive, it is also somewhat misleading, in that Riding can be seen as no less optimistic: witness her post-poetic faith in “the voice of the laity” (*T*, 65), prefigured by her claim to be speaking plainly in her poetry. Granted, her writing rarely incorporates colloquial or “everyday” turns of phrase, but neither does it use obscure vocabulary or make esoteric literary allusions.⁶⁵ Her perfectionism would more aptly be described as idealist than elitist.⁶⁶ Adams’s hypothesis that “Riding learned from Stein how to pare down language to its purest” while “demand[ing] more discipline for her [own] poems” is reasonable, but the implication that Stein’s writing is “undisciplined” needs justifying, and we have returned to the notion of merely “superficial

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Mary Kinzie, review of *The Poems of Laura Riding*, in *American Poetry Review* 10, no. 6 (November 1981), 38.

⁶⁴ Barbara Adams, *The Enemy Self: Poetry and Criticism of Laura Riding* (Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, 1990), 58.

⁶⁵ As Robert Nye puts it, in his Introduction to *A Selection of the Poems of Laura Riding*, “All that is required by way of guide and companion to a reading of these poems is the twelve-volume *Oxford English Dictionary*, and its supplements, not because she uses a lot of unusual words but because she doesn’t” (New York: Persea, 1994), 4–5.

⁶⁶ Michael Schmidt makes a point, in his introduction to the recent Carcanet edition of *The Telling*, that is similar to Adams’s, but more in keeping with my emphasis. He speaks of her “tremendous optimism about the human intellect and about the power of language,” an optimism “requir[ing] of each individual a discipline almost impossible to achieve, a continuous consciousness of self, of self in relation, and of self in language.” *The Telling* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2005), vii.

resemblance” without the argument having been much advanced or substantiated beyond explication of Riding’s early view of Stein’s project.⁶⁷

The exception to the critical tendency indicated above is Steven Meyer’s essay, “‘An Ill-matched Correspondence’: Laura Riding’s Gertrude Stein,” which dwells more patiently on the subject. Meyer helpfully clarifies the details of their personal relationship, and offers insights into the differences between the two writers. He suggests that “Riding understood poetry as potentially redeeming the disordered life” (a statement that chimes with Adams’s view of Riding’s struggle with “the enemy self”), whereas “Stein suggested that ‘in a late age’ poetry revitalizes ‘wornout’ words and thereby restores to them the power to ‘realize’ the objects they name ... in one case, life is made over. In the other, something no longer living is returned to life” (a view which recalls Ward’s point about Emerson’s “permission” “to start life again from scratch”).⁶⁸ But Meyer’s main focus is on differences between their theories of language; he does not explore the implications of his view with reference to the poetic writings themselves. Only five lines from a poem of Riding’s (“One”) are quoted, juxtaposed with a short passage from a “portrait” of Stein’s, in order to show that whereas Stein “aimed to convey often very subtle distinctions with her repetitions ... Riding, by contrast, used repetition principally to define a poem’s meaning ever more closely, thereby reducing the likelihood of semantic confusion.”⁶⁹ While I agree with this analysis, the lack of close attention paid to the writings themselves leaves the argument somewhat lacking in support. This chapter should have gone some way towards filling the gap.

While Riding’s relationship with Gertrude Stein may well seem, in retrospect, to have been something of “an ill-matched correspondence,” consideration of the points of coincidence between their literary writings is of particular significance with respect to the more experimental, modernist aspects of Riding’s work. Both Riding and Stein questioned and even dismissed the value of critical treatment of their work. Nor should their scepticism be taken lightly. As Ulla Dydo writes in the introduction to her *Stein Reader*, “When [Stein] set a text, she said what she meant and she meant

⁶⁷ Adams, *The Enemy Self*, 58.

⁶⁸ Meyer, 170.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 161–2.

what she said. She knew that paraphrase withdrew the words from the text rather than elucidating them: ‘You must not think that you do not understand it because you cannot say it ... in other words,’ she said in an interview in New York in November 1934” (*UD*, 2). Similarly, Wexler relates how (Riding) Jackson, in her final letter, “asked why interpretations and explanations were necessary at all. Were her words not good enough in themselves?”⁷⁰ In this chapter, I have tried to take into account the similarities and differences between the ways in which Riding and Stein “mean what they say”—a characteristically modernist preoccupation that is, perhaps, the closest point of connection between them.

Since their striving to make themselves plain gave rise to some of the most starkly abstract, seemingly austere writing of the time, the homely quality of the enterprise is easily overlooked. Both tended to write, particularly in their more experimental work, very much “from the inside,” rather than from “outside” (social, political or historical) perspectives.⁷¹ In Riding’s view, gender would have had much to do with writing in this integrative (as opposed to merely domestic) way: “To woman the whole universe is, ultimately, an indoor place; it is her work to bring it all indoors ... It is in her homeliness, her indoorness, that woman expresses her compulsion to wholeness: the whole is an interior, is internal” (*WW*, 62–3). From the expansive psychological sweep of *The Making of Americans* to the pithy “portraits” of friends, from the cubist domesticity of *Tender Buttons* to the philosophical plainness of *Stanzas in Meditation*, Stein’s work could well be read in such terms.

What differentiates Riding’s project from Stein’s most strikingly is its strict moral impetus, culminating in the insistence on the need for “finality,” a word which Riding often uses emphatically, as in this manifesto-like statement from the original Preface to her *Collected Poems*:

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. (*PLR*, 491)

⁷⁰ Wexler, xii.

⁷¹ As Dydo notes, Stein’s later, “public works,” such as *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, *Everybody’s Autobiography*, and the book *Picasso*, are written “‘from outside’ in conventional English” (*UD*, 5). It is tempting to speculate that in the case of *Everybody’s Autobiography* (published in 1937) Riding’s earlier book, *Everybody’s Letters* (published in 1933) may have influenced Stein’s choice of title.

Stein, by comparison, is content to go on with the aesthetic “immediacies.” Or in the terms of *Epilogue*: “the psychological universe of Gertrude Stein is a magic-making to give an illusion of perpetual immediacy”—a false consciousness of finality.⁷² Again, this is echoed in the later view: “With Gertrude Stein, there was no ‘rest’; finality itself was made a denial of itself.”⁷³

Susan M. Schultz suggests another way of conceptualizing the issue, with regard to modernist versus postmodern emphases. On the one hand, she points out, Stein shows a “reliance on oppositions—between god and mammon, writer and audience, writing and speaking, identity and the lack thereof” that is “more modernist than post-.” On the other hand, Stein shows “an almost Emersonian ability to believe in polar opposites at the same time. Unlike Riding, Stein was not a firm believer in one term of her opposed categories.” This enables Stein to go on generating work when she might otherwise fall into “the traps she lays for herself”—“traps” of the kind that led Riding, the committed “modernist,” prepared to follow her belief in the truth-potential of language [the creed, as opposed to the craft, of poetry] through to its logical conclusion, to renounce poetry.⁷⁴

In (Riding) Jackson’s view, Stein’s practice simply shows a lack of moral commitment. It is striking that (Riding) Jackson, as a fellow American and former modernist poet, attributes this lack in part to “an unhappy combination of American and other impatiences of modernism co-incident with a giant appetite for functional self-realization—being a Somebody, doing Something,”⁷⁵ so underlining her own sense of the moral imperative to strive to come “to a finally determinate sense of human identity,” an “ultimate integrity” involving renunciation of self and the “immediacies” of poetry. In her own, late view, this is what differentiates her poetic, and related literary, writing from Stein’s, but it is nonetheless striking how American her “hope of and confidence in an ultimate integrity of human identity” seems.⁷⁶ (In

⁷² *Essays from ‘Epilogue’*, 26.

⁷³ *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, 256.

⁷⁴ Susan M. Schultz, *A Poetics of Impasse in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), 99.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

this respect, Stein might be seen as more “European,” as, indeed, were the artistic circles in which she mostly moved.)

(Riding) Jackson does in fact affirm the significance of her identity as an American, in terms of the “combined . . . life stress of immediacy and a life stress of finality,” which “could be the beautiful ultimate of human self-definition.”⁷⁷ But what distinguishes her “version of the American version of the principle of human functionality” is its lack of “contradictions.” While the characteristically American “theory that simplification is the key to all problems” (one thinks of Thoreau’s urging us, in *Walden*, to “Simplify, simplify”) is, in (Riding) Jackson’s view, “correct in instinct,” Americans tend to go astray “by resting much self-indulgently at instinct”— or at, one might say with regard to her earlier view of poetry, the “immediacies.”⁷⁸ Her criticism of such “self-indulgence” bespeaks a puritanical impulse that has much to do with her initial admiration of the unprecedented purity of Stein’s [modernist] [form of] simplification *and* the severity of her doubts about its ultimate worth. It seems safe to say that Riding, as poet, was emboldened by Stein’s example. The further implications of Riding’s “finality,” a notion which is not only crucial in differentiating her work from Stein’s, but also plays into the hands of those who would characterize her “truth” as the object of an obsessive “pursuit,” will be explored in the next chapter.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 254.

⁷⁸ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 136. (Riding) Jackson’s comments are from *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, 255.

Chapter 4

The “Pursuit” of Truth and the Meaning of Death

Since the publication of Wexler’s book, *Laura Riding’s Pursuit of Truth* (1980), the notion of Riding’s “pursuit” has become entrenched in critical discourse on her work.¹ Julian Symons’s review of Wexler’s book refers, rather vaguely, to Riding’s view of poetry at the time of the publication of her *Collected Poems* as “the pursuit of inner truth,” and Deborah Baker’s deployment of the idea in her biography of Riding is particularly worthy of note. Claiming that Riding’s “greater love and idol remained the heated search for truth,” Baker goes so far as to suggest: “if Riding was deluded in her pursuit of truth, in her conviction that poetry or language or even plain persistence would bring it to her, this was a necessary delusion.”² In Helen Vendler’s review of Baker’s biography (along with three books by (Riding) Jackson), the “heated search” becomes an even more impassioned, “savage desire for truth,”³ while Baker herself brings the hypothesis, already bordering on the glib, to a conclusion that serves more to reveal its own speculativeness than anything else: “Perhaps all along truth had been Laura Riding’s pursuer rather than the imagined quarry. Snatched from her as she fled were poems.”⁴ Even Jerome McGann, who helps “toward eradicating the idea that the post-poetical Riding has been seeking a transcendental ground of truth,” fails to root out of his own commentary the received view of Riding’s “truth” as “that object she had pursued all her life with such single-minded devotion.”⁵ The obvious appeal of the metaphor of “pursuit” is

¹ Joyce Piell Wexler, *Laura Riding’s Pursuit of Truth* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1980).

² Julian Symons, “Out of Time and Mind,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, July 25, 1980. Symons writes: “By 1938, when her *Collected Poems* were published, she had moved to a position where poetry was seen as the pursuit of inner truth, and a poem was valid only if it expressed such truth” (795). Deborah Baker, *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1993). The quotations appear on pages 247 and 420, respectively.

³ Helen Vendler, “The White Goddess!” in *The New York Review of Books* vol. 40, no. 19 (November 18, 1993).

⁴ Baker, *In Extremis*, 423.

⁵ Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). The two quotations appear on pages 127 and 125, respectively.

that it neatly links Riding's life and work, dramatizing her life story in terms of her preoccupation with the "one story," truth.⁶ But what of (Riding) Jackson's own view, as stated pointedly in a letter to a friend: "I am not 'in pursuit of truth.' It is not my 'quarry.' I am of my human nature a thinker, and conscious of need, responsibility of thinking-speaking *with* truth. I do not go about hunting 'truths.'"⁷ Clearly she wants to emphasize that truth (or truthfulness) is a *quality* of thinking-speaking rather than a distinct object of thought, but how does she resist its characterization as idealized, conceptual object in her poetic work, and what justifies her indignation at Wexler's representing "the Truth I am depicted as 'pursuing' ... as the object of an obsessive insistence on, and striving for, certainty" (*FA*, xvi)? Furthermore, how might we best understand the alternative, often paradoxical characterizations of truth that Riding puts forward? These are the overarching concerns of this chapter, to be considered chiefly with reference to her poetry and related prose writings of the twenties and thirties. Chapter 5 will go on to explore the topic with closer regard to her seminal post-poetic work, *The Telling*, including the philosophical context touched on in the sections supplementary to the core-text. (Riding) Jackson's conception of truth as expressed in *The Telling* will, however, be clarified towards the beginning of what follows here, in order to better ascertain the validity of her claim for continuity between her poetic and post-poetic thought—in particular, the claim that "formulative variations" of the idea of truth as the "one story that tells all that there is to tell ... can be found in my earlier writings, and as a motif of thought everywhere in my recorded thought" (*T*, 176).

In her poetry and related writings, Riding brings the question of truth to a crux in a vision of what she calls, in the opening article of *Epilogue* III, "The End of the World, and After."⁸ As that apocalyptic title leads one to expect, this involves a re-visioning of "death," which looms large in the poems leading up to that

⁶ (Riding) Jackson "testifies" to her "story of there being essentially and ultimately but one story" (*T*, 176-177) particularly towards the end of *The Telling*: pages 169–177. A notable earlier instance of her insistence upon it comes in her preface to the first edition of *Progress of Stories* (1935), where she asserts that "there is only one subject, and it is impossible to change it" (xii).

⁷ Letter to Sonia Raiziss, included in *Chelsea* 52, 1991, 63. Also quoted by Elizabeth Friedmann in her response to Helen Vendler, published in *The New York Review of Books* vol. 41, no. 3; available online at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2333> (accessed March 16, 2006).

⁸ *Epilogue: A Critical Summary*, vol. III (Deya, Majorca: Seizin Press; London: Constable, 1937), 1–5.

manifesto-like statement in prose. The ways in which she uses an apocalyptic vocabulary to critique the Cartesian, dualistic world of false truth and to characterize the non-duality of thinking and speaking with truth, will be crucial points of consideration in what follows. Throughout, attention will be drawn to the unexpectedly homely, as opposed to bleakly apocalyptic, orientation of her vision of the “end of the world,” my emphasis tending to counter received readings in that respect. With the sense of “homeliness” as “thinking-speaking with truth,” we arrive at the core of her concerns; and insofar as the idea, or ideal, of home is central to the writing of America, we also touch the core of the literary tradition in which this study seeks to locate her work. The overtly moral and spiritual orientation of (Riding) Jackson’s sense of “need, responsibility of thinking-speaking with truth” aligns her more closely with the Transcendentalists (and to reach back further, their forefathers, the Puritans) than picaresque storytellers such as Mark Twain and Herman Melville, but Riding’s declarations of independence and of the pressing need to *start over* are characteristically American in the founding sense. From her earliest published essay on poetry, “A Prophecy or a Plea” (1925), she is very much in the American modernist grain in envisioning the poet as the pioneer of “a new spiritual activity,” heroically bidding for “salvation,” however seemingly “harsh” the implications: “For this poetry, song is not surrender but salvation. If the music will at first seem harsher than older tunes, it is because the new poet must be endowed with the ruthlessness of the pioneer” (*FA*, 279). Whitman-like, the poet must “tramp the whole road,” “reintegrat[ing]” the universe for himself, if he is finally to “come home”:

There will not be many who will be able to go the whole way, to complete the entire cycle that identifies at its close the ideational world of man, that begins with him, with the presumably impersonal world, that ends with him ... if one is faithful enough, constant enough, the analysis will induce the synthesis, the poet will come home: and he will have tramped the whole road, he will have seen. By taking the universe apart he will have reintegrated it with his own vitality; and it is this reintegrated universe that will in turn possess him and give him rest.⁹

Implicit in this vision of a “reintegrated universe” is the notion on which Riding was, several years later, to fasten: the idea of a necessary “end of the world,” which would lead from “the presumably impersonal world” to a homelier “universe” informed by

⁹ *FA*, 280. “A Prophecy or a Plea” originally appeared in *The Reviewer*, vol. 5, no. 2, April 1925, 1–7.

the poet's having "seen." Indeed, the image of the poet's deliberately, analytically, "taking the universe apart" sets the tone for much of her work of the late nineteen twenties and thirties, and stands in stark contrast to Baker's image (more romantic than modernist) of the poet in flight from truth, poems "snatched" from her as she flees. But before considering Riding's apocalypticism further, let us follow up the question of her "pursuit" of truth with regard to the poems that address it most directly.

i. Duality, Non-dual Truth, and the Double Sense of Death

Although Riding's conception of truth-telling as a homely, interpersonal event comes to the fore in her post-poetic work, it is clear from the start that she rejects the duality of a "pursuit" of truth, in which there is an irreducible distinction between the person who knows and what is known, undertaken as if with a view to finally grasping or capturing one's "quarry." Even in the very early poem, "Truth," such a scenario is playfully repudiated:

We keep looking for Truth.
 Truth is afraid of being caught.
 Books are bird-cages.
 Truth is no canary
 To nibble patiently at words
 And die when they're all eaten up.
 (FA, 83)

This charmingly anticipates her later, more sober claim that "there can be no literary equivalent to truth" (*T*, 116); her rejection, that is, of the "search for a writer's equivalent of the human reality" on the grounds that "there can be no equivalents of it that are not artificial substitutes for it" (*T*, 115). As the essential "human reality," for (Riding) Jackson, is rooted in the ground of being, so truth-telling is grounded in the "one story that tells all that there is to tell" (*T*, 176), a story waiting to be told. "The human reality" is "embracing," reclaimable as we renounce our pursuit of false equivalents, but truth needs to be called into being, evoked in our telling the story, or variously inflected stories, of our essential selves. *The Telling* implies this distinction in speaking of "concern with [the human reality] for its entire sake as embracing us, yielding us to ourselves, and entitled to be served by us with truth in return" (*T*, 116–117). Reality, in this view, is a given, a gift of being, while the telling or evocation of truth is the fulfilling, as it were, of our side of the bargain. Thus truth is not an

“object” to be pursued or grasped conceptually, but a quality evoked, *given* reality, by our telling. As the early poem puts it, truth does not “nibble at” words and “die when they’re all eaten up”; it does not, that is, transcend language.

According to the poem, we cannot even begin to track truth down, for it “leaves no footprints for us to follow.” “Truth makes no noise,” it “can’t be seen,” and we are advised to “let curiosity stay at home,” as “it may get lost” (*FA*, 84). Similarly, not even “stealth” will do, for if it ventures out at all, it will have to “wear shoes,” and then “grow up to imprudence” (*ibid.*). The first two lines of the final stanza of the poem sum up its uncompromising stance: “Leave truth alone. / Truth can’t be caught”; but given this assertion (itself a kind of didacticism), not to mention the poet’s flagrant disregard of it in taking truth as the very subject of her poem, it follows that the poem ends with the disclaimer: “I think Truth doesn’t live at all because / She’d have to be afraid of dying, then” (84). By denying even the opposition between living and dying, the closing lines underline the non-dualistic implications of the poem’s earlier, negative definitions of truth—undermining them, too, in stressing their provisional use as metaphors. If truth is not objectifiable, it cannot be described, only experienced and evoked, and to “pursue” it is to separate oneself from reality and the rest of the world. The development of Riding’s poetry and poetics makes clear, however, that she does not subscribe to the mystical (or for that matter, postmodernist) view that the dualistic categories which condition our everyday, pragmatic way of experiencing the world are intrinsic to language itself (which would make non-dual truth-telling impossible)—even if she is acutely aware of the traps of this kind with which language is riddled. On the contrary, her faith in language is a constant throughout her career, and the very cause of her renunciation of poetry. From this perspective, the challenge for her poetry is to speak of truth without reifying it dualistically. The progress of her poetry reflects this in its increasing austerity and recourse to paradox in struggling to come to terms with what she eventually came to see as an irresolvable internal contradiction.

While the early poem “Truth” would hardly rank among her finest, it does illustrate—with some contrivance, but also charm and wit—Riding’s fondness for self-cancelling assertions on the subject of truth. This tendency, which is bound up with the attempt to overcome dualistic ways of seeing, becomes more pronounced in her later poetry, often in a more convoluted and hieratical manner. In “Benedictory,”

for example, the earlier poem's rather whimsical notion that truth "leaves no footprints for us to follow" takes the form of the weightier, metaphysical assertion: "A way is an only way. / It is not to be tracked through itself" (*PLR*, 249). Her early stance tends to be more playful and lightly ironic, as, for instance, in "But Lies," which begins: "Oh, I've never had much good of telling the truth." Nevertheless, it is assumed, as in the later work, that "Truth [is] but one," if, at this early stage, only "a delicate child and changeling" who "dies sleepily and sweetly in my arms / After each new play"; and the "cruel" way in which truth "is born ... out of me babe again" (*FA*, 157) reflects the intensity of her desire for more mature, or lasting, understanding.

To gain such understanding, the division implicit in ordinary, dualistic consciousness must be overcome. The more mature poem, "Opening of Eyes," offers a plainer, less "poetical" critique of dualistic thinking. It begins by describing the fundamental separation of thinker from thought:

Thought looking out on thought
 Makes one an eye.
 One is the mind self-blind,
 The other is thought gone
 To be seen from afar and not known.
 Thus is a universe very soon.

(*PLR*, 91)

The laconic last line suggests how readily the perceived separation of "mind" from object of thought gives rise to the dualistic world-view: a veritable "universe"—the indefinite article indicating the arbitrary nature of this "universe" as a conceptual construction. In reading the poem in this way, my account differs markedly from that of Mark Jacobs, who in his preface to the Persea edition of *The Poems of Laura Riding* suggests that by "'Thought looking out on thought / Makes one an eye', she means ... that, if one thinks hard, giving thought to all that strikes the mind ... then one becomes the eye, and the very eye itself becomes oneself; and all that is seen, whether 'out there' or 'in here', may be taken into thought, to be judged and, as necessary, changed" (*PLR*, xx). This seems to disregard the implications of the lines that follow, which describe separation rather than inclusion or unity of thought: "One ... the mind self-blind, / The other ... thought gone / To be seen from afar and not known"—hardly an enlightened state of mind of the sort Jacobs describes, and the sense of scepticism is underlined by the wry statement, "Thus is a universe

very soon.” Indeed, the second and third stanzas elaborate on this “immense surmise” by which “heads grow wise / Of marking bigness, / And idiot size / Spaces out Nature,” referring here, perhaps, to scientific knowledge in particular. The promise of a truer “opening of eyes,” the truth of “undivided thought,” is not intimated until the final stanza: “But what of secretness, / Thought not divided, thinking / A single whole of seeing?” But rather like the “actuality” of death “as a gift too plain, for which ... Foresight has no vision” in “Death as Death” (PLR, 83), the prospect of “thinking” as “a single whole of seeing” “dies ever instantly / Of too plain sight foreseen / Within too suddenly” (PLR, 92). Thus the poem leaves us with the problem of how to sustain such whole-sighted, non-dual thinking.

Riding’s conception of “death,” specifically, her notion of “consciousness tempered with death,” proves crucial in resolving this difficulty.¹⁰ As the playfulness of her early poetry disappears, death takes on new meaning in ways that become apparent in her poems and prose of the late twenties and early to mid-thirties. Her near-fatal “leap” of 1929 brought the matter to a personal crux, but the preoccupation with death in her writings is integral to her ongoing, intellectual struggle with dualism. Many of her writings of this period use an apocalyptic vocabulary unexpectedly to suggest, not so much an Eliotic “waste land” as an optimistic vision of life coming *after*. Accordingly, Riding often uses the word death in a “positive” sense. As Robert Graves points out in his and Riding’s “Private Correspondence on Reality”: “And yet ‘death’ can be used as a positive as well as a negative word: you have constantly used it as such in your poems, and I myself feel its duality.”¹¹ Graves’s claim that she has used it as such “constantly” somewhat overstates the case, although his point is in keeping with her thought on death at the time of their “correspondence” (published in 1937, in *Epilogue* III) and in much of her mature poetry, from *Love as Love, Death as Death* (1928) on.¹² Thus it may be

¹⁰ *Essays from ‘Epilogue’*, ed. Mark Jacobs (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001), 176.

¹¹ “From a Private Correspondence on Reality,” *Essays from ‘Epilogue’*, 165.

¹² The most noticeable instance in which Riding uses “death” in a more negative than positive sense is her long poem “The Life of the Dead,” which differs from most of her poetry in being, as Riding notes in her prefatory “Explanation,” “highly artificial” in character (an effect conveyed by its being written first in French). It also differs from most of her mature poetry in being a satire, aimed, ultimately, at “tell[ing] the truth about the dead modern world and its dead poetry,” as McGann puts it (*Black Riders*, 132). Riding confirms this view in a particularly provocative way in her playfully “serious” letter to the engraver of John Aldridge’s visual designs for the poems, upon

helpful to trace the development of Riding's double sense of death before focusing on her positive use of it more closely.

Prior to *Love as Love, Death as Death*, as Wexler suggests, Riding's poems provide "only hints of her positive view of death as a means of rescue from an unbearable life." Here, however, Wexler is using the word "positive" in a more qualified sense than Graves, having in mind the poet's "rebellion against the limitations of the physical" and a concomitant sense of death as "the ultimate adventure," as expressed in the early poem "Free," which laments the fact that "Living in a body is the drearest kind of life" (*FA*, 263).¹³ Riding often expresses this "rebellion against the limitations of the physical" in terms of an ambivalence over the surrender of self in physical love, as in "Summons," a difficult poem which draws heavily, however, on the conventionally romantic notion that "Love is the lightest call, / But irresistible [sic] as death is" (*FA*, 182).

The themes of love and death are more compellingly expressed in the slightly later poems of Riding's first collection, *The Close Chaplet* (1926), particularly those included (usually in revised form) in her *Collected Poems*. "The Virgin" is a good example, particularly as it bears close comparison and contrast with "Starved," which was published in *The Fugitive* two years before the appearance of "The Virgin" (under the title "Virgin of the Hills") in *The Close Chaplet*. The earlier poem begins:

Who owns this body of mine?
Not him to whom I gave it for a moment
To test the longing limit of his flesh upon,
Nor yet myself, its guardian.

(*FA*, 233)

Effective as this is, the cool claims of "The Virgin" achieve a more powerful concision:

hearing that he was "disturbed by" their "morbidity." She explains that by "dead" she means "the necessarily unrelieved repetition of living ways that takes place in minds which, when they die, remain so to speak in their graves—go on being depressing little human individuals. As this is really the way most human beings understand death, and so are destined to live death, it is rather important that there should be some record of it. I hope this explanation will not be even more depressing to you than the designs themselves." Quoted by Elizabeth Friedmann in *A Mannered Grace: The Life of Laura (Riding) Jackson* (New York: Persea Books, 2005), 192, from a letter from Laura Riding to R.J. Beedham, Jan. 12, 1933.

¹³ The quotations from Wexler appear in *Laura Riding's Pursuit of Truth*, 54.

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

(PLR, 37)

Contrastingly, “Starved” appeals to the reader to “Pity me, / Pity the orphan frame,” which raises the question, via the ambiguity of the parallel, of whether the “I” is identified with the orphan frame or not, so suggesting an uncertainty and comparative lack of self-possession on the part of the speaker. The poem ends with the speaker’s acknowledging her failure to own “the orphan frame,” so that “Hungering together— / Death is the final crust / Of our poor provender.” “The Virgin,” on the other hand, claims never to have worn “this vestimentary stuff,” which is seen as “a true relic, / Though I have never worn it, / Though I shall never be dead.” The shift to a perspective in which the “hungering” claim of the body has been relinquished is characteristic of the manner in which Riding begins to come to terms with death. The very title of her first Seizin collection, *Love as Love, Death as Death* (1928), bespeaks her growing confidence in this respect. As Wexler points out: “By 1928, Riding was beginning to develop her singular view of death. Some poems in *Love as Love, Death as Death* treat death as the simple end of existence. Others make death the point in life where one transcends the personal and assumes a comprehensive understanding of existence” (the latter being more the sense in which Graves speaks of Riding’s positive conception of death).¹⁴ Nevertheless, there are some striking passages in the very early poems where the later stance is prefigured: for instance, the claim that it is “Good . . . That death is no defect / Of body, but something else,” in “Traitor” (*FA*, 82); “The love of death, the worship of a larger life / Where faith is matched with form / And we are all muses,” in “Ars Mortis” (*FA*, 147); and the exhortation to “Discover the free will, / Count death not necessarily logical / But one choice out of many” in “The Contraband” (*FA*, 251). By 1930, and the poem “Incarnations,” which first appeared in one of Riding’s collections of that year, *Poems: A Joking Word*, she is urging the reader not “to deny . . . The old, original dust,” and describing life as a kind of death in which memory of “the first stuff” is buried:

From what grave, what past of flesh and bone
 Dreaming, dreaming I lie

¹⁴ Wexler, 55.

Under the fortunate curse,
 Bewitched, alive, forgetting the first stuff
(PLR, 9)

If to be alive is to dream, as in sleep (and ambiguously to “lie,” as the word’s line-end placement suggests), death, by implication, is a kind of awakening. This is an idea explored by a number of the poems of this period. In “The Wind Suffers,” the “cure” for “suffering” is more of “the same knowing poison, / An improved anguish, / ... my further dying” (PLR, 95). Similarly, in other “poems of immediate occasion,” such as “The Map of Places,” “Death as Death” and “World’s End,” it is all too easy, but usually missing the point, to read suicidal morbidity into the vocabulary Riding uses in coming to terms with the double sense of death.

“The Map of Places” (PLR, 81), concisely written in sonnet form (but with the sestet coming first), begins by describing a mode of understanding that the poem calls into question as its metaphysical conceit unfolds:

The map of places passes.
 The reality of paper tears.
 Land and water where they are
 Are only where they were
 When words read *here* and *here*
 Before ships happened there.

The poet is not concerned with distinguishing this map from other maps, as “a map” might imply. Stating that it is the map “of places” reinforces this generic sense, as well as contributing to the alliterative impact of the first line. The parallel between “the map of places” and “the reality of paper” plays an important part in structuring our understanding of the poem; likewise, the words “passes” and “tears.”

The first part of the poem essentially serves to clarify the opening statement that “the map of places passes.” The “reality of paper” parallels the “map of places” in being paper-thin, associating it with writing rather than living. The conundrum-like third to sixth lines suggest that such orientation as the map provides is inadequate, or un-lasting, because it fails to reflect an immediate apprehension of reality. Thus the poem seems not so much to be attempting to “convey,” as Barbara Adams has suggested, “a feeling of complete disorientation,” as to be reflecting critically on the uncertainty, or experience of lack, described. Admittedly, Adams elaborates on her claim by suggesting that “the ground under one’s feet [is] no more

substantial than a paper map,” but there is more to the poem than that.¹⁵

Adams’s statement is misleading in that the poem goes on to give a sense of greater clarity, or “nakedness,” of understanding—of standing at a new threshold, perhaps:

Now on naked names feet stand,
No geographies in the hand,
And paper reads anciently,
And ships at sea
Turn round and round.
All is known, all is found.
Death meets itself everywhere.
Holes in maps look through to nowhere.

Feet now “stand” (a footing, of a sort, found), but no attempt is made to locate the self in relative terms of “land” and “water,” on maps of limited scope. The passing of the map of places, disorientating as it may seem (“no geographies in the hand”), allows for a new way of seeing: paper now reads “anciently”; “ships at sea / Turn round and round.” “All,” as regards the map of places, “is known, all is found. / Death meets itself everywhere,” putting an end to the old way of seeing, resolving the contradictions implicit in thought guided by maps. As Riding puts it in her later “Correspondence on Reality”: “Death is a cancellation of the fallacies to which life tempts us to adhere.”¹⁶

Nor is there any support in the poem for Adams’s idea that “the poet stands at the center of this map,” though it is consistent with the analogy she draws with the idea of “God in the center of the metaphysical world whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere” (an image more relevant, I will suggest, to the poem “World’s End”). Standing “on naked names” implies that the contrarities that belong to the old way of seeing no longer impose on us, and the poem is principally to do with breaking through to this further ground of non-dual experience. Riding elsewhere portrays this breakthrough as the “end of the world,” but it is not destructive. The passing of the map of places ushers in a more veridical mode of experience that encompasses dualistic thought, but is not determined by it. Riding’s positive conception of death should be understood in this light. Before turning to

¹⁵ Barbara Adams, *The Enemy Self: The Poetry and Criticism of Laura Riding* (Ann Arbor/London: U.M.I. Research Press, 1990), 57.

¹⁶ *Essays from 'Epilogue'*, 176.

her writing on “the end of the world,” some further clarification of her double sense of death is warranted.

“Death as Death” (PLR, 83) and “Second-Death” (PLR, 128) originally appeared in the same poem-collections, of 1928 and 1930, so we can assume that Riding saw them as central.¹⁷ “Second-Death” speaks of “first-death” only briefly: “First-death, life unlikeness, / Second-death, life-likeness / And portrait sadness”; but “Death as Death” reflects on the experience of “life unlikeness,” or instantaneous, non-cognitive apprehension of death, more fully:

To conceive death as death
Is difficulty come by easily,
A blankness fallen among
Images of understanding,
Death like a quick cold hand
On the hot slow head of suicide.
So it is come by easily
For one instant.

While the mention of “suicide” makes it tempting to read the poem as prophetic of her own suicide attempt (in the year following the first publication of the poem), it is important to note that the word is used as a generalized abstraction, to represent the feverishness of thought itself. The poem is more concerned with trying to grasp the literal meaning of death (“death as death”) than the confession of suicidal feelings. However, such meaning reveals itself only as a sudden apprehension of blankness, before the mind falls helplessly back upon received, dualistic conceptions of death:

Then again furnaces
Roar in the ears, then again hell revolves,
And the elastic eye holds paradise
At visible length from blindness,
And dazedly the body echoes
‘Like this, like this, like nothing else.’

This blind and self-defeating (in that sense, “suicidal”) consciousness of death is characterized by the aptly hellish image of “the elastic eye hold[ing] paradise / At visible length from blindness,” an image strikingly similar in structure to the separation of thought (between “the mind self-blind” and “thought gone / To be seen from afar and not known”) in “Opening of Eyes”—a poem close by among the “poems of immediate occasion.” The tone of “Death as Death,” however, is more

¹⁷ The original poem-collections in which these poems appeared are *Love as Love, Death as Death* (London: The Seizin Press, 1928), and *Poems: A Joking Word* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930).

urgent, perhaps even suggestive of the “existential despair” that Barbara Adams finds in it.¹⁸ With “dazed” persistence, “the body echoes” the mind’s inability to grasp the “actuality” of death.

Like nothing—a similarity
 Without resemblance. The prophetic eye,
 Closing upon difficulty
 Opens upon comparison,
 Halving the actuality
 As a gift too plain, for which
 Gratitude has no language,
 Foresight no vision.

The immediate “actuality” of death being “too plain” to grasp, the mind deals with the “difficulty” by conceiving of death in terms of subject-object relation (“open[ing] upon comparison, / Halving the actuality”). If death is “a gift,” exceeding the grasp of our comprehension, it is one for which we cannot express “gratitude,” nor “foresee.” The root of the “difficulty” of conceiving death as death is precisely the mind’s seeking to grasp it conceptually; the “actuality” of death cannot be conceived in relation to “images of understanding.” The poem thus calls attention to the literal “obviousness” of death—the way it blocks even a “suicidally” intense effort to confront it.

Although the mood of “Second-Death” (*PLR*, 128) is more wistful than urgent, it posits a similarly unreal, or inauthentic, mode of relation to death. With death kept “like a sleep” and truth entombed in “face-shaped lockets,” “the death-faces ... roam” like sad simulacra of our selves:

Far roam the death-faces
 From the face-shaped lockets,
 The small oval tombs of truth,
 In second-death, the portrait sadness.

Long hunger the death-faces to know
 Who was once who and hear hello
 And be remembered as so-and-so
 Where albums keep
 Death like a sleep.

The phrase “portrait sadness” is particularly effective in suggesting the remove from reality at which “second-death” places us (rather “Like nothing—a similarity / Without resemblance”). The repetition of the phrase in the final stanza of the poem

¹⁸ Adams, *The Enemy Self*, 56.

underlines the duality of this “second-death,” its unreal “life-likeness.” The idea of “portrait sadness” adds an implication of failing to grasp the meaning of “first death, life unlikeness” and gives a concomitant sense of “Reality stricken / With homesickness”:

First death, life unlikeness,
Second-death, life-likeness
And portrait sadness,
Continuous hope and haunting,
Reality stricken
With homesickness.

However, the poem’s strongly cadenced close, similar to that of “Death as Death,” coupled with the critically distant point of view of the speaker, also bespeak a confidence in the possibility of attaining a truer relation to death, and so being more at home in “reality.” Commentators on Riding have tended to draw the same, predictably negative reading from her poems concerned with death and “alienation.”¹⁹ But critical predilection of this kind obscures the possibility of an apocalyptic vocabulary being used to characterize the “positive” sense of death. This takes us to the heart of Riding’s concern for truth, and the impossibility, or futility, of “pursuing” it.

ii. The End of the World, and After

Like “Death as Death” and “Second-Death,” “World’s End” (PLR, 111) is placed among the “poems of immediate occasion” in Riding’s *Collected*, possibly an indicator that it stemmed very directly from her personal experience. Presumably it is linked to Riding’s view of events at Graves and Nancy Nicholson’s cottage, The World’s End, in Islip, where Riding spent her first night in England, excited by the intense bond that had immediately sprung up between them, and by the place itself, which she found “perfect.” And a year later, in early 1927, she spent several “*so so happy*” months in Islip.²⁰ “World’s End” is also, significantly, the opening, or “keynote,” poem of one of the “sets” in Riding’s *Selected Poems: In Five Sets*. But it has yet to be discussed more than cursorily by critics. Barbara Adams sees the poem’s “inner and

¹⁹ “Alienation” is Barbara Adams’s word: see *The Enemy Self: The Poetry and Criticism of Laura Riding* (Ann Arbor/London: U.M.I. Research Press, 1990), 56.

²⁰ See Friedmann, *A Mannered Grace*, 80, 102.

outer landscape” as a “wasteland from the standpoint of an isolated survivor whose senses have been numbed with over-use,” but there is little evidence to support this view.²¹ The poem speaks not of the senses but of “sense,” become perfectly clear, “transparent”:

The tympanum is worn thin.
 The iris is become transparent.
 The sense has overlasted.
 Sense itself is transparent.
 Speed has caught up with speed.
 Earth rounds out earth.
 The mind puts the mind by.
 Clear spectacle: where is the eye?

Granted, the poem draws on the metaphor of the eye (“The iris is become transparent”), but there is no indication of its being that of “an isolated survivor.” The later poem “Benedictory” is more helpfully suggestive in this respect:²²

You wished to see fully:
 A world is not to be held in an eye.

A world is an eye.
 An eye is not to be held in an eye.
 A way is an only way.
 It is not to be tracked through itself.
 (PLR, 249)

The denial of subject-object duality which informs these lines, with respect to the distinctness of seer and that-which-is-seen, would render the question posed at the end of the first stanza of “World’s End,” “Clear spectacle: where is the eye?” entirely rhetorical—the implication being that an eye distinct from the “clear spectacle” cannot be pointed to. Wittgenstein poses a strikingly similar question in philosophical terms:

Where *in* the world is a metaphysical subject to be found?
 You will say that this is exactly like the case of the eye and the visual field.
 But really you do *not* see the eye.
 And nothing *in the visual field* allows you to infer that it is seen by an eye.²³

²¹ Adams, *The Enemy Self*, 57.

²² “World’s End” first appeared in *Love as Love, Death as Death* (1928); “Benedictory,” under the title “Benedictory Close,” in *Poet: A Lying Word* (1933)—Riding’s last poem-collection before the publication of her *Collected Poems* in 1938.

²³ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 57, 5.633. There is also a parallel in T.S. Eliot’s “Burnt Norton”: “I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where.” T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 5.

Riding's "iris ... become transparent" also recalls Emerson on the transcendent state in which "all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."²⁴ Despite the difference of terminology, there is a shared conviction that an "eye" cannot be separated out from the "spectacle" of reality itself. Likewise, "The mind puts the mind by," for a thinker cannot be separated out from thought itself.

Thus it is problematic to speak of the dimensions of "inner and outer landscape" that Adams postulates. The lines that come closest to depicting an outer landscape are too abstract to allow one to visualize the "imagery":

The complete world
Is likeness in every corner.
The names of contrast fall
Into the widening centre.
A dry sea extends the universal.
(PLR, 111)

Perhaps Adams means that the poem's landscape is *both* inner and outer, but the lack of any concrete outside reference renders the distinction superfluous, if not misleading. Nor does she develop the idea of a meaningful non-duality, an identity of inner and outer (or personal and universal), except in nihilistic terms whereby "values, hopes and individuality have been destroyed and dispersed." This latter notion overlooks two important, qualifying words: "the *complete* world" and "the *names* of contrast" (my emphases). According to Adams's interpretation, the meaning of the first statement of the stanza quoted above would not be affected if it read merely: "The world is likeness in every corner." The sense of meaningless monotony in the wake of the destruction of "values, hopes and individuality" could just as well be drawn from it. But that this world is "complete" suggests that it is entire, or free from deficiency. Unlike the "similarity / Without resemblance" described in "Death as Death" or the "portrait sadness" of "Second-Death," "the complete world" signifies a world of perfect "likeness" to itself, self-supporting, entirely veridical. For Adams, the dispersion of individuality is (presumably) figured by "The names of contrast fall[ing] / Into the widening centre," but again, this is reductive. For it is not

²⁴ *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 29. It is noteworthy, in light of my earlier reference to Plotinus, that Emerson prefaced the first edition of *Nature* with a quotation from Plotinus (*Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, 27, footnote 1).

“contrast” itself, but “the names of contrast” which are dispersed; loss of individuality is not implied, merely loss of dependency on the oppositions which structure dualistic thought and direct our reading of difference into the world, so preventing us from seeing its essential unity—from seeing “fully.” The “loss” is better understood as a release from dualism than a lapse into nihilism:

All is lost, no danger
 Forces the heroic hand.
 No bodies in bodies stand
 Oppositely. ...
 (PLR, 111)

Accordingly, the final stanza of the poem may be read as an affirmation of identity in non-dual thought and feeling:

No suit and no denial
 Disturb the general proof.
 Logic has logic, they remain
 Locked in each other’s arms,
 Or were otherwise insane,
 With all lost and nothing to prove
 That even nothing can live through love.
 (ibid.)

With the “end” of the old world, the poet has, so to speak (to recall “A Prophecy or a Plea”) come home. There is “nothing to prove,” no truth to be pursued, and “even nothing can live through love.” At the same time, the ambiguity of the phrase “live through love”—meaning both “live by means of love” and “survive love”—underlines what is personally at stake. The ambiguity is also present in “nothing,” which has both positive and negative meanings for Riding.

But what of “the widening centre,” which may well seem to swallow up “values, hopes and individuality,” rather like Yeats’s “widening gyre” in “The Second Coming”? Again, such a reading would overlook its being a *centre*, not some yawning abyss, a place “where centre coincides with centre,” as Plotinus has it, in line with the Neoplatonic tradition in which God is seen as a circle whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere.²⁵ There is no suggestion, as there is in Yeats’s poem,

²⁵ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Penguin, 1991), 547. (Riding) Jackson writes warmly of Plotinus in her notes to *The Telling* (155, 159–162), acknowledging “co-incidences” in their thought (while also, of course, identifying ways in which his differs from her own).

that “the centre cannot hold.”²⁶ “No danger / Forces the heroic hand,” and we may safely read the image of the “widening centre” in terms of positive spiritual experience: the self’s expanding to encompass everything, or conversely (but amounting to the same thing), its shrinking to nothing. As Wittgenstein puts it in his *Notebooks 1914–18*:

Here we can see that solipsism coincides with pure realism, if it is strictly thought out. The I of solipsism shrinks to an extensionless point and what remains is the reality co-ordinate with it.²⁷

At last I see that I too belong with the rest of the world, and so on the one side *nothing* is left over, and on the other side, as unique, *the world*. In this way idealism leads to realism if it is strictly thought out.²⁸

I would suggest that Wittgenstein’s sense of belonging to the world experienced “as unique,” in relation to which nothing is left over, is comparable to the “complete world” in Riding’s poem, where there is “likeness in every corner” and “even nothing may live.”

The essay that begins *Epilogue III*, entitled “The End of the World, and After,” is more explicit about the kind of “end” Riding means: “By the end of the world they [poets] would only mean the end of time, of the time-view of the world.” She is no less provocative in stating what she means by “history”: “Life has been lived in terms of time only as poets have not achieved full wakefulness: history

²⁶ William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996), 187.

²⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–18*, ed. and trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961), 2.9.16. While Wittgenstein’s conception of truth may differ radically from Riding’s, his writings have greatly influenced a number of the contemporary American poets who have also taken close interest in Riding. Contemporary American poets to have avowed the influence of both Riding and Wittgenstein include Charles Bernstein, Barrett Watten and Carla Harryman, whose work will come under discussion in chapter 7. Moreover, Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language, particularly as to style, has been closely compared and contrasted with (Riding) Jackson’s by the British literary critic and theorist Christopher Norris. See Christopher C. Norris, “Laura Riding’s *The Telling*: Language, Poetry and Neutral Style,” in *Language and Style* XI.3 (summer 1978). Norris acknowledges that while the project of *The Telling* “differs essentially” from Wittgenstein’s, his work is “the most likely comparison” in terms of “asceticism of style or diction,” in particular his seeking “wisdom in ‘ordinary’ usage” as opposed to “philosophers’ jargon” (137). There is also close kinship, as Marjorie Perloff has shown in *Wittgenstein’s Ladder* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), between the writings of Wittgenstein and Gertrude Stein; and the latter, as discussed in chapter 3 of this study, was for a time associated with, and may be said in some respects to have influenced Riding.

²⁸ Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*, 15.10.16.

represents the bad dreams of poets.”²⁹ Eccentric as this sounds, it is important to note that for Riding the implications are far from exclusionist: “It occurs to very few of us that the cure for sleeplessness is, simply, to be awake”; in fact, “everyone is now irrevocably wide awake, most of us dislike the sensation and reject the responsibility.”³⁰ This underlying optimism derives from her trust in the un-losable ground of truth, an anti-Manichean belief in what *The Telling* describes as “an ultimate self-righting of being” (*T*, 113); or as (Riding) Jackson puts it in her “Introductory” to *Chelsea* 35, “life’s . . . indestructible perfection.”³¹ The earlier, introductory essay to *Epilogue* III uses livelier, more metaphorical language, but anticipates the later thought.

If we are all “now irrevocably wide awake,” then the cause of our not realizing it (or not being able to assume the “responsibility” that goes with it) must be ignorance. But this raises the question: how can we understand our own ignorance? Riding vividly describes the problem in “The Why of the Wind”:

But when the wind springs like a toothless hound
 And we are not even savaged,
 Only as if upbraided for we know not what
 And cannot answer—
 What is there to do, if not to understand?
 And this we cannot

 When the wind runs we run with it.
 We cannot understand because we are not
 When the wind takes our minds.

(*PLR*, 329–30)

That “we are not / When the wind takes our minds” may explain, but hardly solves the difficulty. “We must learn better / What we are and are not” sounds more constructive, but then we find that we can only say, again, “what we are not”:

We are not the wind.
 We are not every vagrant mood that tempts
 Our minds to giddy homelessness.

(*PLR*, 330)

²⁹ *Epilogue* III, 1. (This essay is not included in the selection of *Essays from ‘Epilogue’*.)

³⁰ *Ibid*, 2.

³¹ “Introductory,” in *Chelsea* 35 (1976), 14. This issue of *Chelsea* is given over entirely to selections from (Riding) Jackson’s work. The phrase “life’s . . . indestructible perfection” occurs in the concluding paragraph of (Riding) Jackson’s “Introductory,” in speaking of “the rate of life’s becoming accustomed to its indestructible perfection in time’s eventual delivery of the truth and life to each other at their total same length of travel in us to the state of all-clarified being.”

“Home,” by implication, remains elusive, as the speaker goes on redefining the same, negative assertion: “There is much that we are not. / There is much that is not. / There is much that we have not to be” (ibid.).

But as “Cure of Ignorance” reminds us, “What is not clear is what is clear” (PLR, 186). The paradox stems from the idea that as long as the “barking” (from ignorance) continues, our seeking to understand its cause will get us nowhere: the dogs may “have the scent, / Yet nothing runs like prey.” Again, the problem lies in the pursuit of “what is clear” as if it were “prey.” Thus the only “cure” the poem can offer is that we “seem to disappear / Until the dogs stop barking,” since “There is no other way to explain” (PLR, 186); and even that suggestion must be framed interrogatively.

Proof, then, for this “cure” would seem to be unavailable. But for Riding, by *Epilogue* III, “death” was the necessary “medicine.” Not, that is, “that it is necessary to ‘die’ to experience death,” she explains to Graves in their “Private Correspondence on Reality.” For “a consciousness tempered with death—a critically purified consciousness—is already beyond contradictory physical existence; it has drained the self from the temporal material by which it asserted itself against other selves.”³² This is the “critically purified consciousness,” I would suggest, of “World’s End,” in which “No bodies in bodies stand / Oppositely.” Similarly, Riding answers Graves’s query about how the opposed aspects of death’s duality can be “reconciled” by granting “reality” priority over the duality of “life” and “death”: “The self now stands neither in life nor in death, but in reality”; for “this is how reality it to be experienced: by letting reality be oneself.”³³ Riding’s conception of death needs to be seen in this perspective: as “a phase of consciousness” rather than something, an end, in itself. It is, she argues,

the critical phase of consciousness—the nullification of the merely individualistic meanings. To know that the truth of any act or utterance is qualified by the degree to which it is entailed in the peculiar circumstances

³² *Essays from Epilogue*, 176-77.

³³ Ibid, 177. Again, this anticipates the later idea that “truth’s nature is to fill a place that belongs to it when the place becomes cleared of a usurping occupant” (*T*, 149). At different points in the argument of the Preface to her *Collected Poems*, Riding speaks both of “truth” and “reality” as being “uncovered” by poems (PLR, 484-485).

giving rise it, that its application is limited by the nature of the field to which it is designed to apply: this is death. Criticism is death.³⁴

By this point, Riding has tightened her grip on her subject matter to a point where “death” has little to do with the “suicidal” desperation evinced by earlier poems such as “Death as Death” and “Elegy in a Spider’s Web.” The shift is not as great as it might seem, however, for Riding is no less concerned with the need to “think death”—a suicidal impulse of sorts, metaphorically speaking: “And if we *think* death, we make ourselves an instrument for the answering of the question about reality we personally constitute.”³⁵ In order for the self to become the instrument of “reality,” one’s consciousness of “death” must be so acute as to “nullif[y] ... the merely individualistic meanings.”

iii. The Question of Authority

But there remains the question of authority: how can we be so certain of this final “reality”? The question is crucial, particularly in light of (Riding) Jackson’s objection to our reading “an obsessive insistence on, and striving for, certainty” into her work, as does the strand of criticism which represents her “pursuit of truth” as much as a “pursuit of certainty,” even suggesting that “her search for the certain proof, the still point, the omniscient eye ... was never-ending.”³⁶ We have already seen how, far from seeking “the omniscient eye,” Riding *denies* the possibility of such an eye. We have also seen how she suggests the futility of trying to find a way round the problem of ignorance, or uncertainty, by seeking to identify its “cause.” When she asks, in “The Last Covenant,” “Has nothing yet been everlasting, / Nothing yet locked from forfeit, / Certain beyond faith, logic and conjecture?” (PLR, 265), it is clear that such certainty would involve no conceptual proof or belief, even. The

³⁴ Ibid, 176.

³⁵ Ibid., 178.

³⁶ Wexler writes: “While [Riding] emphasized the continuity of her pursuit of truth, her readers may also find that her writing demonstrates a psychological constancy in her pursuit of certainty” (*Laura Riding’s Pursuit of Truth*, 4). Deborah Baker suggests that Riding’s “search ... was never-ending” with reference to the line in “World’s End” (a poem that she—wrongly, in my view—describes as “feverish”): “Clear spectacle: where is the eye?” (*In Extremis*, 176). Baker’s use of the phrase “the still point” echoes Eliot’s in “Burnt Norton,” though Eliot, like Riding, denies the “omniscient eye” with which Baker seems to equate it: “Except for the point, the still point, / There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. / I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where” (*Four Quartets*, 5).

“proof” cannot be “made” or formulated, is not the object of some search; it is not a goal to be attained, but a “way”:

You made that which could not be made.
 A way is not to be made, nor a world.
 You made no way and no world.
 You made a mystery because you made.
 (PLR, 245)

Elaborating on this conundrum, Riding identifies the craving “to see” as self-defeating, the very “cause of the mystery”:

You would see, and made a mystery to see.
 The cause of the mystery was that you saw.
 The cause of the mystery was that you would see.
 The cause of the mystery was that you did not see.
 (ibid.)

It is only a small step from these incantatory claims to Riding’s affirmation, in *The Telling*, of truth’s “slipping into place with a rightness that is perfectly not-astounding.” “Benedictory,” like *The Telling*, resonates with several spiritual and mystical traditions, but in view of Riding’s paradoxical critique of the self-defeating striving “to see,” it is particularly instructive to consider some of what Martin Buber says about “man’s religious situation”:

his “existence (*Dasein*) in the presence,” is characterized by the essential paradox that everything is entirely out of his hands and yet depends on him. The paradox is insoluble. It cannot be tampered with, synthesized or relativized. No theological artifice can be allowed to provide an abstract reconciliation between thesis and antithesis. The significance of the religious situation is that the paradox has to be lived. But in the reality of a life of standing-before-God, necessity and freedom are seen to be one.³⁷

In one sense, Buber’s paradox is “insoluble” because, once it is understood “in the reality of a life of standing-before-God”—or as Riding secularly puts it, once “we [have made] ourselves an instrument for the answering of the question about reality we personally constitute”—the need to prove disappears, as “necessity and freedom are seen to be one.” Simply put, this is a return to “wonder”:

³⁷ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner, 1958), 95; quoted by Pamela Vermes in *Buber* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 54. The equivalent passage in the more widely available translation of *I and Thou* by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Touchstone, Simon & Schuster, 1970) appears on pages 143–44. The translation quoted here seems the more accessible, if perhaps freer, of the two, and Gregor Smith’s use of the word “paradox” as opposed to Kaufmann’s “indissoluble antinomies” follows on from my discussion of “Benedictory” more naturally.

You have no need to prove now,
 Nor I to do and say along.
 We have finished with not knowing.
 We have returned to wonder.

We are now back in wonder.
 You made yourselves to know.
 You now know, you are now unmade.
 We are at last, again, in wonder.

(PLR, 247)

The stress upon this experience as “return” suggests that we have now “come home.” In Buber’s terms, it is a return to the wonder of religious “encounter.” Although (Riding) Jackson rejects the “intellectually fashionable” notion, derived from Buber, of “a ‘dialogue’ relationship,” on the grounds that “the other than I is often but a puppet of I’s egocentric notioning” (*T*, 151), her “Benedictory” could well be seen as enacting a movement from a dialogical state of “relation” to the illuminating moment, or “event,” of “encounter.”³⁸ This “return” may also be understood as the return-to-where-we-already-are signified by the notion of being “irrevocably wide awake,” to which she refers in her “Private Correspondence on Reality.”

This resolution, then, this “Benedictory Close” (to recall the poem’s original title) involving the relinquishing of the “need to prove,” would seem to be the closest we can come to “certain” knowledge. The “instrument” of relinquishment is the self “drained . . . from the temporal material by which it asserted itself against other selves.” This “draining” of self is in turn the effect of “consciousness tempered with death,” since “in death all that is contradictory passes into non-existence.” Accordingly, the speaker of “Benedictory” emphatically disclaims herself, denying any separation from “that which is.” As Riding puts it in the *Epilogue*

³⁸ Buber himself notes that the German term *Beziehung* (“relation”) may be “rendered more or less accurately by ‘relationship’ in English,” whereas encounter (*Begegnung*) should be understood as “event,” in “Antwort,” P.A. Schilpp and Maurice Friedman, eds., *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, Library of Living Philosophers vol. 12, (Cambridge University Press, 1967), 603; translated by Vermes, in her *Buber*, 42. Vermes explains more “precisely what is meant by encounter [and, in the process, relation]” in *Buber*, 43: “whereas relation is the unilateral recognition of a vis-à-vis as *you* on the part of an *I*, encounter is what happens when two *I*s step into relation simultaneously. Encounter is the coming together into existential communion of two *I*s and two *you*s. Encounter is a privilege that I receive. . . . ‘*You* encounters me by grace: it is not found by seeking.’” In this last statement, Vermes is quoting from the Gregor Smith translation of *I and Thou*, 11. Buber’s claim that encounter is “not found by seeking” chimes clearly with Riding’s undermining of dualistic “mystery”-making and “cause”-seeking in “Benedictory” and her disavowal of the “pursuit of truth” more generally.

“Correspondence,” “the self emerges ... as a demonstration of the existence not of itself but of reality”:³⁹

Now I am not, utterly I am not.
Utterly is that which is.
Utterly I bring what is.
Least am I, quickest not to be am I.
(*PLR*, 248)

Yet she goes on to urge her “loves” to “be slow: wait. / Do not yet go, the end / Is not as you thought—departure.”

The end does not disperse.
It gathers up, it contains.
You shall be destroyed and contained.
You shall be wholly joined.
(*ibid.*)

In this way “Benedictory” points to the threshold of wholeness, or home, ushered in by “the end.” The world that comes “after” is whole in the same way that the postulated “world that remains” in “The Last Covenant” is “entire,” as opposed to “such seizure of truth, or such— / Time’s empty grasp” (*PLR*, 270). In that poem, too, the futility of pursuing or attempting to “seize” truth (the sense of “seizure” as apoplexy may also apply) is emphasized. And while stress is placed on the nature of “truth’s always” as “self-outlasting” (268), we are reminded that “the count ... in that world” is “homely” (269). Wholeness is ushered in at the close of “Benedictory” as the “slow voiding” of self makes way for “the indivisible”—the note on which the poem ends, as if making explicit what was only “secretness, / Thought not divided, thinking / A single whole of seeing” in “Opening of Eyes.” As Wexler observes, the implication that “only a void is whole because it is indivisible” may well seem rather a “Pyrrhic victory,” but as she rightly points out, “Riding uses ‘slow voiding’ to describe purging the personalistic elements of being so only the essential, generic self remains.”⁴⁰

The idea of wholeness, or ultimate reality, as emptiness, or “void,” is common enough in Western mystical literature, not to mention Buddhist philosophy, but it poses a particular challenge to the poet who would speak of it in terms other

³⁹ For this and the previous quotation (“in death...”), see *Essays from Epilogue*, 177.

⁴⁰ Wexler, 78.

than the hermetic or paradoxical.⁴¹ As we have seen, Riding resorts increasingly, in the poems that address such concerns, to quasi-scriptural, starkly paradoxical assertions that risk repetitiousness and restrict the musical range of the poetry. This, I would suggest, is a limit that Riding ran up against and tested in her poetry, making her eventual renunciation of poetry seem unsurprising, if not inevitable, given her continuing belief in the truth-potential of language. It is telling that in her post-poetic work, (Riding) Jackson leaves behind the preoccupation with “death,” the insistence on paradox, and in general, the “need to prove” her conception of truth, aiming instead for a homelier, more open and intimate mode of expression, free from the poetic demands of verse and the modernist obscurity that would entail.⁴²

Nevertheless, even at the height of her commitment to poetry as the best means of uncovering truth, her standard for judging “the importance of anything” is homely, rather than “mystical”: that is, simply “the degree of communication it represents: whether it is an occasion in which our consciousness can participate with some expectation of a companion response.”⁴³ By a similarly pragmatic standard, “the question of authority,” Riding claims, “disappears in the fact that we are here being more actively severe with our subject than others might be—because we are elaborately sensible of the extent of its implications and of all the potential suspicion of and resistance to it.”⁴⁴ Thus “responsibility”—both in the moral sense, as based on “covenant,” and that of eliciting “companion response”—has much to do with “envisaging all the implications of our subject,” and so is the principal theme of the next chapter.

⁴¹ In Buddhist philosophy, the concept of *sunyata* signifies ultimate emptiness or nothingness, while in the Western mystical tradition, Meister Eckhart’s “startling use of nothingness, with its seeming unconcern for traditional Christian imagery,” as Beverly J. Lanzetta puts it, could also provide a basis for comparison. See Beverly J. Lanzetta, “Three Categories of Nothingness in Eckhart,” in *The Journal of Religion* vol. 72, no. 2 (April 1992), 248. Eckhart’s kinship with Mahayana and Zen Buddhism is much discussed in D.T. Suzuki’s book *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁴² As to her leaving behind “the need to prove”: Christopher Norris, in his essay on *The Telling* (see note 23), puts it thus: “*The Telling* is philosophically a case of idealism *expressed*, not of rationalism tried or proven, through language” (138).

⁴³ *Essays in ‘Epilogue’*, 179.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 172–3.

CHAPTER 5

HISTORY, RESPONSIBILITY AND THE TELLING

i. History and "The New Time"

Throughout this study, I have drawn particular attention to the “homeliness” and “hospitality” of (Riding) Jackson’s truth-telling project, as epitomized by her idea of “knowing our missing story, and dwelling in it, as in the home of our thought” (*T*, 21). But the idea of home, however abstract or utopian, implies ties of social responsibility, which must in turn bear relation to history. As shown in chapter 4, Riding is hardly interested in history as a field of knowledge; her main concern is the “end of the world,” including sense of what comes “after” in the homely, interpersonal realm. Nonetheless, much of her critical writing wages a polemic against “history”: a term by which, as Carla Billitteri has explained, Riding means both “temporal, causal process” and “present-day social and political reality.”¹ An early example is *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), where the inauthentic “faith in history” of “period-modernist” poets is opposed to the “faith in the immediate” which would distinguish “genuine” modernism (*SMP*, 158). Another is *Contemporaries and Snobs* (1928), where “advanced contemporary poetry” such as T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is criticized for its lack of “intellect *per se*”: “For as soon as an independent mental act needs to substantiate itself historically it ceases to be independent and it ceases to be intellect” (*CS*, 84). In short, “Zeitgeist poetry is out-of-date poetry, because it describes an emotion derived from history” (30). In keeping with this proposition, Riding’s faith in the immediate increasingly takes the form of belief in the “end” of “the time-view of the world,” as it is superseded by thought that is “final.”² The “Preliminaries” to *Epilogue I*, for instance, announces the editors’ intention of selecting material according to “the impression of finality it makes on us,” since they “understand the immediate moment to be a summary moment, and the truly contemporary mind to be finally, rather than historically,

¹ Carla Billitteri, “Stories, Not History: Laura Riding’s Progress of Truth,” in *The Arizona Quarterly*, spring 2009, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7460/is_200904/ai_n32324125 (accessed March 1, 2010).

² *Epilogue: A Critical Summary*, vol. III (Deya, Majorca: Seizin Press; London: Constable, 1937), 1.

alive.”³ Begun in 1935, *Epilogue*'s experiment in literary community culminates in *The World and Ourselves* and the companion document, *The Covenant of Literal Morality* (1938).⁴ These collaborative works represent Riding's most direct attempt to come to terms with history as socio-political reality, albeit from a strictly “personal” standpoint. In light of the fact that world war was imminent and the Spanish Civil War (which caused Riding and Graves to flee Mallorca in 1936) ongoing, her perspective on the world situation may well seem “eerily abstract.”⁵ Similarly, her *Collected Poems*, published in the same year as *The World and Ourselves*, is peppered with general declarations of having “rejected time, / Expelled the furtive future / From our coward lag-clock,” so that “nothing's left to count but now” (PLR, 259). Such claims exemplify Riding's bid to be “truly contemporary”: her quintessentially modern “hope,” to cite Paul de Man's view of modernity, “of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure.”⁶

Even with the demise of Riding's faith in poetry, “immediacy” and “finality” remain crucial to her stance vis-à-vis history. *The Telling*, which claims to be no more (or less) than a “personal evangel” (T, 59), brings this strand of her thought to conclusion, while keeping the subject, and to some extent the style, of poetry in view.⁷ We have already considered Riding's vision of “the end of the world, and after” as described by her poems and essays in *Epilogue*, but the ideas of authority and responsibility put forward by those writings call for clarification in view of her having

³ Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *Essays From 'Epilogue'*, ed. Mark Jacobs (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001), 4.

⁴ Laura Riding, *The World and Ourselves* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1938). Hereafter cited in the text as *WO*. The very rare, 16 page *Covenant of Literal Morality* was published in London by the Seizin Press.

⁵ Rodney Phillips, “Laura Riding to the World: ‘What shall we do?’” in *Fence* vol. 4 no. 2, fall/winter 2002, <http://fence.fenceportal.org/v4n2/text/riding.html> (accessed August 27, 2010).

⁶ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 148. Carla Billitteri, in “Stories, Not History,” describes de Man's “characterization” of the modernist desire for “a true present” as “particularly apt for Riding,” though the point needs qualifying slightly with respect to Riding, as we shall shortly see.

⁷ As Michael Schmidt suggests, *The Telling* may be seen as “the end of her poetic *oeuvre*,” given (as here) that our concerns are confined “primarily to the theme of poetry, its limitations and renunciation.” See Schmidt's introduction to *The Telling* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), ix. While *Rational Meaning* develops the linguistic project of truth-telling heralded by *The Telling*, aiming to lay a “new foundation for the definition of words,” the comparative concision, prophetic tone and spiritual intensity of *The Telling* resonate more with the poetry.

“advanced then [as she came to believe] on the still wings of forevision of a time of telling true” (*T*, 32). Even granting her post-poetic advance from “forevision” to the “telling” itself, the question of that “time of telling true” remains, for *The Telling* speaks of it as much in anticipation as fulfillment. The idea of such a “time” is further complicated by the claim that “truth rings no bells” (16). If truth instead “slips into place with a rightness that is,” in (Riding) Jackson’s arresting phrase, “perfectly not-astounding,” there should, she admits, be no call for “insistence” (149). And yet insist *The Telling* often does, despite her reluctance “to caution and counsel so much, rather than only tell my story of us.” The homelier “story-speaking” that *The Telling* speaks of, and tries to voice, is envisioned as a way of being “as of the same room with one another” and “in real meaning, of the same Subject and Soul” (43). Accordingly, the “new time” of such spiritually and linguistically intimate speaking is not to be conceived in historical terms:

Thus, in the very telling of our story to one another is the crux of salvation: as we speak it true, we *have* new being, and are in the new time . . . Where, when is that—marking time from now? When, then, is now? To ask so is to tarry in the old time. There is no answer outside the story of us, true-told by us to one another; and we shall cease to ask, as we tell. (*T*, 37–8)

By insisting on the incommensurateness of the historical time-sense (“marking time from now”) with truth-telling, (Riding) Jackson emphasizes the non-duality of her conception of truth. But she is no mystic: for her, “salvation” depends upon meeting our shared responsibility to *words*, rather than the apprehension of truth beyond the intellect. This commitment to univocal language as the basis for spiritual and social renewal may be seen as a mark of her American-ness, since she sees her compatriots “as having had fall to them a responsibility never assumed by any before them as one requiring unequivocal fulfilment: it is, to define human nature” (*T*, 74). In her view, Americans have “no historical threshold to cross into final self-consciousness in the human rôle” (75). Such boldly new-world sense of responsibility may suggest, as it has for Billitteri, kinship with writers as different stylistically from (Riding) Jackson as Walt Whitman and Charles Olson, in their shared aim of fulfilling “America’s prophetic task—the renewal of society” through “acts of a natural or organically conceived language.”⁸ (Riding) Jackson’s utopianism

⁸ Carla Billitteri, *Language and the Renewal of Society in Walt Whitman, Laura (Riding) Jackson, and Charles Olson: The American Cratylus* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). The quotations appear on pages 83 and 6, respectively.

is notably lacking, however, in the visionary “scenery” found in Whitman and Olson. Indeed, the very lack of political, historical, mythical or religious particularity in her post-poetic writing seems, paradoxically, distinctive. As in her poems, she “gives us almost nothing to see.”⁹ The responsible “self” that she expects to “define human nature” is even, austere, “rid ... of all with which it is substantiated as a centre of social identity” (*T*, 105). The universality (some would say, vagueness) of her vision is nevertheless meant to be homely, precisely because it is universal: concerned with oneness, while leaving room for the reader to make the subject his or her own. For (Riding) Jackson’s hope is that we shall speak in the “privacy of human recognition of one another” rather than “cry[ing],” out of difference, “across world-distance” (*T*, 35). The earlier *World and Ourselves* is conceived similarly, as an address from “the inner platform of ourselves” as opposed to “the platform of the world” (*WO*, x). There too, Riding is anxious that nothing be done “in an atmosphere of publicity,” nothing that might “depend on large-scale conversion” (*WO*, 289). This stance clearly prefigures her belief that “the intimateness” of the “method [she] present[s]” in *The Telling* “does not allow the force of doctrine to what is said” (*T*, 62). However, the homeliness, in the sense of plainness, of her “method” tends to confine the argument to the generalized and, at times, insistent. Happy as the “salvation” of the “telling of our story to one another” may be, its rightness, that is, the rightness of (Riding) Jackson’s style of telling as the very “style of truth,” is hardly open to question.¹⁰ Her faith in words is such that she even anticipates eventual “agreement ... that transcends the ways of doubt” (*T*, 109). Consequently *The Telling*, for all its hope of reciprocal speaking, is apt to move within the “closed conceptual circle” that has been seen as Riding’s “greatest liability” as poet: a tautological rhetoric of

⁹ Paul Auster, *Groundwork: Selected Poems and Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 139. Auster goes on to note that although we may “feel as though we had been blinded,” “this is intentional on her part,” for “she does not so much want us to see as to consider the notion of what is seeable”—a comment which could apply as much to the “vision” of *The Telling*. Michael Schmidt similarly observes that its moral “categories are large, universal, not reduced to specific forms and types or embodied in accidentals” (*T*, viii).

¹⁰ The phrase “style of truth” is from (Riding) Jackson’s “Introduction for a Broadcast; Continued for *Chelsea*” (originally published in 1962), in which she claims: “for the practice of the style of truth to become a thing of the present, poetry must become a thing of the past.” See *The Laura (Riding) Jackson Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Friedmann (New York: Persea Books, 2005), 204; or *The Failure of Poetry, The Promise of Language*, ed. John Nolan (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 24.

authenticity that can seem antithetical to the egalitarian impulse motivating the post-poetic work.¹¹

But the case for final truth-telling that (Riding) Jackson wishes to make cannot be proven conceptually; is not, as she insists, “philosophical.”¹² Rather, she wants “to open the question of our proving one another,” which cannot be addressed in objectively verifiable terms, the “proof” being existential, inter-subjective, beyond logical argumentation. As in “World’s End”:

No suit and no denial
Disturb the general proof.
Logic has logic, they remain
Locked in each other’s arms,
Or were otherwise insane ...
(PLR, 111)

The idea of logic locked in its own embrace, “insane” if “otherwise,” implies the ultimate inadequacy, even incoherence, of dualistic thought. The “general proof,” on the other hand, like the certainty sought in “The Last Covenant,” is “beyond faith, logic or conjecture” (PLR, 265). With the “end” of the “world” experienced in this

¹¹ This view of Riding’s “greatest liability” is expressed by Ella Zohar Ophir in “The Laura Riding Question: Modernism, Poetry, and Truth,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 66.1 (March 2005): 104.

¹² (Riding) Jackson declares, “*The Telling* is not a work of philosophy” in “Christopher C. Norris on *The Telling*: Irrelevancy as Critical Economy,” *Language and Style* 19 (spring 1986), 200. In *The Telling* itself, she asserts that she is “not concerned with argumentation, but with *speaking*” (T, 72). This anti-“philosophical” stance is reminiscent of Martin Heidegger’s break, in his “Letter on Humanism,” with “the logic or argument which has structured Western philosophical and scientific thought from Aristotle to modern positivism”—to quote from George Steiner’s commentary. As Steiner points out, Heidegger “challenges the very term” *logic*, claiming that, in deriving not only from *logos* but also, more radically, from *legein*, it “does not signify a discursive, sequential saying, but an in-gathering, a harvesting, a collecting and recollecting (remembering) of the dispersed vestiges of Being.” See George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 129. This “remembering” of Being bears comparison with “our memory of utter soul-being” in *The Telling* (29); and Heidegger’s postulation of language as the very “house of Being” is akin to (Riding) Jackson’s “House of Truth,” to which “all our true questions” must “come home” (T, 39). In her “Introduction for a Broadcast” of 1962, she speaks similarly of “the house ... that language had built for the speech of truth” (*The Laura (Riding) Jackson Reader*, 204); and in *Rational Meaning*: “Language everywhere opens up the interior of existence to complete occupation” (495). In the supplementary notes to *The Telling* (114), (Riding) Jackson denies kinship with Heidegger, with respect to their different use of the phrase “the human reality.” But she does so, it seems, with reference to Sartre on Heidegger, rather than Heidegger’s post-war writings, in which he distances himself from existentialism, insisting, as David Farrell Krell summarizes in his introduction to the “Letter on Humanism,” that existence “is and remains beyond the pale of Cartesian subjectivism.” This is a position with which (Riding) Jackson might have been more in sympathy. See Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York, HarperCollins, 1993), 215. For Heidegger’s statements on language as “the house of Being,” see page 217.

way, the “new time” is revealed, not so much as new, as *given*: “perfectly not-astounding” (*T*, 149). In the evangelical words of *The Telling*:

We shall have certainty of our being in the new time not when we can prove that we are in it, but when it proves itself to us to be that: it will shine a new light upon us, and we shall see the cause to be in ourselves. (*T*, 38)

Again, the post-poetic thought—in this instance, the idea of “certainty” as a return to the wonder of self-knowledge—is anticipated by the poetry:

You have no need to prove now,
Nor I to do or say along.
We have finished with not knowing.
We have returned to wonder.

We are now back in wonder.
You made yourselves to know.
You now know, you are now unmade.
We are at last, again, in wonder.

(*PLR*, 247)

With the return to “wonder” (not as astonishment, but as a natural knowing-state in which to dwell), the “need to prove” disappears, leaving only “our consciousness of the essential good, and our sureness of ourselves in our sureness of it.” “What,” (Riding) Jackson goes on, “to call it? I try to ‘call’ it in *The Telling* in the simplest terms” (*T*, 146). As this notion of “calling,” or calling forth, suggests, (Riding) Jackson’s telling is not so much philosophical as *evocative*, in the simplest sense of that word. To a philosopher, then, *The Telling* will justly seem “a case of idealism *expressed*, not of rationalism tried or proven, through language.”¹³ As in her early work, “personal authority” is privileged above all (*CS*, 10).

ii. “Personal Authority” and Responsibility

But personal authority, as Ella Zohar Ophir has pointed out, “is an oxymoron,” for “authority, like language, is a phenomenon of communities.”¹⁴ Important point as this is, the extent to which (Riding) Jackson acknowledges the risk she runs of absolutism, in presenting such a “broad,” self-authorized vision of unity, should not be overlooked. For instance:

¹³ Christopher Norris, “Laura Riding’s *The Telling*: Language, Poetry, and Neutral Style,” *Language and Style* XI.3 (summer 1978): 138.

¹⁴ Ophir, 113.

As to agreement: we must all transcend the ways of doubt, belief, argument, persuasion. I present what I think are the terms of a unity so broad that nothing good is excluded—I think they are the terms of the good as well. In this I am, I know, vulnerable to judgement as an absolutist—to charges that I provide for too much, in my understandings, that the values of unity are not necessarily the values of the good, and that both can be rules of tyranny. (*T*, 109)

(Riding) Jackson may not have been surprised, then, to read Norris's comment that her vision of a community of speakers for whom "other than truth-telling will become impossible" would have "horrified Orwell."¹⁵ Since her faith in the unifying truth-potential of language is based on "consciousness of the essential good" (*T*, 146), her resolve (and arguably, means of avoiding the equivalent of "Newspeak") is to strive for ever-more-"perfect"—renewed, more rigorous—word-use:

I must transcend my insistentness in representing unity in terms of the good, and the good in terms of unity. You know that I speak so from the mere encouragement of the beat of truth I feel in the words—not of my making, but of the words own falling well, contentedly, among themselves. But I am their speaker, I am, rightly, vulnerable for them. I must transcend my contentedness in their self-contentedness. We must all be ready to say our saying *over*. There is no truth that cannot be better said *over*. Perfection, in truth, and all else, has no single finality: its finality is in infinity. (*T*, 109–10)

In keeping with this emphasis on the need to "say our saying *over*" and the larger "idea of re-beginnings," (Riding) Jackson is anxious that her "telling" not be taken as "gospel," the last word, but as initiating dialogue that will lead to intellectual and spiritual community (*T*, 59). But the note of insistency in the word "telling" is, itself, telling; and although the "insistentness" of her admission of "vulnerability" almost exceeds that for which it apologizes, she is quick to generalize, shifting the emphasis from "I" to "we." More invidiously, she fears the "dangerous" uses of "vice" to which the allowance she makes for "true difference" could be twisted "if you or you—or you—should be a creature swollen with yourself, overfed with dreams of prevailing in the art of catching the ears of others, and set about to tell differently for the triumph of difference, and not for truth's sake" (*T*, 55), the accusatory tone of which is off-putting, if rhetorically interesting as an expression of Puritanism. Her "vulnerability" in speaking so boldly on our behalf indeed lies at the crux of the question of responsibility.

¹⁵ Norris, 143.

However, to judge as failure or mere “liability” the fact that (Riding) Jackson “was never able to cede authority to some imperfect process of consensus formation ... dissolving the matter by dissolving difference itself,” is to read *The Telling* as something other than a work of spiritual idealism.¹⁶ Its “dissolving” of difference, including “the world of history, in which we live in self-destructive difference from ourselves” (*T*, 149), serves less to deny difference than to affirm the truth of non-dual experience—encompassing rather than circumscribed by duality. Such experience is characterized by an immediacy that is also lasting: a “human immediacy that stays, and would render the Past understandable in terms of *not just itself*.”¹⁷ The problem with history “in terms,” as it were, “of itself,” is that it “begins late and ends early” (*T*, 11)—a notion harking back to Riding’s *Four Letters to Catherine*, where history is described as “a muddle” with “neither a beginning nor an end.”¹⁸ However philosophically imprecise her terms may seem, it is clear that (Riding) Jackson’s readiness to “dissolve difference” cannot simply be reduced to the notion that she wished to wipe out history; rather, she hoped to make it more “understandable.”¹⁹ As indicated in chapter 4, the predominant tendency among critics has been to take a reductive view of Riding’s apocalypticism, overlooking her emphasis on non-duality. Ophir’s account of “the Laura Riding question” is no exception in that respect, notably in suggesting that “the apocalyptic vision [that Riding’s poetry] articulates ... forms its most significant limitation,” without taking into account her poem on that very subject, with its critique of dualism, “World’s End.”²⁰

Which is not to suggest that the problem of (Riding) Jackson’s absolutism may simply be dissolved, even granting that *The Telling* is essentially “conversational,”

¹⁶ Ophir, 113.

¹⁷ *The Failure of Poetry, The Promise of Language*, 72. The quotation is from the essay “Then, And Now,” written, the editor informs us, in 1964–65 as part of “an introduction to a projected selection of Laura Riding’s poems” (49). The arrangement with the publisher, Holt, Rinehart, Winston, was, however, cancelled, as was the subsequent arrangement with Wesleyan University Press (246–7). But its composition must have been contemporaneous with work on the “core-piece” of *The Telling*, which originally appeared in *Chelsea* 20/21, 1967.

¹⁸ Laura Riding, *Four Unposted Letters to Catherine* (New York: Persea, 1993), 68.

¹⁹ The notion of “wiping out history” that I have in mind relates to my earlier quotation from Paul de Man, which in the context of his discussion of Nietzsche, Rimbaud and Artaud, reads: “Modernity exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present ...” (*Blindness and Insight*, 148).

²⁰ Ophir, 108.

rather than narrowly “specialized” or “professional.”²¹ Conversation usually involves the informal exchange of diverse ideas, but that the homely dialogue (Riding) Jackson hopes to initiate must be based on or assumed to lead to “agreement ... that transcends the ways of doubt” creates a tension, in her telling, between inclusiveness and absolutism, “invitation” and exclusion. This tension stems, at root, from the conflict between (Riding) Jackson’s trust in words, their organic truth-potential believed to be available to all, and her extreme scepticism of the uses to which they may all too easily be put. Consequently, *The Telling* requires, as Michael Schmidt puts it, “a discipline almost impossible to achieve, a continuous consciousness of self, of self in relation, and of self in language” (*T*, vii): a rigorous exercise of personal and linguistic responsibility, to say the least, with much to do with what (Riding) Jackson means by “immediacy.”

But responsibility requires that we continually question the certainty underpinning it—the “authority” from which it derives. This means questioning, on the one hand, the sense of obligation or accountability, as to an “other,” to which conscience calls us; and on the other hand, the authority we assume in demanding responsibility of others. It would therefore be contradictory to speak of being *absolutely* responsible. In Derrida’s terms: “We must continually remind ourselves that some part of irresponsibility insinuates itself wherever one demands responsibility without sufficiently conceptualizing and thematizing what ‘responsibility’ means; *that is to say everywhere.*”²² While (Riding) Jackson’s insistence that “there is no truth that cannot be better said *over*” qualifies the absolutism of her demand, effectively she is content to believe, as in *Epilogue*, that “the question of authority disappears in the fact that we are here being more actively severe with our subject than others might be.”²³ Although this elitist stance is at odds with her later, more egalitarian “disposition to the laity” (*T*, 64), she remains, essentially, confident in speaking on behalf of “ourselves.” At the same time, she refuses to “cede authority” to anything

²¹ (Riding) Jackson describes *The Telling* as “conversational” in contrast to the “scholastic professionalism of this era” characterized by “specialization in a purposeful narrow-mindedness.” See “Christopher C. Norris on *The Telling*: Irrelevancy as Critical Economy,” 196.

²² Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 25–6. The quotation is from the chapter entitled “Secrets of European Responsibility.”

²³ *Essays from ‘Epilogue’*, 172–3.

other than personally immediate experience of “the one story, truth.” That refusal, coupled with her acute sense of our communal failure to tell “the one story,” heightens the need for a promise that the “self-consuming story” of “historical ‘truth’” shall indeed be superseded (*T*, 175).

The idea of the promise is important in a number of poems “final” and “continual,” and is expounded at length in her 397-line poem, “The Last Covenant” (*PLR*, 263–276). The covenant-idea clearly informs her conception of *The Telling* as an “evangel.”²⁴ Riding’s use of “covenant” is not secular and legalistic, but quasi-religious. It serves as a call to conscience and as a guarantee, or means of deferral, in arguing for truth yet to be realized. It enables her to speak as though truth were something in its own right, to which a debt is owed, while avoiding the dualistic implications of a contract. Again, her concern is to avoid reducing truth to the object of anything akin to a “pursuit.” Accordingly, the “debt” to truth is conceived also as a gift, a potential state of grace—the theological parallel is striking. As Luke Carson points out, (Riding) Jackson’s sense of “the beneficent duty that words lay upon us, and help us to exert ourselves to serve” (*PLR*, v) “echoes the notion of grace in one version of covenant theology, which considers grace the gift bestowed by God that allows us to fulfil our obligations in the covenant.”²⁵ An important difference is that (Riding) Jackson’s “grace” is a gift of Being rather than “a gift bestowed by God,” the problem with the latter being that it would locate the source or “cause” of truth outside ourselves. Despite the Biblical resonance, Riding’s “covenant does not,” Carson explains, “belong to the archaic past, forgotten by modernity; instead, this archaic form of the contract belongs to the future. This implies that the present is characterized by the contingency of bargaining between partners only, with no possible appeal to justice or to a third party who can guarantee the bargain. The covenant, on the other hand, introduces Truth as a third party.”²⁶ The present “characterized by the contingency of bargaining” is included in Riding’s sense of history, unlike the post-historical “true present” promised by the covenant.

²⁴ See also “A Covenant,” in *Chelsea* 69 (2000).

²⁵ Luke Carson, “‘This Is Something Unlosable’: Laura Riding’s ‘Compacting Sense,’” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 37, no. 4 (winter 1995): 439, endnote 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 414.

But what of “the time-view of the world,” the world of history, which cannot, surely, be so summarily dismissed? It may well be (as Ophir predicts) that “if there is one thing that will dispose history to be unkind to Riding, it is her too frequent declarations that history is over.”²⁷ While, to some extent, Riding’s apocalyptic tendency reflects her optimism, there is no ignoring her impatience with history—“the most discouraging . . . dullest word that I know,” as she admits near the end of her *Letters to Catherine*.²⁸ Ophir rightly suggests that Riding was unable to “find a way around seeing a historical poetry as an intellectually *servile* poetry,” and the same may be said of her post-poetic view of “the world of history.”²⁹ Riding was not shy, however, about bringing her vision of truth to bear upon the “historical” situation, even proposing, in the late thirties, a “solution to the world’s troubles.” To consider this, her most historically oriented attempt to articulate her sense of responsibility, we must turn to *The World and Ourselves*. Written on the cusp of her renunciation of poetry, and giving the first “glimpse” of her post-poetic investment of hope in “pure,” everyday language as the natural embodiment of truth, it is an important precursor of *The Telling*.³⁰

iii. From *The World and Ourselves* to *The Telling*

In her foreword to *The World and Ourselves*, Riding goes quickly and confidently to the question of authority. The book, she claims, will “describe . . . where the responsibility and the privilege lie in speaking on behalf of the others, and how the

²⁷ Ophir, 110.

²⁸ *Four Unposted Letters to Catherine*, 69.

²⁹ Ophir, 99.

³⁰ Carla Billitteri writes of the “glimpse” given by *The World and Ourselves* in the preface to her book, *Language and the Renewal of Society*: (Riding) Jackson’s “famous renunciation of poetry was a direct consequence of her growing belief that ordinary language, properly understood and used, requires no rectification, but is itself the language of truth. This belief, given powerful expression in *The Telling*, is first glimpsed in *The World and Ourselves*” (xiv). Billitteri even sees *The World and Ourselves* as “a less well-known but perhaps more important moment of transition” than Riding’s “repudiation of poetry” itself (86). While I would agree insofar as *The World and Ourselves* is a clearer marker of transition than the gradual process of Riding’s renunciation of poetry, which was not stated definitively in print until 1955, it should be kept in mind that Billitteri’s point is made in support of her case for seeing (Riding) Jackson’s work as an example of “Cratyism”—as expressing the “desire for a perfect language of words univocal in meaning” (xiii)—*The World and Ourselves* being seen as “the earliest [clear] manifestation” of this. (Riding) Jackson’s 1955 statement appears in *Twentieth Century Authors, First Supplement: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature*, ed. Stanley J. Kunitz and Vineta Colby (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1955), 482–83. There she dates her renunciation to 1942.

solution of the world's troubles is in our being now, unequivocally, what we are" (*WO*, ix–x). If the apparent simplicity of this "solution" astonishes, that is, in a sense, what Riding intends. For the idea of "our being now, unequivocally, what we are" echoes *Epilogue*'s claim of "contemporaneousness," whereby "the immediate moment" is a summary moment" and the mind is "finally, rather than historically, alive." Or, to recall her "End of the World" essay: "everyone is now irrevocably wide awake," even though "most of us dislike the sensation and reject the responsibility."³¹ Similarly, in *The World and Ourselves*, which Riding conceived as the fourth volume of *Epilogue*, she declares that an apocalyptic "sense of finality burns in us all, and the world is afire with it." In this book "the final shape ... of our existence" is outlined in a more social context than in the previous volumes (*WO*, ix). Riding makes a point, however, of "refrain[ing] from naming public persons, countries, parties, particular disasters or dire situations" or from speaking "of the immediate victims of the unhappiness" (18), her concern being "the nature of the unhappiness" itself, as distinct from the "outside world."

The argument of *The World and Ourselves* hinges on the distinction between "inside" and "outside." According to Riding, only those of "inside" sensibility—namely women, and men "mature in female sensibilities" (17)—are capable of "achieving order"; and only "by thought," not by involvement in politics, diplomacy or other means of "taking action" (iii). The idea of home is central to this idea of order, the problem being that "a confused outer brutality envelops the inner hearth of life where we cultivate all that we know to be precious and true" (17). It is taken as self-evident that "outside affairs outside the houses ... are the less important ones; they are subsidiary to what goes on inside the houses; they are intended to serve the amenities of private lives and all the inner realities of the mind. We, the 'inside people,' have left all these matters to those who seemed functionally best equipped to act as outside people" (16). In this sense, *The World and Ourselves* is an example of Riding's homeliness at its most literal and elitist. Her view of those who "act as outside people" may not be "scorn[ful]" (71), but cannot but seem condescending: as, for instance, where she writes: "We on the inside are not afraid, but we are ... unhappy on their behalf, however happy on our own. They, these exclusively male-

³¹ *Epilogue* III, 2.

minded beings (with no small number of denatured women in their ranks), are somehow our responsibility. What are we going to do about them?" (17).

To address this question, she reaches out, in a manner anticipating the "Extracts from Communications" section of *The Telling*, to other, somewhat like-minded people, with an emphatically "Personal Letter, with a Request for a Reply" (*WO*, 15–19). Her project is collaborative insofar as it presents many of the letters received in reply. But *The World and Ourselves* is not simply an anthology of these, for they serve principally as opportunities for Riding to develop her own argument, by which she means to show "how to take hold of what really is, to practise certainty" (x). Accordingly, she writes repeatedly of being able or unable to "extract recommendations" from the letters.

Naturally, many of Riding's respondents are far less certain than she, and some call her basic assumptions into question. Christina Stead, the Australian novelist, writes that the dichotomy between inside and outside people "seems to be quite inexact," since "at least half of all great painters, poets, writers, have been social rebels, politicians, strong partisans, men of action." Stead also objects to Riding's essentialist claim that women of action are "denatured." "For where," Stead asks, "is the secret of the 'true nature of woman' buried?" (69). The Scottish novelist Naomi Mitchison also "disagree[s] with several statements in [Riding's] letter and much of its feeling. ... To begin with I don't think we can separate life up into 'inside' and 'outside' as you do. Women are not merely occupied with personal relationships and the conservation of the means of life. That is an archaistic view" (73). Riding argues that these respondents misread and trivialize her "notion of femaleness" (72), that "women are not 'merely' occupied with personal relationships"; indeed, she finds it "an astonishing contention that personal relationships are not that part of experience which is capable of most significance" (75).

Riding groups "answers" such as Stead's and Mitchison's under the heading "maleness and femaleness," while another group, of the same number (eighteen), are seen as representing "the realistic approach" (v). Riding considers the latter to be quite missing the point, since the respondents do not consider "the nature of the disorder ... from the inside," instead giving "historical descriptions" based on a "view of the world as a separate entity in itself." As a result, she can "extract only two recommendations" from their answers (133).

The third and final group, including a number of friends with whom Riding had already collaborated, consists of answers “beginning from the inside.” As her categorization leads us to expect, Riding finds more to recommend in these, but the way her “many strictures” (223) overwhelm the responses testifies to the difficulty of an attempt at community as personal as hers (as opposed to one informed by conscious political considerations). In this respect her commentary bespeaks the risk that speaking “afire with . . . a sense of finality” may extinguish the very sense of community that it aspires to achieve—as indeed was the case for several friends and collaborators of Riding’s during her years in London and Mallorca.

The tacit authoritarianism of Riding’s project is tellingly intimated by a parenthetical remark in her foreword: “I have wanted to start not with history, not with ready-made theory, not with what I alone have to say—but what others around me say and (in so far as I have been able to make them speak personally by inviting them personally) out of their sensibilities rather than out of their ‘ideas’” (x). Clearly, this collaborative project has an “author,” who has taken it upon herself to determine not only who to *allow* to speak (“by inviting them personally”) but also *how* they should speak (how to “*make them* speak personally”). As in *The Telling*, a tension arises between Riding’s gesture of “invitation” and her attempt to induce a certain kind of reply. Her friend, the poet Norman Cameron, begins his letter by drawing attention to the taking-of-sides that hers implicitly demands: “Most of the people who reply to your letter will be either of two kinds—those who, in writing, identify themselves with your ‘we’, and those who answer it with ‘you’” (311). Cameron speaks instead as an “I,” a claim that Riding qualifies by suggesting that he speaks for “us” more than he knows. There is a contradiction between Riding’s insistence on distinguishing “we, the ‘inside people’” from those on the outside, and her refusal to allow that to bring together an “inner-platform” community of speakers must also be to assume a place on a “world-platform” of sorts. Her failure to resolve this contradiction limits the pragmatic scope of her thought on history and responsibility, confining it mostly to the reductive, abstract realm.

The World and Ourselves nonetheless concludes with a series of “recommendations” and “resolutions,” including the proposal of “companies of friends as the basis of self-government” and the suggestion that women act as “hostesses in society”—to cite examples in which the homeliness of Riding’s vision

of society is much in evidence.³² The most important of the recommendations, with a view to the subsequent development of her work, comes last: “How to Speak Purely, in a Way to Avoid Fallacies of Language and Mediocrity of Thought” (509). As Billitteri points out, this declaration of faith in the possibility of speaking purely in ordinary language prefigures (Riding) Jackson’s focus on lexical meaning and the language of “the laity.” Billitteri highlights the contrast between the “elitist collective” of *The World and Ourselves* and the democratic community of speakers envisioned by *The Telling*.³³ But the latter, for all its emphasis on non-duality and the truth-telling potential of all, is not entirely free of the earlier elitism. The inside-outside dichotomy persists in the idea that while “we may go anywhere within” the natural, “total potential of human utterance,” “outside of it there is only place for saying what is mad or wicked to say” (*T*, 68). Effectively, the elitist impulse becomes a desire for inclusion so strong that it verges on absolutism. Another point of contrast that needs qualifying is the idea that “in [Riding’s] earlier work, where literature remained a plausible avenue to truth, [her] polemic on behalf of literature was waged instead against the artifice of history.”³⁴ This seems to suggest that Riding’s anti-historical polemic was simply redirected into her post-poetic critique of literature. The antagonism to history is indeed more explicit and persistent in the earlier work, but (Riding) Jackson continues to draw on an opposition between “the world of truth” and “the world of history,” arguing that truth-telling “parts us from the world of history, in which we live in self-destructive difference from ourselves, and takes us into the world of truth” (*T*, 149). Despite her claim that truth “renders the Past understandable in terms *other than itself*,” her re-visioning of history remains unclear—general rather than specific. Like *The World and Ourselves*, *The Telling* implies that dwelling in the world of truth will enable “outside,” “routine” affairs to take care, as it were, of themselves.

Crucially, however, *The Telling* does not base its assumption of “privilege ... in speaking on behalf of the others” on the divisive distinction between “inside” and “outside people.” By dissolving this opposition and acknowledging the

³² Similarly, *The Covenant of Literal Morality* consists of nineteen articles of belief and ten prescriptions for behaviour.

³³ Billitteri, *Language and the Renewal of Society*, 94.

³⁴ Billitteri, “Stories, Not History: Laura Riding’s Progress of Truth” (as note 1).

“vulnerability” of its position, *The Telling* stays more within the sphere of “ourselves” than the earlier book; and the impression it leaves is more one of idealism than elitism. While (Riding) Jackson claims to provide an example in her writing of how to “tell the story of ourselves to one another,” she stops short of prescribing exactly “how to speak” or what changes in “the world” to expect. It is therefore fitting that her vision of community, while not necessarily literary, is described by the metaphor of the book:

When I speak of our telling the story of ourselves to one another, do I mean that as many as can shall make a book-story, as I here have done, for others’ reading? Is this telling, then, to be done by some for all, even as it has always been with telling? I expect you only to know that there has been a change when there has been a change; and that you will know it not as either a change in yourselves or in the world, or as a change great or small, but only as the change of speaking to one another with a constant reason of confirming Being in one another. And I will expect that all our speaking to one another, then, will be as a book of one continual making. (*T*, 52–3)

This is at once more modest than *The World and Ourselves* in its stance towards “the world,” and more ambitious in its vision of speaking as an event of “Being”—akin, in momentousness, to Heidegger’s. It is as if (Riding) Jackson had made her earlier recommendation “to speak purely” the basis of her entire worldview. The “rule of language which is a rule at once of thought and of moral integrity” (*WO*, 514), requiring “a discipline of keeping wordless until the thing thought of is fully and directly present to our minds” (510), becomes the post-poetic “style of truth, a rule of trueness of voice and mind sustained in every morsel of one’s speech.”³⁵ In *The Telling*, (Riding) Jackson envisions our “multiplied” telling reaching a “point of perfect interreference” (31). Given, however, the acknowledged “presence of mystery-haze even at [her] words’ best outspelling of [her] meaning,” one may well be sceptical. Arguably, the very image of “a spell of concentricity ... [coming] among us” (*T*, 56) implies the possibility that it will prove, in the words of “The Last Covenant,” to be “truth-magic of the moment” merely (*PLR*, 239). But if (Riding) Jackson, at the height of her visionary enthusiasm, risks stultifying rather than “open[ing] the question of our proving one another,” her homely wish not “to excite belief, or regale the reading imagination, only to tell what I find to see where my

³⁵ “Introduction for a Broadcast; Continued for *Chelsea*,” *The Laura (Riding) Jackson Reader*, 204.

thought takes me” (30) allows the reader to stand at “true distance” more readily than *The World and Ourselves* or the poetry at its most didactic. Effectively, *The Telling* takes it more as read that “the time-eclipsed occasion” has “grown language-present,” and so worries less over what “the world “demand[s]”:

Has here the time-eclipsed occasion
Grown language-present?
Or does the world demand,
And what think I?

(*PLR*, 260)

Chapter 6

“Celebration of Failure”: Riding’s Influence on John Ashbery

i. Misreading Riding

On the face of it, the playful, postmodern John Ashbery might not seem to have much in common with the highly serious, modernist Laura Riding. Yet in the 1960s, he named Riding as one of the “three writers who most formed my language as a poet,” the other two being “the early Auden” and Wallace Stevens. More recently, in *Other Traditions* (2000), he has related how “Laura Riding once took me to task in a letter for daring to say publicly that I felt I had been influenced by her.”¹ Given the strict definition of “influence” attributed to Riding, requiring that one “follow her principles of conduct,” and Harold Bloom’s theory of influence as “misprision,” to which Ashbery appeals in his essay, it follows that “one must misread Riding in order to be enriched by her.”² To say that Ashbery has shown no sign of renouncing poetry, as Riding did several years after the publication of her *Collected Poems* in 1938, would be an understatement. Nor does he bring serious consideration to that decisive step in Riding’s career and her work subsequent to it, expressing more interest in the early prose pieces of *Experts are Puzzled* than the “tedious length” of *The Telling*. Moreover, in his essay on Riding, Ashbery cites only one poem, “The Thinnest Shadow,” from his first collection *Some Trees*, to illustrate her influence—and “not because it’s a favorite, but because it seems marked by Riding’s concision more than others more satisfying to me, poems in which her influence is more diffuse.”³

In this chapter I try to account for Riding’s influence on Ashbery more satisfyingly. The gist of my argument is that his writing self-consciously exemplifies her post-poetic view of poetry as “stylized failure-of-expression.”⁴ This view of

¹ For the first statement of Ashbery’s, see *The Poets of the New York School*, ed. John Bernard Myers (Philadelphia: Graduate School of Fine Arts, 1969), 29. For the second: John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 117. See also 69–70.

² Ashbery, *Other Traditions*, 117–19. The reference to “misprision” is on page 102.

³ *Ibid.*, 118.

poetry is anticipated to considerable extent by her own poems, as we saw in connection with Gertrude Stein, to whom Ashbery also is indebted. According to (Riding) Jackson, poetry “scares away failure” with “aesthetic success,” its promise of truth-telling compromised by its necessary artifice (*T*, 66). In Ashbery, such “failure” is typically stylized, as in “Darlene’s Hospital,” in terms of

Pain, expiation, delight, more pain,
A frieze that lengthens continually, in the happy way
Friezes do, and no plot is produced,
Nothing you could hang an identifying question on.⁵

A similar poetics of “pain” informs Riding’s poetry, albeit with more serious implications. I go so far as to suggest that both Riding and Ashbery foreground an aesthetic and philosophical striving for “atonement”—in the radical sense of “at-one-ment, a setting at one, a bringing into concord, a reconciling, a uniting in harmony”:⁶ a hospitality to, and at-homeness with, words. Accordingly, my focus is on the meditative, at times almost “religious,” poetry of Ashbery’s early-to-middle period: poems in which he reflects with some urgency on the “truth” and scope of poetry. Others, particularly later ones, are seen as more resigned to, even at home in, “celebrating failure.”⁷ In these respects his work may be seen as “hospitable to words” both in its concern for the truth-telling promise of poetry and in its playful celebration of the “merely” homely. If, in exploring this surprising but significant line of inheritance, my interweaving of poems itself seems unusually “hospitable,” this is in part because I want to illustrate the “more diffuse” aspects of Riding’s influence on Ashbery. I hope at least to indicate points of confluence between their quite different, but (in some ways) similarly “difficult” bodies of work.

Nonetheless, to claim kinship between Ashbery, a poet famous, if not infamous, for “fence-sitting / Raised to the level of an esthetic ideal,”⁸ and Riding,

⁴ Laura (Riding) Jackson, “Poetry and the Good,” *PN Review* 18, no. 4 (March–April 1992): 21.

⁵ John Ashbery, *A Wave* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1984), 58–59. Hereafter cited in the text as *A Wave*.

⁶ Geoffrey Hill, “Poetry as ‘Menace’ and ‘Atonement,’” in *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984, 2.

⁷ Here I am borrowing the title of Riding’s poem, “Celebration of Failure” (*PLR*, 135).

⁸ Ashbery, *Selected Poems* (London: Paladin, 1987), 92. Hereafter cited in the text as *Selected*.

for whom “a poem is an uncovering of truth of so fundamental and general a kind that no other name besides poetry is adequate except truth” (*PLR*, 484), may well seem unlikely. When Ashbery offers an answer to the “fundamental” question, “What is writing?” his bathetic, conversational response could hardly contrast more with Riding’s high style and tone of certainty. “Well,” he says tentatively,

In my case, it’s getting down on paper
Not thoughts, exactly, but ideas, maybe:
Ideas about thoughts. Thoughts is too grand a word.
Ideas is better, though not exactly what I mean.
Someday I’ll explain. Not today though.

(*Selected*, 50)

Riding proves, however, no less unwilling to classify poetry as “a kind of knowledge.” For her, “knowledge implies specialized fields of exploration and discovery; it would be inexact to call poetry a kind of knowledge. It is even inexact to call it a kind of truth, since in truth there are no kinds (*PLR*, 484). Her point coincides with Ashbery’s where on the one hand poetry seems too far removed from “thoughts” to be classified as “knowledge”; while on the other hand, “ideas about thoughts” (closer to “a kind of truth” perhaps) is plainly “inexact” and therefore unsatisfactory. Both poets seem to promise much (albeit self-deprecatingly in Ashbery’s case: “Someday I’ll explain”) only to fail, significantly, to deliver. The “knowledge” with which both are concerned is not to be *known* in the usual sense implying “specialized fields of exploration and discovery” and verifiable criteria.

Ashbery often takes the unverifiable nature of “truth” as his very subject matter. For instance, the opening of “Winter Weather Advisory” stresses that “the one idea” is not in any sense to be “had”:

What have we proved? That we don’t have the one idea
Worth having, that all else is beneath us,
If within our grasp?⁹

Again, Ashbery seeks “proof” only to play down his “thoughts” and “ideas.” His unemphatic tone does not, however, imply a casual abandonment of the Stevensian “one idea,” or what Riding calls “the one story,” truth (*T*, 176). His speaker gently insists:

... But no, it should be in some book
Perhaps, the book one has never read: there it keeps
Its high literacy like a pearl: no point in displaying it,

⁹ John Ashbery, *April Galleons* (London: Paladin, 1990), 66. Hereafter cited in the text as *AG*.

It's too eloquent, too gracious, for these times
At least.

(*ibid.*)

These lines characterize—without succumbing to—(Riding) Jackson's claim that “there can be no literary equivalent to truth,” but that it can be “evoked” (*T*, 116). “Its high literacy,” kept “in some book / Perhaps, the book one has never read,” may refer to the poem secreted, as it were, within the poem: “the poem of the idea,” as Stevens puts it, within “the poem of the words”: the “supreme fiction.”¹⁰ Ashbery's “perhaps,” followed by the more confident assertion, “there it keeps...” hints that we cannot even be sure of our *not* “having” it. One can only—or so it would seem, for even this proposition is framed interrogatively—make the best of the “all else” that “is beneath us, / If within our grasp,” as we find ourselves reading something more closely resembling “newspaper” than sacred text.

“So it's a question of ‘these times,’ / Now and forever,” the poem goes on, in seeming resignation. But I would argue for the underlying seriousness of Ashbery's engagement with that elusive “question,” further to Stevens's claim that “the first idea was not our own,” and that

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.”¹¹

The same note of stoical melancholy can be heard in Ashbery's “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” in which his own self-regarding, astonished yet astonishingly steady gaze (“beyond amazement,” to borrow a phrase from “Houseboat Days”)¹² reflects Parmigianino's:

But there is in that gaze a combination
Of tenderness, amusement and regret, so powerful
In its restraint that one cannot look for long.
The secret is too plain. The pity of it smarts,
Makes hot tears spurt: that the soul is not a soul,
Has no secret, is small, and it fits

¹⁰“Every poem is a poem within a poem: the poem of the idea within the poem of the words.” Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, Milton J. Bates, ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 199. See also his long poem, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.”

¹¹“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 383.

¹²“Beyond amazement”: *Selected Poems*, 240.

Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.
 This is the tune but there are no words.
 The words are only speculation
 (From the Latin *speculum*, mirror):
 They seek and cannot find the meaning of the music.

(*Selected*, 69)

In short: “It hurts, this wanting to give a dimension / To life, when life is precisely that dimension” (*AG*, 25). In view of which, “A question of ‘these times,’ / Now and forever” seems a present but—as the quotation marks around “these times” suggest—forever displaced reflection, an image in a hall of mirrors. Words spoken in such “speculation” can only fail to bring lasting certainty.

From the perspective of Riding’s poetry, having come “so far” as her penultimate poem “of final occasion” (the ultimate poem in her *Selected*): still “Nothing appears but moonlight’s morning— / By which to count were as to strew / The look of day with last night’s rid of moths” (*PLR*, 318). These closing lines articulate a similarly exquisite awareness of poetry’s amounting to little more than a “Celebration of Failure.” In that poem, the “promise” is described as being compromised, but also celebrated, by what is achieved through artifice: “And haughty judgement, / That frowned upon a faultless plan, / Now smiles upon this crippled execution, / And my dashed beauty praises me” (*PLR*, 132). Torn between the demands of “creed” and “craft,” the speaker of these concise, paradoxical lines admits both gratification and disappointment at her “failure-that-is-success.”¹³ Eventually, of course, convinced that she had uncovered all that there is to “uncover” of the dilemma at the heart of poetry, Riding came down firmly on the side of “creed”—“in order to reacquire,” Jerome McGann explains, “those common risks of language, where failure stalks in every word.”¹⁴ Ashbery’s ultimate allegiance to “craft” over “creed” is plain enough, but his poetry continually calls that allegiance into question, often as a way of going on. In considering the extent to which he

¹³ Riding) Jackson speaks of her growing awareness, as a poet, of “a discrepancy, deep-reaching, between what I call the creed and craft of poetry—which I might otherwise describe as its religious and ritualistic aspects” (*PLR*, 414).

¹⁴ McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 126.

answers to Riding's example, I shall pay particular attention to the most explicit form of his questioning, his prose *Three Poems*, first published in 1970.¹⁵

ii. The Poetics of Pain

For both Riding and Ashbery, the poem may be said to spring from and in some sense "to pass through" *pain*.¹⁶ For Riding, it is an exacting "land of pain" that affords one, finally, not the "boasted miles" of progress, but merely a hard-won "inch of wholeness":

Through pain the land of pain,
Through tender exiguity,
Through cruel self-suspicion.
Thus came I to this inch of wholeness.
(*PLR*, 132)

The arresting, ambiguous phrase, "tender exiguity," suggests a painstakingly measured sense of self, coupled with a necessary susceptibility to pain. "Pain" also informs the opening of Ashbery's poem, "A Wave," where the subject finds himself suddenly displaced, "on an invisible terrain." However poorly apprehended, this "pain" is the source of the poem's expansive "wave":

To pass through pain and not know it,
A car door slamming in the night.
To emerge on an invisible terrain.

So the luck of speaking out
A little too late came to be worshipped in various guises:
(*A Wave*, 68)

Does "it" refer to pain itself (the sensation of passing through pain) or having already passed through it? If the poem's intriguingly elided and ambiguous opening "promises a lesson that is not, at least immediately, delivered," then it aptly characterizes the dilemma of the speaker who would understand, but is denied knowledge of "the relationship of pain to knowledge ... of experience to the understanding that comes only afterward."¹⁷ In the words of "Houseboat Days,"

¹⁵ Ashbery, *Three Poems* (New York: Ecco Press, 1989). Hereafter cited in the text as *TP*.

¹⁶ Compare Ashbery's sense, in reading Gertrude Stein, of "the almost physical pain with which we strive to accompany the evolving thought of one of [her] character's ... perhaps a counterpart of the painful projection of the individual into life" ("The Impossible," 252).

¹⁷ Willard Spiegelman, *The Didactic Muse* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), 252.

such understanding comes only “Once the stench of knowledge has dissipated.” For “the mind”

Is so hospitable, taking in everything
Like boarders, and you don't see until
It's all over how little there was to learn
Once the stench of knowledge has dissipated, and the trouvaillies
Of every one of the senses fallen back.

(*Selected*, 239)

Here “the senses” may remind us of the sense of words both as “speculation” and as means of listening for the ineffable “meaning of the music.” The mind’s “hospitality” enables a kind of “celebration,” like “the music” heard in “Self-Portrait”: in both cases, the poet’s “seeking” is experienced as failure and celebration.

Riding’s long poem, “When Love Becomes Words,” expresses the same paradoxical difficulty of remembering how easy understanding “really” is: “how little there was to learn”; how there is “now little to see / And yet little to hide” (*PLR*, 308). The attempt to explain this false “difficulty” is necessarily cryptic: “It is difficult to remember / That we are doing nothing, / Are to do nothing, wish to do nothing” (*ibid.*). This claim bears comparison with the “measured wisdom,” to which Stephen Fredman draws attention in Ashbery’s *Three Poems*, “that affirms ‘It is possible to know just enough.’” Fredman suggests that one keep “the ‘superficial profundity’ that Nietzsche recommends” in mind:¹⁸

Meanwhile it is possible to know just enough, and this is all we were supposed to know, toward which we have been straining all our lives. We are to read this in outward things: the spoons and greasy tables in this room, the wooden shelves, the flyspecked ceiling merging into gloom—good and happy things, nevertheless, that tell us little of themselves and more about ourselves than we ever imagined it was possible to know. They have become the fabric of life. (*TP*, 95-6)

Riding’s words are more “measured” and concise, but also more enigmatic:

From a spurious cloud of disappointment
We must extract the sincere drop of relief
Corresponding to the tear in our thoughts
That we have no reason to shed.

(*PLR*, 308)

Here something approaching spiritual joy is intimated with a precision to match the care involved in “extract[ing]” consolation. The intimation is reinforced by the

¹⁸ Stephen Fredman, *Poet's Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), 120.

seemingly bland assurance: “We are happy”—compare Ashbery’s being drawn to “good and happy things”—which is all very well. But as an *assertion*, weighted (with “tender exiguity”) as poetry, it also reminds us of the dynamic of *unhappiness*: pain. As Ashbery puts it in “Houseboat Days,” exploiting the same “spurious/sincere” paradox:

... that insincerity of reasoning on behalf of one’s
Sincere convictions, true or false in themselves
As the case may be, to which, if we are unwise enough
To argue at all with each other, we must be tempted
(*Selected*, 239)

Which leads back in “to pain,”

And the triumph over pain, still hidden
In these low-lying hills which rob us
Of all privacy, as though one were always about to meet
One’s double through the chain of cigar smoke ...
(*ibid.*)

The equivalent to Ashbery’s elusive “double,” whom one never quite meets but—in Riding’s words—whose “features” one interprets into a recognizable “likeness,” appears in “When Love Becomes Words” as “the wronged face of someone we know, / Hungry to be saved from rancour of us.” It is discerned, not through a “chain of cigar smoke,” but “in the petulant mist”:

And we love: we separate the features
From the fading and compose of them
A likeness to the one that did not wait
And should have waited, learned to wait.
(*PLR*, 310)

And so it is “we” who “wait,” “for the length of conscience” (*ibid.*), as if to atone for the “wronged face” of that “someone we know” who “did not wait, / And should have waited.” Rather than finally getting to “meet / One’s double,” “We raise our eyes to greet ourselves,” finding ourselves within the homely “reach of love: our selves “read out,” in “welcome,” by “the domestic script of words”:

And we raise our eyes to greet ourselves
With a conviction that none is absent
Or none should be, from the domestic script of words
That reads out welcome to all who we are.
(*ibid.*)

While the inkling of doubt in the interjected phrase, “Or none should be,” anticipates her later view of poetry, the “domestic” terms of this homecoming—the “welcoming” gestures of *The Telling* in particular—remain strikingly similar.

iii. *The “Middle Way”*

It may be helpful to consider the climactic stage of the poetic described above—of at-one-ment—as akin to Martin Buber’s sense of “encounter” (*Begegnung*): presence realized by our stepping into reciprocal relation (*Beziehung*) with “ourselves,” others, and the things of this world as it were simultaneously. This reading is suggested not least by Riding’s “rais[ing] our eyes” in “greet[ing],” as well as Ashbery’s “read[ing]” of grace in “outward ... good and happy things.” It also follows from Fredman’s view: that “The object of [*Three Poems*] meditational questions is the essentially religious question, How does one incorporate the moment of grace (the new spirit [the title of the third of these poems]) into everyday life?”¹⁹ As Buber stresses: “The You encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking”; and nor is it to be held wilfully on to—encounter being only something “actual.” This intense, “frontal” mode of relation must inevitably pass into “latency.” Ashbery uses these terms in *Three Poems* to distinguish two principal “kinds of happiness,” the “frontal” and the “latent.” “Latency” also is Buber’s word (in Kaufmann’s translation of *I and Thou*). Accordingly, *Three Poems* strives to find a “middle way”: between “leaving out” and “putting it all down”; between the “one” and “the many”; between knowing and, as Fredman puts it, “dwelling ... resolutely ... in not-understanding.”²⁰

Ashbery’s “Recital” confirms that these twin poles of anxiety and delight, pain and pleasure, are traceable to a “single source”²¹—itself “a thing one can never cease wondering upon,” never cease rehearsing:

¹⁹ Fredman, *Poet’s Prose*, 116.

²⁰ Fredman, *Poet’s Prose*, 106. The first mention of “leaving out” and “putting it all down” is made in the opening sentences of “The New Spirit,” the first of the *Three Poems*: “I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way” (*Three Poems*, 3).

²¹ Riding’s early poem “The Twins” posits a similarly “single source”: “The original mother / Bore nothing but twins. // Misery came only a moment earlier / Than merriment from the womb. // It is this moment / That makes us possible” (*FA*, 117).

The single source of so much pain and pleasure is therefore a thing that one can never cease wondering upon. On the one hand, such boundless happiness for so many; on the other so much pain concentrated in the heart of one. And it is true that each of us is this multitude as well as that isolated individual; we experience the energy and beauty of the others as a miraculous manna from heaven; at the same time our eyes are turned inward to the darkness and emptiness within. (*TP*, 115)

Passages such as this may well have inspired Robert Creeley's praise of *Three Poems* for being "as near a communal self as I've witnessed" and for its "offering a possible way out of the postmodern dilemma of the self, in which writing no longer speaks for the self as a social entity."²² Ashbery may be understood as being very much concerned with holding open the possibility of "relation"—in which a seemingly retrogressive "moving backward to a position of *I-it*" (a movement into "latency") "may be the prelude to a new movement towards *I-you*," as Pamela Vermes explains.²³ The poem "Ostensibly" depicts this movement, concisely, as the possibility of the coals / Fall[ing] alight ... from growing dim" (*AG*, 56), while in *Three Poems*, the "bloom or grace" of "frontal happiness" is seen to be a necessarily transient, if climactic, moment: like Buber's event of encounter, it must inevitably pass into latency. Ashbery concludes: "its beauty cannot be said to have universal validity but must remain fundamentally in doubt" (*TP*, 114). Riding sought to resolve such doubt, not just through her final renunciation of poem-writing, but also in the poems themselves, as in this instance from "There is Much at Work," which qualifies Keats's famous claim for beauty as truth:

The succession of fair things
Delights, does not enlighten.
We still know nothing, nothing.
Beauty will be truth but once.
(*PLR*, 73)

Indeed, many of Riding's poems prefigure the leaving-behind of the vagarious poetic procedure that such "dwelling in not-understanding" seems to dictate. "Nothing So Far," for instance, beautifully portrays a vision of "universal validity" shadowed by "fundamental doubt":

Nothing so far but moonlight

²² Fredman, 115, quotes from a 1979 Modern Language Association address of Creeley's; the second part of the quotation is Fredman's own words.

²³ Pamela Vermes, *Buber* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 43.

Where the mind is;
 Nothing in that place, this hold,
 To hold;
 Only their faceless shadows to announce
 Perhaps they come—
 Nor even do they know
 Whereto they cast them.

(PLR, 318)

As the abrupt slippage from noun to verb indicates, the poetic act of the mind seems, ultimately, to reinforce the mind's sense of itself as a place of confinement, or "hold."

Ashbery's "Recital" describes this epistemological "quandary" of the poetic predicament as quasi-Promethean:

And the proof is that we cannot even imagine another way of being. We are stuck here for eternity and we are not even aware that we are stuck, so natural and even normal does our quandary seem. The situation of Prometheus, bound to the crags for endless ages and visited daily by an eagle, must have seemed so to him. We were surprised once, long ago; and now we can never be surprised again. (TP, 115)

But what sort of "proof" is this: that "we cannot imagine another way of being"? Perhaps—as Buber would be quick to point out—what we interpret as ignorance in fact signifies a kind of latent, or withheld, knowledge. His concept of dialogical relation is important in this respect. For unlike the transient "event" of encounter, it holds open the possibility of latency:

Two friends, two lovers, must repeatedly experience how *I-you* is succeeded by *I-him* or *I-her*, but does it not often seem in those moments as though a bird with a broken wing is trying secretly to fly? And does not an incomprehensible and, as it were, vibrating continuity manifest itself at times between you-moments?²⁴

It is worth noticing that for Riding, too (writing on "The Idea of God"): "Relation is the only admissible principle of duality."²⁵ Ashbery's project in *Three Poems* is very much to confirm unknowable, "vibrating continuity ... between

²⁴ From "Antwort," quoted (in Pamela Vermes's translation) in *Buber*, 42.

²⁵ *Epilogue* III, 13. For Riding, it is the only "admissible principle" given that there can be only one 'one.' Her reluctance to admit any ruling dualistic principle points up a marked shade of difference between her religious thought and Buber's: for Riding the principle of oneness comes prior to any other, even that of relation; whereas for Buber the reverse is the case: encounter is grounded in relation. It is clear from *The Telling* that her scepticism stems from her perception of the risk "in a 'dialogue' relationship" of "the other than I being but a puppet of I's egocentric reasoning" (151).

you-moments,” the latent “possibility” of the “bird with the broken wing” flying—not perhaps, as he puts it, the “boundless leagues we had been hoping for” (Riding’s “boasted miles”), but far enough to keep it out of the “indifferent, prowling cat’s” clutches:

We are like sparrows fluttering and jabbering around a seemingly indifferent prowling cat; we know that the cat is stronger and therefore we forget that we have wings, and too often we fall in with the cat’s plans for us, afraid and therefore unable to use the wings that could have saved us by bearing us aloft if only for a little distance, not the boundless leagues we had been hoping for and insisting on, but enough to make a crucial difference between life and death. (*TP*, 111)

Our “sulking because [we] cannot have the moon” is put down to “childishness”; for Ashbery (as for Buber) the real challenge is to be reconciled, or attuned, to the ebb and flow of relation—open to the possibility of a seemingly retrogressive “moving backward to a position of *I-ii* being the prelude to a new movement towards *I-you*.”²⁶

This implies a state of readiness approaching selflessness. In “The Wind Suffers,” Riding envisages it as one’s “further dying” (*PLR*, 95). A memorable statement of this paradox is that of the seventeenth century philosopher Pascal:

As I write down my thought it sometimes escapes me, but that reminds me of my weakness, which I am always forgetting, and teaches me as much as my forgotten thought, for I care only about knowing that I am nothing.²⁷

This could almost stand as an epigraph to Ashbery’s work, epitomizing his improvisational practice, grounded in “not-understanding,” a selflessness or humility of sorts. As he himself has stated:

I think every poem before it’s written is something unknown and the poem that isn’t wouldn’t be worth writing. My poetry is often criticized for a failure to communicate, but I take issue with this: my intention is to communicate and my feeling is that a poem that communicates something that’s already known by the reader is not really communicating anything to him and in fact shows a lack of respect for him.²⁸

In this way Ashbery invites the reader’s participation while avoiding the difficulties that dog Riding’s work, of a didacticism at odds with itself. On the other hand, Riding’s practice, while not nearly so improvisational, works on the same basic

²⁶ Vermes, *Buber*, 42.

²⁷ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1966), 240. “Stripped of fiction”: . . . “Further dying”: from “The Wind Suffers” (*PLR*, 98).

²⁸ “The Craft of John Ashbery,” *Confrontation* 9 (fall, 1974), 112, as quoted by Fredman, 114.

premise: the poem's—and by extension, the self's—will to “know that [it is] nothing.” “What is a poem? A poem is nothing,” Riding asserts flatly, in *Anarchism is not Enough*. “It is not an effect (common or uncommon) of experience; it is the result of an ability to create a vacuum in experience . . . it is a vacuum and therefore nothing.” (*A*, 16). Paul Auster's comments on Riding's poetry may help us understand what she means by this, and most of what he says is as applicable to Ashbery:

Turned in upon itself, challenging its very right to exist, the poem, in her hands, becomes act rather than object, transparency rather than thing. There is nothing here, nothing in her work we could call a subject, if not the attempt to uncover the origin of the work itself. Everything takes place in absence, in the distance between word and utterance, and each poem emerges at the moment there is nothing left to say. The why of the poem usurps the how and becomes its generating principle, its will to seek its own annihilation, to render itself light. But the struggle is an impossible one: to win is to lose. And yet, it is the only struggle possible.²⁹

As James Schuyler comments pithily, in his poem “A Few Days”: “John is devoted to the impossible.”³⁰ And as (Riding) Jackson herself claims, in her late essay “Poetry and the Good”: “poetry is what might be called a hidden institution: it itself is invisible, and nothing generally wrong can show in it until it is turned inside out”³¹—a verdict which fits both Auster's description of her poetry as “turned in upon itself, challenging its very right to exist,” and, metaphorically at least, Ashbery's “Introduction” to his own poetic strategy:

First, pain gets
Flashed back through the story and the story
Comes out backwards and woof-side up. This is
No one's story!

(A Wave, 34)

In this poetics of “pain” the poem must, as Riding's “Poem Only” concludes, be “Cruel if kind and kind if cruel / And all if nothing” (*PLR*, 112), if only because (as Ashbery notes with devastating simplicity in “Unreleased Movie”): “There is so much we know, too much, cruelly, to be expressed in any medium, / Including silence” (*AG*, 27). This often leads Ashbery, unlike Riding, to resort to the gambit of

²⁹ Paul Auster, *The Art of Hunger* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1992), 21.

³⁰ James Schuyler, *A Few Days* (New York: Random House, 1985), 78.

³¹ (Riding) Jackson, “Poetry and the Good,” 21.

twiddling his thumbs and talking to himself to make “do” at least until something “better” comes along. Here are three (separate) instances:

Suddenly all is quiet again.
I want to talk about something.
It’s not that easy. Pay no attention.

There is still another thing I have to do.
I’ve never been able to do this.

I’ve never really done this before.
See, I couldn’t do it.
Does this make a difference to you, my soul’s windshield wiper?
See, I can try again.³²

Lines such as these may seem frivolous, but they are significant for “claim[ing] complicity” with what Riding sees as “the troubles of a book” (in the poem of that name):

The trouble of a book is thirdly
To speak its sermon, then look the other way,
Arouse commotion in the margin,
Where tongue meets the eye,
But claim no experience of panic,
No complicity in the outcry,
The ordeal of a book is to give no hint
Of ordeal, to be flat and witless
Of the upright sense of print.

(*PLR*, 90)

While Ashbery’s poetry cannot, of course, escape the “flat and “witless” quality “of the upright sense of print,” it does strive to turn itself “inside out,” so “challenging its very right to exist”:

And it is well then to recall
That this track is the outer rim of a flat crust,
Dimensionless, except for its poor, parched surface,
The face one raises to God,
Not the rich, dark composite
We keep to ourselves.

(*A Wave*, 15)

Such reminders and caveats abound in Riding’s poetry. “Poet: A Lying Word” emphasizes its point by foregoing verse: “It is a false wall, a poet: it is a lying word. It is a wall that closes and does not” (*PLR*, 234), while “Doom in Bloom”

³² The first quotation is from *Hotel Lautréamont* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), 53. The second and third are from *And The Stars Were Shining* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), 95 and 87, respectively.

coolly articulates an awareness that “Weakly we write upon / The closing surface of oblivion” (*PLR*, 316). If it is fair to say that Riding became dissatisfied with “flaunting” her words “against despair,” with their “blossom[ing] failure,” then we might describe Ashbery as being tirelessly engaged in trying to hold “the closing surface of oblivion” open. As a result, “there is certainly plenty of monotony,” to appropriate his comment on Stein’s *Stanzas in Meditation*, “but it is the fertile kind, which generates excitement as water monotonously flowing over a dam generates electrical power.”³³ In this sense, his poetry achieves a deceptive effortlessness that is at the same time fecund in suggesting that “rich, dark composite / We keep to ourselves.”

In these respects, and for all its lack of emphasis, Ashbery’s poetry maintains something of “the value” of the “struggle” accorded by Auster to Riding’s poetry. Ashbery could be said to write in keeping with Riding’s view “that behind whatever is said is a consciousness of what is left unsaid, and an implication of ideal completeness, by the discontent with which the single statement is uttered” (*Epilogue III*, 114). But while Riding’s poetic writing voices such “discontent” with increasing urgency, Ashbery normalizes it. Quick to acknowledge that for all we “leave out,” “something soon comes to stand in their place,” Ashbery privileges neither the strategy of omission nor that of inclusion. Rather, his “tactic of exclusion” generates its own “middle way” by seeming to include that which would otherwise have been “left unsaid.”³⁴ It is a pragmatic way around the problem.

To recap: On the one hand, Ashbery would seem to take account of (Riding) Jackson’s verdict as to poetry’s effecting what she calls, in “The Last Covenant,” “truth-magic of the moment” (*PLR*, 239)—a sleight of hand that (in Ashbery’s words) “saves it from embarrassment / By ringing down the curtain” so that “for a few seconds no one would notice” and “The ending would seem perfect” (*AG*, 26). As Auster says, “to win is to lose” in this “struggle.” On the other hand, where Riding “won” out of the problem by “losing” in the grandest manner—that is, simply by stopping—for Ashbery the problem remains pronounced. For as a poet

³³ “The Impossible,” in *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, ed. Michael J. Hoffman (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986), 106.

³⁴ The phrase “tactic of exclusion” is from a review by Andrew Duncan in *Angel Exhaust* 9 (summer 1993), 77.

who may be described, in (Riding) Jackson's words, at once "furiously intrigued by" and disillusioned of "the idea that the characteristics of impotence that [Riding] identified in poetry [might] be outwitted," he must relax the "struggle" simply to ensure its continuance. In so doing, he risks forfeiting something of his claim upon our attention. "There is nothing of radical difference that any of them [poets] can do except to show the prison, which their word-webs tapestry and disguise, to be a prison" pronounces (Riding) Jackson³⁵—nor would Ashbery seem to disagree, about forty years into his career, as to the impossibility of putting up much more than "Token Resistance." His "World's End" (also the title of a seminal Riding poem) is delimited by the modest injunction: "I can only tell you how to stop things happening."³⁶ Or else it's a matter of "Saying It To Keep it From Happening," to borrow another poem-title. While his poetry can be seen as expertly demonstrating Riding's post-poetical assertion that "In speaking that is under poetry's protection, failure is scared away until all's said" (*T*, 66), he would seem to do so openly; no pretence is ever made of having "said [it] all." The process by which, according to (Riding) Jackson's analysis, "small felicities of utterance magnify themselves into a persuasive appearance of truth" (*ibid.*), is continually debunked by his foregrounding the discrepancy between "the figured representation of our days" and "the justification of them," as "The Recital" puts it:

Perhaps no art, however gifted and well-intentioned, can supply what we were demanding of it: not only the figured representation of our days but the justification of them, the reckoning and its application, so close to the reality being lived that it vanishes suddenly in a thunderclap, with a loud cry.
(*TP*, 113)

*iv. "Stylized Failure-of-Expression":
Signs of Riding's Influence in Ashbery's Later Poetry*

Interestingly, Ashbery began to incorporate clear references to Riding's work quite late in his career, around the early nineties—an effect perhaps of his work on his Charles Eliot Norton lecture on Riding, later collected in *Other Traditions*. Perhaps he has grown so used to what a poem in *Hotel Lautréamont* (1992) calls "The Old

³⁵ This and the quotation beginning "furiously intrigued..." are from "Poetry and the Good."

³⁶ Both poems are from *And the Stars Were Shining*.

Complex,” that Riding’s “rugged black of anger” with its “uncertain smile-border” has ceased to threaten, turning instead into “the rugged blade of anger” he can “regulate,” noting the “occasional black steed” (107). Though as he is quick to point out: “Of course you have to actually take the medicine” (ibid.), thus reinstating the poetics of pain, and the notion of the poem as a kind of preventative medicine (that “scares away ... failure”). But—to adapt Fredman—Ashbery’s “aesthetic analogue to experience” is so embracing and relativistic as to induce a sort of spiritual agoraphobia that contrasts with Riding’s harder-won “inch of wholeness”—a consequence, in no small part, of her less derivative and more concise—more absolutist—poetic language.³⁷ In mind of these differences, the principal point of confluence between Riding and Ashbery is particularly significant: their radical scepticism, which emphasizes the inappropriateness of a “designful” pursuit of truth. In this regard, and especially as to tone, Ashbery comes closest to Riding in her early prose—the short stories in particular.

When asked to comment on her “influence” upon Ashbery, (Riding) Jackson suggested that “perhaps ... what he found stimulating” was “the variety of tempers perceivable there—a certain pictoriality, in this.”³⁸ In “The New Spirit,” we do indeed find “a certain pictoriality” in the variety of authorial perspectives presented. “The anonymous author’s ... reading,” described by Riding in her story “An Anonymous Book,” is analogous to the reader whom Ashbery addresses as “you,” and Riding’s “writing but of his reading, which remains reading for all my writing,” is tempered, in “The New Spirit,” in a vision of their both being “lost” in the “becoming” of the dialogical “medium”:

I seem to hear you and see you wishing me well, your eyes taking in some rapid lateral development

reading without comprehension

and always taken up on the reel of what is happening in the wings. Which becomes a medium through which we address one another, the independent life we were hoping to create ... A permanent medium in which we are lost, since becoming robs it of its potential. (*TP*, 13)

³⁷ Fredman, 100.

³⁸ Interview with Elizabeth Friedmann, *PN Review* 17, no. 4 (March–April, 1991): 72.

This state of being “lost” eventually culminates in a corresponding “rescue.”

Towards the end of “The System,” Ashbery reflects:

For we are rescued by what we cannot imagine: it is what finally takes us up and shuts our story, replacing it among the millions of similar volumes that by no means menace its uniqueness but on the contrary situate it in the proper depth and perspective. At last we have that rightness that is rightfully ours. But we do not know what brought it about” (*TP*, 104).

At the same time, Ashbery shows just how far into the “end” of the “story” the imagination, given free rein, can go. In more recent work he has grown fond of reminding us that we are, after all, always free to say things like: “the heck with endings. I don’t think I want to wear those socks.”

... The conventional wisdom is that we desire what’s unattainable (reclining clouds, distant factory chimneys) for precisely that reason. No allowance is made for the goodness that might be lurking therein, like love in a tongue-tied child whose cheek one pinches as one passes along to bigger and better disappointments. We never know what we could walk back to except when we do go back, and then it’s as if not knowing and knowing were the same thing.³⁹

Making “allowance” for “the goodness ... lurking” within one’s “desire” for the “unattainable,” with the implicit pain or sense of failure involved in “pass[ing] along to bigger and better disappointments,” marks, I would suggest, what Riding calls in “A Last Lesson in Geography”:

the beginning of the sixth sense, the sense of speech ... a sense suffered rather than enjoyed, a sense of the impossible, which in the weak people had meant stuttering notions of immortality, and in the strong people, up to now, only a terrible crying out sometimes with a pain they didn’t feel. (*Progress*, 250)

In this story—re-published, for the first time (1964) by Ashbery, in *Art and Literature*—the function of “speech” is to realize this conception of “pain,” to allow ourselves to “feel” it. As the pain takes precedence and “the strong people”—those who aspire to speak—die, so “the sense of speech” becomes the embodiment of the truth: “She was the body now, and the body had but one sense now, the sense of speech” (*Progress*, 250). As Ashbery suggests, speech is something we “do,” and only in “doing” (or embodying) it do we understand what we really mean: “We never know what we could walk back to except when we *do* go back” (my emphasis). This is not to speak the truth exactly, but to speak, as Riding stresses, in the “knowledge

³⁹ *Hotel Lautréamont*, 71.

... that the words it [the body] spoke were only broken meanings of the word that she spoke ... a word not to say but to know” (*Progress*, 251). In Ashbery’s terms, it truly is “as if not knowing and knowing were the same thing”: saying has supplanted knowing, yet (in “A Last Lesson’s” terms) the speaker’s saying does not supplant “hers.”

From a broader “geographical” perspective, however, this position is seen to be nothing short of precarious. “You see how it is all a matter of the humour of the thing,” Riding comments archly (*Progress*, 251). Even in our “smiling”—given that we are “not quite sure what we are smiling at”—is a trace of anxiety. That is to say, we cannot help but wonder:

But beyond *this*? To go on smiling, and to feel not merely that we do not altogether understand, but that, in effect, we do not altogether exist, that, in effect, only *she* altogether exists, that only the truth altogether knows—in which we cannot give ourselves a perfect lesson, since we as a whole do not altogether exist?

That is the question: can we, in these circumstances, go on smiling?
(*Progress*, 253)

In the terms of Ashbery’s “Introduction,” it is as if the “pain” has been transformed from a singular pain (signalled by the “I” that holds sway in the earlier part of the poem) to a plural “fretful vacillating around the central / Question” that remains unidentified but nonetheless “brings us closer, / For better or worse, for all this time” (*A Wave*, 34). This open-ended state of relation both cements and defers its pledge. To enact it represents, firstly, a conscientious recognition of what (Riding) Jackson describes as “the spiritual failure-that-is-success of poetry”; and secondly, a self-conscious celebration of this “failure.”⁴⁰ Ashbery proves that if the poet chooses not to accept “the unchallengeable logic of [her later] linguistic position,”⁴¹ this need not prevent him rising impressively to her challenge, through an articulate awareness of the work as “stylized failure-of-expression.” Besides, as Riding concludes—in a strikingly Ashberyan passage—near the close of her “Last Lesson in Geography”: “I do not feel that things are quite so bad as they seem. A great deal of pleasure would, I feel, be thrown away if our attitude became too stoical” (*Progress*, 253).

⁴⁰ “Poetry and the Good,” 21.

⁴¹ *PLR*, 10.

Chapter 7

A “Sense of the Further”: Modernism and Beyond

For the Carcanet paperback edition of her poems (1986), (Riding) Jackson made the following statement, emphasizing her work’s self-sufficiency and anticipated wholeness (or “homeliness”) of thought:

My work—poetic and other, early and later—has no allegiances, private, social, cultural. The point of it is, not “modernism” but *What Further?* It anticipates a leaving-behind of the uncertainties of particular or composite identity: whole intelligence as the invisible personality.¹

Her dedication of *The Telling* to her husband, “partner in the endeavor to take words, and oneself, further,” and her parents, “who imparted to [her] a durable sense of the further,” is also worthy of note, for it indicates the personal, more straightforwardly homely context of her linguistic and spiritual “endeavor.” In this chapter, I borrow (Riding) Jackson’s “sense of the further” to frame my assessment of her work’s relationship, first, to modernism (particularly the modernist tradition emphasized by language poets and critics); then to postmodernist, language-oriented writing that extends (Riding) Jackson’s critique of poetry—taking it “further.”² After considering the question of her poetic modernism, I give a general account of the connections between (Riding) Jackson’s larger body of work and language writing. Then I consider the prevailing language-oriented view of her poetry more specifically by comparing it with that of Lisa Samuels, a contemporary poet whose work, known for its “difficulty,” owes an acknowledged debt to Riding’s.³ Finally, I turn to some

¹ *The Poems of Laura Riding: A New Edition of the 1938 Collection* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1986), back cover; also used as book description on the publisher’s website.

² I use the terms “language-oriented writing” and “language writing” to include the work of those who may not have been involved in the movement of the 1970s but are clearly “working,” as Megan Simpson puts it, “within the political and philosophical frame articulated by ‘language poetry’” (notably, in this chapter, Lisa Samuels). The inclusive term “writing” also befits the work of Carla Harryman, who “insists that she has never thought of herself as a poet because of her deep interest in narrative and prose forms.” See Megan Simpson, *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women’s Language-Oriented Writing* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 197.

³ Samuels acknowledges Riding as “tutelary spirit” in *Poetic Arrest. Laura Riding, Wallace Stevens, and the Modernist Afterlife* (PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1997), x. Barrett Watten mentions Riding as “mentor” in his blurb for Samuels’s collection of poems, *The Seven Voices* (Oakland, California: O Books, 1998).

samples of writing by Carla Harryman, who follows the example of Riding's turn to prose as a means of exploring the truth-telling scope of language. Riding's "modernism" is thus seen from the "further" perspective of a now considerably defamiliarized "hospitality to words."

i. Riding and "Genuine" Modernism

It seems apt to preface this chapter's account of Riding's "postmodernism" (that is, the appropriation of her work by postmodernist, language-oriented writing) by framing it in the context of what Lisa Samuels rightly calls Riding's "relative non-presence in stories of modernism" (*A*, xv).⁴ Before examining some of the ways in which her "hospitality to words" has been a source for language writing, what of Riding as modernist? And in what sense is her poetic work in its own right "further" to modernism?

(Riding) Jackson herself writes of having "assumed the character of a modern in the freedom with which I, cheerfully, dispensed with the conventionalities of poetic idiom, and forged me a poetic diction out of natural standards of diction-excellence" (*PLR*, xxix). This relatively breezy, summary comment downplays the difficulty, or struggle, involved in the "forging," which could equally be identified with the Stevensian striving to find "what will suffice," while resisting "the pressure of reality."⁵ Her poetic modernism could also be likened to Hart Crane's declared aim to "give the poem *as a whole* an orbit or pre-determined direction of its own," establishing it "as free from my own personality as from any chance evaluation on the reader's part." Crane adds parenthetically, "This is, of course, an impossibility, but a characteristic worth mentioning."⁶ Riding and Graves, in *A Survey of Modernist*

⁴ Like Michael Bell, I consider "the change from Modernism to postmodernism" to be "not so much a difference in metaphysic so much as a different stage in the digestion of the same metaphysic." See Michael Bell, "The Metaphysics of Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 9.

⁵ Samuels in *Anarchism*, xv. Stevens ("what will suffice") in the poem "Of Modern Poetry"; "the pressure of reality" in "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1951).

⁶ "General Aims and Theories," in *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, ed. Brom Weber (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 220. Crane goes on: "Such a poem is at least a stab at a truth, and to such an extent may be differentiated from other kinds of poetry and called 'absolute.'" Riding saw her poems as more than "stabs" at truths, and believed that poetry can be an actual "uncovering of truth" (*PLR*, 484), but Crane's idea of the "absolute" is nonetheless apt.

Poetry, are more confident, putting forward her poem “The Rugged Black of Anger” to show how a “modernist” poem really can “mean what it says,” if we “let it interpret itself, without introducing any new associations or, if possible, any new words.” As such, it matches their description of a “genuine,” as opposed to a merely “historical” sense of modernism (*SMP*, 155–6).

Modernist, indeed, should describe a quality in poetry which has nothing to do with the date or with responding to civilization. . . . There would occur evidences of time in such poetry; but always its modernism would lie in its independence, in its relying on none of the traditional devices of poetry-making in the past nor on any of the artificial effects to be got by using the atmosphere of contemporary life and knowledge to startle and give reality. . . . Most of all, such poetry would be characterized by a lack of strain, by an intelligent ease . . . not only would it not have to rely on references; it would not, either, have to rely on modern short-story material . . . It would not have to rely on such material because it would have something to say that had nothing to do with reporting contemporary intelligence or with vying with the progress of intelligence. (*SMP*, 178–180)

On this basis, Riding’s poetry would seem to stand at the opposite end of the modernist spectrum to the poetries of collage and allusion in the Poundian tradition, such as Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” Williams’s *Spring and All*, and Pound’s own *Cantos*. Riding’s poetry would instead be seen alongside the “lyric modernism” of Stevens and Crane, poets who were “working within the tradition of post-Romantic lyric poetry in a way that experimental modernists like Pound, Eliot and William Carlos Williams were not.”⁷

While, broadly speaking, this is true enough, it is also, of course, an oversimplification. Riding’s work is more various and interdisciplinary, her idealism more strictly language-oriented, than Stevens’s. (Riding, for instance, would never have written, “The thing said must be the poem not the language used in saying it.”)⁸ Lisa Samuels sees Stevens and Riding in contrast, institutionally and poetically, in that one is “a master of expressive lyricism,” the other a writer who “struggles with the communicative, truth-telling properties of poetry and language.”⁹ The gap between

⁷ Christopher Beach, “Lyric Modernism: Wallace Stevens and Hart Crane,” in *The Cambridge Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 49.

⁸ Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, ed. Milton J. Bates (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1989), 192.

⁹ *Poetic Arrest*, diss. abstract.

them is not nearly as great as the gulf between Stevens and Pound, but nonetheless indicates the narrowness of the widely accepted Pound-Stevens axis of reference.¹⁰ Samuels takes recourse, in contextualizing *Anarchism* as “unconventional modernist criticism,” to a category of “Other Criticism” that would include Williams’s *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, Olson’s *Call Me Ishmael*, Zukofsky’s *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, Charles Bernstein’s *Content’s Dream*, and Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson*—an assortment of writing that is more Poundian than Stevensian.¹¹ Jerome McGann somewhat similarly sees her writing as “a continuation of modernism’s constructivist line (Pound, Williams, Stein, Oppen, Zukofsky) which emphasized the word-as-such.”¹²

Moreover, as discussed in chapter 3, some of Riding’s more experimental writing, in prose and poetry, bears comparison with that of Gertrude Stein, a writer who has little in common with either Stevens or Pound. Nor, as Charles Bernstein explains, do Stein’s theories subscribe to a “formalist” conception of modernism as “the embodiment of the Hegelian movement of art’s ‘advance’”: a “barbarism” that Riding was among the first to embrace. As Bernstein points out, Stein, “perhaps English literature’s most radical theorist of modernism, spoke of contemporaneity, not progress.”¹³ Riding’s and Graves’s description of the independent work of “genuine” modernism, and her later claim that the point of her work is “not ‘modernism,’ but *What Further?*” may well be understood in terms of “contemporaneity, not progress”; hence their “faith in the immediate,” as “the *new* doings of poems . . . as not necessarily derived from history” (*SMP*, 158). Ultimately, the emphasis in Riding and Stein both underlines and points beyond the “crisis in the representation of history” that is “revealed” (Bernstein suggests) by much modernist writing¹⁴—a sense of crisis discussed particularly in chapter 5 of this study. If, as

¹⁰ See Marjorie Perloff, “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” in *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

¹¹ See *Anarchism*, xiii.

¹² McGann, 134. See also Barrett Watten, *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

¹³ Bernstein, “In the Middle of Modernism in the Middle of Capitalism on the Outskirts of New York,” *A Poetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 102. The reference is the same for the previous quotation, regarding a “formalist” conception of modernism.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

Riding and Graves suggest, the defining quality of the “genuinely” modernist poem is its capacity to transcend such categories, it is significant that Riding nonetheless chose, early and late in her career, to define the “point” of her work in relation to modernism. Her question, *What Further?* also, inadvertently, invites comparison of her work with later, postmodernist poetry—language-oriented writing in particular, in view of the linguistic turn her own writing took following her renunciation of poetry.

ii. Hospitable Acts of Language: Riding and Language Writing

In some ways, Laura (Riding) Jackson and “language writing” make an odd pair. (Riding) Jackson is known for linguistic and spiritual idealism verging on absolutism, and for controlling her meanings in ways that language writing—which is almost inconceivable without post-structuralism—calls fundamentally into question. One may well wonder, with Megan Simpson, “How can a poem . . . remain open to genuine interaction with the reader if [in the terms of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*] ‘the poem has the character of a creature by itself?’” Moreover, (Riding) Jackson’s “belief in such an absolute as ‘truth,’ much less the desire that poetry should reveal it, certainly seems antithetical to the aims of language-oriented writing, which seeks to examine how meaning (including anything one might call ‘truth’) is constituted in language.”¹⁵ In short, “‘poetry’ is seen,” in language writing, “as the linguistic activity which calls attention” to the encoded “functions of language.”¹⁶ The radically sceptical stance this implies can easily be contrasted with (Riding) Jackson’s faith in the intrinsic truth-potential of words. As Susan M. Schultz observes of language writing’s best-known admirer of (Riding) Jackson’s work: “for [Charles] Bernstein, unlike his self-proclaimed precursor, Laura (Riding) Jackson, even nakedness is disguise.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Simpson, 34.

¹⁶ Jerome McGann, *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 140.

¹⁷ Susan M. Schultz, “Of Time and Charles Bernstein’s Lines: A Poetics of Fashion Statements,” *Jacket* 14 (July 2001), <http://jacketmagazine.com/14/schultz-bernstein.html>.

On closer consideration, however, it is not hard to see why her work, poetic and post-poetic, has inspired some language writers and theorists.¹⁸ For (Riding) Jackson's "truth" is not (as I have emphasized in earlier chapters) a static, transcendental absolute to be pursued or "believed in," so much as a quality "located," as Simpson puts it, "in the act of language . . . in the company of other humans, her 'companions in being'; or in the case of her poems, 'readers who, rather than passive receivers of a poet's monologic message, are 'equal companions in poetry.'"¹⁹ In this sense, her "hospitality to words" is, like much language writing, collaborative and strictly language-oriented: truth is not to be taken for granted, but enacted in the telling.²⁰ Indeed, her poems are as far from what Ron Silliman describes as "the loosely written, speech-like free verse dramatic monolog concerning the small travails of daily existence—in short *most poems now being written*"²¹—as most language poetry (as represented, for instance, by Silliman's seminal anthology, *In the American Tree*). The popular notion of poetry as a self-expressive means of conveying an experience located outside the poem, "an effect of experience" (A, 16), is as suspect for Riding as it is for Bernstein and Silliman. As Silliman notes, Riding was a pioneer among critics in questioning (and "complaining of") the "forced professionalization" and commodification of poetry,²² an objection that anticipates her rejection of "professional" treatment of the broader "Subject" of *The Telling* (64). Despite the autonomous, "creaturely" character of her poems, their

¹⁸ I say "inspired" rather than "influenced" because for readers like Bernstein, "the important thing is not to be persuaded by [the Jacksons'] arguments but to respond to them" (RM, xviii). It is, in McGann's words, "the challenge of Laura (Riding) Jackson" that compels (*Black Riders*, 124).

¹⁹ Simpson, 39, quoting *The Telling* (97) and *PLR* (411).

²⁰ For an account of collaboration in language writing, see Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 33–37. Perelman points out that "collaborations form a significant portion of published language writing," but adds: "Much more significant is the blending together of the roles of reader, writer, poet, critic, theorist, publisher and reviewer" (33). (Riding) Jackson's own "blending" of roles is evident in a number of hard-to-classify books, from *Anarchism is Not Enough* and *Though Gently to Rational Meaning*.

²¹ Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence* (New York: Roofs Books, 1987), 61.

²² Silliman, *The New Sentence*, 21, quoting from Riding's 1926 essay, "T.E. Hulme, the New Barbarism, & Gertude Stein," *Contemporaries and Snobs*, 126.

“bid” for “absolute rightness,”²³ they “record the struggle to construct meaning as well as meaning itself. Words express *thinking*, not just thought,” as Ben Friedlander puts it.²⁴ Similarly, language poetry “represents a struggle,” Bob Perelman suggests, “not to make inescapable sense,” but “to construct room for further efforts . . . from the readers/writers.” Riding’s poetry differs in its striving to make “final sense” (even where it paradoxically “unmakes” it), but it too attempts to make “room” for the reader in constructing its meanings.²⁵ Her poems’ almost autotelic semantic consistency cannot simply be equated with “the finality of aesthetic completion” that “many poems aspire to” (and language writing opposes): “closed poems that can only be read.”²⁶ On the contrary, Riding claims to start each poem from “the most elementary plane of understanding,” requiring the reader’s active participation in the “discovery” of meaning even as she tries to “deflect the reader from false associations, false reasons for reading” (*PLR*, 484). Despite her emphasis on right and wrong ways of reading, her method is to “uncover,” rather than insist on, the truth of the poems. She wants, as it were, to act as host, ushering the reader in, to discover the words’ truthfulness for him or herself. This dimension of her work—its “hospitable” struggle to “construct meaning” afresh—is comparable (in ways suggested in chapter 3) to Gertrude Stein’s, and an obvious point of appeal for language-oriented writers (for whom Stein is a widely acknowledged influence).

The prevailing view of (Riding) Jackson’s post-poetic influence on language writing is that it has “constructed a theory and practice of ‘poetry’ out of key elements of Riding’s ideal of prose.”²⁷ Simpson puts this in a broader perspective that sheds light also on Ashbery’s *Three Poems*, an acknowledged influence on language poetry:

Her shift to prose seems to indicate less a move away from poetry than a move to a different kind of poetry, what Stephen Fredman identifies as “poet’s prose,” which became a major trend in mid- and late-twentieth-

²³ Martin Dodsworth, “Enduring Witness,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 6, 1980.

²⁴ Ben Friedlander, “Laura Riding/Some Difficulties,” *Poetics Journal* 4 (May 1984), 39, as quoted by Simpson, *Poetic Epistemologies*, 35.

²⁵ Perelman, 36.

²⁶ Perelman, 37.

²⁷ McGann, *Black Riders*, 140.

century writing in the United States. Seen this way, (Riding) Jackson's rejection of verse distinguishes her as one of the first writers to react to the "crisis in verse" that, according to Fredman, drove poets to prose forms in order to "interrogate the realm of truth, rather than merely to present an aesthetic object."²⁸

(Riding) Jackson would of course have disapproved of her "shift to prose" being interpreted in this way, and the account is perhaps a little too neat—yet another way of "professionalizing" the subject, she might have said. Likewise, McGann's argument that "the physique and apparitions of poetry" were, for (Riding) Jackson, "truth's obstacles and distractions," rather than "truth's own 'tellings' and eventualities."²⁹ These are helpful starting points, but they need to be considered in more specific terms, not least of the poems.

iii. "Come, Words, Away": from Riding to Lisa Samuels

Although McGann does not discuss the poem "Come, Words, Away," it provides one of the more striking precedents for his critique. The poem begins:

Come, words, away from mouths,
 Away from tongues in mouths
 And reckless hearts in tongues
 And mouths in cautious heads—

Come, words, away to where
 The meaning is not thickened
 With the voice's fretting substance
 (PLR, 137)

Paul Auster finds that these lines express a "self-defeating desire" which fails to "gain our sympathy," because in "seek[ing] to deny speech its physical properties—in refusing to acknowledge that speech is an imperfect tool of imperfect creatures," the poet's claim for the "human" quality of her "truth" is undermined. Auster does not quote further from the poem, but goes on to suggest: "If the truth in language she is seeking is a human truth, it would seem to be contradictory to want this truth at the expense of what is human."³⁰ But this argument holds only if we concur that poetry

²⁸ Simpson, 38–9, quoting Fredman, 7–8.

²⁹ McGann, 140.

³⁰ Auster, *Groundwork* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), 141. Subsequent quotations have the same reference.

(“the very idea of poetry”) is “precisely that way of using language which forces words to remain *in* the mouth,” and that this is what makes it “human”; also that the poet is indeed seeking to “gain our sympathy,” rather than stating the provisional terms of an unfolding, more complex argument; or even that the text might to some extent be “speak[ing] itself,” as McGann suggests of the thematically related prose poem, “Poet: A Lying Word.”³¹ Auster also takes it as read that poetic speech is a “tool”—“an imperfect tool of imperfect creatures”—rather than the very medium or “eventuality” of truth. By considering the poem’s opening lines solely in terms of their “glacial,” abstract implications, Auster seems to overlook their sensuous qualities as words of rhythmic, musical “substance” “thickened” in the “mouth”—the long, thickly consonantal syllables, “tongues” and “mouths,” instrumental in this respect. These qualities paradoxically complicate and qualify the poem’s argument.³²

Besides, we need only read on a little to find that the poem effectively acknowledges its paradoxical relation to “That fluent half-a-story” which “Chatters against this silence / To which, words, come away now” (*PLR*, 138). *This* silence? To speak of “this silence” makes no sense unless the phrase is understood in light of the speaker’s earlier claim that she seeks, not an abstract truth—a silence “away from words” entirely—but to speak without “blasphem[ing] / Against the silent half of language” (*PLR*, 137). Thus, keeping in mind the religious connotations of “blasphemy,” the poem anticipates a reconciliation of speech and silence grounded in “spiritual realism” (as, in retrospect, (Riding) Jackson describes the “pursuit” of poetry).³³ This reconciliation is envisioned in terms that suggest a homely “hospitality to words,” with the speaker claiming to “know a way . . .”

³¹ McGann, 129.

³² A counterbalance to Auster’s view is that of the Bollingen Prize Committee, who describe Riding’s work as “a poetry of pure intellect that is at the same time unexpectedly sensuous” (quoted on the back cover of the Persea edition of Riding’s *Selected Poems: In Five Sets*). Likewise, Mark Jacobs’s claim that “Come, Words, Away” “is not philosophy, nor is it abstract. The words resound with conviction, reeling from the poet’s mind and mouth in an instantaneous outpouring, and behind this the profound sense that she *means* what she says” (*PLR*, xxii). This is rather gushing praise, but it suggests that we do not merely see what she means to say, and agree, but that the words resound in the senses as well as in sense—that they mean with material as well as intellectual weight. See also Robert Nye’s praise for “Nor is it Written”: “She means it; every single word of it; and their sum. As to explication: it would be error to put other words between these words and you” (*PN Review* 17, no. 4: 58).

³³ *PLR*, xxxi. To return to the religious, even “puritanical” connotations of “blasphemy,” compare McGann’s comments on Susan Howe’s *Pythagorean Silence*: “It’s as if Howe had appropriated

... to fly [words] home from where
 Like stealthy angels you made off once
 On errands of uncertain mercy:
 To tell with me a story here
 Of utmost mercy never squandered
 On niggard prayers for eloquence—
 The marvelling of man by man.”

(137)

The imagery here is almost fancifully homely: one pictures the poet at last at home with words; telling “a story” together, “of utmost mercy,” in plainest words. This would be “the one story”—“of utmost mercy” in the sense that it “tells all there is to tell,” so “giv[ing] *truth*” (*T*, 176).³⁴ Such “utter telling” becomes the poem’s main concern:

But never shall truth circle so
 Till words prove language is
 How words come from far sound away
 Through stages of immensity’s small
 Centering the utter telling
 In truth’s first soundlessness.

(PLR, 139)

The desire expressed by the poem seems “self-defeating” only if the idea of speech as a “imperfect tool” is privileged over that of a “telling” centred in silence, paradoxically “proven” through “stages of immensity’s small / Centering.”

Language poetry is well known for its denunciation of phonocentrism (heralded in 1971 by Robert Grenier’s blunt declaration, “I HATE SPEECH”), but as McGann shows in his study of “the visible language of modernism,” a wide range of modern poetry—from Dickinson to Stein to Riding to Howe—has compellingly addressed the same or closely related concerns. A notable case of a younger poet’s doing so, in ways prompted specifically by Riding (and “Come, Words, Away”), is Lisa Samuels. In discussing her work, I shall also draw on her introduction to *Anarchism is Not Enough*, for its explication of Riding’s poetics, aspects of which inform Samuels’s own.

the Pythagorean model as a figural form for her puritanism. ... ‘Pythagorean silence’ is her antinomian trope for what literary historians call American transcendentalism. She treats her poem’s silence like a fire sermon” (*Black Riders*, 100). Howe’s passionate puritanism (or antinomian transcendentalism), not unlike Riding’s, insists on its textual character, as “a sentence / or character / suddenly // steps out to seek for truth / fails / falls // into a stream of ink / Sequence / trails off // must go on” (quoted by McGann, *ibid.*).

³⁴ See also Riding’s preface to the first edition of *Progress of Stories*, where she writes: “There is only one subject, and it is impossible to change it” (xii).

Perhaps the clearest line of inheritance from Riding's conception of poetry at its most radical, as in *Anarchism*, and Samuels's practice is—in Riding's arresting phrase—their “poetic embrace of nothingness”:

What is a poem? It is nothing. ... It is not an effect (common or uncommon) of experience; it is the result of an ability to create a vacuum in experience—it is a vacuum and therefore nothing. (*A*, 16–17)³⁵

To claim that a poem “is not an effect ... of experience” may be one way of arguing for the rigorous literalism exemplified by her own poems: their meaning exactly what they say. Samuels's poetry has inspired surprisingly similar comment: Leslie Scalapino suggests (in part quoting Samuels herself) that “each poem”

is an abstract correlative of a subjective experience, a ‘refraction journal.’ Everything means exactly what it says. Lisa Samuels writes as if basing language on something it is not; or as if (all) language, having no content, makes the motions of something else. So she deliberately voids the language as a daring means of creating an alternate that isn't in language as if outside by being the same as language.

This is strangely homely territory, indeed: an abstract extreme where “everything” is and is not as it seems. Samuels “deliberately voids the language as a daring means of creating an alternate”: Scalapino could equally have said that her poems are “the result of an ability to create a vacuum in experience.” Similarly, Barrett Watten suggests that Samuels “takes the risks of her mentor, Laura Riding, in experimenting with poetry ‘underneath / the lying tree.’ Often, the resulting trace of her inquiry borders on the absolute in its unrequited syntax.”³⁶ Watten may mean that Samuels's poetry follows the example of Riding's only prose poem, “Poet: A Lying Word,” in resisting the “poetic” (or the “poet”) so “absolutely” as to speak from a ground further to “poetry” as we know it: an experimental “alternate” comparable to the textual “wall” of Riding's poem. The idea of “an alternate that isn't in language as if outside” may also owe something to Stein's non-dualistic “time of writing ... where the inside and outside flow together” (discussed in chapter 3).³⁷ The very title of

³⁵ As Samuels suggests, Riding's idea also “helps to make place for poems like John Ashbery's ‘These Lacustrine Cities’ ” (*A*, lix). His own tentative suggestion that his poems are about “the experience of experience” could perhaps be read as a postmodern take on Riding's claim that a poem “is not an effect ... of experience.”

³⁶ Both quotations are from the description of Samuels' first collection, *The Seven Voices* (1998), on the website of its publisher, O Books: <http://www.obooks.com/7voices.htm>.

³⁷ Stein continues: “It is the one time when writing for an outside does not make the inside outside or the outside inside, it is a diffusion but not a confusing, it is really a kind of an imitation of

Samuels's 2005 collection, *Paradise for Everyone*, evokes a limitless "hospitality to words," with overtones of Riding's *Everybody's Letters* and Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography*. One is led to expect "a poetry of pure intellect [or theory] that is at the same time unexpectedly sensuous," but how do these speculative observations relate to Samuels' poetry more specifically?

Unlike the generation of poets influenced by Riding in the 1930s, Samuels's kinship with Riding has little to do with obvious stylistic resemblance; her poems take the "initiative" that Riding argues for in *Anarchism*, where she suggests that "an original poem" is "a model, to the reader, of constructive dissociation: an incentive not to response but to initiative" (A, 114). This is not to say that no reference is made to Riding's work in the poems. "The Fruits of Conviction," the final poem in *Paradise for Everyone*, could be a tongue-in-cheek echo of Riding's "The Wages of Eloquence" or "The Signs of Knowledge," and also alludes, in the body of the poem, to "Come, Words, Away."³⁸ It begins with a dash, in the middle of something, as though the main "event" ("conviction" itself, perhaps) had already happened, the experience lost track of in subsequent sleep—the poem going on to describe its "abstract correlative." "Conviction" can imply guilt or firmly held belief, and the speaker at first seems uncertain which, or how "apparent" its "vocation" is:

—we slept, ranges accumulating under our heads
 as though insomniac volition had met a likeness, orange
 and unseemly—I remember vocation is apparent
 like a quantity—perfect moon shapes on the wire, shadows
 meritorious as salt, and then your movement
 like the unkind wave that rolls abandonly—the arc
 moves slowly through the city, that one
 stone single as anapestics, a diatribe of longing
 impressed as in "wanting to expire"—the surly clothes
 you put on guaranteed, little legions comb the ground—
 dark teeth prickling, hirsute in a false despair
 the packet lunges and ordains itself—

The thought here—or its "trace"—is very much in process, the twists and turns freely associative: no less dense but otherwise quite unlike the more cleanly cut, clearly aligned thought typically to be found in Riding's poems. On the other hand,

a marrying." See her piece on "Narration" in *Four Lectures by Gertrude Stein* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), 54–5.

³⁸ "The Fruits of Conviction" is one of two poems by Samuels included in *New American Writing* 19 (2001). It appears on page 92 of *Paradise for Everyone* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2005).

Samuels's lines, not unlike Riding's, make interpretation from a position "outside" the poem difficult; they seem rather to "interpret themselves," to borrow a phrase used approvingly in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (of Riding's "The Rugged Black of Anger"). But where the thinking in Riding's poems tends gradually to *proceed*, Samuels's *evolves* more unpredictably. In this respect, her writing is reminiscent of John Ashbery's, as is indicated also by the indeterminate referents of the pronouns "I," "you" and "we." The deliberate "voiding" of language is an effect of the continually unresolved ideas and images. This irresolution directs us to "that which we do not yet know": an underestimated element in our "knowledge" of beauty, as Samuels maintains in her piece on "Poetry and the Problem of Beauty" (another Ridingsque concern; and title).³⁹ We are forced, if we do not feel that the poem "fulfills the terms it lays out," to "work to increase our aesthetic faculties."⁴⁰ As in "Come, Words, Away," the expressed desire, or "diatribe of longing," to reconcile the material ("the surly clothes," for example) and the abstract ("as in 'wanting to expire'") is the very subject of the poem. The second stanza of Samuels's poem openly invites the comparison:

the words are over there, away from mouths
 that speak them—these belong to the table, those walk
 across the floor, seemingly picked up by hands—
 cumulatively they are—in the mouth, dusty with use
 one saturates to take the dirt down or spit it out
 onto the fingertips—seventy times a day
 looking for the accuracy of blood, one is always
 underneath the real, legible appearances—the glow of her
 bright eyes on the piano—barrier of air
 that keeps locale a privacy, diminuendo sudden

After the faltering train of thought, darkly sensuous imagery and heavy, desirous "movement" of the first stanza, the poem here seems to realize itself as "a model of constructive dissociation": the words, "over there, away from mouths" (that nevertheless "speak them") have a life of their own, as it were, an ordinary grace, perhaps. That the "packet," bearer of messages riding the "unkind wave that rolls abandonly," suddenly "lunge[d] and ordain[ed] itself," may have prompted or

³⁹ Samuels was guest editor and wrote the introduction to *Poetry and the Problem of Beauty*, a special issue of *Modern Language Studies* 27.2 (1997). The introduction is available online: <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/samuels/beauty.html>.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

somehow authorized this change. A quasi-ritualistic scene of linguistic purification follows, with some implication of pain, as the speaker looks in words for “the accuracy of blood”—an arresting, Ridingsque phrase, comparable to the earlier “shadows / meritous as salt.” A visionary intensity and, at the same time, a sense of lack are intimated from “underneath the real, legible apparencies—the glow of her / bright eyes on the piano.”

The poem concludes thus:

you are sitting with your feet like lion heads
overtaking, telling the woman in the dream
“there are no people here”—in the climate
riven with perfume, the fruits are marvels
of descriptive engineering—each one designed
to crater in the mouth with sudden fire—

This vision of “marvels / of descriptive engineering—each one designed / to crater in the mouth” may be read as a poetic re-statement of *Anarchism*’s idea of “designed waste”:

The only productive design is designed waste. . . . Energy that is aware of the impossibility of positive construction devotes itself to an ordered using-up and waste of itself: to an anticipated happiness which, because it has design, foreknowledge, is the nearest approach to happiness. (18–19)

Blending the two texts, one could say that Samuels’s “fruits” are “designed” for “using-up” and “waste of” themselves in utterance, “in the mouth.” The idea is dream-like, “unreal” in the sense that Riding argues for in *Anarchism* and “enacts,” according to Samuels, in her “Ode to the Triumph of Bodily Intelligence.” The final stanza of Riding’s poem reads:

Be blessed, passionate intelligence,
In this prime, that has uncovered
The fond geography of ghosts.
You are enchanted against ruin
By that you are but ruin
And nothing but ruin can love or know.⁴¹

Although Riding did not include this poem from *Love as Love, Death as Death* (1929) in her *Collected Poems*, she did keep “World’s End,” which effectively refines the vision of the “Ode” into one of more concise, “general proof.” The closing cadences of the two poems are strikingly similar: compare the last three lines above with the

⁴¹ Samuels quotes this poem from *Love as Love, Death as Death* (1929) (not included in any later collection) in full on pages lvi–ii.

following: “Or were otherwise insane, / With all lost and nothing to prove / That even nothing can live through love” (PLR, 111).

iv. “Hospitality to Words” in Riding and Harryman

However great the stimulus of Riding’s poetry and poetics for Samuels, there is no getting away from the fact that her writing, like that of other poets in the “language” tradition, reflects a more postmodern “understanding of language as the practice of the forms of *arbitrary* signification” (my emphasis), rather than the “rational meaning” that (Riding) Jackson argues for. This is partly why Gertrude Stein is generally seen as a more important figure for language writers. But Carla Harryman, who was closely associated with the language movement,⁴² offers another instance of writing “further” to Riding’s, in the sense that “the physique and apparitions of poetry become truth’s own ‘tellings’ and eventualities.” Riding’s turn away from verse prefigures Harryman’s preference for prose, and the latter’s wish to move beyond “faux divisions of genre” in her writing⁴³ is analogous to Riding’s rejection of “specialized fields of exploration and discovery” in her conception of truth as “uncovered” by poetry (PLR, 484). To the extent that Harryman’s “tellings” uncover the truth, they do so by exposing the properties of discourse *as* discourse imbued with concealed intention—by “insert[ing] a powerful fingernail under the corner of the veneer,” as she puts it in “Property.”⁴⁴ She does so by calling attention to the codes of linguistic activity in diverse genres; to recall McGann: “author and audience are themselves exposed as functions of language, coded beings and sets of activities.” Although (Riding) Jackson and Harryman pay similarly close attention to the literal

⁴² As well as having contributed to the magazine *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, Harryman is included in Ron Silliman’s *In the American Tree* and Douglas Messerli’s *Language Poetics*. She is also discussed in Bob Perelman’s *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), among other critical books and essays.

⁴³ From “An Interview with Carla Harryman” by Megan Simpson in *Contemporary Literature* 37.4 (1996), 515; as quoted by Simpson in *Poetic Epistemologies*, 149. Simpson considers (Riding) Jackson along with Stein, Loy and H.D. in a chapter entitled: “‘Come, Words, Away’: Modernist Women’s Invitations to Innovation.”

⁴⁴ Harryman, *Property*, Tuumba Press chapbook no. 39 (Berkeley: Tuumba, 1982). Megan Simpson comments on the “epistemological and political value” Harryman finds “in being aware of discourse as discourse even as it shapes what one perceives” (*Poetic Epistemologies*, 154).

construction of meaning through language,⁴⁵ Harryman's professed "detachment from authenticity" sets them apart.⁴⁶ It is not surprising, then, that her writing is more akin to Riding's *stories* than the post-poetic writing.

Harryman does, however, draw on Riding's poems. Take "Fish Speech," which begins:

In the beginning there was nothing. No cattails, no wigs, no paws. There was no doom. No lavender or shirt sleeves. No burn no yellow or rest. Neither was there beginning. No light went out. No one held her own against an array of misshapen events. There were no chains. There was no writing or speech.⁴⁷

This could be read as a playful take on several works by Riding, including "Disclaimer of the Person," with its similarly lengthy series of variations on a flat opening statement: "I say myself. / The beginning was that no saying was" (*PLR*, 251). Harryman's poem could also have been prompted by Riding's "In the Beginning," a similarly playful narrative that "retells" the Genesis story from the "Mother's" point of view, starting from the birth of her "daughter" on the seventh day. Harryman's description of her work as an "aggressive kind of play"⁴⁸ could equally apply to Riding's poem, which begins with the flatly asserted claim: "That was not the genesis: / this is the genesis" (*PLR*, 357). However, as the "argument" develops, it involves, as does Harryman's poem, a surrealistic assortment of objects: the daughter "opens the heads of her brothers / And lets out the aeroplanes"; "Together they inspect the cups, the pencils, / The watches, matches, knives they

⁴⁵ Literal meaning comes to the fore in Harryman's "Fairy Tale," in which the main character, an Iraqi girl, is able to save her family from the forces of "good and evil" precisely by her literal opposition to the language of such principles. For example, "she resists saying that anything is either good or bad. She calls the water water and the sky sky and people people. She calls agriculture and nature agriculture and nature, music music and silence silence, the Kurds, the Palestinians, the Turks, the Jewish, the Muslims, the Christians, the Kurds, the Palestinians, the Turks, the Jewish, the Muslims, the Christians, she calls a cloud a cloud." (from *There Never Was a Rose Without a Thorn* (City Lights, 1995), as quoted by Simpson, 152. Harryman's writing here may well owe something to the fairy-tale quality of many of Riding's stories—her interest in it explicit in "A Fairy Tale for Older People" and "A Crown for Hans Andersen"—as well as the recurring theme in them of "a language of complete intelligence" in which, for instance (in "An Anonymous Book"), "everything was known and clear—as if all the difficulties of the intelligence were difficulties of language alone" (*Progress*, 328–9).

⁴⁶ As quoted by Simpson, 153.

⁴⁷ "Fish Speech" was selected for *The Gertrude Stein Awards in Innovative American Poetry 1994-5*, ed. Douglas Messerli (LA: Sun and Moon Press, 1996), 15–16.

⁴⁸ Quoted by Simpson, 145.

have. / Some are from Tuesday's country, some from Friday's, / But nothing there from either Sunday." In grotesquely satirical ways such as these, both poets effectively "hold [their] own" against man's "misshapen" versions of events, calling the forms of socially constructed meaning into question. Which, for instance, is more "natural": "cattails," or "wigs," or "paws"?

The third sentence in Harryman's poem, "There was no doom," recalls the title of the poem that succeeds "In the Beginning" in the *Poems of Laura Riding*, "Doom in Bloom." As mentioned in chapter 3, "doom" was a word Riding had made very much her own by the time of "Poems: A Joking Word" (1930). In the preface to that collection she wrote: "These poems have got to be. Or rather, when they weren't, they had got to be. Or rather, I had got not to feel myself and think doom, but to think myself and feel doom" (1). One thinks of *Anarchism's* poetics of "nothing"; the inevitable "failure" she wants us to "feel" through them. Harryman's poem posits "nothing" as a thing, along with physical objects, acts, sense-impressions and ideas, none being treated as more contingent or final, as the things of commonplace experience are sucked into its "vacuum": "There was nothing to shave, nothing to swim, and nothing to cut. Clouds were no clouds. Silence was neither dominant nor peaceful nor silent." The poem brings this radical scepticism of the absolute to logical conclusion towards the end: "In the beginning there was nothing to hold in mind, since there was no beginning, no nothing and no mind." It is an answer, of sorts, to Riding's sad but still hopeful "Nothing So Far": "Nothing so far but moonlight / Where the mind is; / Nothing in that place, this hold, / To hold" (PLR, 363).

As the examples above indicate, both Riding and Harryman are fond of subverting "the narrative conventions of 'before' and 'after.'"⁴⁹ As a further instance, take the opening of Riding's story "In the End," which first appeared in 1935:

The end of the world was that there was no sky. There came to be no sky! Of the sky only the moon was left. And the moon was as the inside of the world, which now had no outside. And that which had once been the earth was now the inner surface of the world. The end of the world was a change from outside to inside. There was still a world, but it was not as it had been—it was not as a family which is scattered abroad and become everywhere a stranger

⁴⁹ Simpson, 150.

to itself, so that there are scarcely to be found two who can speak together in their household-tongue. There was still a world, but it was as a single house.
(*Progress*, 295)

In spite of its designation as story, this recapitulates the apocalyptic, “homely” theme in Riding’s poetics and critical writing. As in Harryman, the “borderline between imaginative and expository writing is,” effectively, “called into question.”⁵⁰ In the absence of linear narrative, the permutations of metaphor take on the weight of argument, and one begins to wonder whether “sky,” “moon” and “earth” should be taken as literally as (Riding) Jackson says that the seemingly “tired old poetical symbols” of sun and moon in her poems should (*PLR*, 496). Conversely, as in “Come, Words, Away,” “storying” is often what happens in Riding’s *poetry*; and the redefinition of “poetry” by contemporary, innovative poets, in particular their turning more often to prose “to interrogate the realm of truth, rather than merely to present an aesthetic object,” has precedents in the earlier phase of Riding’s work as well as (more obviously) the post-poetic.⁵¹

Like Riding’s story, Harryman’s poem, “Acting,” begins with “a postulation” regarding the “rudimentary” elements of “earth” and “sky.” Soon after, “clouds” and “the sea” and “rocks” also enter into the argument, but on an equal footing with other, less clearly related figures such as “Ducks,” “Reason,” “Birds” and “Contentment.” In contrast to the minimal, contained structure of Riding’s propositional paragraph, Harryman’s initial “postulation” quickly falls apart, each sentence seeming more to “devour” than develop the previous.

The earth is as narrow as the sky is full: a postulation, on a rudimentary level. Clouds protrude to the point of abandoning context. Ducks fly across teasing the edges of clouds with their wings. Reason tells us not to make anything of these events. Birds fall into the sea. The sea swells, pushing the land under. A seeming eternity, by force. So all that’s left is a narrative concealing an error. Contentment is sediment below this image. Passivity has been accomplished through the descriptive process, a mechanism which devours objects, subjecting them to the decay of inner life. Perfection is a disease. Each rock, each sentence suppresses an embryo, elevated as they are to the status of isolated objects to be regarded unto themselves.⁵²

⁵⁰ McGann, 135. He cites works by Ron Silliman, David Bromige, Lyn Hejinian, Alan Davies and Susan Howe, as well as Harryman, as examples of such “borderline texts.”

⁵¹ Stephen Fredman, *Poet’s Prose: The Crisis in American Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1983), 7–8.

The basic unit of meaning here is the sentence; each creates its own “suppressed” field of resistance, and it is difficult to detect a broader context beyond the charge produced in reading from one sentence to the next. The passage describes a landscape of sorts (earth, sky, clouds, ducks, etc.) but the “events” which take place in it are more abstract than concrete, “protruding,” as it were, beyond the picture. The connections between these “events” are not clear—at least in terms of “reason.” For example, do the “birds fall into the sea” because “reason” chose not to “make anything” of the previous sequence of “events”? Or could there be some other reason, perhaps to do with the “ducks . . . teasing the edges of clouds with their wings,” in turn causing the clouds to “protrude to the point of abandoning context”? Can the ducks be counted among the birds that fall into the sea? Are we to assume that their weight falling into the sea causes it to “swell, pushing the land under”? And so the narrative proceeds, playfully inviting us to examine the ways in which we construct it. As Harryman writes in “Privacy,” echoing Riding’s poem “The Rugged Black of Anger”: “Expression concludes existence. Though though and though. . . . This is not the time for subjectivity. But it survives. Because space is small.”⁵³ Or, in the words of Riding’s poem: “Because, so small is space, / The extent of kind must be expressed otherwise” (*PLR*, 59).

But while Riding’s story is thoroughly uncompromising in its non-representational style of storytelling, it clearly appeals to reason; although it is fantastically anti-commonsensical, we can make sense of as it proceeds and as a whole. The narrator aims to *clarify*, if, strictly, on her own terms: for instance, in the way the opening, almost impossibly general idea of “the end of the world” is scaled down to the image of “a single house.” The first and last sentences even match each other rhythmically, beat for beat. The initial imaginative leap is the only one we have, as it were, to make for ourselves. In the end, “There was still a world, but it was as a single house,” whose occupants, we may presume, “can speak together in their household-tongue.” Again, Riding imagines an ideal, post-“apocalyptic” home founded upon an achieved “hospitality to words.”

⁵² “Acting,” *In the American Tree*, Ron Silliman, ed. (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1986), 165.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 162, from the poem “Privacy” (comparable with Riding’s story “Privateness”).

Language-oriented writing, as we have seen, is more sceptical. But it inherits (Riding) Jackson's emphatic conception of truth as "requir[ing] language for its making," and in line with this American tradition of "hospitality," above all, to *words*, continually "calls us back," as Bernstein puts it, "to our rootedness in language, which is our human house, our destined home" (*RM*, xviii).

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