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JANE MALCOLM

“That breeding silence she”: Laura Riding’s Gendered Ethics and the Limits of the Word ‘Woman’

The great irony of Riding’s work is that in attempting to create herself on paper as a subject rather than an image, she objectifies herself. The word is an image for Riding, and her record of the ways in which words use the writer make her an important precursor of the Language poets.

Susan Schulz, *A Poetics of Impasse*

English makes things seem so real.

Laura Riding, preface to *The Life of the Dead*

She lies abed a luxury-long half-hour:
This is her fondest greed, to have the bed all to herself,
And, eyes, full awake yet not in focus of thought,
To bubble babies lazily from her mouth
Like idle smoke-puffs fanatically precise.

“Dead Birth,” *Poems*

THE ILLUSTRATION THAT ACCOMPANIES THIS BIT OF “highly artificial” verse from Laura Riding’s *The Life of the Dead* depicts a nude woman swathed in Botticellian gauze drifting Chagall-like above a medieval cityscape. Her elongated body floats under the roof peak of an unfurnished modern cottage whose interior is illuminated by three electrical light fixtures. At the rear of the room, a large door partially obscured by a curtain opens onto the city, and the front side of the cottage is exposed and seems to hover over a rocky natural landscape. The nude woman’s head is drawn in profile (though the rest of her body faces forward) and from her mouth, a surreally lit waterfall

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"Dead Birth" by John Aldridge. Reprinted from *Poems of Laura Riding*
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of newborn babies cascades toward the floor in suspended motion. As one fallen baby picks fruit from the sparse tree growing into the front of the cottage, the rest exit the cottage through its back door and climb onto the buildings in the background, growing larger as they toddle

over the chimney tops. The city is deserted and in shadow, except for the naked white bodies of the fallen babies who climb its walls.¹

I describe this rather horrific drawing, which Riding calls a “verbal comedy”—or the “germ of the text”—because it serves as an apt distillation (however macabre) of the poet’s attitudes toward poetic creation, linguistic precision, and generative femininity (417). “La Naissance des Bébés Morts”/“Dead Birth” appears in a larger work, *The Life of the Dead*, an “experimental impression” Riding composed in French and translated into English, “in order that the English might benefit from the limitations which French puts on the poetic seriousness of words” (417). The poem’s “experimental” form treats a subject persistently recurrent in Riding’s oeuvre: the figurative woman whose language is procreative and originary. For the woman in the illustration, who “bubbles babies lazily from her mouth,” this monstrous parturition seems effortless and second nature: she “idles” forth child upon child from a placid countenance. For Riding, whose tenuous position as a woman modernist poet, literary critic, and language philosopher (some would say perverse philologist) ended publicly with her famous repudiation of poetry, the struggle with words would not be so effortless.

Laura Riding is best known for her audacious decision to abandon poetic practice soon after the long-awaited 1938 publication of her *Collected Poems*, declaring that poetry had “run out of possibilities,” and she no longer could justify writing it (qtd. in Nye 2).² Each stage of Riding’s public career up to and including this rejection reflects the ambivalence toward femininity expressed in “Dead Birth.” Much of her rich modernist criticism—written at a moment when modernism’s male coterie had no patience for Riding and she, in turn, wanted nothing to do with them—willfully focuses on a neutered “human” rather than on a “he” or “she,” and though Riding posits Woman as the progenitor of poetic language (an oxymoronic “dead birth”), she continually refuses to make herself or her career representative of gender per se. Instead, the need to tell the “truth” repeatedly trumps the problem of gender and becomes her sole “claim to cultural authority” (Ophir 85). This mandate and her self-imposed alienation were rooted in a strong ethical commitment to the power of language as a *human* tool, not to be (ab)used lightly. As Ella Zohar Ophir explains, while most modernist poets “felt compelled to formulate statements about the value of poetry, few insisted that its value had to be *truth-value*” (89). In Riding’s literary-critical works—A

Survey of Modernist Poetry (1928, co-written with Robert Graves) and especially *Contemporaries and Snobs* (1928)—she excoriates the “professional” poet who fetishizes linguistic adornment rather than promoting the integrity and essence of language by communicating “honestly”:

True, there is more experimenting and greater strictness in the construction of the poem, and a greater consciousness of what a poem should not be. But so far this consciousness has remained a negative influence: it is a professional, critical self-consciousness, not a creative one (*Contemporaries and Snobs* 129).

She blames self-conscious cultivations of “persona” (or *impersona*) for many modernist poets’ vacuous aestheticizing impulses and in “The New Barbarians and Gertrude Stein” explains: “So the reasons why there should be a new poetry prove to be the very ones why there is not a new poetry but only a disturbed, a self-critical, a tightly written, a strongly corrective poetry” (*Contemporaries and Snobs* 130). Riding awaits the modernist poet who writes with complete liberty from professional or public expectations, yet exercises this freedom by cleaving to a feminized linguistic authenticity. Needless to say, few (if any) poets lived up to her ideal, though she did appreciate, if in a back-handed manner, Gertrude Stein’s work:

[Stein] has 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 from Gertrude Stein *but not from contemporary poetry*—is fundamentally a nice person; and so is Gertrude Stein (195, emphasis added).

Whether or not her appreciation of Stein rings wholly sincere, Riding often is associated with her and other figures of the avant-garde (Zukofsky, Bataille, Olson, etc.) who “insist[ed] on eclectic and subjective processes” of poetic composition and on establishing a radical poetic orthodoxy (Samuels xiv). I suspect that Riding never would concede to this attempt at canonical enfranchisement.

Riding’s perceived role in the creation and development of a modernist canon remains minor, though she wrote prolifically during the

1920s and '30s, cultivated an epistolary friendship with Gertrude Stein, and is credited as one of the first writers to use the word "modernist" in print (*A Survey of Modernist Poetry*). Her current legacy depicts a brash, fiercely intelligent poet—"Laura Riding-roughshod," according to her friend and fellow poet Hart Crane (Schultz 77)—moving from an academic career at Cornell, to an idiosyncratic stint with the American Fugitive Poets, to a fruitful association with Robert Graves in London and Majorca (where they founded the Seizin Press), to a fifty-year seclusion in Wabasso, Florida, where she (with the help of her second husband, Schuyler Jackson) wrote *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words*. The focus on Riding's eccentric and difficult relationship to language, and by extension, poetry, values her "humanist" prose and her formidable critiques of modernism over the hundreds of poems she wrote. Accordingly, Riding's theories on gender, for which her poems are a cryptic locus, easily are lost in the philosophical rigor, or "hardness," of her prose works. Yet, Riding's compulsion to purify language, to trace meaning back to its origin in words themselves—what Charles Bernstein identifies as a complete rejection of the Saussurian relationship between sign and signified (260)—finally is rooted in her understanding of authentic language as *feminine* and of woman as the source of linguistic "truth." Riding's poems crystallize her most complex, sophisticated, and begrudged gender philosophies, to which she also devotes prose texts such as "The Word 'Woman'" and *Lives of Wives*. Reading this opaque, often vexing poetry alongside her treatises on modernism, language, and Woman illuminates the extent to which Riding pointedly genders the ethical usage of poetic language. In turn, Riding's eventual rejection of poetry constitutes, in part, a futile attempt to "unsex" her relationship to language by rejecting the impersonal ethics and masculine aesthetics of modernism.

We shall grow weary (if we have not already) of talk of circles, triangles, spheres, form, plane, stasis, and masses . . .

Contemporaries and Snobs

Laura Riding's poetry importantly is the product of her recalcitrant critical stance on modernism, which she repeatedly characterized as a pejoratively masculine intellectual affectation, disguised as a literary

movement.³ Riding's capacious literary criticism helps contextualize her terse, often cryptic, poetry at the same time as it complicates her tenuous participation in a modernist genealogy—which is to suggest that Riding's frequently articulated humanist principles, which are often inflexibly essentialist, to some extent confound her progressive, "modern" aesthetics. In particular, *Contemporaries and Snobs* insists upon the primarily "human" quality of poetic writing and ultimately vilifies what she identifies as the inherent "snobbism"—or the laboriously constructed "impersonality"—of contemporary poetry. Indeed Riding's rhetorical force (in what is certainly her most prescient critical work on modernism) transforms this negative critique of impersonality into a positive *poetics of personality*:

Poetry is not contemporary poetry. It is not philosophy. It is not even literature. As between literature and life, it is closer to life. But life invents time rather than poetry, a sanctimonious comment on itself, a selflessness. Poetry invents itself. It is nearly a repudiation of life, a *selfness*. Unless it is this, it is a comment on a comment, sterile scholasticism (14, emphasis added).

For Riding, then, poetry is the hyper-real, the most vital human act, and thus the most concrete expression of human agency, or "selfness." In order not to be a "comment on a comment," poetry must supersede even philosophy and ask, if not answer, the most difficult questions: "Why am I here? How do I conceive of the self in the universe?" Temporal and spatial understandings of worldly phenomena must, through poetry, be transformed from crudely quantitative observations into "deliberate" intellectual statements. In other words, the poet's merely sensory or instinctive responses to the world-at-large sustain an intellectual transformation through language, which is to say that poetry not only structures her surroundings, but justifies the poet's very existence. At this point in her criticism, Riding's stakes are mortally serious, particularly as she insists that poetry is the highest register of human expression, that it acquires an organic relationship to the human form, and that it facilitates the highest order of interpersonal communication: empathy.⁴

At times, *Contemporaries and Snobs* unavoidably becomes its own kind of "comment on a comment," particularly since Riding's unself-

consciously grandiose idiom lends the book an unsettling aphoristic tone. She seems to relish proverbial statements about the perversity of modern literary criticism—"The presence of excessive criticism in a time is a sign that it fears its own literature" (16),—yet exempts her own criticism, and certainly her own poetry, from such judgments. Nevertheless, Riding identifies and excoriates the "professional" impetus—defined as a masculine authorial *mauvaise fois*—that drives most poetry written in her time and that transforms the poetic act from a vibrant exploration of truth, which she insists should be its chief aim, into a sterile attempt to historicize from a safe distance and from an impersonal vantage.⁵ Once poetry is merely representative, merely historical, it is dead—or as Riding describes, it has lost its "organic connection" (24) with its makers, whose humanity is of fundamental importance.⁶ Thus Riding argues that modernist poetry, as it strives to exemplify aesthetic impersonality, proves to be retrospective, subject-less, and ultimately to cultivate a lack of content: "Since poetry was to write about nothing, it could write about everything from the standpoint of nothing; it could still have its epic without the burden of having to have conviction about it" (26). In as much as *Contemporaries and Snobs* sets out to police modernist crimes of writing, its disdain for modernism's lack of "conviction," its endlessly adaptable "nothing"-ness, trumps all other transgressions because, once relieved of this "burden," the poet writes himself into irrelevant, "epic" absurdism.

In a broader historical context, this lack of conviction resembles the subjective self-distancing that poets like Rimbaud (and eventually Eliot, Pound, and Joyce) champion in their work. To a great degree, Rimbaud's famous declaration that *Je est un autre* drove modernism's rejection of its Romantic predecessors, and the intentional aestheticization of *language* over *subject* reflects that rejection. In her much more recent "comment" on the poetics of impersonality, Maud Ellmann argues that impersonality was a mainstay of the modernist project, and of Pound and Eliot explains, "Indeed both poets spent their careers devising disappearing tricks and new varieties of scriptive self-occlusion" (ix). In *Contemporaries and Snobs*, Riding insists that, despite its best intentions, this anti-Romantic self-erasure unwittingly champions a romanticized poetic mode, by obscuring the human agent behind the writing and attempting to create a cult of so-called "posthumists" (of which Eliot, Cummings, and Joyce are proud members) all of whom,

in essence, doth protest too much.⁷ These “posthumists” literally have rejected their humanness as a matter of art. As a consequence, residual if unintentional romanticisms, such as the delicately absented “I” whose disappearance is all too *recherché*, explain why, according to Riding, psychoanalysis becomes the most apt interpretive mode when reading Eliot’s work, for example (37). She cites *The Waste Land* in particular, calling it the “great twentieth-century nursery-rhyme” (109), whose *modus operandi* is to prod the reader or critic to excavate for traces of the poet’s hidden wounds. Ellmann’s *Poetics of Impersonality* describes precisely this phenomenon:

But there is a darker innuendo in the theory [of impersonality]—that poetry is necessarily impersonal, because the act of writing is impelled by forces which elude the author’s consciousness. Poetry writes itself—and the poet is mere amanuensis, whether his dictation comes from God, the unconscious, the tradition, or the dead. (4)

Whereas Ellmann attributes impersonality to the machinations of a personal (if not cultural) unconscious, Riding clearly sees it as an irresponsible artistic strategy: “As far as possible, he [the contemporary snob] wants to rid himself of the pathetic errors of personality and make the creative operation a pure critical reflux, free of error” (*Contemporaries and Snobs* 112). A heightened disdain for the “pathetic errors of personality” drives what Riding identifies as the sterile “critical reflux” of her contemporaries, who do not wish to muddy their work with emotion. Thus the pursuit of a peerless, impersonal aesthetic—and of the professional acclaim that would accompany it—is anathema for Riding, who insists in the strongest terms that we cannot “substitute poetics for persons” (114).

Perhaps the most biting critique Riding puts forth in *Contemporaries and Snobs* concerns James Joyce, whom she portrays as a fatally flawed ambassador of modernist *impersonae*. Of *Ulysses*, which Riding unflinchingly includes in a larger body of sterile, impersonal modernist work, she writes: “James Joyce, who by colossal evasion, which involved swallowing the *Zeitgeist* and then vomiting it up again, accomplished the dual and monstrous feat of capitulation and revolt in one huge, involuntary reflux-spasm” (34). Not only does Riding disdain Joyce’s

“vomitous” vernacular by likening his stream-of-consciousness exposition to a “huge, involuntary reflux-spasm,” she indicts *Ulysses* as a “colossal evasion” because Joyce writes as a professional who equivocates to the whim of the “Zeitgeist” rather than as a poet whose use of language reflects his humanness, for “poetic must mean *non-contemporary* if contemporary is understood as anything other than a historically descriptive phrase” (56, emphasis added).⁸ At this crucial rhetorical moment, Riding’s tone turns incendiary, and her sardonic indictment of Joyce as a “monstrous” modernist figure seems intended to goad her audience. Though this evisceration of Joyce’s work jumps off the page for the contemporary reader, in context it is merely one in a series of vituperative, if canny, evaluations of her contemporaries’ literary output, to which the 200-odd pages of *Contemporaries and Snobs* are scrupulously dedicated. In sum, Riding laments what she views as modernism’s ineffectual core aesthetic values, and doggedly attempts to characterize them as cheap stylistic fads—in Joyce’s case, as a simultaneous (thus neutered) “capitulation and revolt.”

Even as she misreads, misunderstands, or at the very least infantilizes, much of the modernist aesthetic project because it does not conform to her poetic Ideal—she evicts poets left and right from her rarefied Republic—Riding puts forth a carefully formulated deconstruction of Joyce and Co.’s impersonality:

As in any time there exists a number of unclassified minds capable of much but wanting in personal differentiation, such an equivocal definition of poetry opens up for them an unlimited opportunity for converting want of person into ritualistic impersonality. (95)

Perhaps the crux of her critique and, in true Riding fashion, tedious to parse, this statement articulates a crucial value judgment, couched in gendered terms, in which Riding stridently renounces what she dubs the “poetic absolute,” or the fantasy that a poetic work might come pre-packaged, as it were, with philosophical fulfillment for the reader. “Want of person” thus becomes a male poetic guise whose falsity, in Riding’s view, forecloses any possibility of enduring aesthetic merit or canonical relevance. *Contemporaries and Snobs* argues that “there are no true creative values but poetic values,” and the poetics of impersonality

rely upon a vacuous mechanism or “fixed emotional routine” that is historically contingent, thus relative (68). In other words, Riding rejects impersonality by refusing to separate the poet from the poem and thus repudiates any “ritualistically impersonal” project written toward palatable social catharsis rather than personal linguistic expression or “selfness”: “The poem cannot be absolute unless it belongs to itself; and it cannot belong to itself unless the poet belongs to himself” (44–45). Thus Joyce’s “colossal evasion” consists of writing to further a professional aesthetic agenda—as a bard for his time, rather than as a devout “self” with an exemplary, affective relationship to language.

Riding encodes gender in various ways throughout *Contemporaries and Snobs*, but is most explicit in her disdain for male impersonality as an impoverished aesthetic agenda. Elaborating on the tenets of “ritualistic impersonality,” Riding’s most severe attack on her male contemporaries exposes what she describes as the “ladylike” impulses that cower behind their staunch facades: “The ribaldry of Eliot, Cummings, and Joyce are instances of this conscientious effort on the part of gentleman-authors to avoid the temptations to sentimentality inherent in the poetic faculty; this effort, that is, to be ladies” (116). What begins here as a half-hearted denunciation of modernist “ribaldry” quickly becomes an intricately gendered parable about modernism’s effeminate aesthetic and ethical underpinnings. Eliot, Cummings, and Joyce, the “gentleman-authors,” perpetrate intentional “ribaldry” in their work in an effort to sanitize their poetics of any “temptations to sentimentality”—again, a repudiation of Romantic ideals. Yet this effort to de-sentimentalize their poetry is likened to an act of politesse, to a concerted effort “to be ladies.” In other words, the “conscientious” indelicacy in their work is *actually* a symptom of ladylike delicacy. This gendered indictment reveals what is, for Riding, the most pernicious effect of impersonality by suggesting that any attempt to circumvent the human quality (a necessary “sentimentality”) central to the “poetic faculty” is to be soft. In effect, she all but calls these “gentleman authors” wimps, and spares no sarcasm in deftly feminizing an entire facet of the modernist project. Ultimately, this attack hints at Riding’s profound ambivalence toward modernism as a philosophical endeavor and femininity as a pliable aesthetic category: can she fight for the “human” and remain modern? Riding argues for excesses of personality, for the entirety of the poet’s humanness to be made manifest in his albeit avant-garde

language—whereas impersonality necessarily shields the reader from “sentiment” (and thus from intellectual and affective growth) with effeminate aesthetic disguises. Yet Riding’s attachment to the “selfness” of poetic language allows for nothing short of an emotionally robust, absolutely un-“ladylike,” humanist poetry that is all too personal and by no means a “comment on a comment.”

Many gentlemen there are born not babes.
They will be babes, they will be babes
In the shades.
They will dribble, they will babble,
They will pule in pantomime
Who were not babes in baby time.

“Many Gentleman,” *Poems*

In 1937, Laura “Riding-roughshod” momentarily abandoned her extensive literary-critical pursuits in order to compose and distribute four hundred copies of “A Personal Letter With a Request for a Reply,” a formidable four-page missive that laments the “unhappy state” of geopolitics and presages the coming world war. For Riding, this letter represents an uncharacteristic foray into contemporary politics that conveys the philosophical frustrations of an exiled intellectual—she and Robert Graves were forced to flee their home in Majorca as a result of Franco’s insurgency—whose “personal life and labour” has been “corroded” by the “outside mechanism” of international affairs. Yet the voice in Riding’s letter is not a singular “I” but a pointedly collective, feminine “We” for whom the turmoil of “outside affairs” interferes with “the inner realities of the mind”—cogitation, introspection, reflection. Early in the letter, Riding distinguishes between what she determines to be masculine and feminine domains—the “outside” and the “inside of the house”—and allies the “We” with a valorized/feminized philosophical entity with the imperative to act: “What shall we do? Let us first consider who ‘we’ are—we, the ‘inside’ people. First of all, we are the women. Women are those of us who are most characteristically, most natively, ‘inside’ people.” Riding places this “We” in opposition to a masculine “Them” that is “violent” and “dehumanized,” asserting that contemporary geopolitics “give off a curious all-male odor.” Yet Riding carefully explains that the masculine/feminine divide central to her letter’s political inter-

vention does not correlate with a simple gender binary, but instead is an ethical and aesthetic divide between “two worlds of differing quality, in either of which men and women may jointly move and live.” Accordingly, “denatured” women can forsake the domain of intellection and interiority, just as certain men may embrace it.⁹

While Riding stipulates that the feminized “home” is a characteristically precious “hearth” of sensibilities, she importantly insists that it is also the locus of truth, humanism, and “educative thought,” whereas the masculine “outside” world is “commonplace,” “blank,” and “crudely emotional.” In this respect, Riding’s political gendering aggressively contradicts the more commonplace gender distinctions of her contemporaries whose hard conceptions of modernity implicitly claimed rationality, philosophy, and progressive ethics as masculine domains.¹⁰ She goes so far as to diffuse, even emasculate, the threat posed by these “outer employments” by alluding to their inherent impotence: “The public corridors of life teem with fretful, blundering Napoleons.” Riding’s hyper-emotive, diminutive men with misguided political aspirations are cookie cutter replicas of one another, each costumed for success, but fundamentally unimpressive. In effect, she deftly elides the bombastic personalities and maniacal aims of contemporary world leaders such as Franco, Stalin, and Hitler, aligning their childish “masculinity” with an inability to act either rationally or intellectually.

Yet Riding’s valorization of private, “mature,” intellection, to which “blundering Napoleons” are the antithesis, ironically undercuts her letter’s humanist goals, which is to say that her argument embodies a troublesome contradiction. She sets out to confront the ethical problem of an unethical international polity by appealing to a feminized “We” that can act morally “from the inside”—a privileged space of rationality and intellectualism—but ultimately portrays not only the agents of international unrest, but its subsequent effects (the very problem she sets out to confront) as pejoratively and ridiculously masculine. For Riding, “international affairs are not ‘intellectual’ problems,” they are mere cosmetic annoyances that rudely interrupt, and therefore diminish, the tranquil intellection of inner life, that is, the swift destruction of her own literary-intellectual oasis. Consequently, Riding’s letter seems to challenge the very teleology of modernity that is a driving motivation for this “recklessly disconnected,” violent world of politics: “What can we do about these children of the outer world, in their pseudo-rational-

istic, self-murderous contortions over problems that need no more for their solution than the moving round of the clock-hands?" Confronted with the "ominous" rise of fascism in Spain, Italy, France, and Germany, Riding stubbornly and somewhat blindly insists upon the sanctity of the private life of the mind, which trumps all urgent political and diplomatic concerns. Perhaps this explains why the letter solicits the responses of four hundred poets and intellectuals as to whether "there is anything to be done" to preserve this sanctity (emphasis mine). In other words, Riding's letter is peculiarly feminist yet blithely elitist as its "We" expresses frustration at finding itself "continuously gainsaid and agitated" by an "indiscriminate monster distraction."

Whether Riding's letter affirms or contradicts the humanist (and arguably feminist) enterprise legible in so much of her poetry and philosophy, it nevertheless provides an illuminating context for the imbrication of gender, aesthetics, and ethics in her work. As a woman modernist—the post-poetry (Riding) Jackson herself might contest this appellation—Riding's gendered allegory of European politics on the cusp of World War II resonates with the uncharacteristically *engaged* assessment proffered by Gertrude Stein, Riding's former friend and correspondent, in *Everybody's Autobiography* (also published in 1937):

There is too much fathering going on just now and there is no doubt about it fathers are depressing. Everybody now-a-days is a father, there is father Mussolini and father Hitler and father Roosevelt and father Stalin and father Trotzky [sic] and father Blum and father Franco is just commencing now and there are ever so many more ready to be one. Fathers are depressing . . . As I say fathers are depressing any father who is a father or any one who is a father and there are far too many fathers now existing. The periods of the world's history that have always been the most dismal ones are the ones where fathers were looming and filling up everything. (137)

Stein's "depressing fathers" play a role similar to that of the "outside" men in Riding's letter; both are infantilized hyper-male prototypes who wreak irresponsible and intrusive havoc on the world of intellection. Just as Riding's "outside people" reflect masculine sensibilities, Stein's "looming" fathers "fill up everything" with their "dismal," masculine

parenting, and “ever so many more” wait in the wings for their turn to do the same. Stein’s version of epidemic “fathering” likewise portrays masculinity as an aesthetic adornment—a guise that “Everybody” can assume. Perhaps not accidentally, Stein’s jarring commentary on the state of contemporary politics interrupts an otherwise innocuous moment of reminiscence and deflates the lighter tone of the narration that precedes it. Yet, whereas Stein levels by association Mussolini, Hitler, Roosevelt, Trotsky, Blum, and Franco—rendering them banal and interchangeable by assigning each the same lowercase title “father”—Riding specifically refuses to name names. Instead she constructs a gendered political allegory that, in the end, pits two equally abstract philosophical entities—a feminized ‘We’ and a masculinized political (un)conscious—against one another.

Riding’s “Personal Letter” is by no means the first incarnation of this singularly provocative philosophy. In 1935, while still living in Majorca with Robert Graves, Riding completed the first draft of a treatise entitled “The Word ‘Woman’” that theorizes the relation of “woman identity” to “human identity” (9). Riding defensively will insist (when the essay finally is published in 1989) that this treatise is NOT the history of the muse, a distinction that reflects the author’s strained relationship with and uncongenial dissociation from Graves who famously declared: “Woman is not a poet; she is either a muse or nothing.” Though Riding completed this initial version of “The Word ‘Woman’” while her professional and personal relationship with Graves was still intact, both the content and tone of her writing seek to dispel the “storybook qualities” of Woman/Riding-As-Muse that would haunt the popular and critical reception of Graves’ *The White Goddess* (1948):

Indeed there is a sick, trance-like intensity on the face of the woman standing in rapt self-belittlement before the great male author (who has become great by recording with fervent conviction that man is great—woman being generically included in man) that no male admirer could quite match: the male admirer would not feel how great the great male author was, but how great ‘we’ [men] were. (59)

Riding’s antipathy toward the “great male author” (arguably code for Graves) in this passage resonates with her portrayal of the “outsiders” in

her open letter, in as much as her critique of “male” authorship underscores its deliberate ignorance and forced impersonality. In contrast, Riding portrays the “woman” author as stoically authentic in her refusal to don the trappings of a modernist persona: “When the demand of impersonality is made on *woman* . . . woman cannot be indifferent to values” (75, emphasis added). Not surprisingly, Riding then extends this critique of inauthentic masculinity to “Modernism” more broadly when she asserts that the modernist impulse resulted in a “quieting down of all the egoistic hysterias” (55) the male poet grappled with when confronted with an “untranslatable” female “residue” (27). In order to dispel the myth of this “untranslatable” modernist muse, Riding’s essay ultimately repudiates the word “woman” because it cannot mean precisely—it defies definition and thus is integrated too easily into an indiscriminate, hegemonic masculinity. In an oddly proto-Derridean moment, Riding identifies and quickly disavows the role of ‘woman’ as an essential “supplement” (the muse) that helps to define the male center (the Artist/Writer).

Accordingly, “The Word Woman” delineates Riding’s conception of the “feminine” that can be traced to the origins of *language* rather than *writing*—to the moment of creation as opposed to the moment of production. In this respect, Riding’s philosophical history of gender assumes significant literary, theoretical, and ethical ramifications because it is “woman” who must place her difference in relief by *renaming* things—Riding calls this her “first work”—and in order to begin to speak (her “second work”):

She must, indeed, take over from man his sense of her difference and make it articulate. What she says must less and less reproduce the confusions of her temporary life with man, must reveal more and more what she is, even be her second work. And she will speak more clearly, not from arbitrary resolution to do so, but from the fact that she is, gradually coming to speak . . . it is inevitable that her utterances should at first reflect the diffuseness of that which she is clarifying in clarifying herself. (79)

This process of “clarification” helps to elucidate Riding’s own frustration with the poetic languages of modernism, which she continually

genders male. Whereas the role of woman, according to Riding, is to return to the essence of language and embody “truth,” the male modernist has attempted to obscure this truth with unnecessary figurations and adornments. Riding highlights the superficiality of this tradition that, in its effeminacy (however ironic), falls very short of her quasi-platonic poetic Ideal. She elaborates on this superficiality in a brutal rhetorical moment in *Contemporaries and Snobs*:

Can it be that the social backing of contemporary poetic gentlemanliness is only, after all, a gloomy medley of social authority, spaded Freudianism, Baroque Baedekerism, sentimental antiquarianism, slum-and-boudoir philology, mystical Bradleyism, tortoise-shell spectacled natural history, topee’d comparative religion and Arrow-collared Aristotelianism? (119)

Here, Riding portrays her contemporaries as “Arrow-collared Aristotelians” and effete, sentimental gentleman—harsh critiques to level at her hard modernist counterparts, whose aesthetics pointedly shunned unnecessary emotional and descriptive “slush.”¹¹ What she identifies as “poetic gentlemanliness” seems to be a metaphor for banal professional politesse—legible in both form and content—that becomes the mode of a modernist poetics more captivated by ego-driven fads (“spaded Freudianism,” “mystical Bradleyism”) than authenticity and truth-telling.¹²

Riding’s “The Lady of the Apple,” an early poem from *The Close Chaplet* (1926), offers its own version of the word “woman”—the archetype, Eve—as the sacralized source of an authentic language:

Turn up the earth, uncover her tomb, turn up
Her Pentecostal cheek, immaculate
And slain with lilies. Numbers in the blood
Unpetal and a resurrection springs
Out of the woman’s mouth for the last act
Of love: a word . . . (*The Word ‘Woman’* vii)

Here, Eve “labors” not to *procreate* but to create by naming: her progeny or off-“spring” are figured as redemptive “words.” This linguistic “act of love” mirrors the monstrous parturition of “Dead Birth” at same time as it affiliates “Woman,” the source of humankind in this context, with the originary pain of enunciation and articulation. In the beginning

was the “word” and the “word” was “Woman,” so to speak. If this co-option of the *Gospel of John* sounds presumptuous, it is no more so than the banner Riding supposedly displayed in her Majorcan retreat that read: “God is a Woman” (Ashbery 66). In fact, the “Lady of the Apple” bears a striking resemblance to “Dead Birth”’s floating nude: both are a source or “spring” from which words bubble up; both embody a morbid procreativity. Likewise, both poems portray the danger of speech and naming, the “last act” that potentially sacrifices the “unpetaled” woman for the sake of her linguistic progeny.

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?
 “The World and I,” *Poems*

Susan Schultz, one of the few critics to contend with the role Riding’s own gender played throughout her career as modernist poet-critic, strident ex-poet, and eventual language philosopher, suggests that Riding is never able to resolve her desire for an ethical poetry with her identity as a woman modernist: “Riding’s internal argument over her role as woman and poet was ultimately self-defeating for her as a poet . . . there is a necessary relationship between her belief in sexual essentialism and her renunciation of poetry” (48). Schultz’s chapter on Riding appears in a larger work entitled *A Poetics of Impasse* and seems keen to portray Riding as a victim of her own rigid convictions about the purposes of poetry that could never be reconciled with her inescapable role as a female muse. Schultz maintains that “thinking and disappearing” are “synonymous” for Riding whose “intense formalism always endeavored to use the poem to transcend the poem,” to the extent that she intentionally courted obscurity (65, 67). Yet Schultz suggests that Riding is not solely to blame for her renunciation of poetry, citing the “difficulty” her work posed (and continues to pose) for a mostly male audience—W.H. Auden famously called her “the only living philosophical poet” (qtd. in [Riding] Jackson *Failure* 79) and John Ashbery remarks, “How intimidating is the critical intelligence that breathes down one’s neck when one is reading Riding’s poetry” (103)—as well as the overbearing personal influence of Robert Graves and Schuyler

Jackson.¹³ Schultz ultimately suggests that, in an effort to escape the piercing male gaze—of the reader as well as her various male collaborators—Riding, the victimized object of that gaze, must silence her “self” as it exists on the poetic page. Moments in Riding’s later work support this conclusion, as in *The Telling* (1972) when she describes this process of self-silencing as a quasi-spiritual inevitability: “Most mute, as rememberers of First Things and perceivers of Last Things, and knowers of ourselves as that in which First and Last are bound together, are women” (45).

In a revised introduction to *The Poems of Laura Riding* (reissued in 1980), Riding reflects briefly on the role she played as a woman poet writing within the modernist tradition:

In becoming a poet in the century’s first quarter of poetic modernism, I assumed the character of a modern in the freedom with which I, cheerfully, dispensed with the literary conventionalities of poetic idiom, and forged me a poetic diction out of natural standards of diction—excellence, shaped to the requirement of the special concerns of poetry. (xxix)

Attentive to the “cheerful” freedoms that accompanied her entrée into a modernist mode of poetic writing, Riding also acknowledges having “assumed the character of a modern” to achieve this freedom. Written retrospectively, Riding’s reminiscence implies that she was aware of the extent to which she, too, cultivated a modernist persona—one that Schultz calls “strictly idealist” and “rigorously intellectual” (66)—but one that also struck Riding as “natural,” as if the loosening of “conventional poetic idioms” finally allowed for authenticity in her poetry. Schultz’s chapter on Riding is attentive to this authenticity and to the ways that gender impacts what she calls her “feminine verse.” She relies on metaphors of nakedness and adornment in order to characterize Riding’s poetic project as a literary striptease, if curiously anti-erotic, motivated by intellectual honesty and a compulsion to “bare all.” By highlighting the “strictly idealist” and “rigorously intellectual” aspects of her work, she underscores Riding’s scorn for artifice and display: “If masculine poets dress up for an audience, then Riding’s feminine verse is stripped to the bone” (66). In effect, her austere poetics reflect a naked essentialism that constitutes a calculated “response to poetic disguises” (55).

Yet Schultz's elaboration of Riding's "literary striptease" never addresses the erotic implications of this metaphor, even as she insists that the so-called "striptease" is a form of "hostility" directed toward a male public—or as in "Dead Birth," a grotesque nakedness that accompanies an infinite reproductive cycle. If after 1939, the "special concerns of poetry" were no longer a priority for Riding, then perhaps *no* poetic idiom could allow for authenticity, which is to suggest that poetic stricture of any kind—any formal constraint on language—for Riding becomes synonymous with impersonality, with "assuming a character," whether gentlemanly or ladylike. Allowing for the possibility that Riding's decision to abandon poetic writing transcends even her rigorously defended beliefs about gender and the "muse," I remain dissatisfied with Schultz's conclusion that, "the woman poet has no choice but to aggressively silence herself" (58). Without exploring the implied erotics of Riding's "literary striptease," Schultz must ascribe the poet's "impasse" to simple fatigue, thus enervating Riding's poetry of its potentially seductive energy by suggesting that her work is not revolutionary, but retrograde. Riding's repudiation of poetry, then, becomes an inevitable literary suicide committed by a woman modernist who wants to free poetry from "art's ornamentation," but cannot endure the nakedness this freedom imposes on the lyric subject.

Riding often cleverly conceals this naked lyric subject behind the weighty philosophical agenda propounded in her poems, as is the case in "Care in Calling," whose metaphysical rigor reveals the extent to which Riding seems unable to cleave poetic practice from a fiercely ethical, gendered debate about the merits of poetry itself. A poem that interrogates the naming process and the danger of imprecision, "Care in Calling" opens as a Socratic dialogue:

Who, then, is child,
And who is man?
Child is the first man still,
Man is the last man not yet.
And the first man is seed,
And the last man is seed silenced.
The last man is womanish:
Woman which before man

Was silent word alone—
That breeding silence she.

Let it be a care
How man or child be called man or child,
Or woman, woman. (*Poems* 184)

The poem begins mid-dialogue, by rebutting an insufficient answer: “Who, *then*, is child / And who is man”? We sense that the poem’s exegesis on the human is only one facet of a much larger discussion that began long before Riding’s stanza enters the debate. In turn, this opening question interpellates the reader as it seems to ask, “Who are you?” and we realize that we have no ready answer.¹⁴ Riding then presents an impossibly complicated taxonomy of the human family that temporally connects “man” to “child” with a set of algebraic equivalencies: *child* is to *first man* as *first man* is to *seed*; *man* is to *last man* as *last man* is to *seed silenced*. This recursive reproductive cycle excludes “woman” because it operates in the present tense (“is”) whereas “woman” operates in the past tense (“Was”). Yet the “last man” is “womanish,” a diminutive comparison that ironically contrasts with the equivalencies preceding it: “last man” is modified by the adjective “womanish,” not compared to another entity, as in “first man is seed.” The “-ish” reinforces this adjective’s ineptitude—“last man” is *reminiscent* of woman, but importantly not a woman. Because the semantic and mathematical connections between “man” and “child” allow both to be replaced with variables, we take no “care” in calling “child” *x* or “last man” *y* (or in equating *x* and *y*) but these variables cannot extend to “woman” who, in the context of the poem, has no equivalent. This singularity is reinforced by the poem’s final directive: “Let it be a care / How man or child be called man or child, / or woman, woman.” While these lines insist that the words “man,” “child,” and “woman” are not arbitrary names, they also imply that “man” and “child” are interchangeable: “man” or “child” can be called *either* “man” or “child,” but “woman” can only be called “woman.” She is nonpareil.

As if Riding’s algebraic syntax were not difficult enough to decode, the poem likewise creates a set of temporal oppositions between man/child (after) and woman (before). The tense markedly shifts from present to past when woman becomes the poem’s focus: “Woman which

before man / Was silent word alone— / That breeding silence she.” While the poem insists upon the singularity of “woman” as a name, it also constructs “woman” as a symbol for silence and generative solitude at the beginning of time—“before man.” Accordingly, “woman” and “word” are equivalents, and again Riding locates “woman” at (and as) the origins of language. The poem’s interrogation of naming wends its way to a memorable conclusion with, “That breeding silence she,” which finally answers the question, “Who, then, is child / and who is man?” From a feminine “breeding silence” comes language, even the poem’s own modifiers: the “That,” which portrays “she” as an entity that existed before names—“that” connective tissue “that” links subject and predicate. Yet another version of perverse parturition, “Care in Calling” offers a philosophical counterpoint to the grotesque femininity portrayed in “Dead Birth.” Whereas the floating female nude in the sketch is “full awake, yet not in full focus of thought,” here femininity is over-thought and mapped methodically onto the origins of language itself as the “breeding silence she,” who exists only through her own self-conception.

Despite the various and complex ways Riding privileges femininity and sacralizes reproduction in her work, I am hesitant to label her a feminist *tout court*, particularly because her poetic explorations of generative femininity (replete with parturition and bubbling babies) are terminal. Not surprisingly, Riding herself objected to the “mere feminism” of the what she calls the “equality-period”: “We, woman, are now entering upon our second work. Our difference, our not-manness, is here the basic principle” (*The Word ‘Woman’* 54).¹⁵ Thus rather than depict Riding as a discouraged woman modernist who deliberately pressed herself into seclusion—too unappreciated, too smart for her contemporaries, too much Robert Graves’s muse—her renunciation of poetry ultimately reflects her profound dissatisfaction with modernism’s threatening public facades. In effect, this renunciation constitutes a calculated attempt to justify the “breeding silence she” by rejecting modernist impersonality and embracing the “human mean” in language, or rather, in silence. Riding’s deliberate dissociation from poetic practice signifies a contrary return to the “inner realities of the mind” she so assiduously defends in her “Open Letter.” By turning inward to examine the feminine source of “meaning” in language, as she does for the rest of her life, Riding happily explores the terms of her own metaphorical

understanding of the person in and through language, however rigid the outcome (*Rational Meaning* is an alienating text, to say the least).

Thus the contradiction in Riding's poetry, which in some sense can only be read as terminal, is that its linguistic precision invokes a philosophy of language that is inherently figurative because it is gendered female. Consequently, Riding's poetics inevitably mirror this ambivalence toward gendered representation even as they enact her rejection of the word "Woman." If poetry cannot tell the "truth" because it is rooted in analogy and figuration (and she abandons it for this reason), Riding finds herself unable to justify the feminized "We" she once championed as the only solution to the chaos of language (and to the grander metaphysical problems of the world-at-large). The post-renunciation Riding faced an insurmountable conundrum, eloquently foretold in her poem "Grace":

This posture and this manner suit
Not that I have an ease in them
But that I have a horror
And so stand well upright—
Lest, should I sit and, flesh-conversing, eat,
I choke upon a piece of my own tongue meat. (*Poems* 99)

Riding's gendered ethics force her to bite her own tongue, so to speak, but in the pursuit of a "higher truth," whether or not we can laud the result. Gertrude Stein, in a prescient moment, celebrates Riding's perverse commitment to an obsessively precise language (that becomes a reclusive ethical calling) when she writes in "Sentences,"

An adjective have to be faced. An adjective in sound based on fugitives. Leave roads alone. They will be pleased. To cover it with however it is only there. An adjective and they will have had May. May Rider. Mary Riding. Minna Riding, Martha Riding, Melanctha Riding. Thank you. (*How to Write* 117)

Stein thanks her former friend Riding for writing directly toward the "it," for coaxing out the kernel of the word itself. Riding deconstructs language in breeding, brooding silence, Stein in repetition. Both are poet-ish.

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NOTES

1. "Dead Birth" and the nine other illustrations in *The Life of the Dead* were commissioned by Riding in close collaboration with artist John Aldridge, who executed them and oversaw the engraving process. Because of their grotesque morbidity, several engravers initially refused to take on the project (Friedmann 192).

2. Bernstein argues that the ethics of Riding's renunciation of poetry are similar to a "renunciation of Communism and a turn to 'core values' not uncommon among intellectuals [of] this period" (n258). Having begun in the 1930s to write a *Dictionary of Exact Meanings*, Riding agitated against poetic metaphors because she believed that language should be transparent and used precisely and articulately, without intent to dissemble. Bernstein explains: "For the unnameable catastrophe of these years, with its rationalized but irrational logic of extermination, engendered a crisis of and for expression in which the abuse of language became inextricably identified with the abuse of the human" (259). Contemporary political events clearly influenced Riding's decision, since she was Jewish, and she and Robert Graves were forced to leave Majorca, Spain at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

3. Riding alludes to one of these disguises in this section's epigraph (CS 174). Citing Ezra Pound's "limited" metaphorical range, Riding claims to "tire" of "Mr. Pound's jargon," particularly of the sculptural metaphors he evokes to describe the modernist idiom in *Blast!* (1913) and "The Hard and the Soft in French Poetry" (1919).

4. Ellmann describes a group of "humanist critics" (to which Riding might belong) as those who "resist the theory of impersonality because they sense the anti-liberalism which inspired it" (5).

5. Rainey describes the economic structures that bolstered the development of modernism as a public literary movement, explaining how "modernism negotiated its way among the 'contrived corridors' of its own production" (78). As for the mechanisms of self-promotion traceable in the careers of both Joyce and Eliot, Rainey argues, "modernism marks neither a straightforward resistance nor an outright capitulation to commodification but a momentary equivocation that incorporates elements of both in a brief, necessarily unstable synthesis" (3).

6. From the beginning of *Contemporaries and Snobs*—Riding's first virtuoso treatise on modernism—she begins to articulate a philosophy of the "human" that recurs throughout her writing: "There is a sense of life so real that it becomes the sense of something more real than life. Spatial and temporal sequences can only partially express it. It introduces a principle of selection into deliberate intellectual forms; animal experiences related by time and space into human experiences related in infinite degrees of kind. It is the meaning at work in what has no meaning; it is, at its clearest, poetry" (9). Riding's "post-poetry" writings become increasingly devoted to language as a humanist principle (particularly *The Telling* and *Rational Meaning*).

7. Though restrained in her critique of Ezra Pound as a poet, Riding does mention him in this context and questions his motivations as a critic: "language such as Mr. Pound uses . . . soon becomes jargon, which means not only trite but senseless—for it is so limited that when it loses its literal sense its metaphorical sense (such as the application to poetry of terms invented for sculpture) becomes purely academic" (CS 174).

8. In effect, Riding equates the "contemporary" with the "historical" and thus repudiates both in the same way that Raymond Williams later will define a "structure of feeling" as a necessarily ineffable, ahistorical affective state. Riding explains that critical purchase on the present is inherently mimetic thus retrospective, and a truly "modern" (as distinguished from "contemporary") poet maintains a pre-conscious "sense" of his/her moment without attempting to record (and thus enervate) it.

9. Though her letter never truly seems to allow for this possibility.

10. As an example, see Ezra Pound's *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*.

11. In "A Few Don'ts" Pound cautions: "If you are using symmetrical form, don't put in what you want to say and then fill up the remaining vacuums with slush" (*Literary Essays* 9).

12. Bernstein suggests that Riding's quest for truth in language, which eventually results in her abandonment of poetry and in *Rational Meaning*, is problematic specifically because it ignores the everyday—slangs, dialects, political speech, etc. He argues: "the Jacksons are themselves licentious in their moral censoriousness" (97).

13. In particular, she relays a disturbing anecdote from the memoirs of T.S. Matthews (a close friend of the Jacksons) that describes a tearful Riding being made to burn her own poems as Schuyler Jackson looks on (Schultz 75).

14. This moment of interpellation is reminiscent of Emily Dickinson's Poem 288 (though Dickinson's narrator effaces her own authority along with that of the reader): "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! // How dreary—to be—Somebody! / How public—like a Frog— / To tell one's name—the livelong June— / To an admiring Bog!"

15. This principle is echoed in Loy.

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