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Rosanna Warren**Ghosting: Laura Riding and Gertrude Stein**

In December 1929, Gertrude Stein reported to Laura Riding, “I am saving the sentence.” To which Riding replied from Mallorca, where she and Robert Graves had recently settled, “We are glad you are saving the sentence. I am busy on the word.” This exchange reveals what brought these two radical women writers together and something of what drove them apart. Their friendship took shape largely in letters and for only three years, from 1927 to 1930, when Stein cut off communication. After the break, Stein kept on inventing and contorting sentences to increasing acclaim until her death in 1946, while Riding persisted in breaking barriers in her poems until, around 1941, she renounced poetry and spent the rest of her long life in a fanatical attempt to establish the literal meaning of words. She died in 1991; the linguistic treatise on which she labored for decades with her husband Schuyler Jackson was published posthumously as *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words*. Years after Stein’s rejection, Laura (Riding) Jackson asserted in a 1971 letter to George Fraser, “Gertrude Stein might be called an antithesis of what I am in how I view and do by words. . . . I regard her as having an ultimately destructive intention.” In the same letter, she denied being influenced by Stein (or by anyone else): “My work is not loaded with reflections of other work, other thinking than mine.” Still later, in 1986, she wrote in her essay “The Word-Play of Gertrude Stein,” her contribution to Michael J. Hoffman’s *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, “Gertrude Stein and I were at opposite poles in our view of the linguistic function.” Yet from her ecstatic praise of Stein in her essay “The New Barbarism and Gertrude Stein” in the newly founded literary journal *transition* in June 1927 to Stein’s silence in 1930 and beyond, Riding was haunted by Stein. She adopted Stein’s syntax in her letters and poems, and Stein’s example inspired some of her strongest writing. This is a story of a séance with a living ghost.

* * *

Laura Riding knew about destruction. She had what she called in “Obsession”—another essay celebrating Stein, in her genre-defying 1930 book *Experts Are Puzzled*—“this gift of annihilation.” Throughout her life, she repeatedly discarded versions of herself, names, attachments, friendships,

and modes of writing, always in search of some outer limit, some ultimate truth. In poem after poem (while she still composed poems) she explored, as she put it in “Dear Growth,” in 1928’s *Love as Love, Death as Death*, “The change of self in wide address of self / To usefulness . . .”

She was born Laura Reichenthal in 1901 to a poor Jewish immigrant family in the garment district in New York City. As a scholarship student at Cornell, she married a young instructor, Louis Gottschalk, becoming Laura Gottschalk in 1920 and moving with him to Urbana, Illinois, and then to Louisville, Kentucky, where he was hired to teach. But young Mrs. Gottschalk was not going to be immured as a faculty wife in the Midwest. She was writing ambitious, spiky poems, and in 1923 she started publishing them under the name Laura Riding Gottschalk (Judaism, too, she left behind with the family name Reichenthal). Her work attracted the attention of the Fugitives, a sophisticated literary group in Nashville who published a journal of that name where her poems began to appear. In 1924, the Fugitives awarded her the Nashville Prize, and she traveled to meet them and to read her work.

The Fugitives opened the literary world to Riding. A maverick association including senior poet scholar-critics John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson and younger poets Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren, the Fugitives were incubating an American version of the New Criticism; they were among the first serious readers of T. S. Eliot in the country. For two years, 1923 to 1925, Riding published with them and vigorously sought support for their journal among her acquaintances in Louisville. She even had a brief fling with Tate, which inspired a spate of love poems in the New Critical mode of ironic, metrical, rhyming, metaphysical stanzas. In 1925 she divorced Gottschalk and moved to New York City, where she stormed around Greenwich Village (her friend Hart Crane called her “Laura Rideshalk-Godding” and then “Laura Riding Roughshod”) and published, in the literary magazine *The Reviewer*, “A Prophecy or a Plea,” an essay demanding radical poetic innovation: “By taking the universe apart, [the poet] will have reintegrated it with his own vitality.” That December she sailed to England and entered a ménage à trois with Robert Graves and his wife, the painter Nancy Nicholson.

For the next fourteen years Riding led a feverish avant-garde life in

England, changing her name legally in 1927 from Laura Riding Gottschalk to Laura Riding. One book followed another at a great clip: poetry, fiction, and criticism, with two critical volumes, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* and *A Pamphlet against Anthologies*, produced in collaboration with Graves. Leonard and Virginia Woolf published her first collection of poems, *The Close Chaplet*, in their Hogarth Press in 1926, the same year they brought out Stein's *Composition as Explanation*. The following year Riding and Graves started their own publishing venture, Seizin Press, a hand-letter press where they did their own printing and controlled the whole process as the word "seizin" (freehold possession) suggests.¹ Their first Seizin book was Riding's *Love as Love, Death as Death*; their second would be Stein's *An Acquaintance with Description*.

The three years of Riding's and Stein's personal connection coincide with the publication of Stein's manuscript, and with a crisis in the Riding-Graves-Nicholson household. The ménage à trois, an arrangement they called the Trinity (which included Graves's and Nicholson's four children), smashed quite literally on April 27, 1929, when a fourth prospective member, the Irish poet Geoffrey Phibbs, withdrew, and in protest Riding threw herself out a third-story window, fracturing her skull, pubis, and several vertebrae. Graves ran down the stairs and leapt out a second-story window to succor her. Riding nearly died; her convalescence was long and painful. Throughout the upheaval, Stein, in Paris, wrote consoling letters to both Graves and Riding, assuring Graves that "it will make Laura a very wonderful person, in a strange way, a destruction and recreation of her purification." Riding herself would mythologize the events in prose and poetry, stating in a letter to Stein, "Robert went out with me. Anyone else who wants to be here with me as Robert is must discover in herself or himself an out-of-windowness." The intensification of a cult around Riding may be inferred from Robert's

1 Riding and Graves didn't set the type: in England (as opposed to later, in Mallorca) they employed a compositor who sent them typeset plates from which they could print in their apartment on their 1872 Crown Albion press. They kept extra type on hand for corrections and revisions. The process is described in letters from Riding to Stein in August and October 1928 and explained in the footnotes to their published correspondence, *A Description of Acquaintance*.

declaration to his family that Laura was “seamless, like the garment of Christ.” Phibbs, the errant Irishman, wrote to *his* abandoned wife, “I told you Laura was like Jesus—she died but has risen again.”

Laura Riding’s life continued adventurously. She and Graves moved to Mallorca, where they wrote, published, and attracted a coterie of literary followers until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 drove them back to England. In 1939 they experimented with communal life in the United States as guests of two couples, editor and writer T. S. Matthews and his wife and the gentleman farmer Schuyler Jackson and his wife. In short order, Riding and Schuyler Jackson fell in love, Graves returned to England, and Mrs. Jackson was hospitalized with a nervous breakdown. In 1941 Riding and Schuyler Jackson rose from the wreckage as a newly married couple, with Laura Riding assuming her final name, Laura (Riding) Jackson, and “renouncing” poetry. As she explained in 1980 in her preface to the reissued edition of her 1938 *Collected Poems*, “I came eventually to where I found poetic utterance arrested even in its being poetic utterance.” Poetry, she decided, “could not be itself a warranty of truth of word.” Henceforth she devoted herself, with Schuyler Jackson, to their opus on linguistics, *Rational Meaning*, meant to eliminate all ambiguity from words in their pursuit of an absolute truth. This “truth” would be unshakeable and would admit no criticism or disagreement: it would provide “a universal linguistic solution.” “There has been no recognition at all of the unchallengeable logic of my linguistic position,” (Riding) Jackson asserted in 1980.

But in 1927, Laura (Riding) Jackson was still Laura Riding, and she was still writing poems. What did Riding learn from Gertrude Stein? It is the poems that interest me. To see the poems clearly, we must retrieve them from the hurricane of personality and gossip—as well as from (Riding) Jackson’s own midcentury renunciation.

“As Well as Any Other,” the first poem in Riding’s first book, *The Close Chaplet*, shows her in command of traditional prosody and also resisting it. When the book came out in 1926, free verse was a widely available convention in English. Eliot’s *Prufrock and Other Observations*, with its revolutionary improvisational cadences, had come out in 1917, while in the same year his essay “Reflections on Vers Libre” criticized slack and

increasingly popular free verse. *The Close Chaplet*, opening with a challenge to traditional verse (“the old, adoréd rose”) in rhyming metrical stanzas, offered, for the most part, electrically intelligent free verse except for a sequence of satirical sonnets in which the conventional form clinched the jokes (“And yet his verses were neither grease nor bad / As some that better loins and liver had”).

“As Well as Any Other” consists of three six-line stanzas rhyming AABCCB, with each rhyme pair a pentameter followed by a trimeter. Riding is strutting her metrical stuff to show what *can* be done, and what she will no longer do, and why. Here is the 1926 version:

As Well as Any Other

As well as any other, Erato,
I can dwell separately on what men know
In common secrecy,
And celebrate the old, adoréd rose,
Retell—oh why—how similarly grows
The last leaf of the tree.

But for familiar sense what need can be
Of my most singular survey or me,
If homage may be done
(Unless it is agreed we shall not break
The patent silence just for singing’s sake)
As well by anyone?

Reject me not, then, if I have begun
Unwontedly or if I seem to shun
The close and well-tilled ground:
For in untraveled soil alone can I
Unearth the gem or let the mystery lie
That never must be found.

Addressing Erato, the classical muse of lyric poetry, the poet demonstrates that she *can* celebrate “the old, adoréd rose” but impatiently asks, “oh why.” This version nods to patriarchal tradition: “what men know”; in 1938 she revised “men” to “we.” The second stanza swings open on the adversative “but,” shifting the line of argument, and insists on the “singularity” of this speaker, picking up from “separately” in the first stanza. “What need can

be,” she asks, for yet another “familiar sense” or poem. The third stanza addresses the muse, and perhaps a whole poetic tradition, with an urgent plea or command: “Reject me not.” The poem flashes a warning: it will begin “unwontedly,” it will “seem to shun / The close and well-tilled ground.” It concludes by justifying its demand: “For in untraveled soil alone can I / Unearth the gem or let the mystery lie.” The first-person singular “I” stands defiantly out at the end of the line and rhymes: this is a solitary voice, intent on its singularity. It considers the drama of selfhood, a problem Riding had already put through its paces in an earlier poem, “Dimensions,” awarded the Nashville Prize by the Fugitives: “Measure me by myself / And not by time or love or space / Or beauty.” Riding will continue to worry at this pronoun throughout *The Close Chaplet*, studying the strangeness of being a conscious self: “The quality of what I am / Encases what I am not” (“Prisms”); “My flesh is at a distance from me” (“Virgin of the Hills”). She would pursue this theme throughout her poetry: she had no apparent interest in the natural world or in physical realities beyond the self.

When Riding revised “As Well as Any Other” for her *Collected Poems* in 1938, she changed it significantly. The last three lines in particular align with the abstract turn her thought had taken:

For in peculiar earth alone can I
 Construe the word and let the meaning lie
 That rarely may be found.

The well-worn image of the gem has been replaced by “the word,” increasingly the object of Riding’s devotion. The physical verb “unearth” has given way to the linguistic term “construe,” the analysis of sense and grammatical function; the earthy metaphors of “well-tilled ground” and digging out a gem have been dropped. The original line had presented a choice of opposing actions: to “unearth the gem” *or* to “let the mystery lie,” to present a beautiful gem-poem *or* to keep it secret (with the teasing pun on “lie”). But the revision turns “or” to “and” and offers one united action: this nonconforming poet will “construe the word” *and* “let the meaning lie / That rarely may be found” (“rarely,” not “never”). In its deliberate

obscurity, literary modernism was a semisecret society for an elect, initiated membership. As a poet, Riding had been “persistently accused of difficulty,” she claimed in the preface to her 1938 *Collected Poems*. She veers here close to a famous statement by T. S. Eliot, whom she often derided. In “The Metaphysical Poets,” first published in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1921, Eliot wrote that “it appears likely that the poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*. . . . The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.” Laura Riding, in her own way and for her own purposes, also “dislocated” language into her meaning. Her encounter with Stein’s radical syntax showed her more strenuous ways to do that.

Riding composed most of the poems in *The Close Chaplet* in a taut free verse, knowingly cadenced. She pioneered in that book an elliptical, compressed, often abstract art, abundant in definitions and assertions, often nailed in place by the verb “to be.” The young Auden learned a lot from her, calling her “the only living philosophical poet.” Her lines startle: “Birth is the beginning where all part. / Death is the beginning where they meet” (“Ahead and Around”); “One sleep, one stirring / Were one life enough / Were they enough one life” (“One”). The strangeness arises from jarring juxtapositions and non sequiturs, but her sentence structures respect grammatical norms. This changed after she read Stein’s *Composition as Explanation* in 1926.

When Riding, Graves, and Nicholson returned to England in June 1926 after a semester in Cairo, where Graves had a brief teaching post, they narrowly missed meeting Gertrude Stein. Shepherded by Edith Sitwell, Stein had delivered an address about modern art and her own writing at both Oxford and Cambridge, the lecture that the Hogarth Press would publish as *Composition as Explanation*. With its run-on sentences, repetitions with variation, sentence fragments, dislocated clauses, all in the service of a serious argument about language touching the real, Stein’s text came as a revelation to Riding. It taught her to “begin again.” From *Composition as Explanation*: “This brings again to composition this the using everything. The using everything brings us to composition and to this composition. A continuous present and using everything and beginning again.”

Even before Riding's poems register the impact of Stein's contortions, they hunger for a renewal of self and language, a renewal of self *through* language. She imagines this reformation obsessively in the form of death: the title of her next book of poems, the first Seizin publication, was *Love as Love, Death as Death*, and the poems take up, again and again, the fantasy of a language as far beyond poetic figuration as beyond life itself. Long before she leapt from the window in 1929, Laura Riding had experimented imaginatively with death as a figure for self-recreation and poetic renovation. In "Death as Death," the body of a suicide "dazedly . . . echoes / 'Like this, like this, like nothing else.'" The first poem in the book, "The Map of Places," violently rejects representation: "The reality of paper tears." Riding's exasperation with existing symbolic forms permeates the whole volume: "Death meets itself everywhere. / Holes in maps look through to nowhere."

Riding's death hunger, however allegorical, is personal to her and has little to do with Stein. The two women had very different temperaments, but both were pressing literary language to its perceived limits, and for a few years they recognized a common endeavor. Riding's review of *Composition as Explanation* in *transition* in June 1927 pulses with that excitement. It also shows that Stein had given her a way to step around T. S. Eliot, the lion in the path at that point for experimental poetry in English.

Riding quarried her review in *transition* from the manuscript of her book *Contemporaries and Snobs*, a much longer attack on what she saw as modernist critical dogma, published in London by Jonathan Cape in 1928. That whole book rebels against Eliot's ascendancy, the influence of *The Criterion*, his thesis of impersonality from "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and the institutional authority of criticism. "Mr. Eliot's *Waste Land* is the great twentieth century nursery rhyme," she declared. The section in *transition* takes aim more particularly at Eliot's review of Stein's *Composition as Explanation* in the January 1927 issue of *The Nation and Athenaeum*: "There is something precisely *ominous* about Miss Stein. . . . Her work is not improving, it is not amusing, it is not interesting, it is not good for one's mind. But its rhythms have a peculiar hypnotic power not met with before. It has a kinship with the saxophone. If this is of the future, then the future is, as it very likely is, of the barbarians. But this is a future in which we ought not to be interested."

Riding latches on to the word “barbarian” and its variants in her defense of Stein, “The New Barbarism, and Gertrude Stein.”² (I wonder whether Eliot had in the back of his mind Yeats’s reaction to the premiere of Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* in Paris in 1896: “After us, the savage gods.”) It is this “barbaric” energy in Stein that Riding applauds as a refusal of “the organized metaphysic of poetry professionalized in the narrowest possible social sense as an art-and-craft” (i.e., Eliot’s style of criticism). Stein, she says, has combined “the function of the critic and the poet”; “no one but she has been willing to be as ordinary, as simple, as primitive, as stupid, as barbaric as successful barbarism demands.” Two words that would become talismans for Riding in the years to come make an early appearance here in the tribute to Stein. One is the adverb “literally”: Riding congratulates Stein for “taking everything around her very literally.” The other key word is “finality”: “When the time-sense acclaims a beauty which was not at first recognized, the finality of this beauty is at once established.” A dogged insistence on literalism would characterize (Riding) Jackson’s ultimate enterprise, *Rational Meaning*—which circulated in manuscript form in the 1940s—and before that, in the 1938 preface to her *Collected Poems*, she compared herself to Saint Francis, demanding that the “Rule” must be observed “literally, literally, literally.” “Finality” crops up everywhere in her writing, but especially in texts articulating her absolute goals, at first for poetry, and later for all language. In the 1938 preface she places the two words side by side: “Then we have not merely poems—we have poetry; we have not merely the immediacies—we have finality. Literally.” She even took “Finality” as a name for herself after the leap from the window, Graves’s sister reported.³

2 The title for the longer chapter in 1928’s *Contemporaries and Snobs* is “T. E. Hulme, the New Barbarism, and Gertrude Stein.” Riding and Graves also used the essay as the conclusion to *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, published the same year.

3 In *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding* (Grove Weidenfeld, 1992; reprinted through iUniverse, 2000), Deborah Baker writes that Rosaleen Graves reported to their brother John: “Laura preferred calling herself ‘Finality.’”

The more Riding quotes from Stein in the essay in *transition*, the more her own prose begins to adopt Steinian rhythms and grammar. The quotation marks remain, but as the sentences of the two writers seem to run together, the marks feel almost superfluous. Homage turns into something more intimate than imitation: a form of radical absorption. Stein, from *Composition as Explanation* (quoted by Riding):

Beginning again and again and again explaining composition and time is a natural thing.
It is understood by this time that everything is the same except composition and time, composition and time of the composition and the time in the composition.

Riding, on the same page:

This acting first principle provides a “perfectly articulated general theme” because there is time, and everybody, and the beginning again and again and again, and composition.

Riding, on the next page:

Writing by always beginning again and again and again keeps everything different and everything the same.

Riding, later on the same page:

This is repetition and continuousness and beginning again and again and again.

The whole essay isn't a pastiche of *Composition as Explanation* but a performance as interpretation.

* * *

The relation between Laura Riding and Gertrude Stein unfolds in five acts. Act I we have just witnessed: Riding's review of *Composition as Explanation*. At this time the two women had not yet met. In Act II, Riding and Graves, having started Seizin Press in 1927, invite Stein to send them something to publish; she sends *An Acquaintance with Description*,

and Riding and Graves set to work printing it. This is where the extant correspondence begins, and it tracks the stages of the production of Stein's book. It would be fun to think of Riding "composing" Stein's work by setting the type since she had been so inspired by *Composition as Explanation*; unfortunately, we can't be so literal, since Riding and Graves had a compositor set the type and send them plates from which they then printed on the press in their apartment. But in some larger sense, Riding *was* composing Stein's book; the letters concern the processes of printing and proofreading and then details of publicity and distribution. In October 1928 Riding was able to tell Stein that they were doing the final printing and would soon send the text to the binder. By this time, Riding and Graves had met Stein and Alice Toklas in Paris, a mostly friendly encounter the previous May, though Riding managed to complicate it by blaming Stein's collaborator and friend, the young composer Virgil Thompson, for gossip about her and Graves. One glimpses Riding's imperious violence in her letter to Stein: "If he is [responsible for it], I must ask you to destroy him for me (and R.G.)." Stein evidently didn't take this aggression well, and Riding semi-apologized and patched it up.

An Acquaintance with Description must have been hell to typeset and hell to proofread. Like *Composition as Explanation*, it's an *ars poetica*, but it's more abstract and more deranging to the rules of grammar. Whereas in the earlier essay Stein set about "explaining" the process of writing ("Writing is always beginning again and again"), *An Acquaintance with Description* transposes to the medium of language the problem of representation ("description") that her friend Picasso had so agitated in his painting, leaving clues to subject matter—fragments of jugs and guitars and letters and the human form—but so drastically rearranging it as to make it close to illegible. When Stein told Riding that she was "saving the sentence," she meant it. *An Acquaintance* "describes" nothing, but gallops through delirious variations on parts of speech, turning nouns into gerunds and vice versa, lining up competing prepositions, and shattering sentence structure: "description having succeeded deciding, studying description so that there is describing until it has been adjoined and is in a description." As the piece progresses, some of the lines almost entirely disintegrate sense yet compel attention to sense-making: "which is why it is that it is looking is it in it as

it it is as it is is it as it is there." One is forced to consider each monosyllabic word as an atom composing a peculiar large molecule.

Act III tracks the friendship developing between Riding and Graves as a couple and Gertrude Stein; there is almost no mention of Alice Toklas. Riding's letters, even practical ones about printing, take on Steinian mannerisms. "Dear Gertrude," Riding writes in November 1928, "I am sending you a copy of *Love as Love, Death as Death*. It is an out of series one, that is, there will be imperfections in the printing, but never mind everything is there." To which Stein replies affectionately, complimenting the look of the *Seizin* book (which anticipates her own), and appreciating Riding's poems: "It is what I like you begin play and it becomes literal and you begin literal and it becomes play, and to me that is you." In April 1929, in the weeks leading up to the crisis with Geoffrey Phibbs, Riding takes Stein very much into her confidence, hinting at the personal complications and asking for sympathy: "The trouble is persons and work the same. Always you are there, in this sameness. You know. I nearly went to Paris to see you, after Rouen, but I was too ill." A few days later Stein writes to thank Riding for the copies of *An Acquaintance with Description* she has received, expressing pleasure in the look of them and inviting Riding and Graves to visit her and Toklas in Paris or later in their country house in Belley.

On April 27 the Trinity explodes, and Riding hurtles out the window. Stein responds with lively sympathy ("It will make Laura a very wonderful person"), and for the next few months letters fly back and forth, some written by Graves. As Riding recovers enough to write her own letters, she expresses her attachment to Stein more and more intensely, almost as if she had appointed the older woman as surrogate mother *and* lover. Her sentences sound increasingly Steinian as she explicitly addresses the question of identification: "This year's laura for yes There is always Gertrude and just now there is Laura and it is a very clear or confused thing but it is a thing. It is the same thing that people who know our work but not us and imagine our faces and make mistakes about them make no mistakes but only get us mixed."

One can sense, already, a little reserve from Stein, the more established writer, in spite of her affectionate greetings ("My very dear Laura"). She warns against hysteria: "After all it is hysteria that is vulgar and the

complete absence of hysteria is very rare.” But Riding revels in the intimacy; indeed, the intimacy with Stein seems bound up with her recovery and with her own identity as a writer. She sends a draft of the poem she would later publish as “This” in *Poems: A Joking Word* and tells Stein about gathering poems for a new book she imagines calling *Here Beyond* and about a prose book to be called *Obsession*, in which Stein is to feature: “And you are in it now and again and always.”

Several dramas are playing out in this letter from August 1929. One appears to be an attempt to draw Stein, if not into a reconstituted version of the Trinity, at least into Riding’s own magnetic field. This was a ploy that was bound to fail: Stein was not assimilable. A second plot takes shape in the first sentence, an observation about the two women’s writing that turned out to be more prescient than Riding can have understood at the time. “Dear-Dear-Gertrude-Gertrude, Laura’s writing is becoming more & more Laura, and Gertrude’s writing is becoming more and more writing.” Whatever Riding meant, in the decades to come she would assert herself increasingly as a personality (“more & more Laura”) and as a writer only insofar as she became known as the poet who had abjured poetry, whereas Stein pursued her sentences to the bitter end (“more and more writing”).

It’s eerie enough to observe the ventriloquism of Stein in Riding’s letters. But the more artistically significant haunting takes place in the poems. Not all of them: Riding’s later poems are stylistically various, and a few of them, like “Divestment of Beauty,” seem improbably begotten out of Stein by Allen Tate. “Divestment” opens “She, she and she and she—” and concludes in a Fugitive pentameter, “The recondite familiar to your candour.” But in 1929, in the throes of her obsession (Riding’s word) with Stein and the experience of near death, Riding produced some of her best poems, and they adapt Stein’s prose to Riding’s poetic purposes. We can see an early version of that effort in the poem Riding sent to Stein in July 1929 from the London Homeopathic Hospital. Later entitled “This” in *Poems: A Joking Word* in 1930 and revised and retitled as “Celebration of Failure” in the 1938 *Collected Poems*, this draft feels lightly Steinian in its anaphora and other repetitions, but its autobiographical urgency belongs only to “Laura,” who is becoming “more & more Laura”:

Through pain the land of pain
 Through narrowness and self-hate
 Through precious exiguity
 Through cruel self-love
 So came I to this inch of wholeness.

Having gone “through” this exercise of committing the unspeakable (pain) to language, Riding found her way to one of her central poems, “Beyond.” No wonder she imagined making it the title poem of a projected book. It takes its theme, description, from *An Acquaintance with Description*, the Stein text that Riding had just laboriously printed. Not only the theme: Riding has transplanted Stein’s grammatical variations on the parts of speech of description—the infinitive verb (“to describe”), the gerund, (“of describing”), the participle (“describing”), the noun (“description”). Steinian, too, is the extreme repetition like rotation of a wheel, advancing by turning the same few words around and around: “pain,” “impossible,” “describing,” “beyond,” “mystery,” “not,” “but.” The poem does advance. It creates its own linguistic “beyond” out of impossibility: “Pain is impossible to describe.” In its unpunctuated *via negativa* (not, not, not, not), it presents a paradoxical reality in grammatical and rhythmical but not figurative terms, bringing the unspeakable “beyond” into the “here” of the printed page:

Beyond

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

Riding the extremist reached, in this poem, the supreme limit and achievement in her art. After 1940 she found no more poetic “beyond” in which to express herself. In August 1929 Riding told Stein that she was writing a prose piece called “Obsession” in which Stein played a part. It came out in *Experts Are Puzzled*, Riding’s collection of essays and fables

published by Jonathan Cape in autumn 1930, by which time Stein had nothing more to do with Riding.

A heterogeneous affair, *Experts* continues the assault on Eliot (unnamed) as the figurehead for the “expert” institution of literary criticism: “We seem to exist to correct, in proper order, the minute derangements caused in the legacy by our existence—,” a mini-paraphrase of “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” But most of the pieces carry on the rebellion not by literary critical argument but by performing counter-modes: fables, imaginary addresses, and the memoir of near suicide, “Obsession.” It’s an obstreperous book, often amusing: “The room happened to be full of Commas.” At moments it touches on megalomania, as in “Miss Banquett or the Populating of Cosmania,” where the heroine, a stand-in for the author, reenacts Genesis to create a whole new world in seven days in which her beauty can be admired. Even for 1930, the racism is rather startling as Miss Banquett says of “her black people” that they “represent the dark, thoughtless and peaceful side of my beauty.”

Gertrude Stein haunts the memoir “Obsession,” both in the disjointed prose style and as a major character. Is *she* the obsession? Since Riding associated Stein so intensely with her recovery from her fall, “Gertrude” is folded into the obsessive account, the mythologizing, of death and resurrection, though the main obsession is perhaps with the survival of the central persona, “Laura.” “No, I am not a mystic, I am Laura. What business? Laura. How can Laura be a business? How can she not? Complete obsession. Never before, now at last. Until now, delusion of completeness, unavowed delusion. Now, complete obsession, avowed completeness, now Laura. And what of Space? Gertrude. All-together Gertrude, separate Laura. Strong all-together Gertrude, separate strong Laura. Laura alone. Gertrude everyone” (and so forth). Throughout these pages, Riding wrestles with beings she has tried to absorb and with and against whom she needs to define herself: “Gertude,” “Robert” (Graves), the “Numquam” (Phibbs). Paramount, however, are “Gertrude” and “Robert.” Their presence guarantees the “I” of “Laura.”

* * *

Acts IV and V unfold briefly and sadly. For months, Riding and Graves had been expecting to visit Stein and Toklas at their country house in Belley in Southeastern France, near the Swiss border. Plans had been made for August. Stein had written to say that she'd seen the landlady of the house Riding and Graves were to rent. And then things suddenly went sour. As far as one can tell from the surviving correspondence, Riding sent a letter that must have massively offended Stein. She wrote in July from Mallorca in the Steinian run-on idiom she used for their communications, and she seems to have let her pen run away with her. She passed along a gossip criticism of Stein from Stein's friend the painter William Cook; she seemed to accuse Stein of making "generalizations" and quoted a proverb of Stein's about "a Jew not putting down his last cent"; she seemed to celebrate the end of the little magazine *transition*; and perhaps worst, she made a crack about Graves teasing her that people "might think [her] a Lesbian" because of her poem "Laura and Francisca" about a child in the village.

Stein's response came quickly, saying they had to put off their visit. In August, a letter from Riding went unanswered. Ditto a letter from Graves in October; ditto an anxious, longer letter from Riding in November. And into the silence, a final letter from Riding in late November registered the pain of excommunication: "All right I promise not to write again not even about the weather *certainly* not. Laura."

The last act occurs more than fifty years later, when Riding has had ample time to suffer and ruminate over her rejection by Stein and to mount a counterattack. In 1984 the editor of *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein* asked (Riding) Jackson whether he could reprint her early essay "The New Barbarism, and Gertrude Stein." (Riding) Jackson gave him, instead, a new essay in which she radically rewrote their history. "The Word-Play of Gertrude Stein" came out in 1986. (Riding) Jackson had spent decades trying to fix words to absolute "meanings," and Stein's radical inventiveness with sentences, once so inspiring, now appalled her. A few quotations will suffice. They read like an obituary for a once fruitful friendship. (Riding) Jackson's late prose style is so weighed down by multisyllabic abstractions

and so barricaded by prepositional phrases it's hard to believe it comes from the author of *The Close Chaplet* or *Love as Love, Death as Death*. "Consideration of the rationality of the use of a word has come to be viewed as a pedantic piety," she intones. She describes "the fanatically persistent efforts of Gertrude Stein to put words together so that, while meaning nothing collectively, they yet appear to amount to something." In one of the few lucid sentences, she writes, "Gertrude Stein constructed sentences that were, in internal make-up, not sentences." True enough: and that was what had opened new poetic avenues for the younger Laura Riding. As for any resemblance between their works: "My poetic work has been here and there in the past—and is even occasionally in the present—spoken of as having a likeness 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." In 1930, Stein ghosted Laura Riding. But up to that break, Stein's living ghost attended her, and Riding welcomed its whisperings.

If, back in 1929, Stein was "saving the sentence" while Riding was "busy on the word," Riding at that time still cared for grammar and wrote lively sentences. Years of fixation on words alone and on a theory of words needing fixed definitions seem to have extinguished her feel for the movement of language in prose or poetry. In 1970, in her preface to *Selected Poems: In Five Sets*, which she allowed Faber and Faber to publish in London, (Riding) Jackson wrote, "No poet before me has gone to the very breaking point. . . . I know no one besides myself and my husband Schuyler . . . who has put feet across the margin on the further ground—the margin being the knowledge that truth begins where poetry ends." That margin marked, perhaps, the edge of the "beyond" she fantasized in her poem of that title. Her poetry, at that time, had not reached "the breaking point," and it bore its own brave, valuable truth this side of the border. As it still does.

Notes

Quotes from Riding's, Stein's, and others' letters come from *A Description of Acquaintance: The Letters of Laura Riding and Gertrude Stein 1927–1930* (University of New Mexico Press, 2023), edited by Logan Esdale and Jane Malcolm; and from Elizabeth Friedmann's authorized biography, *A Mannered Grace: The Life of Laura (Riding) Jackson* (Persea, 2005). Quotes from Riding's poems and essays, unless otherwise noted, come from *The Poems of Laura Riding* (Persea, 1980), edited by Mark Jacobs and rereleased by Persea Books in 2001 in a newly revised centennial edition; and from *First Awakenings: The Early Selected Poems of Laura Riding* (Persea, 1992), edited by Elizabeth Friedmann, Alan J. Clark, and Robert Nye, with a preface by Laura (Riding) Jackson.

Ugly Duckling Presse has recently reprinted several notable works by Riding referenced in this essay, including *The Close Chaplet* (2020, ed. Mark Jacobs) in an edition that includes the 1925 essay "A Prophecy or a Plea"; and *Experts Are Puzzled* (2018, ed. George Fragopoulos and introduced by Mark Jacobs and George Fragopoulos); the University of Alabama Press reprinted *Contemporaries and Snobs* in 2014, edited by Laura Heffernan and Jane Malcolm; the University of Virginia Press posthumously published Laura (Riding) Jackson and Schuyler B. Jackson's *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words and Supplementary Essays* in 1997, edited by William Harmon and introduced by Charles Bernstein.