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MINDSCAPES: LAURA RIDING'S POETRY AND POETICS

por

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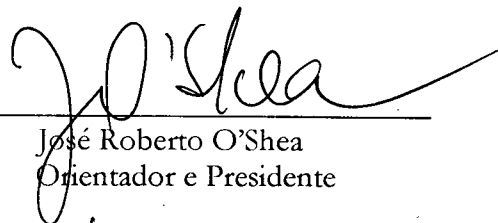
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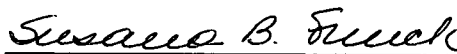
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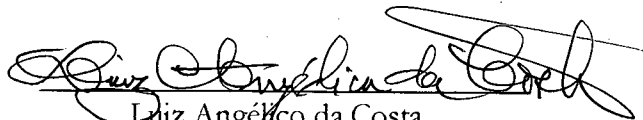
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In the memory of Laura (Riding) Jackson (1901-1991)

To my parents, Antonio Ubirajara Lopes and Maria do Carmo Garcia Lopes

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis proposes a revisionist reading of contemporary poetry by examining the case of one of the most forgotten American writers of the twentieth century: Laura (Riding) Jackson (1901-1991). The goal is to demonstrate that Riding not only had a definite and unique poetics, but that hers stands as one of the most extreme and paradoxical stances in Anglo-American modernism, to the point of abandoning the writing of poetry in 1938. Drawing on the concept of "canon formation" as well as the Foucaultian concepts of "discourse" and "author-function," I investigate the construction of the modern Anglo-American poetic canon, recovering the context and the circumstances of Riding's "disappearance." While I cover the "discourses" on poetry circulating in the first half of the twentieth century—Pound's ("imagism"), Eliot's ("dissociation of sensibility," "impersonality," and "tradition"), and the New Critics' ("organic unity," "ambiguity")—I offer a critical overview of alternative modernisms being articulated at the time. My intention is to demonstrate that Riding's poems are telling expressions of a writer to whom "the mind thinking becomes the active force of the poem," to use Charles Bernstein's apt formulation. Among my findings is that the reasons for Riding's non-canonization are many and complex: the hegemony of New

Criticism, her voluntary exile from the literary scene (where reputations are made or thwarted), her refusal to be anthologized and to be explained in critical terms other than her own. All these factors, together with the “difficulty” of her poetry, contributed to make of Riding “the greatest lost poet of American poetry,” as wrote Kenneth Rexroth. Helped by the insights of two important critics of American poetry, Charles Bernstein and Marjorie Perloff, I defend that Riding’s “poetry of mind”—where what is at stake is that which we think to be our reality—represents a radical shift in modernist poetics from an image-centered to a language-centered poetry. Focusing on the conscious experience and the durational time of thought present in her poems, I conclude that Riding’s mindscapes have the precise goal of identifying a universal fact: as human and thinking beings, we are in a permanent condition called language.

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RESUMO

Esta tese propõe uma leitura revisionista da poesia contemporânea através do exame do caso de um dos mais esquecidos escritores norte-americanos do século XX: Laura (Riding) Jackson (1901-1991). O objetivo é demonstrar que Riding não apenas possuía uma poética definida e singular, mas que ela permanece uma das instâncias mais extremas e paradoxais do modernismo anglo-americano, a ponto de Riding abandonar a escrita da poesia em 1938. Recorrendo a conceitos de “formação do cânone” bem como às noções de “discurso” e “função do autor”, em Foucault, investigo a construção do cânone da poesia moderna anglo-americana, recuperando o contexto e as circunstâncias da ocultação de Riding. Enquanto cubro os “discursos” poéticos em circulação na primeira metade do século XX—o “imagismo” de Pound, a “dissociação da sensibilidade”, “impersonalidade” e “tradição” de Eliot, a “unidade orgânica” e “ambigüidade” da Nova Crítica—ofereço um panorama crítico de modernismos alternativos sendo articulados à época. Minha intenção é demonstrar que os poemas de Riding são expressões vigorosas de um escritor para quem “a mente pensando se torna a força ativa do poema”, para usar a apta formulação de Charles Bernstein. Entre minhas descobertas sobre as várias e complexas razões que levaram à não-canonização de Riding estão a hegemonia da Nova Crítica, o exílio voluntário de Riding da cena literária (onde são feitas ou desfeitas as reputações), sua recusa em ser antologada, bem como em ser explicada em termos críticos que não os dela. Todos esses fatores, mais a “dificuldade” de sua poesia, contribuíram para fazer de Riding “a maior poeta esquecida da poesia norte-americana”, como escreveu Kenneth Rexroth. Ajudado pelos insights de dois importantes críticos de poesia norte-americana, Charles Bernstein e Marjorie Perloff, defendo que a “poesia da mente” de Riding—onde o que está

em jogo é que o que pensamos ser a nossa realidade—representa uma mudança radical no paradigma da poética modernista: de uma poesia centrada na imagem para uma poesia centrada na linguagem. Focalizando a experiência consciente e o tempo duracional do pensamento presente em seus poemas, concluo que as “pensagens” de Riding têm o objetivo preciso de constatar um fato universal: enquanto seres humanos e pensantes, estamos numa condição permanente chamada linguagem.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: TOPICS FOR A READING OF LAURA RIDING

A Foucaultian Viewpoint

It is not enough, however, to repeat the empty affirmation that the author has disappeared. For the same reason, it is not enough to keep repeating (after Nietzsche) that God and man have died a common death. Instead, we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers.

*(Foucault Reader 121)*¹

What is a poem? A poem is nothing. By persistence the poem can be made into something; but then it is something, not a poem.[...] Whenever this vacuum, the poem, occurs, there is agitation on all sides to destroy it, to convert it into something. The conversion of nothing into something is the task of criticism.

*(Anarchism 18)*²

The main objective of this study is to account for the relative disappearance of Laura Riding from institutional and canonical versions of Anglo-American poetry as well as from the received history of modern Anglo-American literary criticism. Secondly, to fill this gap in literary history through a recovery of Riding's radical and polemic poetry and poetics, in order to assert her importance as one of the pioneers of modernist poetry and criticism.

¹ Michel Foucault in the essay "What is an Author."

In this introduction I want to foreground the importance of seeing the development of modernist American poetry and criticism in Riding's time, as well as the process of canon-formation, from a Foucaultian viewpoint: this means to stress the notion that "criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying" (*Foucault Reader* 44). This entails also, in terms of the present research, that in order to explain the reasons for Riding's erasure from the official literary history of American poetry, or the common reduction of her work as a footnote to modernism, it is necessary to account for the powerful discourses that were being constructed in the literary, academic, and institutional realm of her time, as well as her critical position regarding such discourses and time.

Discourses, for Michel Foucault, are ideological and institutional practices that attain hegemonic power during a specific historical period. Discursive practices "are characterized by the delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories" (*Language* 199). Therefore, my methodology in this study implies focusing on discourses on poetry that became dominant in Anglo-American modernism. The specific discursive formation emphasized in this contextualization of Laura Riding's appearance and disappearance from the canon of Anglo-American poetry is the criticism of T. S. Eliot and the beliefs, values, principles, and rules generated by the New Criticism. Discourse, again, as understood by Foucault, refers neither to the logic of the chain of reason, as in logic, nor to the sequence of phrases of the linguists. It takes on a more ample and problematic signification. Contemporary medical discourses, for instance, are constituted by different formations such as qualitative

² Laura Riding in "What is a Poem."

descriptions etc (“What is an Author” 82). Contemporary literary discourses, such as the ones produced by Eliot and the New Critics, are also constituted by formations and concepts such as irony, ambiguity, objective correlative, dissociation of sensibility, unity, aesthetic autonomy, organic form, tension, and intentional fallacy, as well as practices such as close reading.

Like other institutions, literature (and specifically poetry) is assumed in this study not just as the art of language, pure and simple, but as unavoidably linked to certain forms of discourses that attain hegemonic position at certain historical periods. Through history, poetry has taken on many roles, from the shamanic and religious, to nationalist, political and even racist and sexist ones. In the nineteenth century, as in Romanticism and later in Aestheticism, poetry began to be defended as being an autonomous discourse, a structure of knowledge in itself distinct and superior from science, philosophy, politics, or history. Its universalistic claims, as we will see, turned out to displace the importance of gender, race, class, and politics from the literary debate. However, we can not forget, as Terry Eagleton reminds us, that “Literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, *is* an ideology. It has the most intimate relations to questions of social power” (*Literary Theory* 22).

In the specific case of modern Anglo-American poetry, critics and poets such as I. A. Richards, William Empson, T. S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and the New Critics were deeply influenced by Matthew Arnold’s assumption that poetry should function as a substitute for religion and morality. As shown by Eagleton, in the case of the advent of English studies in the beginning of the twentieth century, literature was systematically used to reinforce aesthetical values and class ideologies (Ibid. 17). What is important to bear in mind is that literature not only produces artistic effects and responses, “masterpieces” and “failures,” but also epistemes: the operation of certain ways of thinking, writing, and evaluating; structures of power/knowledge which hold regulating visions on the nature of history, reality, and

literature as being the sole truth, thus imposing standards of behavior and judgement.

Therefore, in order to contextualize the complex phenomenon called modernism, more important than tracing the influences of an author upon another is the investigation of the concepts, approaches, and theories underlying said phenomenon. And, as the New Criticism became the hegemonic discursive formation during Riding's career as a poet-critic and afterwards, I find unavoidable the need to deal with such a power-knowledge and the discourse on poetry it helped to foster. On the other hand, Riding's renouncing of poetry has been more discussed than her poems themselves, and not sufficiently from the viewpoint articulated in her poems. As she puts it, at 85, "To be critic in relation to poetry at the point of renouncing it, obeying your consciousness, makes of you, in quarters where poets have hierarchic power, someone to keep as quiet as possible" ("What, if Not, Poems" 15).

As suggested by Foucault's quotation in the first epigraph to this chapter and in my argumentative line, the concern in this study on modernist poetics is not only with tracing the signifying aspects of language in specific poems (meanings unfolded by a close reading, for instance), but also with recognizing poetry's particularities as a form of discourse. This implies focusing on the relationship between poetic language and its uses vis-à-vis "the institutional rules that make possible particular significations and, consequently, make possible particular forms of knowledge" (Con Davis 262).

The New Criticism created a body of knowledge that dominated American literary studies by setting up the rules as to how poetry should be read and written within and outside the academy, with notions, such as aesthetic unity, balance, organic form, irony, paradox, and metaphorical complexity, functioning as a set of laws for poetic discourse, or a discursive formation. In this process, as Philip Goldstein observes, the New Critics and, specifically, Brooks's approach "enabled literary criticism to become a distinct discipline with an equally

distinct subject matter—the canon” (40). The main instrument of this powerful discourse, which would dominate Anglo-American universities for more than forty years, was the pedagogical method of close reading. Ironically, Laura Riding was in great part marginalized by critics who were most privileged by the method she helped to foster. Moreover, she was taken outside the canon of modernist poetry she helped to create and criticize.

The Problem of the Canon

The word *canon* has several meanings according to the dictionary. It means “a list of the books of the Holy Scriptures officially accepted by a church as genuine,” “a standard used in judging something, a criterion” (*Webster’s* 265). But it also refers to a composition that repeats the same melody (such as in a Bach’s fugue). As an authoritative list, it means a selection of authors considered great, those who have passed the test of time and whose sanctity and author-ity are indisputable. In the second sense, it means the set of values (aesthetic, moral, political) responsible for the inclusion or exclusion of authors. In the next dictionary meaning, a canon implies a selected library of the books that are assigned greatness by ideological apparatuses (a range of institutional sites and practices such as the universities, state cultural institutions, publishing, reviewing, or literary awards): “*Canon* has been adapted to literary criticism to designate those works and authors whom the literary establishment, through a loose consensus, considers ‘major’” (*Columbia Dictionary* 37). To be accepted in the canon, therefore, means that a given work or author will be taught, read, studied, valued, and respected.

These simultaneous meanings of the word *canon* are indicative of the ideological complexity of the term. It must be thought of as a cultural practice, either taken by a group, a

critic or an institution that possesses clear political and esthetical agendas, although not always recognizing so. Therefore, a literary canon is never only an innocent list “of the best.” As in the biblical tradition, the canonization of a text or an author functions, above all, as a category of power. To canonize a text or an author means allowing it permission to enter the codices of “sacred” works. One of the strongest beliefs in canon-formation is that the included texts are embedded in trans-historical values. The usual humanistic assumption that underlies the practice of canon-formation is that authors included in the canon speak for the “human being.” Thus, great literature is taken as the receptacle of fixed and permanent universal meanings that enable us to understand the whole truth of human nature and of poetic practice.

When the discussion is the poetry and criticism generated in the first half of the twentieth century, specifically within the context of Anglo-American High Modernism, the names usually considered central and canonical by the literary establishment are those of William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens, with the essays and books of I. A. Richards, Cleanth Brooks, William Empson and T. S. Eliot recognized as the major critical statements. Their power can be measured (yet another meaning for canon is of a ruler) by the space destined to these names in most standard anthologies.³

Certainly, at least in the United States, the canon manifests itself through basic ideological state apparatuses: not only the university but also by what Charles Bernstein has insightfully called “the official verse culture.”⁴ One of the most common and aggressive ways a

³ For an excellent historical overview of the selective canons in the U.S., see Alan Golding’s “A History of American Poetry Anthologies” (*Canons* 279-307).

⁴ “I am referring,” writes Bernstein, “to the poetry publishing and reviewing practices of *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *American Poetry Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry* (Chicago), *Antaeus*, *Parnassus*, Atheneum Press, all the major trade publishers, the poetry series of almost all the major university presses. [...] Add to this the ideologically motivated selection of the vast majority of poets teaching in university writing and literature programs and of poets taught in such programs as

canon perpetuates and institutionalizes itself is through anthologies. They are still the best barometer for noticing the political and poetic criteria orienting the “official verse culture” as regards principles of inclusion and exclusion. We can see how such principles operate, for instance, by looking at the most official anthologies in the U. S., *The Norton Anthology of American Poetry* and *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*—the quintessential examples of what a canon looks like. As Ron Silliman aptly puts in his essay “Canons and Institutions: New Hope for the Disappeared,” “the distinction between individual subjective canon of a specific reader and the social organization of public canons, such as we find in the Norton anthologies and college curricula, lies precisely in the factor of power. Public canons disempower readers and disappear poets. They are conscious acts of violence” (*Politics* 153).

In the earlier decades of the century, women modernists such as Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, and Laura Riding pointed to the fact that, looking at the canon of Western literature, one perceives that it is composed in its vast majority by male white European middle and upper-middle class representatives. In the construction of the literary tradition undertaken by Eliot and, more recently, Harold Bloom, canon-formation occurs between male poets confronting their “anxiety” by struggling to overcome the precursor’s influence.

The canon is attacked by Laura Riding in the “The Corpus.” In this essay she debunks Eliot’s idea of tradition:

The social corpus is tyrannically founded on the principle of origin. It admits nothing new: all is revision, memory, conformation. The individual cosmos must submit itself to the generalized cosmos of history, it must become part of its growing encyclopedia of

well as the interlocking accreditation of these selections through prizes and awards judged by these same individuals. [...] What makes official verse culture official is that it denies the ideological nature of its practice while maintaining hegemony in terms of major media exposure and academic legitimization

authorities. [...] The Corpus, in making categorical demands upon the individual, thus limits the ways in which works may be conceived and presented. (*Anarchism* 28)

Written in 1928, the piece is clearly a response to the criticism of Eliot, “the chief modern apologist for a hereditary canon of Western literary classics” (Asher 1). Riding was advancing questions that would be retaken during the 1960s by feminist criticism: What are the women in the literary game, beyond the roles as muses, victims or *femmes fatales*? Who decides the inclusion and exclusion and for what purposes? One problem that feminist criticism has been struggling with in the latest thirty years is the necessity of perceiving the limitations, the political and aesthetic implications of the literary canon. The pressing question becomes: To what extent is the exclusion from the canon not based on gender, race, ethnicity, and class prejudices? Excluding works by women from the canon serves to contribute to the oppression of other marginal groups as Other: that is, as not belonging to “the Corpus,” which is founded on heteronormative criteria and, according to Riding, on a principle of group-identity.

In fact, we can better see Laura Riding in the context of modernism when we remember that—living in England as an American writer connected with Robert Graves—she made the terrible “mistake” of being a woman poet with tremendous intelligence and originality of thought. She was not writing the kind of poetry that a woman was expected to write, and she was doing it profusely: since her arrival in England and before the departure to Majorca (1926-1930), Riding produced six books of poetry, two collection of critical essays (*Anarchism Is Not Enough* and *Contemporaries and Snobs*), as well as two books of criticism written with Graves (one being nothing less than a survey of modernist poetry and the other an attack on anthologies!). However, she was not welcomed in the English literary scene. The reception of her work was severe, as the innumerable negative reviews published at that time demonstrate. The more

and funding” (*Content's* 248).

damaging attack came in the pages of *The Criterion*—the magazine edited by her arch-rival Eliot—where John Gould Fletcher (associated with Pound and himself an imagist poet) ridiculed and reduced Riding's poetry by claiming that she was an imitator of Marianne Moore, Graves, and Gertrude Stein. Riding's poetry was frequently considered cold, cerebral, difficult, dreary, and futile. As Jed Rasula rightly posits, "In a poetic atmosphere sobered by T. S. Eliot's august presence and pronouncements, Riding's early work was almost certain to appear as an affront to the self-proclaimed dignity poetry had arrived at. She sprang, like Athena, fully armed" ("A Renaissance" 167).

In the patriarchal and traditionalist canon promoted by Eliot and the New Critics, which dominated English and American poetry until the beginning of the 1960s, there was no room for Laura Riding. Strictly speaking, maybe there was such a place but only for a short period of time, from 1922 to 1925, when the *Fugitives* published and praised her poetry in their magazine *Fugitive*. What has to be investigated, thus, is how a poet-critic so fundamental for modernist poetry and criticism, a poet who was acclaimed by some important poets in the 1920s and 1930s, could be dismissed from the canon imposed by this form of discourse. Literary accounts of modernism frequently forget that women were not at all "marginal" to it, but at the center: they were editors (Nancy Cunard, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Beach), and were at the head of key private presses and alternative magazines such as *Poetry*, *The Dial*, and *The Little Review*. They were writing futurist and feminist poetry as well as manifestoes and innovative and ground-breaking works (Riding, H. D., Stein, Loy).

Against the relatively homogenous modernist tradition designed by the New Critics, I want to stress the diversity and conflicting aspects of modernist poetry, in which Riding had a fundamental role as an independent poet, critic, editor, and thinker of poetry. It is important to bear in mind that, when addressing the diversity of American poetry, it is more appropriate to

take “diversity” in its etymological root: not to imply a bland variety, as it is more frequently understood, but in the sense that the *Oxford English Dictionary* brings us: as signifying difference, oddity, contrariety, disagreement, wickedness. Thus, to locate the period in which a specific object appears and its competing discourses—in this case, Laura Riding’s poetry and poetics—becomes a fundamental task. The same applies to the exploration of “the space left empty by the author’s disappearance,” as Foucault suggests, for my purpose here, the usual disappearance of Laura Riding from canonical accounts of contemporary theory and poetry. Not mentioning the quality of her innovative poetry, only her achievements in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927)—discussed more extensively in chapters 2 and 3—as well as the definitive impact the book had on critics such as William Empson and Cleanth Brooks, would be enough to replace her position among the founders of Anglo-American modern criticism. However, the vocabulary used by poets and critics to define her is surprising: “Blue Butter Balls” (Louise Bogan), “the witch of truth” (Marjorie Perloff), “prize bitch” (William Carlos Williams), “anomaly” (Cary Nelson), and “eccentric” (Helen Vendler). The peculiarity of her work is also evident in the difficulty critics have in placing her in the context of contemporary poetry: “neo-Metaphysical poetry” (Sona Raziss), “New Critical poet” (David Perkins), “philosophical poet” (W. H. Auden), “proto-feminist” (K. K. Ruthven), “a modernist puzzle” (Victor M. Cassady), and even “proto-Language poet” (Jerome McGann).

Contrary to Riding’s belief, expressed in the second epigraph to this chapter, one should say that, even if one can Platonically think of poetry as a vacuum, a poem does *not* exist in a vacuum,⁵ for this would mean to erase its existence from human transaction. More than a specific form of human utterance, a poem is always the product of the discursive formations of the historical place and country in which it flourishes. Thus, it becomes necessary, in my

⁵ “A poem [...] is not an effect (common or uncommon) of experience; it is the ability to create a

methodology, not only to situate Riding within Anglo-American modernism but also to consider “the politics of literary forms” of the period. This implies paying attention to how poetic forms inform specific ideologies and ways of thinking (Bernstein, *Politics* vii). The problem is that “both the formalist and new critical maps,” as Bernstein writes, “tend to treat stylistic developments as a series of autonomous technical ‘advances’ within an art medium and without recourse to sociohistorical ‘explanation’: a canonical strategy that underwrites the teaching of literature in most university settings” (Ibid. 237).

The New Criticism and its use of Eliot’s author-function created a hegemonic modernist episteme, or an assembly of principles, laws, and concepts that became canonized. Another more common result of the hegemony of the New Critical method, as Eagleton explains, was that “[r]escuing the text from author and reader went in hand with disentangling it from any social and historical context” (*Literary Theory* 48).⁶

In “Tradition and Individual Talent,” a key essay for Anglo-American modernism, notoriously, Eliot defends how each poem and poet had to be set up within the whole range of the (male) European tradition of poetry, from Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare to Yeats. According to Eliot, a poem is valuable if it is in agreement with this tradition—that is, with a specific discourse on poetry—and in how the poem and the poet respond to it. By this time, we have at least a sense of how, paradoxically, the author became a function of the New

vacuum in experience—it is a vacuum and therefore nothing” (*Anarchism* 17).

⁶ The poet, anthologist, translator and critic Jerome Rothenberg sums up, in the Preface to *Revolution of The Word*, the poetry scene in America’s “tranquilized fifties” for the young poets: “To us the news hadn’t yet filtered that the age of the modern, the experimental & visionary (for we sensed it even as wisdom), had passed: to be replaced by a return to the old forms, to conventional metrics, diction, a responsible modernism, liberal & reformist, rational & refined, & goodbye to the madmen of language. Those were the first lessons of college days. They called it Auden or Lowell, Tate or Wilbur. Middle-ground, like the politics then emerging. It became a question of amelioration. A shift of stance. A little toughening of Tennyson. Change the topic, the conversation. Change the footnotes. Kierkegaard instead of Darwin. Church instead of Nature. But the body of the poem must be untouched. The images must be inherited & the inheritance must be along the line of what was called the ‘great tradition.’ Western. Christian. White.” (xi)

Criticism's discourse. What function? As Foucault states in his essay

[A]n author's name is not simply an element in a discourse (capable of being either subject or object, of being replaced by a pronoun, and the like); it performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a *classificatory* function. Such a name permits *one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others*. In addition, it establishes a relationship among the texts. (*Foucault Reader* 107, my emphasis)

It becomes clear now how Foucault's definition can be instrumental in analyzing the role Eliot and the New Criticism had in the discursive formation of the contemporary literary criticism and poetics. The definition also sheds light on Laura Riding's place in this context, since her discourse on poetry is in some ways at the basis of New Criticism, as we shall see. For better or worse, the relationship between the author's function and the institutional practice of criticism, with its construction of a canon of indisputable authors, was a reciprocal one: Eliot was operational not only as the poet of *The Waste Land*, but on the discursive formation of New Criticism itself, having the immediate effect of the reshaping of the whole Anglo-American canon. As J. L. Austin has described, Eliot's role as poet and critic was "the most ambitious feat of cultural imperialism the century seems likely to produce (qtd. in Eagleton 38). New Criticism, in turn, used the poetry of Eliot to reinforce its values, reshaped the English canon by the reintroduction of the Metaphysical poets, but also privileged a group of modern poets that was used to define and justify its critical formulations. Discourse and practice, thus, lived, as it were, in symbiotic relationship in Eliotian and New Critical literary ideology. Thus, crucial questions arise: Why certain authors are "in" and other authors "out" with respect to the received accounts of modernism? Which is to say, more directly perhaps, how and for whose interests does the canon function? Why is it that autonomy, balance,

difficulty, closure, and unity were the privileged terms in the critical discourse on poetry, rather than interaction, disruption, simplicity, openness, and fragmentation?

Riding's case is fascinating in such a context also because one may say that she was partially responsible for her own "decanonization" from Anglo-American poetry: first, by stopping writing poetry after 1939 and vanishing from the literary scene; second, by attacking critics who failed to approach her poems according to her view; third, by forbidding the republication of her poems if editors did not include a statement in which she explained the reasons for her decision. Moreover, it is interesting to note, in this context, the construction (or deconstruction) of her authorial identity, which can be exemplified by the several changes her name took along her career: Laura Reichental Gottschalk, the young wife of a history professor, Laura Riding Gottschalk, the poet who was eulogized in 1924 by the Fugitives as the revelation of American poetry; Laura Riding, the independent poet, thinker, editor, and critic of modernist poetry who invented her own surname; and Laura (Riding) Jackson, the writer who rejected poetry at the height of her career, on the grounds that poetry was an inadequate medium to achieve what she considered to be the truth-properties of language. Therefore, in this study, I will be using respectively the names Laura Riding and Laura (Riding) Jackson to refer to her authorial positionings before and after her renouncing of poetry.

Open Reading

In this introductory chapter I will attempt to apply what Foucault defines as archeology within the historical frame and identify several discourses produced on modernism in the first half of the twentieth century. I will focus on the great institutional influence of Eliot's poetics and New Critical formulations on the academy, criticism, and anthologies of the period. This

link between power and knowledge, Foucault claimed, characterizes the disciplinary aspect of all modern political (and, in our case, poetical and literary) organizations. Archeology then, becomes “a task that consists of not—of no longer—treating discourses as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that *systematically form the objects of which they speak*” (*Archeology* 137, emphasis mine). What becomes necessary for the revisionist critic who wants to contextualize the period when this discourse on poetry achieved its hegemony is to trace the functioning of these discourses within that same historical period. As Bernstein has pointed out, when speaking on the necessity of describing the politics of poetic forms, “it is essential to trace how some uses of convention and authority can hide the fact that both are historical constructions rather than sovereign principles” (*Politics* 239). This methodology also allows us to see the Anglo-American canon produced in the first half of the century as a discursive formation in itself, and close reading as a major instrument of it, since it became the main form of evaluation.

Contrariwise to the New Critical belief, a political reading of poetic forms asserts that the meaning of a text—if there is such a thing as an unitary meaning—is not to be found exclusively in the “well-wrought urn”⁷ of the poem itself, but can be enriched if understood in its historical and cultural context. No act of reading a tradition or a poem is apolitical, ahistorical, and genderless as the New Criticism claimed. Influenced by Foucault’s thought, New Historicism surmises that in the act of evaluating literature it is crucial to understand the ideology of the author, the historical time it was produced, as well as any other cultural element exhibited in the text. A fully historical and discursive account of such a turbulent period,

⁷ Paul Lauter points out that the titles of critical landmarks of the period of height of New Criticism are indicative of their discourse. In the bible of New Criticism, Cleanth Brooks’s *The Well-Wrought Urn*, its title is self-explicative of its discourse: the poem as an urn (an artistic static object rather than a tool, a product, or a process), well-wrought (craftily executed, well done), and metaphysical (since it directly refers to John Donne’s poem “The Canonization” analyzed by Brooks) (*Canon and Contexts* 37).

following Foucault, can only be valid if we are able to see the interconnections, the links among the simultaneous discourses (or poetics) of the period.

The need to control and regulate interpretation—as exemplified in the large institutionalization and systematization of the method of close reading—transformed interpretation in a form of power/knowledge in itself. As pointed out by Eagleton, “it encouraged the illusion that any piece of language, ‘literary or not,’ can be adequately studied or even understood in isolation. It was the beginning of a ‘reification’ of the literary work, the treatment of it as an object in itself” (44). Logocentric discourse, on the other hand, is disseminated in the discourse of modernism: we have only to remember the persistence of Kantian and Coleridgean concepts such as “autonomy,” “organicism,” as well as the Romantic stress on the imagination, to see how much modernism is embedded in a “metaphysics of presence” (with notions such as “self” and poetry as “an overflow of powerful feelings,” according to Wordsworth). As we shall see, the New Criticism established as canonical the idea of the poem as autoregulative, self-reflexive, with the oppositions “closed” after interpretation, in perfect unity. The poem was taken as a powerful and authoritarian stance in itself that supposedly possessed universal value.

Discourse and power/knowledge, thus, become operative terms of analysis of the context of modernism. In order to carry out a cultural critique of institutions (with its mechanisms of control and regulation, norm-fixations, its power of imposing questions on the nature of reality, canon-formation, and poetry), the methodology will elicit the discussion of some competing discourses existing in modernism. Power here is taken as a relational, never merely institutional, term. As described by Foucault, it takes not necessarily the form of violent imposition, but is dispersed through mechanisms of control and conduct that are subtle and never explicitly ideological in the political sense. Among the more immediate effects of such

normalization of discourse—as it occurs in canon-formation—is the exclusion of what is considered other, deviant, eccentric, abnormal, dissociated.

A broader and more practical response to the question of the main features of modernist poetry, as understood in this methodology, is presented in Jerome Rothenberg's and Pierre Joris's recent, internationalist, and experimental anthology of modernist and postmodern poetries. In the two volumes of *Poems for the Millennium*, which gathers 360 poets from all over the world and covers one hundred years of poetical production, the editors pass in review a "tradition of the new" in which appear names such as Rainer Maria Rilke, Fernando Pessoa, Laura Riding, Federico Garcia Lorca, Paul Celan, Mina Loy, the Russian Futurists, European avant-garde movements such as Dada, Surrealism, as well as the poets of the Caribbean Negritude. In their anthology, as one would expect, they stress modernism as an international phenomenon, indicating a major shift that took place not only in the way poets and artists thought about their art but also in the world we live in: "What began to take shape, then, was the idea of poetry as an instrument of change—a change that would take place foremost in the poem itself, as a question of language and structure as well as of a related, all-connecting vision" (2).

Rothenberg and Joris identify eight main emphasis or impulses in the description of modernism and its avant-garde movements that will be workable in this study, and it is highly important to sum them up in order to relate to Laura Riding's poetry and poetics, with the purpose of situating her work within a broader context of modernism. The procedure will serve, in Chapter 3, to see Riding's allegiances or opposing artistic attitudes regarding these same modernist impulses. I will summarize what Rothenberg and Joris identify as modernism's constitutive features:

- 1) Experiences with "new forms of language, consciousness, and social/biological

relationships,” followed by an attempt to revise the human past.

2) Interdisciplinarity: poetry intersects with painting, sculpture, cinema, music, drama, and philosophy.

3) The discovery of the unconscious or alternative forms of conscious states as a possibility for language experimentation, with language itself becoming an instrument of vision and change.

4) A retaking of the idea of poetry as performance, as ritual, with the appearance of radical forms of sound poetry and “textsound works” (2).

5) A radical investigation of meaning and language and its visual, aural, material, and typographical features, as well as “explorations of new languages and those sublanguages (dialects, pidgins, etc.) that had long been at the fringes of accepted literature”(3).

6) The discovery and reinterpretation of ancestral traditions of poetry (ethnopoetics) in which the poet as a shaman appears not as a model to be seized, but as the configuration of the intensities of language through language.

7) The liaisons between politics and modernism, with poets commonly organizing poetical/political movements.

8) Poetry as a free play of language, as a passionate exploration of poetical and meaning possibilities.

Modern/Modernism/Avant-Garde

The *Oxford English Dictionary* points to the fifteenth century as the time when the word *modern* gained some social currency in the Western world. It derived from the Latin *modernus*, coined from *modo* (meaning “just now”). *Hodiernus*, in a similar manner, derives from *hodie*

("today"). Etymologically, the word points to the appearance, in the human realm, of a paradigmatic cultural shift, with the advent of "a new consciousness of time, imbued with a sense of acceleration and discontinuity" (Giles 178). Or, as Jürgen Habermas reminds us, as a term "to distinguish the present, which had become officially Christian, from the Roman and pagan past" ("Modernity" 3). To be modern means to exist in a different and transitional phase, with a heightened sense of living in an "unrepeatable time" (Calinescu 3).

In tracing the changes in the idea of modernity throughout history, Matei Calinescu distinguishes two conflicting notions emerging in the second half of the nineteenth century: "modernity as a stage in the history of Western civilization—a product of science and technological progress, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by capitalism—and modernity as an aesthetic concept" (41). The first is a bourgeois notion of modernity, with its belief in progress, scientific and technological advances, as well as with the concern with time, the cult of reason, and "the idea of freedom defined within the framework of an abstract humanism, but also the orientation toward pragmatism and the cult of action and success." The second, still according to Calinescu,

the one that was to ring into being the avant-gardes, was from its romantic beginnings inclined toward radical antibourgeois attitudes. It was disgusted with the middle-class scale of values and expressed its disgust through the most diverse means, ranging from rebellion, anarchy, and apocalypticism to aristocratic self-exile. So, more than its positive aspirations (which often have very little in common), what defines cultural modernity is its outright rejection of bourgeois modernity, its consuming negative passion. (42)

In Calinescu's account of modernity, it was in the middle of the nineteenth century, in France, that the idea of modernity came to be applied to the split referred to above and became an aesthetic concept: modernism as a necessity created in cultural response to the new conditions

and experiences presented by modernity. As Calinescu posits, “Aesthetic modernity should be understood as a crisis concept involved in a threefold dialectical opposition to tradition, to the modernity of a bourgeois civilization (with ideas of rationality, utility, progress), and finally, to itself, insofar as it perceives as a new tradition or form of authority” (10). The validity of Calinescu’s definition is that it keeps us aware of modernity as both a cultural and an aesthetic concept.

The Kantian notion of art’s autonomy and its purposiveness without a purpose, formulated in *Critique of Judgement* (1790), invades modernity as early as 1835 in its radicalization presented by Theophile Gautier’s formulation of *l’art pour l’art*: to claim the uselessness of the artistic object was a response to the increasingly capitalist and utilitarian spirit of the times. Aestheticism—an attitude that promotes beauty as an end in itself—was a reaction to the massification and vulgarization of art. Modernism became attached, in the artistic sphere, to an attitude of resistance to the increasing commodification of cultural objects: as a cultural response.

But how was the time to which the modernists were responding? “Our time,” or, as it is more commonly understood, the twentieth century—this great “Age of Extremes,” as Eric Hobsbawm has called it in his seminal book—is one marked by contradictions. If, on the one hand, the Enlightenment project, progressive and rational, would point to an unending industrialism, scientific advances, and urbanization, it also produced a crisis provoked by two of the most inhuman wars of all times, occurring in a short span of time. Virginia Woolf’s famous claim—“human nature changed around 1910”—assumed a cruel and astonishing reality in 1918. The period from 1918-45 would live through the rise of fascism, Hitler’s power in Germany, and two global conflicts, while the rise of Soviet Communism and its unfolding in other parts of the world represented alternatives to bourgeois and capitalist societies. The age

was also profoundly impacted by the years of world economic depression provoked by the Crash of 1929, in New York City. It was also “the greatest period of mass migration in recorded history” (Hobsbawn 88). It is the time of the Jewish Holocaust, ending significantly with the atom bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

With all this complex landscape in mind, events and facts explain why, in the cultural realm, a common word to describe modernity’s *Zeitgeist* was *chaos*. The breakdown of old conceptions of the world and the creation of new ones (Freud’s unconscious, Einstein’s theory of relativity, scientific and technological advances in all fields of knowledge) was to cause a radical effect in culture as a whole. Old certainties vanished, and art should react and explore this new condition. Under the pressure of time and change, poetry would be deeply affected by this *Zeitgeist*:

The defining characteristic of Modernism was its insistence in that the mind be subjected to this wholly new kind of stress. Poetry became an ‘intolerable wrestle with words and meanings,’ a hauling and straining, a racking of the mind’s power of comprehension. Older and traditional definitions of poetry—the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling, the best words in the best order—were impatiently dismissed. Obsessive attempts to say ‘the unsayable’ made extreme demands on the mind’s elasticity. Not only literature but all art of the period seemed to be intent on stretching the mind beyond the very limits of human understanding. (Bradbury and MacFarlane 72)

As an aesthetic and cultural category, modernism can be summed up by the word *change*. Many artists felt that the old instruments and forms allowed by tradition were not enough to capture the world and its dramatic changes. A new mind, therefore, demanded new poetic forms. Accordingly, in the realm of poetry, a characteristic move from the side of the more

experimental modernism⁸ has involved, as Rothenberg posits in *Revolution of The Word*, “a range of procedures that bring out the opaque materiality of language as a medium, as against a ‘romantic’ view of language as purely a transparent window toward an ideal reality beyond itself” (9). In the present study, *modern* will be used in the more neutral chronological sense, indicating key social and historical changes, in closer connection with the term *contemporary* (the sense of pertaining to our time). *Modernist*, on the other hand, will be used specifically, as a concept, in reference to those works and writers who consciously questioned and disrupted (or attempted to disrupt) classical, Romantic, Victorian, and conventional values. The same can be said in the case of, for instance, French Symbolism (with the poetics of Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, and Stéphane Mallarmé). Early modernist poetic values were also being articulated in Great Britain (with Hopkins’s “inscapes”) and in America with the experiences of Walt Whitman (who called his *Leaves of Grass* a “language experiment”), Edgar Allan Poe, and Emily Dickinson. We cannot forget that the appearance of the term to designate a poetic movement originated in the Latin American *fin-de-siècle*, with Ruben Dario’s formulation of *modernismo* (which in many ways was an original response to French decadentism and late-Symbolism). [In this study modernism refers to the development of a wide range of experimental poetics produced in the first decades of the century up to 1945, the end of World War II. I use *radical* in the etymological sense of the word, to indicate a poetry that addressed the root of the problem of poetry: language].

Modernism and avant-garde are terms that have been sometimes synonymous, sometimes, opposites. Since the discussion is extensive, I will glimpse some definitions and approaches. Michael Bradbury and John MacFarlane are criticized by Astradur Eysteinnsson, for

⁸ Rothenberg mentions experiments in typography (from Mallarmé to Marinetti), concrete and visual poetry, Charles Olson’s “projective verse,” the chance poems of the dadaists, the *poésie sonore*, the texts of Stein, among others.

instance, for taking the avant-garde as simple preparations for the so-called conquest represented by the canonical works of modernism, thus isolating potential avant-garde impulses and works of art within modernism. Peter Bürger, on the other hand, makes a crucial (and problematical) contribution to this debate by stating that modernism is still depended on the ideas of the autonomy of the art object as inherited from Romanticism and Symbolist aesthetics. Modernism still privileged, as Bürger sees it, the organic view of the artistic object, thus positing a separation and a distinction between art and life praxis. On the other hand, he states that the avant-garde movements of the first decades of the twentieth century such as Dada and Surrealism (and I should add Russian and Italian Futurism, Cubism and Simultaneism) had as one of the main objectives exactly the questioning of art as a bourgeois institution, simultaneously with the deconstruction of the autonomous view of the artistic object. More importantly, the avant-garde wanted to breach the gap between art and life (Artaud's "Theater of Cruelty," Dada's performances and chance poems, Lorca's theory of the poet as possessed Duende, Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades), displacing the authority and the aura of the artistic object. Following this logic to the poetical realm, the modernists were creating a new logocentric fetishism, while the avant-garde was displacing the author's authority, the emphasis on notions such as "craft," and creating the poem as a field of experiences, a place of dialogue, interaction. Therefore, in Bürger's account, modernism embraces the autonomy of art, while the avant-garde rejects it.

Here I prefer, as Eysteinsson suggests, to use avant-garde in conjunction with modernism, in order to point out the more radical, norm-breaking aspects of modernism, those works and poems that transform poetry in an experience of limits. This norm-breaking and anti-traditional aspects of the avant-garde had the characteristic of being commonly organized in poetic *movements* which not only questioned scientific rationality and

Enlightenment paradigms but also the bourgeois institution of art itself. Art, in its non-organic view as generated by the avant-garde, became highly critical of the past, self-reflective and, in its more negative and radical version, self-destructive. On the other hand, and criticizing Bürger's polarization of modernism *versus* avant-garde, Bernstein reminds us that, once the disruption of habitual patterns of thought and perception is at the core of modernism as a whole, avant-garde and modernism must be thought as "fractions of the same dialectical movement" (*A Poetics* 102).

Therefore, modernism has tended to be thought of as a modern version of Aestheticism, deriving from Romanticism and Symbolism, influenced by the philosophy of Kant and Walter Pater, as well as the poetry of Teophile Gautier and Stéphane Mallarmé; according to Huyssien and Bürger, the idea of autonomy of the work of art continues to be taken as modernism's paradigmatic defining feature. Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* sees modernism's aestheticism as detached from the praxis of life while obscuring "the historical conditions of this process as in the cult of the genius, for example" (40). The skeptical, self-critical avant-garde, on the other hand, was a reaction to *this* idea of modernism, and had as its mission (as in Tzara, Artaud, Duchamp, Breton) to close the gap between life, social praxis, and art. The avant-gardistes, posits Bürger, "view [art's] dissociation from the praxis of life as the dominant characteristic of art in bourgeois society" (Ibid. 49). If we place Riding's poetry and poetics within the debate on modernism versus avant-garde as described by Bürger, we see the relativity of Bürger's binary opposition as well as the already mentioned difficulty in locating Riding's achievements: if, on the one hand, she is closer to the avant-garde impulse by advocating a strong rejection of aestheticism,⁹ or when she conducts a critique of literary canons and their institutions,¹⁰ on the

⁹ As she mentions in *Rational Meaning*: "Where language is converted into the mere instrument of an art, it loses its virtue as the expressive instrument of humanity" (24).

¹⁰ "From the beginning, poetry was for me territory of life, not literature.—To know oneself to be in a

other hand, by believing in the autonomy of the poem (although she claims that her approach is more humanistic than literary), she is closer to the modernist agenda.

The Case of Laura Riding

“Laura Riding is the greatest lost poet of American poetry,” poet and critic Kenneth Rexroth proclaimed in 1971 (108). No doubt, Riding’s exclusion from the now familiar Anglo-American modernist poetry canon is surprising. She was included in a canonical textbook, *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973), with six poems. However, she strangely disappeared from the second edition (1988). The editors, Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair, justified the exclusion of Riding and other important poets based on practical and didactic reasons: “The difficult decisions to omit some of the first-edition poets and poems were based on *a canvass of teachers*, which showed that *they were seldom if ever taught*” (“Preface” xlvi, emphasis mine). Riding reappeared in the 1996’s edition, but with four poems less than in the first one. Besides, in the two volumes of David Perkins’s *A History of Modern Poetry*, while whole chapters are devoted to Yeats, Eliot, Williams, and Pound, Riding’s poetical achievements deserve only a page and a half.

The fact remains, however, that her poetry and criticism raise seminal questions on language, self-knowledge, gender, intellectual freedom, and the human mind, and therefore must be placed at the core of the contemporary poetry debate. Jo-Ann Wallace points out in a 1992 essay that Riding’s critical and creative independence, her refusal to “cede interpretative authority,” is what makes her so interesting for us: her work “has points of similarity to the three most important critical movements of the last sixty years. She shared with New Criticism

World is to have a story to tell of oneself and live and tell fully, exactly” (“Some Notes” no page)

a strategy of close textual analysis, with feminism a strategy of exploring female difference, and with deconstruction a strategy of rigorous linguistic analysis; and yet, although her strategies were similar, her intention was always quite different" (120). Thus, it is problematic to see that Riding's seminal work, even today, is marginalized simultaneously from the "official verse culture" and from the branch of feminist criticism which claims the existence of a "women's literary tradition."¹¹ In the first case, she is not mentioned in *The Harvard Book of Contemporary Poetry* (edited by Helen Vendler in 1984) nor in Harold Bloom's colossal *The Western Canon* (1994). In the second, and despite the discussion on opening up the canon, she is absent also from *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English* (1985), edited by two of the most important names of feminist criticism, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. At this moment, year 2000, there are in the U. S. only two books devoted entirely to the critical discussion of her work: Joyce Piell Wexler's *Laura Riding's Pursuit of Truth* (1979), and Barbara Adams's *The Enemy Self: Poetry and Criticism of Laura Riding* (1990)¹², against the hundreds of titles dedicated to Stevens, Pound, Eliot, or more recent poets who have acknowledged Riding's influence, such as Sylvia Plath or John Ashbery.

A pressing question is how and why she was forgotten. Several reasons for that have been advanced: not only editors were, for decades, totally uninterested in republishing her important books but, as we have seen, Riding herself was in part responsible for the fact that her work was progressively gone from anthologies and from most histories of contemporary

¹¹ I refer to this tradition as formulated by English and American feminists such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Alicia Ostriker and Elaine Showalter.

¹² To be mentioned, also, Wexler's *Laura Riding. A Bibliography* (1981) and Deborah Baker's *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding* (1993). The situation, fortunately, is likely to change, with the publication of several of her books. In 2001, as part of the celebrations of Laura Riding's centenary, *Anarchism Is Not Enough* will be published by the University of California Press. In January, will be released a new and authorized biography of Riding (by Elizabeth Friedmann), a whole issue of the important literary magazine *Chelsea*, a collection of her most important essays (*The Laura Riding Reader*), as well as Lisa Samuels's doctoral thesis *Poetic Arrest—Laura Riding, Wallace Stevens, and the Modernist Afterlife*, to be

poetry. First, by refusing to allow her poems to be included in anthologies after 1938 without including a statement where she explained the reasons for her decision of renouncing poetry. This attitude, I must add, was a question of coherence: it is not by chance that one of her polemical books was titled *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*. She sustained her dislike for anthologies as late as 1964, arguing in an unpublished manuscript that “anthologies damage the way-of-access to poetry” (#6304, Box 94, Fol. 20). However, the decision to renounce poetry, in itself, is not enough to justify her virtual invisibility from any discussion involving Anglo-American modernist poetry and criticism. Other reasons for her “disappearance” have been explained by her allegedly difficult personality, which led her to a radical critique of the “professionalization” of poetry she observed in modernism and in the academy, as well as her total independence of any school or trends of literary modernism. As Alan Clark states, in a private correspondence:

Laura’s objection to those words of academic criticism is characteristic, and I think it is similar to her objection to being called a “feminist”—and even, sometimes, to being called a “modernist” (in any but the widest, least confining, of senses). The common point seems to me to be a determined assertion of the right of the writer (any writer) not only to classify his-or-her work, and to describe his-or-her interests, in his-or-her own way, but, further, to have work and interests dealt with in their own terms—not in the arbitrary conveniences of an imposed, an essentially foreign, critical terminology. (Letter to the author)

I believe that it was her poetic and critical independence which annoyed and still annoys many critics, heightened by the fact that she engaged in polemics with anyone who attempted to discuss her poetry without taking into account the terms exposed by her project. That is

why her case is paradigmatic in terms of cultural authority. She refused to be co-opted either by the literary establishment or by academics who insisted on making her a proto-feminist. As she asserted in a statement in 1991, “I have never belonged to any ‘school’ of poetry—though the values I defined for the poetic use of words, which were nothing other than the values of language treated not only as a verbal discipline but one on which the intellectual integrity and total spiritual worth of poems depended, became associated in people’s minds with as a school of my instituting” (qtd. in Chevalier 808).

Although, as has been stressed, Riding was shortly associated with the Fugitives group—later New Critical poets—the quotation above shows that the writer, at 90, was well aware of her importance and place in the history of modernist poetry and criticism. More surprising is that, for a short period of time, especially during the 1920s, when she became associated with the Fugitives, her poetry was highly acclaimed, privately or not, not only by Ransom and Tate, but also by Yeats, Williams, Auden, Graves, and Stein. In 1936, for instance, Yeats wrote to Dorothy Wellesley:

You are right about Laura Riding. I had rejected her work in some moment of stupidity but when you praised her I re-read her in *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* & was delighted in her intricate intensity. I have written to her to apologize for my error & to ask leave to quote ‘Lucrece and Nara,’ ‘The Wind Suffers,’ ‘The Flowering Urn.’ She will refuse, as Graves has, but as a matter of honor I must ask. This difficult work, which is being written everywhere now [...] has the substance of philosophy & is a delight to the poet with his professional pattern; *but it is not your road or mine, & ours is the main road...* (Letters 58, my emphasis)

Auden, whose early poetry is strongly influenced by Riding’s abstract and stark style, called her “the only living philosophical poet” (*Poems* 410). And, despite the common criticism

of her poetry being formless, Williams praised her work exactly for its innovative form, that is, for its capacity to subvert sense (to defamiliarize language) and to create new meanings through “a perfect literalness and lucidity of phrase” (*Something* 97). Her poetry, Williams wrote, “is constantly seeking and arriving at, point by point, a station beyond what might be termed common sense” (Ibid. 98). And he adds: “The form is the invention or the perception—the form is the discovery, the adventure, the greatest achievement of the poet in its time” (Ibid. 99).

By radicalizing the approach of the poet with its material, words, by making poetry the place where language occurs as verbal exchange, as a field of an encounter, Riding saw poetry as the ideal medium for language to be converted into truth. Poetry could render truth—“even if it is a contradictory one,” as she writes in the 1939 preface of her *Collected Poems*—through an accurate use of language. Poetry became for Riding a profound investigation of language, and of thought, a practice destined not to the delight and approval of a tradition, a market, or a reader’s expectation; as with Martin Heidegger, poetry is the foundation of Being by the means of words, as an “uncovering of truth of so fundamental and general a kind that no other name besides poetry is adequate except truth” (*Poems* 407). As Riding herself remembers, she was since the beginning more humanistic than literary in her project.

Even though she was a radical individualist who opposed the idea of poetry as a reflection of the *Zeitgeist*, pure and simple, her poems exemplify many conflicting and dialectic aspects of modernism and the avant-garde. For one thing, her project relies to a great extent on the notion of the “independence” of the poem, although never separating it from life, and, at the same time, does not call for any tradition (as in Eliot or Pound). On the contrary, the autonomy of the poem was not only the recognition of language as a being in itself, but also a place where the other and the I could be joined: “The poet does not simply observe or record

'life,' but creates a language in which the human condition can be read, can indeed be made possible" (Carr 55). A poem, once written, became a reality separate from the poet, a "self-explanatory creature." As in Stein's or in Stevens's, in Riding's poetry of thought language is not only reflective but also creative of meaning. In her project there is a strong desire to overcome the barriers between genres (prose, poetry, translation, essay) and subject matters (criticism, philosophy, linguistics, cultural critique); her project aims at dissolving the distance between life and art, between the "literary" and the literal. From our privileged viewpoint, such emphasis on language and its process would seem to make Riding a precursor of the radical and postmodernist movement of Language poetry, functioning as an important poet's poet that is more acknowledged by avant-garde poets (John Ashbery, Michael Palmer, and Charles Bernstein) than by critics.

Powerful and canonical neo-New Critics such as Bloom and Vendler are definitively unable to recognize her achievements as a poet and her talent as a critic. Vendler, in a 1993 article for the *New York Review of Books*, claims that the quality of Riding's poetry is "dubious" while agreeing with Paul Auster's thesis that her renouncing of poetry is indicative not of poetry's failure to capture truth, but that she had reached "her own limit in poetry" (12). Although one might take this interpretation as plausible, the renouncing itself does not invalidate the importance of her poetry and her work. A reader who follows Vendler's line of thought is led to believe that Riding stopped writing poetry not on the grounds of humanistic and linguistic principles—as the author herself affirmed throughout her career—but due to her failure as a poet: Riding would have stopped writing simply because she was a bad poet. Vendler's final word on Riding reaches the absurd of dismissing her existence as a poet: "It seems likely to me that if Riding survives, it will be as a storyteller (*Progress of Stories*, *The Trojan Ending*) rather than as the lyric poet she wanted to be" (12). But one may ask Vendler if Riding

ever wanted to be “a lyric poet.” In fact, one might argue that Riding’s poetry is a rejection of lyricism as understood by Vendler, that is, as inherently expressive of a lyric “I,” based on a Romantic notion of voice, and in poetry defined by Wordsworth as “an overflow of powerful feelings,” in a rejection of “natural speech.” Vendler’s statement sharply contrasts with those by poet-critics such as Bernstein, one of the articulators of the Language Poetry movement, who takes Riding as a key modernist poet, philosopher, and theoretician: “No North American or European poet of this century has created a body of work that reflects more deeply on the inherent conflicts between truth telling and the inevitable artifice of poetry than Laura (Riding) Jackson” (*Rational* ix).

It is important to remark that—in terms of Riding’s importance as a critic, as a thinker of modernist poetry and one of its formulators—it is rare to see critics recognizing the importance of her critical books—such as *Anarchism Is Not Enough* and *Contemporaries and Snobs*, or, for that matter, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*—for the development of modern criticism (which will be discussed in chapters 2 and 3). Dates are important here: *A Survey* appeared two years before I. A. Richard’s *Practical Criticism* (1929), three years before William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), and fourteen years before John Crowe Ransom’s *The New Criticism* (1941), thus a long time before the effective arrival of New Criticism on the literary scene and, consequently, before it became a powerful discourse.

As we shall see in Chapter 3, in that pioneer book, Riding and Graves were already calling for a “new method” of poetic explanation more adequate to read poetry (*Survey* 21). They denounced the stress on paraphrase in the reading of poems, exposed the “fallacies” (142) of traditional interpretation, by focusing on “the poem itself” (89) through detailed and innovative analysis. The book was a passionate defense of modernist poetry against the accusations of difficulty and illegibility. As I have stated, in the 1920s, Riding was one of the

few critics to publicly defend the centrality of poets such as Gertrude Stein and e. e. cummings for the experimental and radical poetry of the time.

Cleanth Brooks—considered the quintessential New Critic and whose books *Understanding Poetry* (with Robert Penn Warren), *The Well Wrought Urn* and *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* became not only best-sellers but responsible for the dissemination of the practice of the method of close reading originated with Riding and Graves—is among the few who acknowledges, however briefly, her fundamental intervention in modernist criticism. In recalling the origins of New Criticism, Brooks remarks that Empson

shared with I. A. Richards a book that he had read written in America by Laura Riding and Robert Graves entitled *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*. Riding and Graves had taken one of Shakespeare's sonnets to pieces and rebuilt it again to show how deep and how rich it was—in other words, they did what we might call a 'New Critical' reading. *But they didn't call it that, of course.* Empson told Richards he could do what Riding and Graves had done with one poem with any poem in the English language. Richards challenged him to go and do it, and three weeks later Empson had the groundwork for *Seven Types of Ambiguity* done!" ("Afterword" 372, my emphasis)

The statement suggests that what matters for Brooks is not who actually applied the method that would be transformed in the discipline of "close reading," but those who were the first to find a name for the enterprise, the first to "professionalize" the procedure. In this sense, it was *Practical Criticism* and *Seven Types of Ambiguity* and not *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* that took the credit for influencing the New Criticism and for the "invention" of the method of close textual scrutiny (although the French *explication de texte* is an important precursor). Maybe due to his advanced age at the time of the interview (Brooks died a few months later), he mistakes *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* for *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, as well as the place where it was

written (actually, Egypt and England). However, Brooks's memory was good enough at least to detect where the original method of close reading had originated, before it was systematized by the New Critics. It is important to recall that Riding and Graves did in their books other close readings, besides the one on Shakespeare's sonnet, above all in a spectacular reading of a poem by cummings and a poem by Riding herself, as we will see in Chapter 3. However, Brooks, in his influential and canonical books, not only forgot Riding altogether in his account of modernist poetry and methodology (never publicly mentioning her) but elected a significantly different canon, one that would become hegemonic for thirty years or more and that has Eliot, Yeats, Frost, Auden, Stevens and Tate (and not cummings, Stein or Riding) as its legitimate names.

It is ironic that the co-inventor of the method would be decanonized by the same critics who most took advantage of it for the New Critical approach. If, as Chris Baldick argues, "[n]othing distinguishes twentieth-century literary criticism more sharply from that of previous ages than this close attention to textual detail" (13), the name of Riding and Graves would necessarily have to appear in any literary account of the most important American modernist critics and theoreticians of poetry in the period, side-by-side with the names of Pound and Eliot.

If the most important methodological feature of New Criticism was close reading, then it would be logical to acknowledge Riding and Graves's importance in its foundation. And, even though the English New Critics Empson and Richards acknowledged at some point the influence which Riding and Graves's method had on the textual strategy of close readings, the importance of the achievement is rarely raised by American New Critics. As I have been arguing, there was a deliberate attempt to exclude the name of Laura Riding from the whole history, by Empson and even by Graves himself.

After the break-up of the partnership with Riding in 1939, Graves began to proclaim himself as the sole author of the book (which they, by the way, previewing future misreadings, were smart enough to insist in the opening page of *A Survey* that it consisted of “a word-by-word collaboration”). Graves went to the point of including large parts of *A Survey* in his collection of critical essays, *The Common Asphodel*, without ever mentioning Riding. The erasure of Riding from the modernist history of criticism also occurs with Empson, who in the second edition *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1947) excluded the name of Riding as the co-inventor of the method he appropriated and developed: “I ought to say in passing that he [Graves] is, so far as I know, the inventor of the method of analysis I was using here” (xiv). Surprisingly, in a private letter addressed to Riding on September 10th, 1971, Brooks advances exactly the thesis that it was precisely an American woman poet-critic living in London who invented the method of close reading: “I have wondered how much the impulse toward what was called the New Criticism—and in its more extreme forms associated with Empson’s [...]—came to England from this side of the Atlantic through your own offices” (“Letter,” #4608 no page).

Another point to be made is that, although Laura Riding was connected with the Fugitive group for a short period of time, her view differed significantly from their Agrarian and reactionary agenda. Secondly, she would not subscribe to the ideal order of Eliot’s canon. As we have seen, Riding was against the idea of a literary tradition and skeptical about the canon, which she saw as a type of “boy’s club,” a masculinist group formation whose Corpus “is used as the rallying point of the group, the counterpart of the primitive clan totem, the outward and visible sign of a long-extinct grace” (*Anarchism* 31). Or, as she posits in *Contemporaries and Snobs*: “No one seems to realize that the destruction of poetry as a tradition would not destroy poetry itself” (142).

While the New Critics took the poem as an enactment, through its organicist functioning

and nature, of a social and cultural idea, either to separatist or religious ideas (Wallace 117), and characterized the modern poem as “a full commitment to metaphor” (Brooks), Riding had the single objective of investigating language and the uncovering of meaning in the poetic process in relationship with the human being. As she explained in 1995, she was trying “to function in the field of human criticism rather than in that of literary criticism” (“The Promise” 23).

She took poetry as the highest form of human communication, and used it to explore the process of thought faithfully, with no space for ambiguities, through a progressive de-metaphorizing of her poetry. She wanted to make poetry achieve a new kind of literalism through lucidity of expression and, through reason, by accurately saying what she needed to say. Contrarily to the New Critics, she identified ambiguity with “uncertainty of meaning,” “an evasion of truthful statement” (*Rational* 512), representing a failure from the poet’s part to express what he/she means: “the New Ambiguity—and/or the New Criticism—postulated a given created linguistic confusion as the generic and necessary character of poetry [...]” (Ibid. 513).

Because Riding is not very well known, before expounding on the construction of the Anglo-American poetic canon (Chapter 2), her poetics (Chapter 3), and her poems (Chapter 4), I find useful to summarize her life and career.

A Life Dedicated to Language

Laura Reichenthal was born in New York City, on January 16, 1901. The daughter of Nathaniel, a Jewish immigrant born in Austria (who was also a tailor and a socialist), she had an unsettled and poor childhood. Her mother, Sarah, was the daughter of German Jewish immigrants and worked, until becoming an invalid, in the textile industry. Laura was educated

in the rigorous principles of socialism and Marxism defended by her father, who dreamed of transforming her in an American Rosa Luxembour. Due to her father's constant shifts of jobs, she attended a dozen different primary schools. At Brooklyn's Girls's High School, however, she was able, according to herself, to receive an "extraordinarily good language-education. At Cornell University, I was also very fortunate in teachers (in languages, literature, history)" (Chevalier 808). When she was 15, she told her father that she was renouncing the political ideals to become a poet. Her father vehemently disagreed with her decision. With several grants, from 1918 to 1921, she was able to attend Cornell University, although never completing a degree. She also attended courses at Urbana and Louisville. Her first poems date from this period. In 1920, Riding married her history professor at Cornell, Louis Gottschalk, changing her name to Laura Reichental Gottschalk. Sensing that the name sounded too pompous, she changed to Laura Riding Gottschalk.¹³

1924 was the first turning point of her career, when she was praised by the *Fugitives* as "the discovery of the year" (*The Fugitive* 130). The praise could not be higher from the future New Critical poets, who conferred on her the Nashville Prize for poetry. The high claim Riding received by Tate in the pages of the magazine is proof of their respect for the originality of her poetry. It is also indicative of the value criteria that would become a hallmark of the New Criticism: "With a diverse play of imagination she combines in her poetry a sound intellectuality and a keen irony which give her work a substance not often found in current American poetry. Her poetry is philosophical in trend, yet not divorced from life, but generally

¹³ Riding thus explains in a 1983 statement the changes of her name: "My student name was 'Reichental.' While still a student I married Louis Gottschalk. When I began submitting poems to magazines, I wanted a middle name for fuller identification, but I disliked the phonetically cumbersome effect of the two Germanic surnames, either pronounced as such or in Anglicized phonetic renderings. 'Riding' was an invention paying respect to the first sound-quality of my family name while, phonetically simple, having a certain identity-weight. After five years of marriage there came a divorce; I dispensed with the name 'Gottshalk' and made 'Riding' my name for all purposes, legally" (*Cornell*

tense with emotion and concerned with profound issues" ("Announcements" 130). Riding would become for a brief period of time an honorary and then a full member of the group, although she only once took part in their gatherings. After 1925, when she left the U. S., her contact with the New Critics would totally cease. Riding also managed to publish poems in some of the most prestigious magazines of the period, such as *The Nation* and *Poetry*. Her critical independence, however, did not allow her to establish any ties with the future New Critics: soon she divorced her husband and spent a brief period in New York City, where she met personalities such as Edmund Wilson, Malcolm Cowley, and became a close friend of Hart Crane's. Deeply attracted by her poetry published in the pages of *The Fugitive*, (and especially by the poem "The Quids"), Graves invited her to come to England for a collaborative project, a book on modernist poetry (which he was formerly going to write with T. S. Eliot). In 1926, she made a decision similar to many of her contemporary modernists, beginning her expatriate and independent career in Europe (Baker 15).

Riding arrived in January and soon joined the Graves family (Nancy Nicholson and their four children) on their move to Egypt, where Graves was awarded a professorship at the University of Cairo. Graves, who was relatively known in English literary circles, would become her partner for the next thirteen years, during the richest period of their literary life. Back in England after six months, Graves convinced Leonard and Virginia Woolf (who had just published his *Poems* (1914-1926)) to publish Riding's first book of poems, *The Close Chaplet*, through their private press. The book sold only twenty-five copies and, as we have seen, was compared to Graves's book and harshly criticized by John Gould Fletcher in the pages of Eliot's magazine, *The Criterion*, which infuriated Riding and her partner. The result, as Baker

tells in *In Extremis*, “was the souring of Graves’s personal and professional relationship with Eliot” (Ibid. 159).

With the popular success of Graves’s *Lawrence and the Arabs*—a biography of his friend T. E. Lawrence—they managed to found their own private press (The Seizin Press, 1927-1938), publishing their own works and also authors such as the New Zealand filmmaker Len Lye and Gertrude Stein. In 1927 *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, written in 1926, was published. In 1928 they published another collaborative work, *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, followed by Riding’s solo critical works *Anarchism Is Not Enough* and *Contemporaries and Snobs* (Ibid. 160).

Emotionally stressed due to a failed affair with a young Irish poet, as well as to the type of relationship she was maintaining with Graves and his wife, Nancy, Riding attempted to kill herself in 1929, jumping from the forth-floor window of Graves’s apartment in London, followed by him, who jumped from the third-floor. Graves had minor injuries, but Riding almost got killed and had to spend some months in the hospital, risking to become permanently crippled. The suicide attempt was not only a scandal in the literary world but also a turning point in her literary and personal life. Looking for a quieter and cheaper place to live and work, and accepting a suggestion by Stein, Graves and Riding left for the Spanish island of Majorca. In the village of Deyá, they continued publishing their books, as well as forming a little community of writers and artists. In 1936, with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, the couple had to leave Majorca in a few hours, returning to London (Ibid 339).

In 1938, at the peak of her poetic career, Riding published *Collected Poems*, containing 181 poems selected from her earlier nine books. It was, ironically, her farewell to poetry. In 1939, she and Graves were invited by the American poet and critic Schuyler B. Jackson for a visit. Riding returned to America, Jackson and Riding fell in love, and it was the end of the partnership with Graves. Around 1940, she renounced poetry and vanished from the literary

scene until the 1960s. In 1972 she published what she called her personal evangel, *The Telling*, as well as *Selected Poems: In Five Sets*. In the preface to the latter book, she summed up her earlier decision to abandon poetry, with a disturbing phrase: the discovery that “truth begins where poetry ends” (15). Now signing Laura (Riding) Jackson, she spent the rest of her days living modestly in a house without electricity in Wabasso, Florida, where formerly the couple had managed a small citrus packing business. Turning to the study of linguistics, she wrote with her husband the ambitious *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words* (published posthumously in 1991), a book on the nature of language. It was only in the last year of her life, 1991, that Riding got some kind of official recognition from the literary Establishment, winning the Bollingen Prize for her “lifelong contribution” to poetry. She died on September 2, at 91 (Ibid. 420).

CHAPTER 2

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE POETIC CANON OF MODERNIST POETRY

... cheated history—

Which stealing now has only then

And stealing us has only them.

(Riding, *Poems* 73)

In this chapter, in order to introduce the poetics of Laura Riding, I first contextualize the main discussions that were occurring in Anglo-American poetry and criticism in the first half of the twentieth century. After a brief presentation of Pound's Imagism and an account of its influence, I concentrate on the hegemonic discourse on poetry of that time, dominated by T. S. Eliot and the New Critics, and the consequent canon they created. I hope the chapter's subtitles indicate my intentions: "T. S. Eliot and the Impersonal Theory of Poetry," "Dissociation of Sensibility," "The New Criticism," and "Close Reading." In "Problems of New Criticism," I address questions regarding close reading and the New Criticism as a whole. My next step is to discuss alternative, or counter-modernisms that were occurring at the time ("Alternative Modernisms"), involving neglected poets from the grouping named objectivists, as well as Gertrude Stein. I close the chapter with a discussion of "Laura Riding as Modernist Thinker," focusing mainly on the groundbreaking work *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927).

Ezra Pound

In the establishment of a modernist Anglo-American poetics Ezra Pound (1888-1972) is a key-figure, and more paradoxically so because he tends to be embraced both by conservative and more radical critics. His arrival in London in 1908 and his articulation of Imagism and Vorticism (which makes him also an avant-garde representative) are frequently taken as the point of departure to Anglo-American modernism. Pound also had a canonical power, not only through his influence as the poet of *The Cantos*, but as a theorist of poetry, an editor, a contributor of magazines such as *Poetry* and *The Criterion*, as well as a cultural polemicist, translator, and critic. As a canon-builder, Pound was almost single-handedly responsible for the launching of modernist poets who were either influenced or changed by his impact: William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, H. D., William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, Louis Zukofsky, and Marianne Moore.

In the received accounts of Anglo-American modernism, Imagism and Vorticism are taken as the first genuine Anglo-American poetical movements. Pound and the Imagists offered a specific poetic project, with its laws and prohibitions, its recipe of how poets should write in order to avoid the Victorian and Romantic poetic conventions. Few documents had more impact on the discourse on poetry in the twentieth century than the imagists' manifestos. In what is generally considered the first manifesto of Anglo-American modernist poetry, "A Retrospect," published in *Poetry* in 1913, Pound, H. D., and Richard Aldington asserted the three cardinal stances of the movement:

- 1) Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective.
- 2) To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
- 3) As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome. (*Literary Essays* 3)

The first stance claims for an imagist poetry: concrete depiction of images, rejection

of rhetoric and avoidance of abstraction or intellectualization. The second defended a poetry of precision and brevity, of accuracy of expression, always guided by the power of the image. I must also mention the influence of philosopher T. E. Hulme in the creation of Imagism. Influenced by Henri Bergson's notion of *durée*, as Bradbury and MacFarlane posit in their study on modernism, Hulme and the imagists had the belief that "no image can replace the intuition of a duration, but many diverse images, borrowed from very different order of things, may, by the convergence of their action, direct consciousness to the precise point where there is a certain intuition to be seized" (235). The image—defined by Pound as "That which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (*Literary Essays* 4)—became an instrumental notion in the discourse on modernist poetry, and was one heavily attacked by Riding and Graves in their *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, as we shall see later on. Finally, the third stance of Imagism claims free verse as the ideal form for modernist poetry. Only writing in free verse and breaking with meter and traditional forms was it possible to "make it new."

Pound's influence and importance to contemporary poetry and poetics is undeniable. Among his contributions is the "ideogramic method," the editing of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, the promotion of an opening of the canon through translations of the poetry of other cultures and ages (China, Egypt, Japan), and the language experience of *The Cantos*, which stands canonically as the most radical poem-collage of the present century.

T. S. Eliot and the Impersonal Theory of Poetry

As in the case of Pound, no account of Anglo-American poetry produced in the first half of the twentieth century is complete if does not deal with Eliot's poetics. His influence, not only as a poet, and editor, but most fundamentally for our purposes, as a critic, cannot be ignored, especially if one wants to study the critical discourse on poetry that became

dominant in the first half of the century. As one of the pioneers of poetic experimentation—whose masterpiece *The Waste Land* (1922) became the canonical modernist poem of the century—Eliot also became the main individual responsible for the shaping of the canon during Riding's career, as well as being influential in the development of the New Criticism. More importantly, he favored a shift from Romanticism and Victorian poetry to the seventeenth-century Metaphysical poetry of John Donne, Andrew Marvell, and Richard Crashaw. His poetry and criticism exposed a formalism that would make him to be considered by the New Critics as the fundamental poet of Anglo-American modernism (Gillory 148).

In an essay that has been considered one of the seminal and influential documents of Anglo-American modernist criticism, "Tradition and Individual Talent" (1919), Eliot argues that the sense of tradition is essential for the modernist poet. The question of having a "historical sense" meant a perception "not only of the pastness of past, but of its presence" (*Essays* 4). When the modern poet writes, according to Eliot, he does so "with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (*Ibid.* 4). Since no poet creates in a vacuum or has meaning alone (which would be very difficult to imagine indeed), the candidate to become part of this tradition must have this historical sense of origins if he aims at having any poetic value, and he has necessarily to be compared or contrasted with his precursors. To escape from the vacuum of existing outside literary history, the poet needs to embrace tradition in a dialectical way. Eliot sees this tradition as being "complete" before the arrival of the new poet but, in order to continue a whole, the tradition needs to make room for "the really new" work of art among the existing literary monuments: "the whole existing order must be, *if ever so slightly*, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is *the conformity between the old and the new*" (5 my emphasis). The only

option left to the poet is “the necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere” (Ibid).

Although Eliot’s insight that the new works alter the old order and our sense of them apparently leaves room for an avant-garde project, could there be a better description of how the canon performs its politics of poetic forms? Poets only have meaning if compared with other poets that belong to a same tradition. In other words, if you are a European, what you write must be written with the European tradition in mind, and not with North-American, Latin American or Chinese traditions, for instance.¹

Let us follow Eliot’s thesis. As he describes the process of canon-formation in his essay, the “really new” work has necessarily to adjust, to conform with traditional assumptions, in order to be accepted and have its value considered. Candidates to this “closed” canon must show their credentials first and prove their filiation with the European tradition of verse if they wish to achieve canonical status: one has only to conform with the discursive formation of a tradition already established. The new is allowed entrance in the canon only if it is able to produce masterpieces, which perform the miracle to be new even under the shadow of a powerful heritage, represented by what Eliot calls “the mind of Europe” (Ibid. 6). Thus, with his model Eliot not only reduces the potential for change as excludes from view (with the exception of America) all non-English literary or extraliterary traditions. In Eliot’s discursive formation, new works are valuable if they conform with preset rules, and their value depends on how much they fit or fail to fit an ideal order manifested by the great works.² Therefore, Eliot’s scheme limits the possibility of revolutionary or so-called “disordered” poetic projects.

In his famous essay, Eliot also attacks Romantic ideas and formulates his own idea of modernism. By debunking notions such as inspiration, genius, and sentimentality, he ends

¹ As is known, Eliot revised this position in a late essay, entitled “The Frontiers of Criticism”, in *Poetry and Poets. T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957, 103-119).

² The idea of literary history as a struggle among “strong” authors and their predecessors—as the members of a same family or group—takes a Freudian and conservative turn in Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence—A Theory of Poetry* (1973).

up stressing what would become another cornerstone in modernist discourse, namely, “impersonality”: “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion” (Ibid. 10). In this process, it seems, the more impersonal, the more traditional a poet becomes, since “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (Ibid. 7). The modern poet, according to Eliot, has no personality to express, but a particular medium: language. In this medium, and through this medium, impressions, images, and experiences can be combined. The emphasis on the medium, in fact, represented a paradigmatic shift from the Romantic idea of genius and values, such as spontaneity, to the modernist idea of the poem’s intricate structure of meaning. Moreover, a basic error of critical evaluation, according to Eliot, was to take the poet’s life as the explication of the poem. This move from the poet to the poem would be essential not only for a generation of poets (including Riding, though in a more conflicting way, as we will see), but for the development of New Criticism. However, poetry—especially the type favored by Eliot and the New Critics—was seen as an autonomous artifact, always ambiguous and ironic, and even though it was composed of paradoxes and conflicts, it achieved a final unity, an ideal order above ordinary life (Baldick 67).

Eliot is more concerned, in his poetry and criticism (being trained in philosophy), with states of mind rather than with lived experiences: the poet does not necessarily have to undergo the experiences described in the poem. As we have seen, poetry is a “turning loose of emotion,” and an “escape from personality” (*Essays* 10). The poet’s aim is not at all to express emotion, but to produce emotions through the use of an “objective correlative.” As he defines it in the essay “Hamlet,” the notion of “objective correlative” is more related to the effect of the objectified artwork than to the source and subject matter of the artwork. As “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion” (766), we see that the power of the visual *image*, to

Eliot, was ideal to function as translation of emotions and complex states of mind.

If one of the main concepts advanced is impersonality, it is curious to note a dissociative aspect implicit in Eliot's theory. He writes that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely *separate* in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (Ibid. my emphasis). Thus, paradoxically, in order to overcome the "dissociation of sensibility" between thought and feeling, the poet had first to separate the personal from the impersonal, the private from the public, and the "self" from the tradition. The poem became a mask to distract us from the maker. Therefore, the overcoming of the dichotomy of mind and body—present in the doctrine of "dissociation of sensibility" itself—as I hope to demonstrate, becomes not only one of the core questions for modernist poetics but also crucial for the discussion of Laura Riding's poetry and poetics.

Dissociation of Sensibility³

Eliot's hypothesis formulated in the essay "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921) and elsewhere advances that there once existed a poetic sensibility that was able to fuse thought and feeling. Such sensibility was corrupted and lost during and after the poetry of the seventeenth-century, especially in the period immediately after the Elizabethans and Jacobean dramatists. From Philip Massinger on, Eliot argues, thought and feeling became more and more separated in the language of English poetry. In the early poetry of the seventeenth century Eliot identifies "a quality of sensuous *thought*, or of *thinking* through the senses, or of the senses *thinking*" (*Essays* 247, my emphasis). On the other hand, he argues

³ Sensibility, as understood here, is opposed to "sentimentality," which according to Eliot, the New Critics, and Pound carried connotations of "femininity," as well as being linked with Wordsworth's definition of poetry as "an overflow of powerful feelings." Sensibility means here the balance of thought and feeling, mind and body, the senses, in their double signification: as meaning, and as bodily senses. Following Lisa Samuels and George Lakoff, sensibility in this study relates to "concerns with embodied thought and emotional knowledge" (Samuels 197). It relates to the ideal of creating a yin/yang relationship between body and mind, a desire for a perfect blend of thought

that Victorian poets such as Tennyson and Browning “think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odor of a rose” (Ibid. 247). Since the great age of Metaphysical poets⁴, therefore, and due to the turbulent political changes that ended up in Civil War and took the Catholic church out of power, a dissociation of sensibility has set in. English poetry dramatically declined, never able again to achieve that fusion. To complete his job of rethinking a tradition from a hypothesis, Eliot accuses Milton and Dryden of having major responsibility for this tragedy of contemporary poetical sensibility. In their poetry, Eliot argues, it is either thought or feeling: “they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced” (Ibid. 248). Sentimentalism suffocated the reflective potential of poetic language in their works. Even Keats and Shelley failed in overcoming this dissociative disease: “In one or two passages of Shelley’s *Triumph of Life*, in the second *Hyperion*, there are traces of a struggle toward unification of sensibility. But Keats and Shelley died, and Tennyson and Browning ruminated” (Ibid. 248). As I hope to demonstrate, Eliot’s thesis of dissociation is strategic for his revaluation and reshaping of the tradition of English verse for his time. Moreover, it became almost a synonym of modernist sensibility.

In the same essay, however, Eliot observes instances of a unified sensibility in the Italian poetry of the Duocento, in poets such as Guido Cavalcanti and Dante, as well as in the nineteenth-century French Symbolist poetry. Laforgue and Corbiere’s ironic modes are compared to the Metaphysical sensibility of the English poets. Thus, following the problematic historical account he presents, one may be led to believe that the problem of dissociation between thought and feeling not only started in a very precise historical setting (seventeenth-century England), but related curiously to the Italian and French poetries of other periods. Eliot finally suggests that this problem also haunts modern poetry, since he claims that English poetry “*never* recovered from this dissociation” (247 emphasis added). The solution or cure for this dissociation of thought and feeling in modernist sensibility—

and sensation, senses (meanings) and the senses (physical, bodily).

which is equated with the religious disintegration of the modern world and its values—could be solved only if poets became more intelligent and critical, more complex. Difficulty becomes, thus, an evaluative criterion best fit to deal with modernity's decadence and chaos:

We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, *must be difficult*. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (248 my emphasis)

Modernist poets had to overcome this dissociation through a more intellectual use of poetic language in order to write "valuable" poetry. This was achieved by approaching language not only as a transparent vehicle of reality, and poetry as an "overflow of powerful feelings," but as a more complex perceptual and linguistic experience. Eliot, responsible for the canonization of the poetry of Donne in the context of modernist poetry, praised him as possessing "a mechanism of sensibility which would devour any kind of experience" (Ibid. 247). For Donne, argues Eliot, thought and feeling were simultaneous experiences in the writing of a poem: in his poetry we can feel through his mind and think through his body. How this unification is achieved can be seen in the well-known example of Donne's image of the lovers as a pair of compasses. In the poem "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," the speaker addresses his wife as he is about to temporarily leave on a trip.⁵ In the last three stanzas, the speaker makes of his departure an occasion to reinforce his feelings toward the woman, managing to explain their relationship and prove his fidelity by means of an extended simile:

If they be two, they are two so

As stiff compasses are two;

⁴ An age, I must add, marked by the question of the spirit versus the senses.

Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th'other do.

And though it in the center sit,
Yet, when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home.

Such wilt thou be to me, who must,
Like th' other foot, obliquely run;
Thy firmness makes my circle just,
And makes me end where I begun. (*Complete Poems* 88)

Through the use of a radical and unexpected image (the two lovers as the pivot of a compass), Donne was able to articulate the precise instant an immediate experience becomes thought and vice versa, thus representing, for Eliot, a major example of a unified sensibility. This ideal of poetic use of language in which images are charged with thought and feeling aptly fits Pound's definition of image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time." That is exactly what images do here: the poet was able to use language and thought to communicate ideas through emotions and vice versa. The attachment between the two souls is compared to the legs of a compass: as the speaker must begin to draw the circle (his departure and return), he has to leave the center (their life together). Paradoxically, as the speaker distances from the center, the moving leg becomes still more attached to the other one, which, although fixed, also obliquely "follows" the other's movement (thus implying the speaker's loyalty). It is the very fixidity (or steadfastness) of his wife which determines his movement. They are both a single

⁵ The poem is also a fine example of the Metaphysicals' extended metaphor.

instrument: their souls are attached as the twin legs of a compass. The image has the function of precisely objectifying a complex feeling and thought. Here is an apt example of how an image is not being used by Donne ornamentally, but totally “woven into the fabric of his thought” (Eliot, *Varieties* 123). This intelligent and more elaborated type of image was the one typically valued by Eliot, the New Critics, as well as by Pound’s Imagist theories.

For the poet with a unified sensibility, the world resembled the Baudelarian “forest of symbols,” something to be devoured and translated by the poet’s sensibility. The fact that similar ideas were already stated in Romanticism as well as by other modernist fellows cannot be overlooked,⁶ though in Eliot the notion takes a totally different direction and to a very specific end: nothing less than the revision of the whole canon of Anglo-American poetry, with the use of the unified sensibility as a normative and evaluative category, lowering Victorian and Romantic poets and developing another tradition, one which comes from Donne and the Metaphysical poets (Crashaw, Cowley) and not from the names of Neo-Classicism and Romanticism (such as Milton, Wordsworth, Blake) or Victorianism (such as Swinburne and Tennyson). That tradition, finally, would be represented in contemporary poets who exhibited those qualities observed by Eliot.

As one would expect, not all critics took Eliot’s thesis of a literary dissociation of sensibility for granted. The theory has been attacked by Tuve and Bateson. One of the more lucid attacks came from Frank Kermode. In *Romantic Image*, he argues that Eliot’s model is totally a-historical: since the dissociation can be found in different periods of times and places, why set it as belonging mainly to seventeenth-century English poetry? Kermode states that “if we were to pursue the dissociation back into the past, we should

⁶ Matthew Arnold, A. Grosart, and A. Symons were among the ones who were able, before Eliot, to point to the unification of thought and feeling in the metaphysical poetry. In Grosart’s edition of Crashaw’s poems (1872 and 1873), he notes “the seventeenth-century peculiarity of feeling thought as sensation” (see also J. E. Duncan’s *The Revival of Metaphysical Poetry*). Hulme and Pound, as I have said, hold similar ideas. Hulme identified a similar unification of thought and feeling in Italian

find ourselves in Athens. It would be quite reasonable to locate the great dissociation in the sixteenth-century or the thirteenth-century as in the seventeenth; nor would it be difficult to construct arguments for other periods" (142).

Whether or not one agrees with Eliot's thesis, its impact as a discursive practice cannot be underestimated: the literary sensibility it imposed became a critical standard of evaluation during the formative phase of High Modernism. Influential critics such as R. L. Leavis, I. A. Richards, and the New Critics accepted Eliot's thesis, which became in turn a justification to reshape the canon of Anglo-American poetry, displacing the Romantic and Victorian poets to privilege the Metaphysical poets, as well as the difficult modernist poetry of Yeats, Pound, and Eliot himself. It is also crucial to be aware of the ideological claims behind Eliot's thesis, since it can be seen as a moral explanation for the "chaos and the vices" of modernity and the English tradition of verse.

Because, to my mind, it is inadequate to discuss poetry without taking into account discourses that surround it, I can see how the notion of a "dissociation of sensibility" was symptomatic of a mind/body dichotomy operating within modernist poetry itself: there is no doubt that in Eliot's accounts the mind is always the privileged and dominating term. Thus I can say that this rationalist approach to "sensibility," at least in the version of Eliot and the New Critics, is what was really "dissociated" and "unbalanced" in an age that did not know or acknowledge this. Finally, the Eliotian modernist quest for a reunification of body and mind was not achieved. In fact, it is ironic to observe how the Eliotian and New Critical program is itself dissociated, because in its binary constructions (mind/body, thought/feeling, tradition/individual), it is clear that the first term is always dominant, thus perpetuating the "dissociation" Eliot had condemned in the Romantics and Victorians. Furthermore, I would like to ask: if Eliot really thought of mind and body as being naturally simultaneous, why would he have the need to create such theory? I agree with

poetry after Dante and Cavalcanti, and Pound associated it with medieval and late medieval poetry.

Lisa Samuels when, discussing what she calls the “Eliotic ideology,” she states that “[i]n insisting on forceful intellect and linguistic difficulty, Eliot’s program ironically perpetuates the dislocation of thought from feeling, which must chase after thought to try to figure out its ‘meaning.’ Eliot confirms the intellect as father of the body” (*Poetic Arrest* 200). Kermode also identifies the dissociative aspect implicit in Eliot’s theory: “The truth may be that we shall never find a state or culture worth bothering about (from the literary point of view, that is) in which language is so primitive as to admit no thinking that is not numinous (142).

The New Criticism

T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards, W. K. Wimsatt, and William Empson, in England, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, R. P. Blackmur, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and René Wellek, in the United States, are generally considered the main names of New Criticism. The movement had an enormous impact on the study of literature and on Anglo-American criticism and scholarship mainly during and after World War II. More importantly, by their intervention these critics had a seminal role in the formation and legitimization of a restricted Anglo-American poetry canon. One of the main problems faced by the New Critics at the time was that traditional literary evaluation had forgotten not only “the text itself” but was unaware of the revolution in modern poetry that was taking place not only in America but also in Britain. On the other hand, in the discourse of the New Critics, the privileged space traditionally given to the Romantics and Victorian poets was replaced by the Metaphysical poets or even by contemporary poets working on the Metaphysical mode.

In 1920s America, a movement called Fugitives, grouped around Vanderbilt University, began to edit a literary magazine, *The Fugitive* (1922-25). As Southern regionalist

and Agrarians, they aggressively rejected Northern values: they were against capitalist and progressive ideals, confining themselves to a separatist and regionalist politics. The political idea of maintaining the traditional Christian, agrarian, and autonomous community of the U. S. South—a more organic model of society than the one presented by Northern industrialism—soon was transferred to literary evaluation. These new academic critics would set a revolution in literary criticism that, as in the case of Eliot and Pound, cannot be ignored, since it changed the status not only of the literary criticism but of the shape of the American poetical canon from the 1930s to the 1950s. These new critics were reacting against the common amateurishness of literary journalistic reviewing practice then dominant, and against certain specialized academic scholarships such as historicism and philology (Cain 94). More importantly, they opposed the ideological approach of the Northern Marxist critics, who were progressively being quieted due to the increasing anticommunist and anti-Marxist ideas arising between the wars. To be sure, as many of the New Critics were also poets, it is understandable that they would, in the formulation of their new methodology of literary analysis, focus on the poem itself, on its poeticity and literariness.

As early as 1919, as we have seen, Eliot had called for a criticism that would concentrate on the poem, not on the reader nor on the poet's personality, although similar claims had already been made by Edgar Allan Poe, Walter Pater, and others in the nineteenth century. The aestheticist claims of the New Critics, with their rigorous textual analysis, were also symptomatic of the need felt in the American academy to narrow and define its field of knowledge (Cain 95).

Against the politicization of Marxist Criticism (in its will to understand art and poetry in ideological context) the New Critics felt that, in an increasingly scientific and consumerist society, poetry had lost its importance as a structure of knowledge, as well as a binding sense of community. As Ransom states, they felt the need to create objective and

descriptive criteria of evaluation for the analysis of poetry: "Here are some articles of faith I could subscribe to: 'That literary criticism is a description and an evaluation of its object. That the primary concern of criticism is with the problem of unity—the kind of whole which the literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts to each other in building up this whole'" ("My Credo" 45). In critical terms, the New Critics were against the pedagogical trends then dominant in Anglo-American literary criticism at their time. In "Criticism, Inc." (1941), Ransom reacted against impressionist criticism, with its approach to the poem as a personal statement. In the traditional line of biographical and historical criticism of a poem, they argued, readers and critics tended to emphasize the life of the poet at the expense of the poem itself. If there is such a thing as a meaning of the poem, it was certainly not to be found in the author nor in the reader, neither in the social nor in the historical context. The poem's "organic unity" had an ontological status. Ransom and the New Critics accused the other critical trends of reducing the poem's evaluation to biographical and psychological evidence, as well as to its historical context, thus obscuring the discussion of the poem in itself. It was, in general, a proposal of a more intrinsic study of literature, as it became canonical and influential with books such as René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1949).

Another feature of the discursive formation of New Criticism was W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's denouncing of what they called "the affective fallacy": that is, any attempt to evaluate the poem from the reader's viewpoint. On the other hand, in the evaluation of a poem the meaning could never be reduced or equated to the author's feelings or intentions at the moment of writing the poem ("intentional fallacy"). Like any other work of art—a painting, for instance—a poem was seen as an object constituted of aesthetic autonomy; it had, again, an ontological status. The poem was thought of as a being in itself, an organic structure whose meaning and final unity could only coincide with the detailed examination of its parts and formal features. A good poem, argued the New

Critics, was able to achieve organic unity through a number of effects and opposing conflicts such as ambiguity, irony, paradox. In short, through verbal “tensions,” as Tate formulated it, in opposition to what occurs in literal language, the configuration of poetic meaning is achieved by the poet’s ability to explore the denotative and connotative meanings of words to their limit. “Rather than just reflect an experience outside itself, literature dramatizes experience within the theater of its form” (Baldick 83).

In the New Critical discourse, a poem is always complex, a place of conflict where the “drama” of meaning (Brooks) aims at achieving a final unity or harmony. The critic’s role is to unfold this process where thought and feeling are balanced and where chaos finally becomes order, thus showing how the poet was able to combine heterogeneous and frequent conflicting elements in an organic relationship. A good poem, in the New Critical view, are always organic, the parts reverberating in its whole and vice versa, and where form is never separated from content. The critic’s task was to prove the formal unity by tracking the formal relations in the poem, through a close and detailed reading of a text.

Close Reading

The procedure of close analysis was pursued to its extreme in 1930 by Richards’s disciple William Empson, in the New Critical landmark *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. This method of critical reading became the main discursive practice of the New Criticism. The book and its definition of ambiguity—“any verbal nuance, however slight, which gave room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language” (1)—was fundamental to the New Critics.

The New Critics advocated that, as a self-contained and autonomous artifact, the poem had a meaning to be found through a careful and detailed close reading. As one would expect, a typical close reading started with several readings of the text itself. Then,

the focus fell on the relationship between the title and the poem. The next step was the uncovering of possible literary allusions in the poem, and how the title and the allusions shed light in the overall meaning of the poem. After being able to identify the core of the poem, its theme, as well as its diction and tone (if ironic, mysterious, serious, noble), the reading examined the denotations (referentiality) and connotations (polysemy), and searched for important etymological roots of the words in the poem. Proceeding from looking for the poem's formal patterns, came the analysis of important poetic elements: metaphors, symbols, images, as well as prosodic aspects (stanzas, rhymes, meter). At this time, the reader was able to explore the dramatic conflicts the text unfolds and identify its main paradox. A final move consisted in explaining and proving how the poem is able to achieve a final harmony and organic unity through the relationship of all its elements, how its tensions were finally conciliated in a organic unity, therefore defining the uniqueness and quality of that specific poem. How the poem's meaning was made by many conflicts, dramatically animated, according to the New Critics, could only be arrested by a close reading.

With the formalist method of literary analysis as sketched above, New Critical methodology gained an enormous power within the academy as well as well among general readers and poet-candidates, mainly with the best-seller *Understanding Poetry* (1938), by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren. According to Alan Golding, this can be said to be "the single most influential poetry textbook published in this century [...], mainly through its role in 'disseminating' (the phallogocentric metaphor is appropriate) New Critical judgments and methodology" (102). Far from operating neutrally, the bestseller acted on the Anglo-American scene as an instrument of the educational institutions, having a poetic and canonical impact, inasmuch as it was also an anthology, a selection of poets whose regulative and prescriptive method could be applied best: the book gathered what its authors considered "the best" exhibits of modernist poetry. As the method should explain

the poem and the poem should confirm the method, the choice of poems always depended on descriptive values implicit in the method: “complexity,” “irony,” “paradoxes,” “ambiguity,” “tension,” “indirectness.” Thus, close reading became the perfect method not only to deal with the more difficult type of poetry produced by the Metaphysical poets, but with the complex modern poetry being produced by Eliot, Pound, Ransom, Auden, Stevens, Moore, Yeats (but not Riding).

Problems with the New Criticism

It seems natural, from the historical point of view, that such a method of focusing on the text alone would have found resistance at a time when the Anglo-American academy was, according to the New Critics, dominated by biographical and historicist analysis, and which always reduced the meaning and evaluation of a poem into a paraphrase. From our present point of view, such methodology presents several shortcomings in the broader context of a politics of poetic forms. First, by concentrating on the internal dynamics of the text, the New Critics tended to ignore its external dynamics, that is, they treated as irrelevant questions of history, psychology, author’s intention, biography, and the reader’s experience. As advocates of aestheticism and of the autonomy of poetic language, they transformed poetic discourse into a substitute for Anglocentrism and religion. Even though they defended the difference of poetry from other types of discourse such as science, philosophy, and history, this form of literary criticism soon became a routine and a “science” of interpretation of literary texts in itself, a “power/knowledge”—in fact, a hegemonic procedure. It gave literary criticism respectability, transforming the reading of poems into an autonomous and authoritative discipline in itself, without having to rely on historicism and psychologism. However, it is ironic to observe that, with their rigorous methodology, the New Critics ended up constructing the study of poetry as a science, with

its laws, principles, much like the science that most of the New Critics were reacting against.

Another fact frequently dismissed in the discussion of the context of modernism, as well pointed out by Jed Rasula in *American Poetry Wax Museum*, and as I have reiterated, is that when critics write about the canon formation of American poetry, few are able to mention that, for at least three decades or more, the New Critics not only held in power in terms of academic methodology, but were simultaneously imposing a canon. Rasula criticizes contemporary critics of American poetry, arguing that, in discussing the New Criticism's consequences and methodology, they often and oddly neglected that "New Criticism was in effect a public relations firm that pioneered and then successfully promulgated a certain brand of poetry. Insofar as a canon of Modern American poetry has seemed self-evident to so many critics and anthologists, the New Criticism succeeded" (Ibid. 69). Rasula sees the permanence of New Critical and Eliotian values operating even today in the reception and formation of the American canon, exemplified in the figures of powerful critics such as Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom. For Rasula, the New Criticism "remains the most successful American literary movement of the century" (Ibid. 70). One of the immediate consequences of the hegemony of the New Critics in the history of the canon of American poetry can be detected in the fact that the names that mostly got visibility and became successful were poets who were either linked with, receptive to, blessed, or discussed by the New Critics: Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, Delmore Schwartz, Randal Jarrell, Yvor Winters, among others. This explains, partially at least, the consequent erasure from the canon of such important figures such as Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, Lorine Niedecker, Louis Zukosky, George Oppen, Langston Hughes and, ironically, Laura Riding.

The best example of the liaison of the American canon and New Criticism is presented in Brooks's influential *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (the *The* of the title being

indicative of Brooks's limiting choice, while *Tradition* echoes Eliot's "Tradition and Individual Talent"). Again, the victory of the official history of modern poetry as told by the New Criticism led to a simplification of a much more diverse past. Rasula posits that official anthologies and versions of modernism tend to transform poetry in a kind of museum: a selection of exhibits and major poets, "the modernist version of the curiosity cabin, the museum, is a device for taming and ordering diversity" (Ibid. 479).

Nevertheless, as one of the most influential discourses on contemporary poetry, the New Criticism was important for pointing to the necessity of never losing the text itself from view when discussing literature, although contemporary literary criticism is becoming more and more contextualist. It has also made us see the fundamental role of the reader in the construction of a possible meaning of the poem, and called attention to poetry not only as a "language art" but also as a distinct and legitimate structure of knowledge. Even a Marxist critic such as John Fekete, although linking the New Critics' organicism with their conservative politics, is able to praise the advances in literary analysis promoted by the New Criticism:

The insistence that the work of art is a construct, a dense object, a closed structure of objectification, is a genuine advance for a critical theory over all earlier biographical, 'historical,' 'sociological,' 'philological,' or other scholarly methodologies. Until the aesthetic status of a work of art is established, there can be no aesthetic discussion, strictly speaking, and Ransom and the New Critics are important in bourgeois theory for asserting the ontological status of art as aesthetic. (102)

New Criticism offered readers a method of reading poetry that can be used in different ways and with different intentions. It is still a valuable tool that can be appropriated by Feminist Criticism or Black Studies, for instance. Moreover, with close reading, we have learned to pay attention not only to what the poem means but how it means. This was a valuable advance promoted by the New Criticism in relation to excessively intrinsic forms

of criticism of their time. Criticism was unaccustomed to paying attention to the assembly of devices used by poets when writing a poem, to the poetic process (*poiesis*) in itself. But I disagree with the New Critical belief that to concentrate solely on the structures of the text offers the poetically correct interpretation. Disagreeing with Fekete, I would argue that much is lost when we reduce our appreciation of poems as “closed structures of objectification.” Because the New Critics came to believe in the methodology of close reading as the only possible way for analyzing poems, the procedure has become a new orthodoxy, a formalist routine.

What the New Critics were unable or unwilling to recognize is that there are no single, correct ways of reading, only possibilities of readings, made by different readers and by different historical, racial, social, sexual, and political contexts. Believing in the autonomy and unity of poems as artistic objects, the New Critics’ so-called objective criticism privileged form at the expense of other possible contents (content here understood as the biographical, historical, personal data of the poet, and the poem’s time of composition), apparently forgetting that poems are written by persons, who have bodies, ideologies, political ideas, living in a certain time and culture. As Terry Eagleton posits,

Reading poetry in the New Critical way meant committing yourself to nothing: all that poetry taught you was ‘disinterestedness,’ a serene, speculative, impeccably even-handed rejection of anything in particular. It drove you less to oppose McCarthyism or further civil rights than to experience such pressures as merely partial, no doubt harmoniously balanced somewhere else in the world by their complementary opposites. It was, in other words, *a recipe for political inertia, and thus submission to the political status quo.* (*Literary* 50, emphasis mine)

Furthermore, as I have argued, the vulnerable point of the method is that it tended to privilege a specific type of poetry and a narrow cast of poets, eschewing works and poems

that do not aim at organic unity or balance, for instance.⁷ How to discuss the structure of works such as Stein's *Tender Buttons*, Pound's *Cantos*, Williams's *Kora in Hell* and *Spring and All*, Mina Loy's dada-futurist poems, or even Laura Riding's abstract and literal poetry, in terms of organic unity, ambiguity, balance, and closure? Or, for that matter, works that set as their major goal exactly to deconstruct such aesthetic values, as well as those works that react to the idea of finding a final meaning in art, as in the poetry of avant-garde movements?

The New Critics also believed in the existence of a poetic language separate and distinct from ordinary language. The unity and difficulty of form as advocated by them were not only a rejection of the chaos of modernity, but a formalist response: the poet, as Eliot writes in "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," had to find a way of "controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (qtd. in Kolocotroni, Goldman, and Taxidou 371). For Brooks, poetry's themes may change and vary historically, but its formal structures do not: thus, in every reading the critic looked for the same effects and features—irony, unity, ambiguity, paradox—which in turn were taken as an evaluative norm for all good poems. In "The Language of Paradox" we find Brooks at his most reductive. Defending the notion that other discourses (such as ordinary language, science, philosophy) were "naturally" opposed to poetic discourse, he forgets that many modernist poets were working exactly to break with such a distinction, by incorporating languages, dialects, working with the "found language" of newspapers in collagist compositions, or trying to incorporate discourses that lyric poetry had traditionally avoided. In the same text, Brooks criticizes "the tendency of science to stabilize terms, to freeze them into stricter denotations," while "the poet's

⁷ In *Poetry, Language, and Politics*, John Barrell writes that the New Critics' notion of balance is itself "a term of value with a crucial function in middle-class ideology, underwriting the political authority of 'consensus,' or the 'middle-ground,' by representing as irrational extremism whatever cannot or whatever refuses to be, gathered in the middle-ground" (6).

tendency is by contrast disruptive" (*Contemporary* 36). One might ask if it is not exactly the scientific and stabilizing discourse of criticism which is achieved through a typical close reading? What, after all, was evident in the privileged position of a close reading: the disruptive discourse of poetry or the scientific and stabilizing discourse of criticism? "The truth the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox," argues Brooks (*Ibid.* 36). If "all" poems always speak the language of paradox, what would the critic do with works which establish a radical literalism and de-metaphorization of poetry, aiming at emptying language from any ambiguity (such as Riding's), or to push meaning to its limit by means of nonsense, discontinuity, and fragmentation (such as in the work of Cummings, the American Dada, Stein, and even Pound's *Cantos*)? In the same text, Brooks criticizes the "tendency of science to stabilize terms, to freeze them into stricter denotations," and "the poet's tendency is by contrast disruptive." As Riding had alerted as early as 1928, in *Anarchism is not Enough*: "By persistence, the poem can be made into something, but then it is something; not a poem..." (18).

As we have seen, the poem had to be taken as a purely formal and aesthetic object outside history, time, aside from the author's subjectivity and intention. Some aspects of the New Critical approach announce features of Poststructuralism and deconstruction, e.g., the emphasis on the text itself, above its author. The New Critical moment also coincides with the moment that the critic's power became more dominant. Faced as a complex and form-content binary machine, the final unity of the poem could only be revealed by the therapeutic examination of the New Critic. As Allen Tate would argue, reading a poem aimed at proving that through its tensions, oppositions, paradoxes, the poem finally achieved an equilibrium. But one may ask if it is not at this exact moment that a poem becomes a commodity, a tamed object, with the feeling that the critics and readers really caught "the meaning" of the poem? William E. Cain points out to a paradox implicit in the New Criticism: its major weakness is that "it generates 'close readings' without apparent

limit, saturating the text with so much interpretation that ‘the text itself’—which the New Critics sought to rescue—tends to disappear” (102). Or, as Riding and Graves have warned in *A Survey*: “It must be admitted that excessive interest in the mere technique of the poem can become morbid both in the poet and the reader, like the composing and solving of cross-puzzles” (25).

As a consequence of the New Critics’ dominance in the universities as well as in the new canon established by them, the once disruptive aspects of modernism became tamed. In 1958, Delmore Schwartz thus described American poetry: “What was once a battlefield has become a peaceful public park on a pleasant summer Sunday afternoon” (26). One of the immediate effects of the long lasting hegemony of Eliot and the New Criticism was that it reduced the real and radical diversity of American poetry produced from 1900 to 1945 to a list of major white male Anglo-American poets.

Marxist critics such as Eagleton, as we have seen, argue that this type of criticism is “a recipe for political inertia.” To be sure, the view of the work of art as an autonomous object, as Bürger posits in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, is a dissociative and bourgeois concept in itself. Its major flaw is that it posits itself as existing outside social reality and social praxis (46). The avant-garde movements, on the other hand,

view [such] dissociation from the praxis of life as the dominant characteristic of art in bourgeois society. One of the reasons this dissociation was possible is that Aestheticism had made the element that defines art as an institution the essential content of works. Institution and work contents had to coincide to make it logically possible for the avant-garde to call art into question. (49)

A flagrant feature of the discourse on poetry promoted by Eliot and the New Criticism, thus, besides the problematic, limited canon it created, is that it erased, for the purposes of literary evaluation, accounts of gender, race, class, biographical, and historical information. They treated as irrelevant possible contexts that could be used to clarify the

poem's meanings or that might enrich our understanding of poems as cultural artifacts. Feminism, Black Studies, Queer Studies, Marxist Criticism, and New Historicism have attacked this failure on various grounds and to various degrees. Some of the conservative, elitist, reactionary, and even religious aspects of New Criticism began to be exposed more intensely from the 1960s on. This attack seemed to be validated not only by the frequent religious discourse behind the discussions of poetry, but also by Eliot's conversion to Anglicanism (followed by other New Critics), and the conversion to Roman Catholicism by Tate and Wimsatt. The allegiance of some of the New Critics such as Ransom, Tate, and Warren to the cause of Agrarianism, moreover, exposed the conservative face of the movement. Good poetry became a cure for the moral decadence the New Critics saw as affecting contemporary society.

If the medical metaphor applies here, we can say that through close reading the New Critics treated the poem "like a patient etherized upon a table" (to use Eliot's line), one whose mental health conditions could only be revealed as good or bad through a scrutiny of the patient's "behavior," through the unlocking of its "problem." Or the poem was put on a divan: the critic forced the poem to deliver all his repressed meanings, tensions, and ambiguities, an analysis taken under the view of the poem ultimately as a dramatic piece of language necessarily paradoxical. Or, as Brooks asserts, "The unity which it represents is achieved by the resolution of complexities, and thus the structure of the poem reflects what the poem is saying" (*Modern* 81). This task was achieved when the critic managed to balance the oppositions presented by the poem, but now recovered in a final unity, as an integral and well-adjusted piece of language. Commenting on a poem by Carl Sandburg—one among many American poets to be "decanonized" with the New Critical entry in the literary scene—Brooks blames Sandburg for his "lack of psychological subjectivity, the lack of complexity in the poet's attitude, the weak dramatic sense, the general 'crudity of form'—all these are aspects of a violent repudiation of the poetic tradition" (*Ibid.* 73).

That is: for Brooks, healthy poets, in a line akin to Eliot's thought, are those who conform to a tradition, those who are able to overcome the poetical malaise, namely, dissociation of sensibility. By disciplining the reading, the poem was considered bad and punished with exclusion if it refused to deliver its ambiguities, paradoxes, and ironies. In the meantime, a subject is created: the poem. And, by extension, we, readers, became absolutely subjugated by the poem's final authority as uncovered by the critic.

Alternative Modernisms

After having established Eliot's and the New Critics' influence, I can say that the "official verse culture" version on the American poetic canon in the period from 1900 to 1945 is one that historically coincides with Eliot's position as the most important modern poet and critic of the period, next to other poets supported by the New Critics. However, if one looks carefully at the range of poetics of the period, one can see that it is richer in **modernisms** than the institutional versions led us to believe.

The first problem is that, by establishing 1922 as modernism's official beginning, the official version erases from view not only the whole period from 1914 to 1922, but also seminal achievements of poets such as Stein, e. e. cummings, Louis Zukofsky, Mina Loy, Langston Hughes, George Oppen, Laura Riding, at the same time that it occludes avant-garde movements such as Dadaism, Futurism, not to mention other international modernisms that were taking place around the world. Writing from the viewpoint of a Latin American poet, Octavio Paz criticizes Anglo-American poets such as Eliot and Pound for being incapable of recognizing their immediate precursors (Cubism, Simultaneism, Futurism and Dada) as well as the importance of the avant-garde of the first decade of the century for the cultural milieu of the time, preparing the terrain for their own works. Unfortunately, inside the academy, little effort has been made to establish

connections and accounts of the international avant-garde movements of the period and their unfoldings in the United States.

The frequent omission of names listed above is indicative of the reductive side of this concept of modernism, canonically expressed in the eternal figurations of the names of Yeats, Eliot, Frost, Auden, Stevens, and Pound. Revisionists of twentieth-century poetics, such as Perloff, will not conform. In an incisive argument against the “normalization” of the history of modernist poetry, she asks an important question: “It has, for example, become a received piety that ‘High Modernist’ poetry was the poetry of the ‘well-wrought-urn,’ the self-enclosed, autotelic, spatialized artifact. Does that definition cover the case of Bretch? Of Marinetti? Of Appolinaire? Of Gertrude Stein?” (*Poetic 2*).

What is more ironical in this construction of the canon of American poetry, as critics such as Rothenberg, Perloff, and Bernstein observe, is that it commonly reduces the modernist movements being articulated around the globe to this specific Anglo-American and frequently “antimodernist” and traditionalist view of modernism, one that would become canonical by the end of the World War II.⁸ Critics from the “left” in the American academy agree that to talk about modernist American poetry in the 1990s still means the repetition of an elite team, an already predictable list of male authors from England and America, a canon that allows few possibilities of canonical variation, musically speaking. Moreover, as we have seen, the permanence of Eliotian and New Critical ideology in the so-called official verse culture is evident in influential canon-builders such as Vendler and Bloom. For Perloff, it is the European avant-garde movements that best testify to the appearance of “radical” Anglo-American modernism, specifically that occurring between wars, such as Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism, in a list of names in which appear Tristan Tzara, Guillaume Appolinaire, Marinetti, Vleimir Kheblnikov, Stein, Loy, Huidobro,

⁸ Robert von Hallberg states the connection between nationalism and canon-formation coinciding with the Anglo-American post-war period: “Certain historical moments, those of consolidation, such as after a war, say, when a nation is given to patriotism and appeals to shared traditions, seem

André Breton, and Antonin Artaud. As Perloff states:

Again, if modernism is equated with Anglo-American modernism, then the attribution of order and hierarchy, organic form and autonomy, centering and aesthetic distance may well be applicable; if, on the other hand, we focus on Continental Europe, on, say, Italian Futurism and Dada, on Apollinaire and Cendrars, or on Klee and Tatlin, the picture is quite different. (*Poetry On* 18)

In her revisionist approach to modernism, Perloff not only opened the focus up to include international modernism, but investigated the concern with “a revolution of the word” taking place at the time. She stresses the view of poetry as an investigation of language possibilities, but with a more systematic radical questioning of bourgeois tradition and art. If one sets the received version of modernism within the context of Peter Bürger’s discussion pointed out earlier, one sees reason to believe that, from our privileged point of view at the turn of the century, Eliotian and New Critical versions of the recent poetic past were all less radical and modernist than we once thought. We can see today with more clarity not only the formalist and limiting aspects of their agenda, but the several conservative, religious, and ethnocentric elements implicit in their ideology.

Adopting a more social and historical approach to the question, Cary Nelson’s *Repression and Recovery* is helpful here, since he detects a common and given dualism operating in the “official” version: the construction of American modernism as a contest “between an aesthetically but elitist and apolitical modernism and a tired tradition of genteel romanticism” (21). This binary opposition—the basic mechanism of any ideological construction in claiming itself to be invisible—has the effect of erasing other important movements and authors from view, diminishing literary history to a stable battle between a specific version of modernism versus a late Romantic and Victorian poetics. By creating a version that seems complete, closed, after the “battle” was won by the moderns (Eliot,

especially propitious to canon-formation” (*Canons* 3).

Frost, Yeats, Stevens, Auden), the version defended by influential names such as Bloom and Vendler closes off alternative, more dynamic and divergent versions of modernism. And, most importantly, the contest described by Nelson—between elitist modernism versus genteel Romanticism—obscures or makes invisible crucial poets and movements that were taking place in the period alluded (1900-45). Even more problematic is that the quest for the single most representative name of the period points to a pervasive restriction of diversity even within the confines of the canon. Bernstein illustrates well this hyperreductive aspect of the canon when he states that

Many of the New Critics, like Vendler, constructed their own partisan map of High Modernism, purged of the more formally radical and avant-garde directions not only among excluded poets but, significantly, within the poets canonized. It is the type of gutted modernism, which frequently transforms itself into outright antimodernism, that may lead some critics to cede “modernism” as a project to its most politically and aesthetically commentators and consequently to suggest that the avant-garde and modernism are antithetical. (“Comedies” 237)

Although Bernstein’s point is well taken, one observes that even American critics sympathetic to the avant-garde, like Perloff, cannot avoid falling in the trap of the canonical and New Critical reading of modernism that she, herself, opposes. That occurs when she tries to prove, against the canon constructed by Vendler, that our time would more rightly be called a “Pound Era,” as Hugh Kenner baptized it, rather than a Stevens one, as is claimed by Vendler and Bloom. The search for totalization of a complex poetic era such as ours in the choice of a single representative name for it—be it either “The Pound Era” (Kenner), “The Stevens Era,” or the “Eliotian Revolution”—shows us how strong and pervasive is the hegemony of these names even among the critics considered to be the left of the literary establishment.

To pursue the discussion of the alternative modernisms of the period, I will follow

what Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris write in the preface to their monumental anthology of modern and postmodern poetry, *Poems for the Millennium*.

The history of twentieth century poetry is as rich and varied as that of the century's painting and sculpture, its music and theater, but the academic strategy has been to cover up that richness. Imagine—now—a history of modern art that left out abstract painting or collage or Cubism or Surrealism or Dada, and you have a sense of what literary histories (in America for certain) look like to those of us who know that similar moves and movements exist in poetry and that many of the earlier movements in art—but Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism in particular—were essentially the work of poets. [...] In the American instance, views of “modern poetry” established by mid-century have largely continued to the present and, as they entered the standard anthologies and literary histories, have tended to play down the more revolutionary aspects of modernism in favor of the recognition of a handful of “major” figures, many of whom are celebrated precisely for their antiexperimental and antirevolutionary positions or for their adherence to a relatively conventional view of poetic traditions and formal possibilities. (11)

European avant-garde movements, in their turn, were not satisfied only with rejecting previous poetic schools, but were also attacking the very institution and status of art, against the idea of poetry (or theater) as dissociated from the praxis of life. The avant-garde works aimed at dissolving the unity of the artistic object, at negating tradition, and opening the poem to other discourses that might not be thought as poetic at first glance. If the avant-garde has failed to destroy art as an institution, at least they did destroy “the possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to universal validity” as well as “the destruction of the possibility of positing aesthetic norms as valid ones” (Bürger 87). They exposed the bourgeois ideology behind even the modernist idea of art, in its attempt to be a truthful rendering of *Zeitgeist*, thus they “radically changed the place value of

political engagement in art” (Ibid. 83).

We need to recall, as Nelson, Perloff, Rothenberg and other critics more sympathetic to poetic innovation have done, that in the Eliot and New Critical Era, political, black, feminist and queer poetry was being written, as Nelson demonstrates in *Repression and Recovery*, that Dadaism was alive and well in America, as in the forgotten work of Eugene Jolas, Walter Arensberg, Else von Freytag-Loringhoven, and Bob Brown; that Futurism has found a seminal avant-garde feminist voice in Mina Loy (only recently being rediscovered); that the objectivists (Louis Zukosky, Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, Lorine Niedecker) were radicalizing and politicizing Imagism; not to mention that, as early as 1914, Gertrude Stein was constructing her own version of avant-garde, as Jerome Rothenberg shows in the anthology *Revolution of the Word—A New Gathering of American Avant-Garde Poetry 1914-1945*. Other important movements were forgotten in the construction of American poetry canon, such as the Harlem Renaissance (Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown), and individual innovators like Abraham Lincoln Gillepsie and Jackson Mac Low. Names such as these cannot be left out in any fair account of contemporary American poetry, lest we end up with a tamed version of modernism. The next step is to flashback to the first decades of the century, precisely, to trace alternative and “dissident” traditions and possibilities in order to have a more unstable and dialogic map of modernist and avant-garde poetry. Before discussing Riding as a modernist thinker and poet, I will focus on some aspects of the poetics of other and less-discussed poets from the period: the objectivists and Gertrude Stein.

Objectivism: Perceptive Poetics

An important trend appearing in American poetry in the 1930s, Objectivism remained until recently largely invisible in terms of academic and public reception. It was

only in the 1960s that some of the so-called objectivist poets started to gain recognition. Even though they were “marginal” in the academic and institutional arenas, they inspired many American postmodernist poets such as Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, Paul Blackburn, Allen Ginsberg, and the Language Poets.

Objectivism can be best understood as a set of strategies (Finkelstein) derived from a rereading of the poetics of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams: Charles Reznikoff (1894-1976), Louis Zukofsky (1904-78), Lorine Niedecker (1903-70), George Oppen (1908-84), and Carl Rakosi (1903) are its representatives. As Michael Heller writes, “Whatever differences the Objectivists have (and they are many), they all seem bent on discovering what Merleau-Ponty has called “the decisive moment of perception: the upsurge of a true and accurate world” (8).

As in the case of Imagism, the movement was launched in the pages of Harriet Monroe’s magazine *Poetry*. In 1931, by Pound’s insistence, Monroe invited Zukofsky to edit an objectivist issue. In the following year, *An Objectivist Anthology* was released in France by Mary and George Oppen. Writing in total obscurity and experiencing difficulty in publishing their poetry, Oppen, Reznikoff and Zukofsky decided to found The Objectivist Press during the mid-1930s, and published some of their own work (Oppen, Zukofsky), as well as Pound’s *ABC of Reading* and Williams’s *Collected Poems* (Dembo 2).

As Rothenberg writes, Objectivism seems not only a superation of Imagism but a dive into a Poundian and vorticist aesthetics: “If Pound’s dicta for Imagism brought ‘the direct treatment of the thing’ as a foundation for poetry, his next movement—into Vorticism—opened the poem to those “historic & contemporary particulars”—rushing into the ‘vortex’ of the poet’s mind & culture—at the heart of Zukofsky’s formulation” (*Millennium* 525). Following the path opened by a tradition of experimental American poetry since Whitman (who called his *Leaves of Grass* “a language experiment”), the Objectivists were eager to express their vision in as many poetic possibilities: from the

haiku to the long and inclusive poem. The poem was seen as a “vortex” which could absorb the “minute particulars,” “history,” “philosophy,” as well as the other discourses which surround us, from “newspaperese” to music. The main achievements are Oppen’s *Discrete Series* (1934), Zukofsky’s life-long poem “A,” Reznikoff’s *Testimony* (a prose work), *By the Waters of Manhattan* (1962), and Niedecker’s *North Central* (1968) and *My Life by Water* (1970).

In the preface to *Poetry*, Zukofsky ended up formulating the main aspects and claims of the objectivist poetics. Writing on the poetry of Reznikoff, he outlines a poetics heavily marked by the three Imagist principles (“direct treatment of the thing,” verbal economy, use of musical—non-metrical—rhythm). Or, as Zukofsky states: “the poet’s image is not dissociable from the movement or the cadence shape of the poem” (“An Objective” 24). In what turned out to be, in fact, the manifesto of the group and of the key documents of American modernist poetry, Zukofsky argues that “the simile can be not a wandering ornament, but a confirmation of the objects or acts which the writer is setting down” (“Sincerity and Objectivation” 280). This view is connected with an ethical approach to the world, as well as to the materials of the poem (words). To be objective means to enter the world with an openness and an always renewed awareness, “thinking with things as they exist” (“An Objective” 20).

For Zukofsky, the test of a poem is its “sincerity.” However, the term must be understood not in the Romantic sense of “an overflow of powerful feelings,” or as implying a poetics of confession, but as a deeply ethical, poetical, and esthetical stance. The formal stance is stressed by the concept of “objectivation,” which reminds us that the poem is a construction or structure of meaning, an artistic object made of language. The poem is taken as a perceptual object made of words, of rests and movements, with writing becoming an instrument that enables the poet to think with the things as they exist. Influenced by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, Oppen’s phenomenological attitude

defines the poem as a “test of truth,” as already said, or of “sincerity.” He believed that “there is a moment, an actual time, when you believe something to be true, and you construct a meaning from these moments of conviction” (“The Objectivist” 161). The following fragment of a Reznikoff’s poem (“Walking in New York”), written in the midst of the economic Depression, illustrates the objectivist poetic approach:

The tramp with torn shoes
 and clothing dirty and wrinkled—
 dirty hands and face—
 takes a comb out of his pocket
 and carefully combs his hair.

(*Poems* 208)

It is important to remark that, for the objectivists, the image is never an ornament, but always, as in the case of Reznikoff’s fragment, a concrete representation of an object, a state, or a human experience with clarity and precision. The poem as a reportage, as a statement of facts and things seen and rendered visible. This is the basic principle of the objectivists: to bring objects, people, situations, into focus. In this sense, it is a development and radicalization of Poundian poetics, with its rejection of abstraction, rhetorical excesses, and emphasis on the juxtapositions of images, as well as on the simplicity of language and the use of direct speech. Williams had opened the possibility of this poetics when he wrote:

As the cat
 climbed over
 the top of

 the jamcloset
 first the right

forefoot

carefully

then the hind

stepped down

into the pit of

the empty

flowerpot

(*Poems* 70)

As a classical example of the American objectivist sensibility, “Poem” stresses the immediate reality of an experience: the words of the poem follow the movement of its subject with photographic quality, as well as using words more common to what Williams called the American idiom. This fits Zukoksky’s ideal of “[t]he poem, as an act of attention, focus[ing] the consciousness, making it more receptive to external, objective phenomena within a momentary span of time” (Finkelstein 52). The objectivist poem, thus, turned out to be an act of perception, always dynamic, stressing the juxtaposition of images and the “minute particulars” of how the mind constructs the world. Influenced by visual arts and photography, in this poem Williams treats words and the world with photographic accuracy, depicting the things as they unfold from reality, the mind of the poet and the words mimicking the movements of a cat. The line-breaks provoke a syncopated rhythm that also incorporates the unpredictable movements of the animal, its hesitations and decisions (for the objectivists, as Reznikoff says, “the rhythm is also part of its meaning”). No commentary, no sentimentalization, no symbolism, and no mythology: the poem constructs itself as images appear in the poet’s retina, as a snapshot or a sequence of snapshots. Far from aiming at pure subjective description, in this basic form of objectivism

poetry stresses “not so much things as the process of the mind encountering those things. [It] strive[s] to erase the lyrical ego from [...] poems and deny the Romantic idea of transcendence: sincerity demands truthfulness to one’s local reality, one’s own perception” (Hirsch 4).

Other values respected by the objectivists were clarity of expression and the use of colloquial American English. Although precision and concision were important values, many objectivists engaged in the long and experimental poem (Zukosfy “A,” Niedecker *Lake Superior*, Reznikoff’s *Testimony*). Objectivism was responding, in a important move, to the dilution of Imagism in the hands of Amy Lowell (“Amygism,” according to Pound). These poets were still assimilating or responding to the modernist revolution from the 1910s and the 1920s. More importantly, they were reacting to the academic and arcane verse written under the dominance of Eliot, Tate, and Ransom. In the 1930s and 1940s, they were, in fact, the countercurrent of American poetry, distant from the academy and from public recognition.

These poets were well aware of their marginal status. With the exception of Niedecker, all of them were Jews. In the midst of economic Dépression, the rise of Fascism in Germany, and in a clearly anti-Jewish cultural milieu, they felt the necessity of incorporating in their poetry their Jewish heritage as well as a sense of displacement. They also had, again with the exception of Niedecker, communist and socialist positions, although they were too experimentalist to follow the line of the more overtly political poetry of the period. Zukofsky, a New Yorker, was involved with organizations on the Left, and was a collaborator of the newspaper *The Masses*, of the Communist Party. He also incorporated Marx’s thought in his poetry, mainly in his long poem “A” (Scroogins 389).

The case of George Oppen is also illustrative: like Laura Riding, he renounced poetry (from 1936 to 1964), arguing that the writing of poetry was antithetical to the political and social action he felt necessary at that moment, when there were mass unemployment and

misery in every corner of the United States. In 1950, in the midst of the Cold War, and due to his political activities, Oppen had to flee to Mexico in order to escape being interrogated by the Un-American Activities Committee led by McCarthy. Charles Reznikoff, who had a journalistic and legal formation, was also deeply attuned to the misery and the powerlessness that he witnessed in the streets of New York City. In his *Testimony*, he transformed into poetry judicial cases registered by American courts at the end of the nineteenth-century, exposing the violence and injustices of American culture.

Literally, these poets were marginal figures in the American canon until the late 1960s, as Michael Heller demonstrates in his study *Conviction's Net of Branches: Essays on the Objectivist Poets and Poetry*. Niedecker, for instance, spent most of her life living in a cabin in Blackhawk Island, Minnesota, outside literary circles, and with a heightened, Thoreauvian sense of the environment. It was only when they started to be published by major publishing houses that they became visible for a new generation of poets and readers. An indication of their marginal status within the canon of American poetry is the fact that, until recently, none of them appeared in any of the canonical anthologies.

Gertrude Stein: a Wor(l)d Under Construction

If Objectivism stressed the poem as “a little or big machine made of words” (Williams), while the New Critics idealized the poem as “a well-wrought urn,” Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) was among the first American modernists to question the inherent mechanisms of this “language-machine” itself, as well as to open poetry to alternative word-orders than those prescribed by tradition and patriarchal culture. The goal of her seminal work, as in *Riding's*, is to investigate how language works, and how an alternative order of discourse—as well as the sense of a fullness of being *in* language—can be achieved and found beyond and behind the so-called reality.

As a former student of psychology and philosophy, and as many of her modernist fellows (again, such as Riding), Stein was deeply interested in the process of consciousness and its subtleties, and in perception, as thought in movement. Thus, her work progressively explored the phenomenological possibilities of writing. Also influential to Stein was the cubists' pictorial break with mimesis and perspective, its deconstruction of common objects (plate, bottles, violin) over and over again until the verge of abstraction. Stein was doing in poetry what cubist collage was doing in painting: depicting objects from simultaneous perspectives, apart from their conventional associations. One technique to attempt to depict objects as if taken in their four-dimensional quality was called *faceting*: the repetition and spreading of fragments and outlines of objects over and over through the canvas, until it becomes difficult to identify a center, or a central object or image. In language, this object is the word, the noun, and it is from the pulverization of the noun that Stein started. The intention was to offer several facets of the same objects simultaneously, spread out on the page. Her aim diverges from Imagism and from some objectivist poets in significant ways: Stein aims at rejecting the level of objectification or photographic representation still at the core of the Objectivist poetics, with the belief in a transcendental sign (the Image, the Ideogram), in order to pursue a high degree of defamiliarization. "Stein's lonely project was to reveal that 'meaning' lies not in symbolic references, that is, with reference to another, separate reality, but in the relationship that words have among themselves" (Kimber 36).

Let us start with her familiar circular phrase "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose"⁹ (1922) as a summa of her main technique: repetition as difference. The line was first used in the children's book *The World is Round*, being carved in a circular form in a tree by the heroine (later Stein used it as her stationery). At first, the line may appear as either a pure

⁹ "The phrase was coined the year before in *Sacred Family*, but this piece was not published until 1922 in *Geography and Plays*, and the phrase does not reoccur in her writing until that year, when she employed it in both "Objects Lie on a Table" and "As Fine as Melancta" (qtd. in Neuman and

tautological affirmation or a sort of children's game. A rose is a rose etc, *ad infinitum*. X can be only X. Traditionally, in English poetry, *rose* has been taken as symbol of love, birth, death, and it was not improbable that Stein had this in mind when she commented that, with her line, for the first time in two hundred years, a rose had become red again in English poetry.

If we repeat the line aloud for several times, and pay attention to the verbal music of speech that is formed in the process, an interesting play of sameness and difference in the word's meanings begins to emerge: "a rose is a Rose is arose Eros is arrows." *Rose* can be understood as a girl's name, but the line also brings similar sounds as *arose* (connoting sexual excitation or orgasm), as well as *Eros*, *arrows* (naming as pointing devices or vectors), *Cesar*, and *Isa*. Thus, many other combinations become possible: a rose is a Rose is Eros. Roses, arose! Eros is a rose is. Eros is arrows, Cesar is a rose etc. Or, in a Joycian fashion, a roseisaroseisarose, or arosecesaroseisarrowsisarrose. But, one may ask, what does one learn from this game? Is this poetry? According to Stein's definition and practice, yes. In "Poetry and Grammar," she writes: "when I wrote that phrase and later made that into a ring I made poetry and what did I do I caressed completely caressed and addressed a noun" (*Lectures* 231).

If there is such a meaning inherent in the word *rose*, it can only be understood in this collage of conflicting sounds and meanings. The movement of language is submitted, in unexpected ways, to the play between the signifier (the actual sound of the word *rose*) and its signifieds (the cultural meanings and sonorous possibilities of the line). As Stein states in the same text: "Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun. Poetry is doing nothing but losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns" (234). Poetry, thus, to Stein, is a problem of naming.

Stein's verbal portrait of Picasso and his painting process reveals the peculiarities of her own method (Picasso was also painting her portrait at the time): "This one was working and something was coming then, something was coming out of this one then. This one was one and always there was something coming out of this one and always there had been something coming out of this one...This one was one who was working" (*Reader* 142). Stein aims at capturing the movement of Picasso's mind at work; she aims at demonstrating that the painter, in the act of painting, becomes so intensely concentrated that he forgets himself, that in some sense he becomes the objects he "describes." Stein is mimicking her own style, in fact. Stein applies Picasso's method of composition to a new treatment of words and sentences, incorporated in her fundamental idea of "beginning again and again," which will have a strong impact in some poems of Laura Riding's. The use of repetition and participles aims at translating a feeling of a continuous present: Stein wanted to make a deeper reflection on the act of composition itself and on our uses of language. The result is that the artistic object becomes not a mimetic account of what she saw, but a newly created reality, a language reality. Stein discovered that "[t]he only way to state the truth perceived was to state it in the language as fresh as the perception itself. What was important was difference, not similarity" (*Dydo* 47). Stein has demonstrated that language is not transparent as we have been taught to believe, but is as material as paint. The goal is a radical de-referentialization, a pulverization of the referent, so to speak.

Turning our attention to what has been thought about language and poetry in Russia, for instance, we begin to understand the revolutionary directions Stein was taking. As a major theoretician of Russian Formalism, Viktor Schklovsky defended in "Art as Technique" (1917):

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an

aesthetic end itself and must be prolonged. [...] Tolstoi makes the familiar strange *by not naming the familiar object*. He describes an object as if he were seeing it *for the first time*. (58, my emphasis)

The technique of defamiliarization (*ostraneniye*) describes with precision what Stein had already achieved in one of her most important works: the cubist prose-poems of *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms* (1912-14). As a series of still lifes of her immediate surroundings, *Tender Buttons* portrays the common objects of domestic life. Extending Henry James's idea of a "continuous present" and Cézanne's and the cubist's approach to painting, Stein began to develop, to explore in her writing the possibilities of a procedural and cubist poetics. The first object reads

A CARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS.

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt color and an arrangement in a system of pointing. All this is not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading. (*Tender 3*)

In the context of Anglo-American modernist poetics, how do imagist principles of accuracy in presentation fit in a piece of language which, after announcing its object as "A Carafe," in its very title deconstructs and negates the noun which it is supposed to present? Her poetics goes against the principle of using "absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation," and the belief that "the natural object is always the most *adequate* symbol." The object is awkwardly defined as "A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt and an argument in a system of pointing." It seems that we are in fact, here, with a different view regarding precision, concision, and unity. Stein wants to question referentiality itself. As Ulla E. Dydo explains, "[i]n the world of Stein's writing the bonds that tie words to things are loosened and names split off from objects. Stein attempts to perceive everything afresh, as if she had never seen it before.[...] There is no

hierarchy of words or of usage” (56). Compare Stein’s method with Pound’s famous poem “In a Station of Metro”:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:

Petals on a wet, black bough.

(*Personae* 109)

In Pound’s canonical imagist poem, even if we have some effect of defamiliarization between the first and the second lines, the analogy is quite obvious: petals/faces, metro crowd/black bough. Despite the careful manner by which the subject is presented— influenced by Japanese haiku poetics of juxtaposition—it caused a great impact in twentieth-century modernist poetics. In Pound’s poem there is a determined center— faces—and the image follows a rational sequence of events: first the title presents a pan of the metro station in rush hour, then a zoom on a face or a couple of faces (friends that he is going to meet?) which the poet sees in the crowd. In the second line, the definition of the image, is compared to a black bough, that is, an undifferentiated mass of people. The poem is still formally drawing its strength from the power of metaphor, from the epiphanic image, in short, from mimesis.

Pound’s poetics has as one of its principles the rejection of abstraction, of “intellectualization” and “vague generalizations.” In “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” (1913), Pound claims: “Don’t use such an expression as ‘dim lands of peace.’ It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer’s not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol. Go in fear of abstractions” (*Essays* 5). On the other hand, Stein achieves in her poetry a degree of abstraction that sets her at the core of artistic movements such as Cubism and Abstractionism. As the cubists were attempting to reduce and dissolve the object in order to present it as if it had never been presented before, Stein was able, according to Riding and Graves, to recognize that language “had to be reorganized, used as if afresh, cleansed of its experience: to be ‘pure’

and 'abstract' as colour and stone" (*A Survey* 274). In using words as if they had "no history," Riding and Graves claim, Stein's poetics presents an antidote to a modernist poetics heavily dependent on Romanticism, Symbolism, as well as on the formula poetry = image.

Stein's goal is not recognition, but strangeness. The problem she faced was of another "order of things": how to portray objects as they emerge from reality and are captured by our ever-changing thoughts about them, but *before* one begins to reorder the object in terms of conventional associations, personal memories, symbolism, and ordinary metaphors? A response to such an impasse is Stein's (and Riding's, I would add) major contribution for modernist poetics.

Stein defies the logic of syntax and of imagist association by creating a verbal composition, a texture of language, which attempts at every time to defy the reader's expectations. She names and un-names at the same time, as in this piece:

WATER RAINING

Water astonishing difficult altogether makes a meadow and a stroke. (*Tender* 12)

Stein's text delays its meaning through the very attempt to present a signifier. One of the main techniques is to use the verb to be not to identify name and thing (not to copulate as the "is" of identity) but to create a greater distance between the terms, even running the risk of seeming absurd and giving nonsense formulations. As she does in this fragment of "A PLATE": "A lamp is not the only sign of glass. The lamp and the cake are not the only sign of stone" (7). The titles in *Tender Buttons* promise to describe what can be barely described. Stein's language embodies perception as a process made of disjunctions, discontinuities, not the powerful overflow of images in the eye's retina. "[H]er attention was no longer focused on the universals of experience, but on the process of experiencing

each moment in the present tense *as it intersects with the consciousness.*" (Dubnick 71, my emphasis). It is as if she was implying to the reader: "It is a bottle, but it is opaque. It is not to be seen through. This is a language game. Are you in?" That is, Stein advises us, in the act of reading her language-games, not to expect *mimesis*, and to be open to the full music of words and sentences. The goal is simultaneously to push to the extremes of the linguistic possibilities and to test our human possibilities in relation to our uses of language.

As Shirley Neuman and Ira B. Nadel point out, "[h]ad scholars had Saussure's formulations book available to them before its publication in the 1950s, and had the linguistic observations of the Russian formalists not had to wait for the mediation of Roman Jakobson for their impact on Western literary criticism, we would certainly have been quicker to articulate Stein's relation to language" (xix). If the poetic function is to be found every time language directs its energy to itself, as a code, this is fully achieved by Stein in the poetry she wrote. The first paragraph of "Roastbeef" is another fine example of Stein's technique of repetition as difference:

In the inside there is sleeping, in the outside there is reddening, in the morning there is meaning, in the evening there is feeling. In the evening there is feeling. In feeling anything is resting, in feeling anything is mounting, in feeling there is resignation, in feeling there is recognition, in feeling there is recurrence and entirely mistaken there is pinching. All the standards have steamers and all the curtains have bed linen and all the yellow has discrimination and all the circle has circling. This makes sand. (*Tender* 21)

Or, as one might hear, in the last sentence, "This makes *sense*." If this is a description of a roastbeef, it is one only glimpsed in the fragment by the word *reddening*. In such a description there is no center, in the conventional understanding of the term. Stein's titles immediately depart from the objects they claim to portray: as a result, the pieces are verbal constructions activated by an object or a series of objects. As in a cubist painting, one feels

disoriented in trying to find accurate description, since there is no defined object to grasp, the object's signification being disseminated through the canvas, so to speak, made highly abstract and bordering the limits of referentiality: the linguistic object is less a photography than a recreation of the artist's mind, the movement of signification itself.

The case is that Stein's notion of language, as early as 1914, was deconstructionist *avant-la-lettre*. Madan Sarup's description of Derrida's theory is an apt analogy to what Stein was actually doing in her language, only forty years before:

In Derrida's view of language the signifier does not yield us up a signified directly, as a mirror yields up an image. There is no harmonious one-to-one set of correspondences between the level of the signifieds in language. Signifiers are continually breaking apart and reattaching in new combinations, thus revealing the inadequacy of Saussure's model of the sign; according to which the signifier and signified relate as if they were two sides of the same sheet of paper [...] In other words, Derrida argues that meaning is not immediately present in a sign. Since the meaning of a sign is a matter of what the sign is not, this meaning is always in some sense absent from it too. Meaning is scattered or dispersed along the whole chain of signifiers; it cannot be easily nailed down, it is never present in any one sign alone, but is rather a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence. (35)

In the quotation above, one could easily replace Derrida by Stein in order to have an apt description of what she was doing in her poetry. Since perception has other logic than that of grammar and syntax, the result is a text that simultaneously creates and erases meaning. Stein understands perception and language as an endless process of repetition (sameness) and differences—*Defamiliarization*: to render the object as seen for the first time. She wanted to describe her immediate reality from multiple viewpoints, in process, as in a cubist painting. Thus, her importance to a radical modernist poetics. In poetic pieces such as "Cézanne," "Preciosilla," *Tender Buttons* and *Stanzas in Meditation*, Stein goes against the

Symbolist tradition of modernism, which is still grounded on a concept of the unitary image (Pound), or the “objective correlative” (Eliot). As Charles Bernstein sums up, “Stein’s focus became the words themselves; her declaration is that of *wordness*. The writing has become so dense that the meaning is no longer to be found in what the words represent, or stand for, but in their texture: the repetition, juxtaposition and structure of phrases, sentences, and paragraphs” (“Inventing” 58).

In a similar way to Riding’s poetics, Stein aims at de-automatizing our perceptions through the breaking of conventions, through a poetics that stressed the incantatory powers of language, and through a rejection of conventional symbolic references that we culturally bring with us in our lifetimes. As an avant-garde poet, probably the most important of American radical modernism, Stein wanted to press language to its limit and the price she had to pay for several decades was the still common accusation of unintelligibility and nonsense. For critics like Michael Davidson, however, “what makes *Tender Buttons* so vital is not the strategies by which meaning is avoided or encoded but how each piece points at the possibilities of meaning. Unlike the symbolists who create beautiful detachable artifacts, Stein’s prose is firmly tied to the world—but it is a world constantly under construction, a world in which the equation of word and thing can no longer be taken for granted” (197).

Bearing in mind these various poetics and critical discourses on poetry developed by the modernists in the first half of the twentieth century, I turn now to Laura Riding’s positioning to these questions, as exemplified in her partnership with Robert Graves in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*.

Laura Riding as Modernist Thinker

[M]odernist poetry is a declaration of the *independence of the poem*.

(*A Survey* 124, italics added)

Although not commonly acknowledged, in terms of the Anglo-American scene one can advance the thesis that *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), by Laura Riding and Robert Graves, was the first study on poetry to use the term modernism in the polemical senses proposed in Chapter 1. In fact, it was a pioneer work whose challenge was to confront and explain modernist poetry written in English in the first two decades of the century. Or, as Riding writes retrospectively, modernism was “a useful term for the spot-lighting of the development in its effective existence as a self-unifying agglomeration of loosely kindred trends. And the book proved a useful critical report on the make-up of the temper of the twentieth-century’s pioneer version of ‘modernist poetry’” (“Engaging” 21). As we have seen, critics, in general, have had a hard time trying to locate the exact appearance of the term in the Anglo-American context. Calinescu, unable to identify the precise appearance of the term—mainly in its polemic and dissident meaning—has nevertheless to rely on Riding and Graves’s book in two pages of his opening chapter: “By 1927, when Laura Riding and Robert Graves publish their collaborative *Survey of Modernist Poetry*, the term must have established itself as a meaningful—though still largely controversial—literary category” (83).

More commonly than not, even critics who never mention Graves and Riding as poets are able to point out to the historical importance of *A Survey*, and how it immediately inserted itself in the literary debate of its time. In *The Concept of Modernism*, Eysteinsson mentions *A Survey* in order to reinforce his argument that the impulse to define modernism is simultaneously an impulse to define a canon:

It is not hard to demonstrate that canon formation has been both highly arbitrary and of prime significance in Anglo-American modernist studies. In one of the first books to use the concept, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, Laura Riding and Robert Graves make E. E. Cummings their representative modernist, but the “movement” appears to include both Eliot and Hemingway, whereas Williams and Pound (and all the Imagists) are aggressively banished without any logically presented reason. (86)

Although Eysteinnsson and Calinescu blame Riding and Graves’s book for never trying to work out a definition of these terms, the first one contradicts himself by admitting that “[t]he main elements for such a definition *are there, however*, and the reader can bring them together and work out *a fairly consistent concept of modernism*” (84, italics mine).

In my opinion, far from being arbitrary, the book is inclusive and polemic in its approach, at least in the main proposed scope: the Anglo-American poetry of the 1920s. The book presented discussions of authors very different among themselves such as Stein, cummings, Eliot, Moore, Yeats, Tate, Hopkins (who was published for the first time only in 1918), Pound, Williams, Ransom, Crane, Stevens, and Riding herself. Far from what Eysteinnsson claims, in the conflicting context it presented, *A Survey* was making radical and prophetic choices: the two writers who are claimed as genuine modernists— Stein and cummings—are two authors who, contrarily to Eysteinnsson’s argument, were until recently very much outside the “official verse culture” of literary modernism—at least the one defined by Eliot and the New Critics. Moreover, those two authors (in a list that would include Williams, the Objectivists, and Riding) would be instrumental for a new generation of poet-critics as exemplars of alternative modernisms to the Eliotian and New Critical ones. Stein was praised in *A Survey* due to her approach to language and experience, her awareness that language “had to be reorganized, used as if afresh, cleansed of its experience” (274). Her use of repetition and her technique of “beginning again and again,” moreover, are praised for “breaking down the possible historical senses still inherent in the

words” (285). Cummings, on the other hand, was eulogized for his original poetical approach, his compactness of expression, and for his innovative poetic experiences as an example of how to avoid the conventional form that generally stood between the reader and the poem (41). The conclusion they reach is that “poems in the future [will] be written in the Cummings way if poetry is not to fall into pieces altogether” (19).

In important and symptomatic ways, the book is a clear response to the more neo-classical and history-oriented Eliotian and Poundian versions of modern poetry (the ones, by the way, that in fact became canonical). As Riding writes in *Contemporaries and Snobs*, poetry should be seen as “an ever immediate reality confirmed afresh and independently in each new work rather than as a continuously sustained tradition, confirmed personally rather than professionally” (134). In terms of politics of form, its strongest attack is on Imagism and other so-called “dead movements” such as Georgianism and War Poetry, on the one side, and on the idea of “tradition and individual talent,” on the other. The differences between modern and modernist as Riding and Graves conceptualized in their book can be better glimpsed in the severe treatment given to Imagism. They considered it a modern, but not modernist, movement. As an example of what they called “*Zeitgeist*-poetry,” they accuse Pound and the imagists of wanting “to be new rather than be poets; which meant that they could only go so far as to say everything that had already been said before in a slightly different way” (117). They accused the “marketing” strategies of the imagists as a symptom of their modernness, which made them “a stunt of commercial advertisers of poetry to whom poetic results meant a popular demand for their work, not the discovery of new values in poetry with an indifference to the recognition they received” (117). Poetry was becoming dangerously a marketable commodity more attuned to publicity and to becoming popular at any cost, and it was being vulgarized in paradoxical formulae such as poetry is “news that stands news.” Imagism, thus, was a mere “new” literary affectation influenced by Japanese mannerisms, a fashionable manner of

presentation that was up-to-dating with the Japanese influence in painting. Another problem, as they saw it, is that the imagists “believed in free verse; and to believe in one way of writing poetry as against another is to have the attitude of a quack rather than of a scientist toward one’s art, to be in a position of selling one’s ideas rather than of constantly submitting them to new tests” (117). In short, they criticized the limitations of imagist poetics, which had too easily become, by 1927, a new mannerism, although their poetic themes remained relatively unchanged.¹⁰

To Riding and Graves, the imagist theory of poetry argued for poems that record “images, not sentiment—*pictures, not modes of thought*” (my emphasis). They also criticized Imagism in its belief of style as “the use of the language of common speech, but in a very careful way, as a paint-box.” Genuine modernist poets, they defended, wrote as they did in order to make the reader pay full attention, to increase his/her awareness of language, and not to be “distracted” or entertained as Riding and Graves saw occurring in imagist poetry. We could apply what Charles Bernstein says about American poetics to what was at the core of *A Survey*: Riding and Graves were stressing poetry as “a process of thinking, rather than a report of things already settled, an investigation of figuration rather than a picture of something figured out” (*Poetics* 117). In their advance of a poetry of thought, of complete awareness of one’s language, the ideal of a poetry as a verbal maximum aiming at maximum truth led them to criticize Imagism as too referential and sentimentalist, too imbricated in the idea of language as a mere translation of images that invoke ideas, as it were, a kind of new realism.

Riding and Graves do not see modernist qualities as restricted to a specific period of time but as inherent in language itself: they observe them, synchronically, as occurring at the very instant a specific poem (be it by Shakespeare or Cummings) deviates from the

¹⁰ The argument developed in the book, surprisingly, is contemporaneous to Schklovsky’s theory of “defamiliarization”—in the sense that the Russian Formalists also strongly rejected imagist theories of poetry, the idea of poetry as image.

norm and tradition and advances deeper thought and linguistic experiences. Therefore, and paradoxically, modernist poetry in the sense defined by Riding and Graves is timeless. "It is always important to distinguish between what is historically new in poetry because the poet is contemporary with a civilization of a certain kind, and what is intrinsically new in poetry because the poet is a new and original individual" (*Survey* 163). This poetry, moreover, is marked, symptomatically, by its urge not only to defamiliarize language and its conventions but its willingness to assume some degree of difficulty, as well as "*a concentration on the poetic process itself*" (115, italics mine). A poem is not only explained as being "a newly created thought-activity" (*Ibid.* 118), but one that has the virtue of being explained better if taken in its own right of being, unparaphrasable. As would become more explicit in their examples of close readings, the language-centredness of Riding and Graves's approach is implicit in this phrase: "The ideal modernist poem is its own clearest, fullest and more accurate meaning" (*Ibid.*). By rejecting the belief in a specific style or "mask," or a specific manner of writing poems, or in poetry as necessarily being a written response to a historical circumstance, they placed emphasis on the humanist problem of language itself. This is what makes the book symptomatic of modernism itself while it approximates Riding's research to that of Ludwig Wittgenstein, at least if we understand modernism to be, as Charles Bernstein rightly observes, "a break from various ideas about narrative and description to a focus on the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the medium that implicitly challenges any idea of language as having one particular 'natural' mode of discourse" (*Poetics* 94).

Even more importantly, the lesson that comes from *A Survey* is that the force of modernist poetry lies in its "independence, in its relying on none of the traditional devices of poetry-making in the past nor on any of the artificial effects to be got by using the atmosphere of contemporary life and knowledge to startle or give reality" (179). For the

modernist poet, each poem becomes a process of discovery, the recording of a struggle to make meaning and, if necessary, to invent new ones. A great part of modern poetry, on the other hand, was too tied to the etymological meaning of “modo” (just now); it was a poetry that suffered too much from what we might call *Zeitgeist* anxiety. It wanted too much to be contemporaneously accepted, up-to-date with the artistic fashions. The modernist poetry the book argues for has the task of finding new values for the human being by putting language to a test. This poetry consciously defies ideas of “style” and “readership,” since it sees this idea as tied to bourgeois notions of achieving popularity, of poetry as a kind of new commodity in the modern market. And, against the impersonal theory of Eliot, they quote Emily Dickinson as an example of an independent poet who belongs to no movement “and whose *personal reality* pervades her work” (122, my emphasis).

In short, modernist poetry, according to Riding and Graves, had nothing to do with the desire of being modern, or up-to-date, nor with being a new version of a tradition (as in the new version of Symbolism and Romanticism they saw present in Imagism and Georgianism), nor a neo-classical reflection of the *Zeitgeist* pure and simply, as modern poetry (Eliot, Pound, Auden, H. D.) claimed to be.¹¹ Riding and Graves rejected Eliot’s view of tradition as an overpowerful presence haunting the poet’s mind, one in which the “really new” works are those that can best fit in the shelves of Tradition (or “the mind of Europe,” as Eliot also defines it). *A Survey* neither subscribes to the Poundian assumptions that poetry’s central aim is “to present an Image,” nor to his famous modernist slogan “make it new,” since the authors thought that this discourse dangerously brought about the permanence of a given tradition, with the poet becoming the incarnation of a new authority. As Riding would write in a late essay, “Literary ‘news’ is a commodity practically

¹¹ In fact, Riding’s rejection of the *Zeitgeist* is a clear response to Eliot’s understanding of history, with his view that the poet is bound to his age. As we have seen in “Tradition and Individual Talent”, for Eliot “tradition” is a matter of historical sense, “which we may call nearly indispensable to any one who would continue to be a poet” (*Essays* 4).

identical with literary 'history'; literary 'history is a commodity practically identical with literary 'news'" ("Literary News" 664). Against Eliot's credo, Riding and Graves believed that poetry should rely less on the idea of a tradition and be more workable if understood as a mode of investigation, and as an ever immediate reality confirmed afresh and independently in each new work, rather than as a continuously sustained tradition:

The real task is, in fact, not to explain modernism in poetry but to separate false modernism, or faith in the immediate, the new doings of poems (or poets or poetry) as not necessarily derived from history. Modernist poetry as such should mean no more than fresh poetry, more poetry, poetry based on honest invention rather than on conscientious imitation of the time-spirit. (*Survey* 158)

Poetry, therefore, should be written less with an eye on tradition and more with an eye on language uses, and on language itself, less emphasis on the final product and more on the process.

In this ground-breaking book, Riding and Graves were, in fact, suggesting alternative ways of opening the map of poetic possibilities, and in this sense closely following the modernist impulse described by Rothenberg and Joris, "acting off a new permission to write a poetry freshly invented—reinvented—in each succeeding poem" (*Millennium* 5). Although I disagree with the book's argument that Pound and the imagists did not discover new and fully modernist values, the book itself is indicative, as a whole, of the diverging (political, artistic, ethical) views occurring at the height of modernism. A great dose of courage and spirit of adventure were necessary to propose a map of modernist poetry while it was still in formation. And, contra Eysteinsson and Calinescu, I believe that, on the one hand, far from merely despising or criticizing the poetry of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, and Edna Vincent Millay, and on the other hand, far from endorsing the emerging canonical positions then being configured, the book was taking its stance while being also critically aware of the "construction" of modernism as a

matrix of competing and complex discourses. In the case of Pound and Eliot, the authors of *A Survey* also saw the wish, from the part of these trends of modernism, to regulate literary history in such a way that a determined idea of “order” passed as “natural.”

Writing retrospectively on *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, Riding complains about the easy rejection of the term—modernist—by contemporary critics to define a tendency in the poetic activity of that period, arguing that the critics forget that the issue was already approached in her and Graves’s survey of 1927. She defends the term modernist, “as an appropriate characterization of the stir of consciousness, in the poets of the first quarter of the century, of a new time-setting, and of the effort this induced to assure a marked difference in the poetic literature that bred itself in it from that of the preceding century. The term had no other function than the identification of this development” (“Engaging” 21).

CHAPTER 3

LAURA RIDING'S POETICS

Poetics is the continuation of poetry by other means.

(*A Poetics* 160)

Introduction

Charles Bernstein's parody (quoted above) of the famous assertion made by Clausewitz ("politics is the continuation of war by other means") is an appropriate provocation to begin this chapter. It suggests that what is usually called "the poetic" is not merely isolated in its specific feature—the poem—but also embodied in the reading process, in the way one approaches poetry, thinks, and writes about it. Nevertheless, a poetics only proves itself coherent or contradictory by the success or failures achieved in the poems actually written by a given poet.

To speak of Laura Riding's poetics is to speak of the rigorous set of linguistic and ethical principles she posited to herself throughout her long literary career. First, let us consider what Riding meant by the word *poetry* and how she defined it before and even after renouncing it in 1941; besides, what roles and functions did she assign to the art of language? I also mean the verbal strategies implicit in the poems themselves and her unique approach to words; finally, how did she write and why she wrote the way she did? Even the prefaces Riding found indispensable to write to accompany her books point out to this necessity of precisely and consistently defining the terms of her poetics.

Second, her method of reading poetry—expounded in several essays and books (*Anarchism Is Not Enough* and *Contemporaries and Snobs*), but mainly the method of close

scrutiny she devised in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*—are keys to the understanding of her poetics and her poems. And, in my view, her poetics opens the possibility of thinking about countermodernisms being articulated then, ones that vanished in the official accounts of literary history. As Barbara Adams rightly pointed out, “Riding’s early essays also provide the keys to her own practice of writing poetry. The reciprocity between theory and poetic performance increases our understanding of both, and shows how Riding cut against the main currents of her contemporaries, bypassing Imagism, Eliotian traditionalism and Stein’s abstract painterly manner of expression” (*The Enemy* 26). I not only agree with Adams, but also think that it seems at least a fair thing to do, when dealing with Riding’s work, to try to apply the method she herself developed to read her own poems.

Thirdly, it is important to mention that her poetics never forgets the readers. On the contrary, it provokes and challenges them, while envisioning them as partners in the experience of poetry, as producers, and not only as passive receptors. Riding was aware of the role of the reader, but was critical of the traditional roles and conventional expectations circulated by a literary tradition that refused to take seriously poets like Cummings and Stein, and of the common rejection of poetic texts based on their “unintelligibility.” Or, as Riding and Graves posited: “[m]uch of the so-called obscurity of poems was created by the laziness of the plain reader, who wishes to hurry through poetry as quickly as he does through prose, not realizing that he is dealing with *a kind of thought* which, though it may have the speed of prose to the poetry, he must follow with a slowness proportionate to how much he is not a poet” (*Survey* 149, emphasis added). Despite the arrogant tone of this last remark, which seems more a provocation, what the authors were saying still holds true in the context of poetry in the end of the twentieth century. The idea of poetry, generally speaking, is so much tied with Romantic assumptions about the poem as the true voice of feeling, or the poem as an emotional

transcription of a beautiful scene, a confession, that to ask readers to think (a bit more than they are used to) seems to be asking too much. In a capitalist world, where everything is disposable, wasted and consumed, and where the media frequently treats poetry not only as an endangered species but as just another kind of entertainment—an exotic branch of the cultural industry—“difficulty” is the last thing the reader wants to face.¹ Poetry, Riding and Graves were proposing, was to be seen as a “kind of thought,” a kind of language that asked more from the reader than was the case in more conventional forms of writing or in everyday uses.

The linguistic peculiarity of poetry in relation to other discourses was also remarked by Ludwig Wittgenstein at about the same time, when he pointed out: “Remember that a poem, even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information” (*Zettel* 27). The challenge of Riding’s poetics is to deny the apparent transparency of language in poetic discourse, by focusing on the notion of text, in how we use language, on what words are and how they mean. Riding sees the text in front of one’s eyes as a performative, nonfixed, and open activity. A poem is some thing to be “rewritten” by the reader, and not simply read, as we more traditionally consider this experience. “If you write,” she says, “write *writing-matter*, not *reading-matter*” (*Anarchism* 20). That is why I believe that in many important aspects her work advances questions that would be later addressed by reception-theory and the poststructuralism of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida.

Besides, the relationship between language, poetry, and truth occupies a great part of her career as a thinker and writer of poetry. Or, as she retrospectively writes, in 1939, the year of the outbreak of World War II: “No poet other than myself in my time has cared

¹ Riding and Graves blame, with a prophetic note, not only the reader but also poetry itself for this situation (i.e. 1927): “By domesticating itself in order to be received into the homes of the ordinary reading public and by allowing its teeth to be drawn so that it would no longer frighten, poetry had grown so tame, so dull, that it has ceased to compete with other forms of social entertainment, specially with the new religion of sport” (*A Survey* 110).

about poetry, language, and truth, in one integrated caring" ("Some Notes" 22). From the beginning, Riding discussed poetry more from a humanistic viewpoint than from an artistic, merely stylistic one. Her suspicion of many modernist "styles" being developed at the time raises political questions such as: Can forms also be ideologically used to impose one's "techniques" on the reader? Isn't the profusion of modernist styles and the search for "the new," in many ways, a reflex of commodity in the realm of poetry?

In the later part of her career, mainly in *The Telling*, Riding achieved a sort of styleless style. The goal of her linguistic utopia was to capture the "voiceless language" she addresses in "The Wind, The Clock, The We" (*Poems* 181). Thus, her counteraesthetic view of the question of poetry and language differs in important ways from the New Critics (as well as from Pound and Eliot, for that matter). In Riding, the dialogic nature of language (its ethics) always precedes its formal features (its aesthetics). Her creed in poetry as a way of unconcealing truth—which is close to Heidegger's philosophy—was always more determinant than its craft. As we shall see, she would come to the belief that the formal, esthetical elements of poetry (its artifice) were not only blocking her ideal of reaching truth through language but also had become, in fact, the main reason for her rejection of poetry. Language, as human utterance, came before poetry in Riding's poetics.

Due to what has been advanced above, it is at least curious to consider a remark made by Laura (Riding) Jackson in a private letter to Michael Trotman (April 19, 1986): "...what you call my 'aesthetic.' I do not have one. I do not have views on what is called that, as on what is called 'poetics'" (Box 47, Fol. 1). Her problem with the term, I think, is due to the connotations of literary systematization and aestheticism that she rejected. It is in this peculiar resistance to be absorbed by the literary system and its politics, in the attacking on art as an institution (Bürger), in writing a poetry following her own beliefs and rejecting ideas of order and tradition, wherein lies the avant-garde element in Riding's modernism.

However, against (Riding) Jackson, I would argue that every poet has a poetics, even if one claims to have none. It seems contradictory for someone who asked to be read as a whole—poetry, story, and criticism—to deny the reader the right to see how and if the parts fit together. I believe that, even if a poet does not voice or write about the poet's own practice, a poetics is inscribed in the very “flesh” of the poems themselves—and in the differences or sameness among one another. A poetics is inscribed in the assembly of one's personal strategies and themes, in the peculiarities of diction and style; it is present in statements and interviews as well as in one's characteristic ways of wording the world. In short, a poetics is identifiable if we take poetry as *poiesis*: the actual making of poems, as well as in one's personal approach to language. That is evidently Riding's case: few modernists have written and thought about poetry with more passion and coherence. From 1925 until a few months before her death, in 1991, Riding consistently wrote essays, letters, and books on the triadic subject of truth-poetry-language. Moreover, she maintained extensive literary exchanges on these subjects with many of her contemporaries, including Robert Graves, James Reeves, and Gertrude Stein. I believe that the poems she left present more than enough clues to trace a poetics, a distinct and original way of thinking about poetry and writing. “I do not write poems about theory,” she remarked in a letter to the poet James Reeves dated March 6th, 1933: “what may look like theory is an immediate—gradually immediate—adjustment of intrinsic location” (#6304, Box 1, K-110-J-2-A). Finally, it is also important to study how she read her contemporaries and her critique of contemporary poetry throughout her career.

In this chapter, I attempt to demonstrate that Laura Riding not only had a clear and distinct poetics, but that her poetics stands as one of the most extreme and paradoxical stances of Anglo-American modernist poetry, to the point of abandoning the writing of poetry altogether because of the radicalness of her project. She performs that difficult task of making theory an extension of practice and vice versa, to paraphrase Charles Bernstein.

Notoriously, from 1941 on, when she starts signing her name as Laura (Riding) Jackson (so as to make clear that her activity as a poet was a thing of the past), she rejected the writing of poems and began to devote her energies to the study of the nature of language (an anti-Saussurean dictionary of “rational meaning”). She came to believe—as in the “Preface” written in 1970 for a book of selected poems—that “truth begins where poetry ends” (*Selected Poems* 15). As I shall also attempt to demonstrate, Laura (Riding) Jackson ended up constructing a polemical antipoetics that in many ways conflicts with Laura Riding’s notion of poetry as the redemption of language.

What one can surely say is that few poets in this century have pushed to such a limit the idea of a poem being a performance of language (directed by the embodied mind). In a late statement Riding explained that her development as a poet “followed a gradual enlargement of the scene of thought” (*Rational* 448). Assuming the risks of all radical poetics,² Riding considered poetry’s goal as simply to reach truth,³ to attain a higher level of existence and human communication. Her view of poetry and language is highly philosophical, something that places her work in the timeless debate regarding the relationship and differences between poetry and philosophy, from Plato to Heidegger. Writing her poems and essays unaware of the lines of thought that were being explored around the same time by Heidegger, Riding brought back a view of poetry as an exploratory activity and the utmost form of human utterance that makes possible the uncovering of important human realities. Poetry, more than being a mere vehicle to express feelings or to capture the contemporary *Zeitgeist*, more than as a fanciful description of reality, should be able not only to reassociate feeling and thought, but to

² I call it radical because, as the word *radice* etymologically implies, the question of language is at the *root* of her poetics. This attitude places her in the “revolution of the word” implicit in the avant-garde projects as well in the general project of modernism (Joyce, Pound, and Stein).

³ As she writes in the original 1938 preface of *Collected Poems*: “A poem is an uncovering of truth of so fundamental and general kind that no other name besides poetry is adequate except truth [...] Truth is the result when reality as a whole is uncovered by those faculties which apprehend in

achieve, in language, “a deep and deeper thinking” (*Survey* 161) accessible to all. At the level of her poetics, verifying whether or not she succeeded in overcoming the dissociation of sensibility diagnosed by Eliot in the contemporary scene is one of the tasks undertaken in this chapter.

Mindsight

The first text in which Riding clearly advances a poetics is “A Preface or a Plea” (1925). Written when she was 24, it was her first published essay, and it reads as an ambitious manifesto. In its polemic tone and its positionings, the essay managed to attack simultaneously Romantic, Victorian, expressionist, impressionist, and even modern theories of poetry.

Riding begins with the basic affirmation that “the most distressing event in the life of a human being is his discovery that he is alive” (*First Awakenings* 275). It is this basic knowledge—of being both body and mind at the same time—that defines us as human beings. From the metaphor between life in darkness and life in daylight—echoing Plato’s allegory of the cave—Riding then defines two main poetic attitudes that the poet and the reader may assume: the first one approaches life (as well as poetry) as “an evocation of the shadows” (275). In this attitude, art and poetry are turned into a form of escapism or relief. The constant light of reality—sometimes too painful to endure—forces human beings to close their eyes to it, either in musing, sleeping, or fantasizing. In this attitude towards reality, poetry becomes a drug or a medicine, alienating the poet and the reader from themselves. This is what Riding sees as wrong with the tradition of English poetry: too much faith in the “imagination” (or in the “unconsciousness,” as in the modernist period) and too little faith in reality, in the actual facts and moments of one’s existence. In

terms of entirety, rather than in terms merely of part” (*Poems* 407).

short, poetry had to “wake up.” The problem of poetry, then, she argues, is that

For the poets of the classic mold it is a strong cathartic that keeps them free from the malaise and dyspepsia and wraps them in an urbane pastoral Horacian peace; for the Elizabethan, a pretty pastoral constitutional; for all the romantics, a drug—a stimulant for Byron, a delicious dose of laudanum for Shelley, [...] a soothing syrup for the Victorians; a tonic for the realists; a heady wine for the impressionists; a profound emetic for the expressionists. In this strange company [...] the poetic tradition accomplishes the vitiation of life in art. (276)

The rejection of poetry as stated above calls for a different attitude from the poet, one of total awareness of the broad light, therefore arguing for a poetics of consciousness, of awareness. Poetry had to be practiced less as a dream (no surrealism), a relief or a safety valve, and more as the investigation of the very conditions of the awakened experience, of thought. Riding sensed that poets had historically relied too much in the unconscious at the expense of leaving consciousness largely unexplored. Her goal is “to actually map the fullness of thought and its movement,” as Charles Bernstein discusses the embodiment of thinking in the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, René Descartes, Samuel Beckett, Louis Zukofsky and Robert Creeley, among others (“Thought’s Measure” 70). The art of poetry, in some sense, became too confessional, a form of escapism. Riding condemns the Aristotelian description of poetry and art as catharsis, as a move away from reality (consciousness, the realm of light), into the realm of illusion, of commodification.⁴ That is why she rejects the trade anthologies of poetry, which treat poetry, in her view, “as a commodity destined to instructional, narcotic, patriotic, religious, humorous and other household uses” (*A Pamphlet* 26). In this process, she believed that poets and readers

⁴ In the *Poetics*, Aristotle refers to catharsis as the purgation of the emotions in artistic reception, as if exposure to an affective work of art could cause imbalance of the passions or psychological distress. Catharsis can be understood in the medical sense (as purgation of a stress), in a moral sense (a way to learn with the tragic piety), as well as in a hedonistic sense (man feels pleasure when attending to mimetic works of art, as in a play).

became passive receptors, submissive to the Muse (be it called History, Politics, or Religion), rather than active inceptors, makers of meaning. On the other hand, she saw modern poets falling easily into the temptation of transforming themselves into muses, for a public avid for novelties, styles, scandals, tragedies.

In "A Preface or a Plea" Riding seems to retake Plato's allegory of the cave to criticize the Aristotelian theory of art as mere catharsis, which she identified in late Romantic, Victorian, symbolist, and modern poetry. What she wanted was to reformulate our relationship to life and to redirect our attitude towards the art of language. Poetry had to be more than merely mimetic, the translation of a sensation or the depiction of an image; poetry had the task of creating a new human reality by pressing meaning into language. Poetry, thus, becomes an act of criticism: "I am insisting that the pressure is a challenge not to a retreat into the penumbra of introspection but to the birth of a new poetic bravery that shall exchange insight for *outsight* and envisage life not as an influence upon the soul but the soul as an influence upon life" (*First Awakenings* 276, emphasis added). In a line close to certain passages in Sir Philip Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry," the poet is seen not only as a vessel of a content that exists outside, in the world, but as creator of meaning, a shaper of a new reality. The poet had to become again the ignition of language, of awakened visions, rather than merely a translator of forces and things that are outside him. The formula "know thyself" is an imperative for Riding's view of the poet's task. For the poet of *outsight* (or *mindsight*), poetry turned out to be the leading and critical force in relation to reality: she praises poetry as a form of knowledge higher than philosophy or science:

But the function of the poet, of the poetic mind, is inductive rather than deductive.

Life needs proving in poetry as well as in science. Philosophy is but a compromise between fact and fancy. The poet of a new spiritual activity admits neither. He, the

human impulse, is the only premise. He is the potter. He is the maker of beauty, since all form originates in him, and of meaning, since he names the content. Life is created with him. The poetry of this mood will have still the wonder, still the exaltation. But the wonder will proceed not from the accidental contacts with a life that comes to us as a visitation but from *a sense of self* that adventures so steadfastly, so awarely beyond it that its discoveries have the character of creation and the eternal element of self-destiny. (*First Awakenings* 279, my emphasis)

Riding's humanist and demiurgic approach echoes Sidney's defense: "For Poesy, must not be drawn by the ears; it must be gently led, or, rather, it must lead" (259). As a distinct form of knowledge, poetry has a moral role to perform: that of being a molder of the human mind. It has, therefore, a formative function. As a maker, according to Sidney, "only the poet, disdain[ing] to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect of another Nature, in making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in Nature" (Ibid. 221).

Thus, reformulating stances "taken from" Plato, Sidney, Whitman, Blake ("Thought is Act") and Arnold (poetry as "criticism of life"), Riding builds an alternative poetics, a modernist approach to the poetic state of mind in which poets, as, potentially, any human beings, again appear as possessing the divine power of naming, of recreating a new reality through language. The key concept of Riding's manifesto is *outsight* (or *mindsight*), which can be summed up as *poetry's power to affect the outside world rather than being affected by it* (what happens in an insight⁵). The poet must not be satisfied in simply translating reality, but in pressing meaning upon it. It is through one's language uses, one's naming, thinking—with and through language—that the world acquires meaning. Thus, *outsight* (or *mindsight*) refers to thought's negotiation with language and the world; the mapping of consciousness designed by the movement of the words in the poem—"a thing apart, atom by atom in a

⁵ In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *insight* refers more commonly to the privilege of seeing—the

recreated universe of its own” (*First Awakenings* 279)—in their full attempt to pressure meaning upon reality.⁶ The poet must behave, as Riding’s Whitmanesque metaphor of the modernist poet suggests, as a courageous pioneer entering a new territory, and that is why the poet’s attitude may be seen as a little difficult and rude. Thus, the result of this process is that the poet

may be more difficult because more metaphysical since he is preoccupied chiefly with *meaning, but a meaning inevitably rhythmical and poetical*⁷ since it is *a barren life reborn*, touched and shaded with accent, inflamed with his own soul and molded into a temporary or an eternal form that is a symbol of peace and *reconciliation between the inner nature of man and the external world without him* (280, emphasis added).

The ideal modernist poem, one would conclude, becomes thus a “brave new world” to be reshaped by the hands of the maker and by the mind in its most awakened state. This negotiation between mind and reality, nature and human nature, as well as the relationship between thought and feeling, poetry and thinking, is at the core of Riding’s exploratory poetics and of her most important poems, as we will be demonstrated in Chapter 4. As “mindscapes,” Riding’s poems become verbal places where thought and language aim at becoming one.

Open R(ea)iding

As we have seen in Chapter 1, in their greatest contribution to modernist poetics, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, Laura Riding and Robert Graves were eager to defend modernist poetry from the common accusation of what could be called “difficulty for difficulty’s

notion of internal sight— while Riding’s mindsight privileges thinking.

⁶ Thus, the concept of mindsight or oversight is directly connected with the concept of her poems as mindscapes, as I develop in Chapter 4.

⁷ Note that Riding’s affirmation that poetic meaning is “inevitably rhythmical” contradicts (Riding) Jackson’s attack on the craft of poetry.

sake.” In this seminal book, they devise a method of analyzing poems to counter the common complaint directed at Riding’s poems and those of other modernists—of being purposefully obscure. Riding and Graves begin by arguing that what happens is that the “plain reader,” more commonly, is unprepared or unwilling to face the differences in form and content posed by modernist poetry in relation to the more traditional and accepted modes of poetry (those, for instance, heavily grounded on the idea of language as transparent vehicle pointing to reality, on the language of everyday speech, metrical patterns, symbolism, conventional metaphors, rhymes, and subjects). In order to understand poetry, they argue, the reader must be open in order to assume a more participative, less passive and less conventional attitude in relation to what he reads. In short, he is invited to use his intelligence, and to be open to interact with what he is reading. Poetry is not a one-way activity, but always a transitive act, a transaction. The reader must realize that to read a poem is not the same thing as reading a newspaper (or, translated to the contemporary leisure, as watching TV), that a poem forces the reader to pay close attention to how language makes meaning in a way that one does not find in other activities or in everyday experiences. “To go to poetry is the most ambitious act of the mind” (410), Riding writes in the preface of *Collected Poems*. One cannot merely rush over the words of a poem and say that one just does not understand it.

Poetry, being a form of knowledge (or “of life”, as Wittgenstein would say) requires close attention. In the act of reading a poem we cannot limit ourselves to the reception of its “message,” its morale, only to what is being said; we also have to mind *how* things are being said, how language is being used, and to what ends. Poetry invites the reader to hear the sound of language, to follow the fabrication of meaning. Reading and writing poetry become, in this process, critical activities. As Steve Birkenes defines it: “To close-read a poem is, in part, to create a receptivity, a silence in yourself so that the work can leave an impression. [...] The goal of close reading might be stated as follows: to hear the language

of the poem as intensely as the poet heard it in the process of composition” (*Electric Life* 91). This is exactly Riding and Graves’s goal in *A Survey*: to point out that readers have a greater responsibility for the making of meaning than they previously supposed. And, in the case of modernist poetry, readers are frequently asked not only to create unexpected links, but also to fill in the gaps left by the type of poems written by modernist poets. The reader must, somehow, be the poet’s partner in the making of meaning. In these formulations, I believe, Riding and Graves were strikingly predating Barthes’s concepts of “writerly” and “readerly” texts.

Barthes distinguishes the traditional text by the effects it has on its readers: the text of pleasure (*lisible*) and the text of bliss (*escriptible*). The first one “contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it.” And Barthes identifies the second as the modern text, that “imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts, [...] unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language” (*Pleasure* 14). And, in *S/Z*:

Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user, between its owner and its consumer, between its author and its reader. The reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness—he is intransitive; he is, in short, serious: instead of functioning himself, instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or to reject. (4)

Decades before, in *A Survey*, Riding and Graves took a poem by Cummings to prove exactly the points made by Roland Barthes in the 1970s. Arguing for a new method of reading poems while aiming at proving why a new method was necessary, they ended up

not only scattering the seeds of the future practice of close reading, but also advanced experiments that Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels call “deformative reading.”⁸ To illustrate the method, Riding and Graves take “Sunset,” a poem included in the popular *Anthology of Modern American Poetry*, organized by Louis Untermeyer:

SUNSET

stinging

golden swarms

upon the spires

silver

chants the litanies the

great bells are ringing with rose

the lewd fat bells

and a tall

wind

is dragging

the

sea

with

⁸ In “Deformance and Interpretation,” Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels develop the method of deformative reading. Quoting Emily Dickinson’s suggestion that poems should also be read backwards, they develop alternative tools for the reading of poems, in which “theory is a subordinated relation to practice.” In this type of reading, the poem is rewritten or presented in alternative versions (backwards, without all nouns, only with verbs, edited, translated into another language etc.). “Such a model,” they stress, “brings attention to areas of the poetic and artifactual media that usually escape our scrutiny.” (7) I will apply this method of “deformative reading” in

dream

-S

Proceeding with their close reading of the poem, Riding and Graves begin by focusing on the formal differences of the poem from traditional poetry, even though its subject is a common one, a sunset by the sea. First, they call attention to the disposition of the poem on the page: there is no respect for regular lineation (and none but one line begins with capital letters). Second, the poem does not follow conventional punctuation. The so-called description of a sunset is presented fragmentarily rather than in a logical sequence. The poem is made up of a great deal of disjunctions (heightened by verbal play) that reject the logic of cause and effect. Metrics is wholly rejected. Third, its grammar does not present the connections that would make the poem more coherent and intelligible: connectives and other words are “missing.” Thus, to understand the poem the reader has to fill in more gaps than he is used to in conventional poetry.

For the sake of their argument, and inviting us to imagine Cummings’s poem as if it were a skeleton of a prehistoric specimen or a dilapidated papyrus, they propose to rewrite “Sunset” in a more traditional way, in order to make it more intelligible for what they call “the plain reader.” It is as if the poem had to be reconstructed to get to a sense of what the author had originally in mind, his so-called intention. They were able to identify a striking intertextual reference to Gourmont’s symbolist poem *Litanies de la Rose*.⁹ They also

Chapter 4.

⁹ Here are some parts of the prose-poem *Litanies de la Rose* translated by Richard Aldington (I have placed italics to indicate images and words that also appear in Cummings’s poem): “Hypocritical flower. Flower of silence.[...] *Rose* the colour of pure *gold*. O treasure-chest of the ideal, rose of the colour of pure gold, give us the key of your ideal body, hypocritical flower, flower of silence. Rise the colour of *silver*, *censer of our dreams*, rose the colour of silver, take our hearts and *turn them to smoke* [...] *Dawn-coloured* rose, colour of the *sky*, colour of nothing, O smile of the sphinx, dawn-coloured

observed the presence of heavy alliteration in *s*, which is again stressed in the last line and isolated, thus giving us a clue to the context and setting of the poem. The first word, *stinging*, suggests a sharp feeling—like the sting of a bee—an image reinforced by the presence of the word *swarms*, and by the *s* and *z* sounds of the first lines. The word *silver* brings the idea of coldness, contrasting with the idea of hotness suggested by the words *golden* and inscribed in *swarms*. *Silver*, they suggest, stands for water (sea, a word which appears near the end of the poem), as *golden* for the warm light of the sun. Now we have a definite setting: a sunset by the sea, whose sound is even more emphasized by the final capitalized *S*, which reconnects, full circle, with the first letter of the title. A heavy rhyming pattern, supposedly “lost” in the original poem—suggested by words such as *swinging* and *ringing*—is reestablished by being applied to other words in the poem: *seas* / *bees*, *bells* / *swells*, and *spires* / *fires*.

Now, Riding and Graves are able to reconstruct the (theoretically) original poem by using the words suggested by Cummings’s “incomplete” version. Here is their example of the original hypothetical poem Cummings should have written if he were a traditional and not a modernist poet (I will add italics to words that more or less belong to the original poem):

SUNSET PIECE

After reading Rémy de Gourmont

1 White foam and vesper wind embrace.

rose, smile opening upon nothingness. [...] Cup-shaped rose, red vase [...] Green rose, sea-coloured rose, O navel of the *sirens*, green rose, *wavering* and fabulous rose, you are nothing but *water* as soon as a finger has touched you [...] our *bites* make you smile and our kisses make you weep. [...] Crimson rose, O sumptuous autumn *sunsets*. [...] you are nothing but *water* as soon as a finger has touched you [...] you make the great eyes of the mignons *dream* and more than one will *pin* you in the knot of his garter [...] *Papal rose*, rose watered by the hands that bless the world, *papal rose*, and the tears imperaled upon your vain corolla are the tears of Christ, hypocritical flower. The tears of

- 2 The salt air *stings* my dazzled face
 3 And *sunset* flecks the *silvery seas*
 4 With glints of *gold* like *swarms* of bees
 5 And lifts tall *dreaming spires* of light
 6 To the imaginary sight,
 7 So that I hear loud mellow *bells*
 8 Swinging as each great wave swells,
 9 Wafting God's perfumes on the breeze,
 10 And *chanting* of sweet *litanies*
 11 Where jovial monks are on their knees,
 12 Bell-paunched and lifting *glutton* eyes
 13 To windows *rosy* as these skies.
- 14 And this slow *wind*—how can my *dreams* forget—
 15 *Dragging the waters* like a fishing-net.

What is the point of this exercise of rewriting a modernist and difficult poem such as cummings's? The authors explain: "This version shows that cummings was bound to write the poem as he did in order to prevent it from becoming what we have made it. To write a new poem on an old subject like sunset and avoid all the obvious poetical formulas the poet must write in a new way if he is to evoke any fresh response in his readers at all" (17).

If poetry is "aversion of conformity in the pursuit of new forms," as Bernstein claims, Riding and Graves's election of cummings (as well as of Stein and Hopkins) as radical modernist is illustrative of the authors' acute awareness of the political aspects of poetic form. That is, as Bernstein explains, "on the ways that the formal dynamics of a poem shape its ideology; more specifically, how radically innovative poetic styles can have

political meanings. In what way do choices of grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and narrative reflect ideology?" (*The Politics* vii). By playing with conventions, as Riding and Graves have demonstrated in their analysis of Stein and Cummings, it is possible to criticize traditional and passive attitudes toward poetic forms. As Bernstein reminds us, when we consider the conventions of writing, we enter into the politics of language (Ibid. 235). In poetry, conventions put limits in what can or cannot be experienced. They create discourses.

The fact to be observed is that the rewritten poem offers less challenges to the reader than the original one. In order to make the poem, supposedly, clearer for the reader, Riding and Graves had to de-modernize it, peppering it with literary reminiscences or intertexts (Romantic *imaginary sight*), as well as a more familiar Catholic symbolism (*God's perfume for rose, rosy window, jovial monks on their knees*), and stock phrases (*vesper winds, silver seas, white foam*). They also had to tie the freedom that the words have in the original, their relative autonomy, to an artificial end-rhyme scheme, in order to produce a more commonsensical poetical pattern: a fifteen-line sonnet!

Naturally, much was lost in this process of rewriting. Riding and Graves noted the powerful silences suggested by the white spaces surrounding the words in the original poem (acting as musical intervals), as well as the almost graphic use of the alliteration *s* of the original (concentrated, significantly, in the final *S*-, functioning as a structural emblem of the whole poem). These graphic and visual features are attenuated and almost disappear (by their very redundancy) in the new, "readerly" version. Moreover, the links between words that are left to the reader to make in the original poem (like *stinging / gold swarms*) and "wind / is / dragging / the / sea / with / dream // -S" are now imposed, too easily "explained" by similes ("glints of gold *like* swarms of bees," "dragging the waters *like* a fishing-net."). In short, in Riding and Graves's precursor exercise of a "writerly reading," in their "translation," the original poem lost its peculiar characteristics. Its force and concision as a piece of language, its compactness, was regretfully lost in their experiment.

Many superfluous words had to be introduced in order to make the poem supposedly more intelligible, accessible to the reader. The conclusion they arrive at, in the context of a book whose title is *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, is that “poems must in the future be written in the cummings way if poetry is not to fall to pieces altogether” (19). They take cummings’s iconoclastic attitude as an example of independence and experimentation to be followed by anyone willing to write poems. The poet had to invent his own language, to make things a little difficult for the reader, and not to follow preestablished patterns canonized by tradition, even if one runs the risk of being accused of being freakish or bizarre. Thus, what Riding and Graves are proposing is something suggested by Lisa Samuels: a reversal of Shelley’s claim that poetry “helps us ‘imagine that which we know,’ showing instead how poetry can help us *imagine what we don’t know*” (ii). To make things easier for the reader, as Riding and Graves have demonstrated, is to allow being absorbed by the conventional forms established by the dominant culture; it is to surrender too easily to the authority of a tradition.

Chapter 3 of *A Survey* extends the problems posed by the rewriting of cummings’s poem and represents a hallmark of modernist literary criticism. It is also the chapter that, as we have seen, William Empson took as a model (according to himself) for the method of textual criticism developed in his famous *Seven Types of Ambiguities*. As a painstaking analysis of Riding and Graves reading of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129 (“Th’expense of Spirit in a waste of shame”) would take too much space, I would like to sum up what is achieved by it. In sixteen pages, the authors compare the significant differences between what is assumed to be closest to the original quarto (a manuscript of 1609) and the one circulated in modern anthologies such as *The Oxford Book of English Verse*. Proceeding through a detailed analysis of the sonnet, they prove how much the attempt to modernize Shakespeare—through repunctuation and change in spelling—had the effect of losing much of the force and richness of Shakespeare’s original (the same, of course, occurred

with the editing of Emily Dickinson's poems). It was from the reading of this book and the authors' analysis of Shakespeare's sonnet that William Empson formulated his definition of ambiguity.

In the reading of Shakespeare's piece, Riding and Graves went the other way around: if with Cummings's poem they showed how a traditional rewriting of a modernist poem has a damaging effect on the force of the original, now they demonstrated how the attempt to "modernize" traditional or classic texts caused similar damage on the clearness and force of the original, mainly, a damage for the richness of meaning of the original text. The goal of this experimental reading of Shakespeare's sonnet was to prove the point established earlier in the reading of "Sunset": that the meaning of each word is the basic structural element of poetry. That to alter a single word in the poem is to compromise the poem's individuality and structural unity, and even other possibilities of interpretation. With the experiment, they argued that using an unedited text and paying close attention to every feature of a poem are the basis of poetry criticism.

The Independence of the Poem

One of the key ideas presented by *A Survey*—which became, besides the book's close readings, a hallmark of New Criticism—was the stress on the independence of the poem. The organicist view of poetry was already present in Coleridge's formulations, but it reappears in 1927 to justify modernist poetics. Basically, what was stated is that poetic devices operate in an alternative logic that has to be faced in its own terms. Each part of a poem is important in order to give the whole its coherence, its organic unity. Predating by twenty years Cleanth Brooks's essay "The Heresy of Paraphrase" (1947), Riding and Graves were rejecting the belief in paraphrase as the only possible and suitable method for explicating a poem: "A prose summary," they state, "cannot explain a poem, else the poet,

if he were honest, would give the reader only a prose summary, and no poem" (*Survey* 87). The poem's content is intrinsic within its form and therefore cannot be adequately understood if we are unable to face its formal features, its meaningful levels. In dealing with several poems, the authors argue that modernist criticism should avoid the belief that one can have a better understanding of poetry merely by paraphrasing the poem and turning it into a prose statement, or merely by relying on autobiographical or contextual explanations. To do so, they argued, is to risk transforming the poem into a commodity; it is to kill its individuality as the product of a human being. It is to reduce the poem to its exchange value. Therefore, they demanded that we avoid looking for the key to the poem in the author's biography and concentrate in "the poem itself" (88).

Their pioneer textualist approach—antedating by forty years Structuralism, Poststructuralism and the Nouvelle Critique—was to defend the position that to rely mainly on paraphrase to get a sense of the poem's "message" is to avoid dealing with the language reality of the poem on the page. By paraphrasing the poem and being satisfied with it, we transform the poem's language into a mere convenience, a commodified way to interpret a reality that is supposedly outside the poem. To believe in paraphrase as the authority to the explanation of a poem is to rely on the conventional idea of language as being merely a transparent window through which we see the world, or to consider words merely as a bridge one must cross rapidly if one does not want to fall into the abyss (a criticism that reappears in "Poet: A Lying Word"). It is to limit language to its practical uses. In order to better understand Riding and Graves's line of thought, I find it useful to recall Bernstein's example between the differences of a paraphrase and the telling of a dream: "the problem is that if we try to pin 'thinking' down we project an image of it as an entity *rather than, indeed, the very content of language*. Like with a dream, the experience slips through our fingers if we try to recount it: we know that *the telling of a dream* is a quite different matter than *dreaming itself*" (*Content's* 66 my emphasis).

The original experience of reading a poem should not be translated into any other type of discourse, be it scientific, religious, autobiographical, or historical. The best reading of a poem should be another poem. The question of poetry's so-called "unparaphrasability"—which, as we saw in Chapter 2, became one of the tenets of New Criticism—is directly connected with the notion of the poem's independence from the author after it was written down. "Once the poems are 'made,'" Riding and Graves write, "[the poet's] personal activity ceases in them. They begin a life of their own toward which [the poet] has no responsibility of advertising and selling: that they reach the reader at all is an accident, an affair entirely between them and the reader. This, by the way, is not what used to be meant by 'art for art's sake'" (150). Preventing accusations of aestheticism, the commentary serves also as a sharp criticism of the poet's desire to show himself off as a special genius, or the impulse to advertise one's poetry as if it were a "new" product on the poetic market (as in the case of Imagism, in their opinion). It is undeniable here that Riding and Graves were in accord with some aspects of Eliot's theory of "impersonality," but at the expense of giving a personality *to the poem*. However, different from Eliot, Riding and Graves rejected his "historical sense" and privileged individual and personal experiences. Moreover, they did not believe in an overpowerful presence of a tradition in the poet's mind, but in the idea that each poem is governed by its own insight. The poet finds the poem's form in the process of writing it. Their view also differs from the New Critical one, for they see the poem less as a "well-wrought urn" and more as language interaction, an open-ended process. The authors of *A Survey* want to refurbish the Coleridgean idea of the poem as an autonomous organism, a "creature" made of language but who is free to have an independent life:

He [the modernist poet] does not have to describe or docket himself for the reader, because the important part of poetry is now not the personality of the poet as embodied in a poem, which is its style, *but the personality of the poem itself*, that is, its

quality of independence from both the reader and the poet, once the poet has separated it from his personality by making it complete—a *new and self-explanatory creature*. Perhaps more than anything else characteristic of modernist poetry *is a declaration of the independence of the poem*. (124, italics added)

The authors argue that this attitude is required of modernist poets if they are interested in communicating new and fresher meanings (and of the reader and critic as well, if they are willing to understand and face these meanings). It is not that the poet's personality ceases to be important, but that in order to fully appreciate poetry as the art of language we had better "let the poem take precedence over the poet" (Ibid. 131). Without relying on Eliot's idea that the poet has to sacrifice his own personality for the sake of a tradition—for what they praise in Dickinson, a poet "whose personal reality pervades her work" (Ibid. 122)—, is her independence of any movement. Riding and Graves criticized the Romantic notion of poetry as a revelation resulting from the mind of an inspired genius: they were against the Romantic obsession with the distinctive personality of the author. On the other hand, they were also attacking modernist fellows such as Pound, Stein, Yeats, and even Eliot, whom they saw as engaged in self-promotion and the cult of the self-importance of the "modernist genius." Riding and Graves asked the plain reader to put the poet aside for a moment and to concentrate on the materiality of language of the poem itself. The notion of the autonomy of the poem, thus, was a defense of poetry itself, again, not as something to be reducible to a biographical or moral summary, but as a form of knowledge of a different degree and with its own mechanisms. Poetry is a challenge that the reader might or might not be willing to overcome. In an open polemic with the reader, they bluntly argue that if the reader does not understand a poem, it is a problem he has to solve by himself:

We have forgotten, however, that the plain reader, while he does not object to the poetic state of mind in the poet, has a fear in cultivating it in himself. This is why he

prefers the prose summary to the poem and to see the poem, as it began in the poet's mind, as a genial prose idea free of those terrors which the poet is supposed to keep to himself or carefully disguise. Part of the reader's reaction to what he calls the obscurity of certain poems is really his nervous embarrassment at feeling himself left alone with the meaning of the poem itself. (Ibid. 150)

To fear the face-to-face with the poem and therefore with language is to admit one's limits. It is, at least, to recognize, as Wittgenstein famously formulated, that the limits of our language are the limits of our world. There is no way of fully enjoying the poetic phenomenon without being at the same time prepared to face its difficulties, the challenges it poses to our sensibilities, its difference from other human verbal practices, and the fact that poetry is *language in state of artifice*. By de-automatizing language, by rendering it "strange," the strategy of the modernist poet becomes to "make it difficult," in order to force the reader stop and pay attention, to witness how meaning is being constructed (or deconstructed) in a given poem. Riding and Graves believed that "*increasing the time-length of reading* is one way of getting out of prose into the poetic state of mind, of developing a capacity for minuteness, for seeing all there is to see at a given point and for taking it all with one as one goes along" (149 my emphasis). The goal of this radical poetics was nothing less than to transform language itself into the vehicle of thought (Bernstein). Or, as Riding beautifully pointed out in the poem "Earth:" "And you may write it as it seems, / And as seems, it is, / A seeming stillness / Amidst seeming speed" (44).

Interestingly enough, the argument raised by Riding and Graves described above reappears in American poetic criticism in the 1990s. In *Radical Artifice—Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (1991), Marjorie Perloff seems to be practicing exactly the defense of poetry advanced by Riding and Graves in their 1927 book. Perloff's argument is that, nowadays, with the life environment taken by technology, images, the discourses of advertising, propaganda, and the banality of the mass media, the poets that she considers as being the

most radical in contemporary America are those who are stimulated to “make it difficult,” to emphasize poetry as a radical artifice, to write against “media discourses.” Riding and Graves’s denouncing of the Romantic idea of “self” or the traditional lyric “voice,” as well as their criticism of the transformation of poetry into a commodity, seems to support Perloff’s mistrust of the idea of a “natural” language (hence their rejection of image-based poetics).

The Poem as Vacuum

Riding’s resistance to systematization and her construction of a poetics is exemplified in *Anarchism Is Not Enough* (1928), an experiment in interdisciplinary criticism that approaches questions of sexuality, canon, ideology, and poetry. As the title may suggest, in these essays Riding was defending absolute self-reliance and individual experience, in opposition to ideologies and systems of thought that impose their authority on people, be it grounded on political ideology, gender categories, or literary tradition. The book resists and rejects any form of authority that threatens human individuality. Even a specific poem, when transformed into a “thing”—that is, when canonized, institutionalized, or transformed into a commodity—must be read with suspicion.

In the short essay “What is a Poem,” Riding blames Romanticism for having caused on us an automatism, imposing as “natural” responses to a poem those solely dependent on the effects the author manages to create on the reader, “as if the duty of a poem was to give nothing but pleasure.” After the “new” Romantic Edgar Allan Poe, Riding argues, poets began to be more interested in causing effects on the readers than in delivering new experiences. By focusing solely on technique, poets were becoming masters in the art of flattery. “Mystery was replaced by science; inspiration by psychologism” (16). In this process, we got used to thinking of the poem as a thing that produces “special effects.”

This view constrained, Riding thought, the productive dialogue that exists when the poem and the reader are alone. The alternative position is to consider the poem not as a thing, a gadget programmed to produce certain results on the audience. She envisions the poem as an activity. In a kind of Buddhist solution to the problem, Riding advances the idea that a poem is not a *thing*.

What is a poem? A poem is nothing. By persistence the poem can be made something; but then it is something, not a poem. [...] It is not an effect (common or uncommon) of experience; it is *the result of an ability to create a vacuum in experience*—it is a vacuum and therefore nothing. [...]. Whenever the vacuum, the poem, occurs, there is agitation on all sides to destroy it, to convert it into something. The conversion of nothing into something is the task of criticism. Literature is the storehouse of these rescued somethings. (17, emphasis added)

The “something” Riding is referring to, as we have seen, is the paraphrase, which, by being “something,” distracts our attention from the “nothing” which is the poem. A paraphrase cannot stand in our way, impeding a more direct experience with the poem itself. Riding’s radical positioning is a reaction to the blatant psychologism dominating literary discussions at the time, with the interpretation of literature being carried from the viewpoint of a powerful “Corpus” (the canon). She was critical of the discourse on poetry that was legitimating a view of poetry that only distanced us from the real experience of language. As readers, we subject too easily to the authority of tradition and the author. Thus, in order to fully appreciate poetry, she invited the reader to rely more on his own subjectivity than in preestablished systems of order and regulations imposed from the outside, be it named Religion, Politics, or History.¹⁰

In *Anarchism*, as Riding later explained, she was arguing for self-reliance “as against reliance upon definitions of things delivered from socially constructed or philosophical

¹⁰ The ideas advanced here preview Riding’s attitude towards history and time as exemplified in the

systematized frames of authority” (“Comments on”, no page). That is why even anarchism was not enough; because anarchism makes itself into a system, it is already caught in the network of power relations. Anarchism depends on the institutions it attacks to define its own identity.

The authority of the poem and the received interpretations that emerge through the process of literary institutionalization had to be held in suspicion. We must avoid taking either the author’s “talent” or the poem’s critical interpretation for granted. The poem cannot be treated as a sacred “well-wrought urn,” or “a verbal icon.” For Riding, the independence of the poem, its existence as a “creature” made of language, and the vacuum in individual experience it creates, had to be taken into account.

From Image to Language

In *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, Riding and Graves attacked a notion which they saw as still dominating the discourse on poetry. Horace’s formula *ut pictura poesis*—that is, poetry *is* image—is translated in Imagism through the Poundian belief that “the natural object is *always* the adequate symbol” (“Retrospect” 5). Imagism aimed at clarity of expression through the use of precise visual images. Here comes the intervention of *A Survey*: the authors criticized even the modernists as relying too much on old metaphors, myths, symbols, and images canonized by the male Romantic tradition, accusing them of having transformed poetry into a mere artificial portrait of its times. To be sure, thus writes Pound in 1915: “To create new rhythms—as the *expression of new moods*” (269, italics mine). Against absorption¹¹ and figurative uses of language—against “the use of language of common speech,” as Pound defended—Riding and Graves were searching for a way to

poems discussed in Chapter 4.

¹¹ *Absorption*, as the term is used here, is connected with descriptive and realistic modes of writing, those that use transparency as their major effect, as Bernstein explains in his *Artifice of Absorption*

have language incorporate the movement of the mind, not only to represent or translate something that is “outside” language (as if such a thing could be possible).

The position outlined in *A Survey*, I believe, not only, as we have seen, advances the New Criticism, but establishes a direct connection with contemporary theoreticians such as Viktor Shklovsky. Ten years before, in his essay “Art as Technique,” the Russian Formalist criticized the creed (derived from Romanticism and Symbolism) of poetry as essentially mimetic, imagetic, and representational: “Many still believe, then, that thinking in images—thinking in specific scenes of ‘roads and landscape’ and ‘furrows and boundaries’—is the chief characteristic of poetry” (qt. in Kolocotroni, Goldamn and Taxidou 217). In the same passage of the essay, Shklovsky offered the new approach:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms *difficult*, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and *must be prolonged*. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important (Ibid. 219, emphasis added).

This is precisely the same line of argument defended by Riding and Graves. This “increase of time-length” in the reading process could be achieved by several means in the modernist poetry they were arguing for: for instance, through syntactical displacement and repetition (Stein), through the invention of new vocabularies (cummings, Hopkins), by means of the exploration of the white space of the page (as in cummings), as well as by articulating complex meanings through paradox and figures of speech. The poetics outlined in *A Survey* was less interested in the precise rearrangement of symbols in order to provide a pleasurable picture or a snapshot of reality. They defended that, in order to “make it mean” in modernist times, the question of language had to be re-addressed.

Moreover, the poetic image had to be criticized, considered not as the central poetic element but as *one* of them. This strikes a dissonant note in what became the established melody of the contemporary canon, a kind of “law” of contemporary poetics: the imagist doctrine, which claims that, besides avoiding rhetoric and abstraction, the objective of poetry is “To present an image. We are not a school of painters, but we believe that poetry should render particulars exactly and not deal in vague generalities, however magnificent and sonorous. It is for this reason that we oppose the cosmic poet, who seems to us to shirk the real difficulties of his art” (Pound, *Essays* 42). The imagist doctrine clearly rejected poetry that incorporated philosophical concerns as well as privileged the imagination, as in a late version of Romanticism. In a typical imagist poem, there is still the idea of poetry as presenting a striking scene, be it achieved either through cinematic montage (such as in Pound), or by William’s credo of “no ideas but in things.” The layering of image upon image, through a process of parataxis, became in fact the main technique of *The Cantos* and *Paterson*, for instance.

Imagism drew a restrictive line between the concrete (image) and the abstract (thought) which Riding and Graves were eager to question. If Pound was warning the reader to “go in fear of abstractions,” Riding and Graves were moving in the opposite direction, proving that this binary opposition is irrelevant, since in a poem the abstract element (a thought) can be as concrete as “the apparitions of these faces in the crowd” in a metro. To reject “thinking”—the human capability of articulating thought—would be a contradiction to Riding and Graves’s epistemological project. Opposing the imagist discourse on poetry (although Riding and Graves overlooked too easily the other items of the manifest), they presented a modernist response to Pound’s and Eliot’s terms (with the idea of an arrangement of images functioning as an “objective correlative” of an emotion). As we have seen, *A Survey* criticized Imagism as a mannerism, as a mere updating, via Japanese poetry, of the old Symbolist image. The authors not only attacked the poetics of

Imagism but proposed an alternative approach as the ideal of modernist poetry:

The modernist poet does not have to talk about the uses of images ‘to render particulars exactly,’ since the poem does not give a rendering of a poetical picture or idea existing outside the poem, but presents the literal substance of poetry, a newly created thought-activity: the poem has the character of a creature by itself. Imagism, on the other hand, and all other similar dead movements, took for granted the principle that poetry was *a translation* of certain kinds of subjects into the language that would bring the reader emotionally closest to them. It was assumed that a natural separation existed between the reader and the subject, to be bridged by the manner in which it was presented. (118)

Against Imagism and image-based poetics (such as Georgianism and the so-called War poetry of the time), focusing on words and their movements of signification, the authors were building, albeit unacknowledgedly, an alternative modernist poetics. The aim was not only to construe an independent poetics, free from manifestos and literary parties as well, but to avoid poetry as a mere translation of visual images, be these “dynamic” or not. In this paradigmatic shift—embodied, as we shall see, in Riding’s poems—poetry is envisioned as a mode of investigation and a deeper linguistic process, always mediated by the mind’s language. *A Survey* faces, in fact, the problem of poetic representation, of referential language, of mimesis. On the other hand, Riding and Graves were critical of the use of images in the poetry of their time as a contemporary substitute for the old Muses (others mentioned by them are History, the Symbol, Politics, Religion, and Tradition). They noted a curious reversal of roles in modernism, since they saw that the figure of “the Poet” was assuming the place earlier reserved to the classical Muse. While some aimed at a poetry made of “objective correlatives” (Eliot), “direct treatment of the thing” (Pound and Williams), Riding and Graves were aiming at writing a poetry based on thought.

Crossing all the modernist currents of her time, Laura Riding was obsessively

interested in transforming her own poetry into a performance of thought, a performance that she equated to nothing less than “truth,” which later became her ideological imperative. Critical of traditional poetical representation, with many of her poems, Riding causes in us a feeling of disorientation due to the scarcity of images and references, as if we had been temporarily blinded. The purpose is to attain a level of visibility called thought, where vision is understood as “seeing beyond the range of mere observation, the range of close perception” (“Looking Back” 40). Riding’s poems deal with the mind as a language-mediated phenomenon, investigating itself while making sense of the world (as in “The World and I”). As she synthesizes in “By Crude Rotation”:

To my lot fell
 By trust, false signs, fresh starts,
 A slow speed and a heavy reason,
 A visibility of blindness—these thoughts—
 And the content, the language of the mind
 That knows no way to stop.

(*Poems* 107)

In Riding’s mindscapes, each poem becomes a place for the adventure of thought, a mapping of consciousness. The human mind, always thinking, always made language, becomes the main focus of her poetic investigation. The elected “lot” or “country” of this poetics is that of the human, embodied mind, in its struggle to make meaning. In the deconstruction of the image (questioned, made abstract and replaced by “false signs,” “fresh starts,” “a slow speed,” and “a heavy reason”) we see the emphasis on language as an endlessly perceptive process, with word tracking a self that, at each turn, strangely is and is not (“another, and one more”). By a frequent use of paradoxes that undercut her questioning of identity, reality and language, mind and body, Riding put in practice what Shklovsky defined as “strangeness” (*ostranenie*): the ability of the artistic construct to slow

down perception and make the audience see the object in question as if for the first time. Words should be used to point at language as a process of human articulation, of mindscape. Riding was obsessed with the idea that language creates human reality. Her aim, like that of Shklovsky, was to make strange what seems familiar, to discuss the visible, to call attention to the movement of meaning, thus de-automatizing the reader's perceptions.

The "art of the difficult" of modernist poets is explained by Ron Silliman as "a defense mechanism. By difficulty, a writer makes it harder to be absorbed and commoditized (sic)" ("For Open" no page). Riding's position has a striking resemblance with the one posed by Perloff in *Radical Artifice* (1991). In her defense of the difficulty poetry written by the Language poets in America in the age of media, Perloff says that "the current suspicion of imageful language, on the part of the more radical poetries, has a good deal to do with the actual production and dissemination of images in our culture" (57). That Laura Riding was already pointing out to a way out of imagist and referent-centered poetries as early as 1927 puts her in a position of a visionary theorist of modernist poetry.

Language-Poetry-Truth

The height of Riding's poetic career, signaled by the publication, in 1938, of her 477-page *Collected Poems*—which gathers 181 poems from her previous 12 books—coincides with the moment of her most passionate and lucid defense of poetry, not only as the supreme linguistic reality, but as a higher level of existence as well. She was only 37—an age when many poets are still maturing or finding their own voice. In a review of the book, the critic and translator Robert Fitzgerald advised that the value of Riding's poetry would not be recognized for decades to go. He was clear about what he found in Riding's

poems: "The authority, the dignity of truth telling, lost by poetry to science, may gradually be regained. If it is, these poems should one day be a kind of *Principia*. They argue that the art of language is the most fitting instrument with which to press upon full reality and make it known" (342). Poetry became the highest form of knowledge available to the human being, according to Riding: "I have learned from my poems," she writes, "what, completely and precisely, the scope of poetry is; and any reader can do the same" (*Poems* 409). Paradoxically, the same preface also points out her end of her *rôle* as a poet.

The introductory piece to *Collected Poems*, "To the Reader," is a tour-de-force, and may be considered as the strongest advocacy of poetry that Riding had written so far, as well as one of the most important and polemic documents of Anglo-American modernism. More importantly, the book itself places Riding in the broadest context of other contemporaries who were deeply engaged in breaching the gap between thinking and *poiesis*, such as Martin Heidegger. Before tracing some common points between Riding's poetics and some ideas professed by Heidegger, it is important to see what is at stake in her "Preface."¹²

Once again defending her poetry from the accusation of "difficulty," Riding observes that the problem of the reception of poetry must be seen in terms of literary education ("Comparatively few people devote any time at all to the reading of poems; yet many would agree that the realities uncovered by poems are extremely important to know" (406)). Moreover, we have been used to an attitude in relation to poetry as a text "based on fancied experience," that is, approaching it only as something "non-truthful," as "fiction," as something that "yields only a fanciful kind of knowledge" (*Poems* 407).

¹² The few occasions Riding mentions Heidegger, as far as I could identify in my research, besides a few mentionings in the later *The Telling*, is in a letter to the editor of magazine *Sulfur* (July 1983): "It is to no point of comprehension of my thought whether or not I have ever known of Heidegger's writing. His squeezing poetry into his Germanic-thoroughness efforts to isolate human identity, and to formulate a linguistic anatomy of thought, are all an externalistic enterprise on the outside of the reality of sentient existence—and the reality of thought, and of language, and of human identity" (212).

According to Riding, this problem in literary education had the effect of cultivating in us the “wrong” reasons for reading poetry. Some of these reasons, as we have seen, were already listed in “A Preface or a Plea”: approaching poetry in its medicinal roles, either as an escape, a drug, or a relief from the weight of broad light reality. Another “wrong” reason she detects is the usual reader’s unawareness of poetry as a different kind of discourse: “Poems will not serve as reading-matter when you want detective fiction, or a play, or anything but poems,” she argues (Ibid. 411). Poetry was to become, instead, “writing-matter,” that is, something to be worked out—rewritten, in fact—at every reading.

If one approaches poetry as a process of discovery by closely attending to the words of the poem—without relying in paraphrase, for instance—if one engages, with total attention, in the power of poems to uncover important realities, then one resorts to poetry for the “right reasons,” according to Riding. That is why she finds it unjust when genuine poets are accused of merely being “difficult” for difficulty’s sake, or of making inaccessible exactly “what it is their function to uncover” (Ibid. 406). Because “to go to poetry is the most ambitious act of the mind,” Riding argues that both the poet and the reader have first “to overcome a tremendous inertia” (Ibid. 410). In the act of writing, the poet has not only the role of reproducing but *producing* a new linguistic reality: the poem. More than to offer delight and entertainment through the poem’s “special effects,” the poet has the obligation, through the poems, to teach the readers the right reasons of poetry.

Knowing the responsibilities of the poet, Riding defends her own poems as being lucid and almost didactic: “Because I am fully aware of the background of miseducation from which most readers come to poems, I begin every poem on the most elementary plane of understanding and proceed to the plane of *poetic discovery* (or *uncovering*) by steps which deflect the reader from false associations, from false reasons for reading” (Ibid. 407, italics mine). This suggests, in fact, that a poem is something only discovered in the

process of writing/reading. In the sequence, and at the most extreme of Riding's poetical idealism, poetry becomes nothing less than equal to truth:

A poem is an uncovering of truth of so fundamental and general a kind that no other name besides poetry is adequate except *truth*. Knowledge implies specialized fields of exploration and discovery; it would be inexact to call poetry a kind of knowledge. It is even inexact to call it a kind of truth, since in truth there are no kinds. Truth is *the result when reality as a whole is uncovered by those faculties which apprehend in terms of entirety, rather than in terms merely of parts*. The person who writes a poem for the right reasons has felt the need of exercising such faculties, has such faculties. The person who reads a poem for the right reasons is asking the poet to help him to accentuate these faculties, and to provide him with an occasion for exercising them.

(Ibid. 407, italics mine)

Poetry is seen not only as an instrument to reveal truth beyond the appearances of the world, but also as a superior form of knowledge, even to philosophy, history, and science. Although truth is never satisfactorily defined by Riding, it stands as a neo-Platonic and unquestionable stance in her discourse, close to Derrida's idea of a "transcendental signified."¹³ For Riding, truth needs no explanation: it is incorporeal (it is "nothing," it is "the result of an ability to create a vacuum in experience"). "Truth," a poem she wrote in her twenties, already shows Riding dealing with the problem of poetry, truth, and the individual experience:

We keep looking for Truth.

Trmth is afraid of being caught.

Books are bird-cages.

Trmth is no canary

¹³ A sign which acts as a foundation of all our thought, language, and experience. Examples are God, the Idea, the Word Spirit, the Self, Matter. For Derrida, such transcendental meanings are fictions. In Riding's case, "truth" is based on a notion that the being of any entity is always

To nibble patiently at words
 And die when they're all eaten up.

Truth would not like
 To live in people's heads or hearts or throats.
 Don't try to find it there.

[...]

Don't worry the earth.
 Truth leaves no footprints.
 Don't listen
 Before silence has set with the moon.

Truth makes no noise.

Don't follow the light

That follows the sun

That follows the night.

Truth dances beyond the light

And the sun

And the night.

Truth can't be seen.

[...]

Leave truth alone.

Truth can't be caught.

I think Truth doesn't live at all

She'd have to be afraid of dying, then.

(First Awakenings 84)

determined as "presence," which is also to determine the existence of an ultimate origin.

As we have seen, truth occurs when the poet is able to create a vacuum in experience, making room for the “unreal,” that is, the self in state of poetry, of thought. Poetry is the now of language, a condition that follows us closely while we live.

By claiming poetry’s right to be taken as truth—and not as a mere fictionalization of reality—Riding was reintroducing in modernist times, perhaps, the oldest polemics surrounding philosophy and poetry since Plato. Strikingly, among her contemporaries, her project of rethinking the relationship between language, poetry and truth has more to do with Martin Heidegger’s philosophy than with other contemporary poets (with the exception of Wallace Stevens).

But what is truth? In the oldest of the definitions, as Heidegger reminds us, *veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus* (*Pathmarks* 138). That is, truth is the adequation of the intellect to things, the correspondence of the matter to knowledge. According to Heidegger, in “The Essence of Truth,” this concept implies “the Christian theological belief that, with respect to what it is and whether it is, a matter, as *created (ens creatum)* is only insofar as it corresponds to the idea preconceived in the *intellectus divinus*, i.e., in the mind of God, and thus measures up to the idea (is correct) and in this sense is “true” (Ibid. 138). As Robert C. Solomon argues in *Introducing Philosophy*:

What indeed is truth? Should we say, as we have so far, that our beliefs are true if and only if they ‘match up’ with reality? Or, in accordance with our present suspicions, should we not perhaps hold out for some different conception of ‘truth,’ one that does not place such emphasis on ‘matching up’ and the separation of reality on the one hand from our beliefs and experiences on the other? The proper philosophical name for this notion of ‘matching up’ our beliefs and experiences with reality is the *correspondent theory of truth*. (227 my emphasis)

In this sense, truth is the correspondence, the matching up, of a statement with reality. The correspondence theory of poetry asserts that a proposition bears truth-value when it

reveals something correct about reality or a fact. Translated to a common-sense experience: if I say to someone "The sky is clear today," this utterance is only true if it matches up with the fact that the sky is clear (not clouded) at the specific moment and place of my utterance. If I say, "the Earth is round," this proposition possesses truth-value because it matches up with an observable fact. If I am a journalist, and I am given confidential information about the poor health of the President by an anonymous source, the proposition must be checked out. If, in fact, I find out that the President is sick, then my source has given me a truth-value account of the real state of things. What was said "matches up" with what is. Therefore, following the logic of this theory, a statement's truth-value is bipolar in nature: it depends on the relation between what is said (a proposition) and some aspect of reality to which it refers. Moreover, it can never be ambiguous; it can never make room for other interpretations.

From the viewpoint of "correspondent theory," it seems that poetry would not have any chance of being considered truth. Being by nature metaphorical—or, as I have said, being *language in state of artifice*—poetry would develop only a discontinuous, nonidentical relation with the world. In a poem, words are frequently ambiguous: they imply more than what is said" (thus, for instance, Riding's proposition that "Truth makes no noise"). Words defy our common sense, by comparing dissimilar things. In fact, the force of poetry, for poets such as Cummings, rests in its power to say that two plus two "equals 5." As Dennis Rasmussen discusses the question, in *Poetry and Truth*:

Perhaps the safest generalization that can be made concerning propositional truth in poetry is that poetry may use propositional truth as material, *but it appears that we cannot expect that poetry will always offer, or even try to offer, true propositions.* A poem may contain any combination of true and false propositions, depending on the poet's artistic purpose (15, my emphasis).

Thus, with Riding, this old question at the beginning of Western philosophy resurfaces at

the core of modernism: Can poetry be truth? Or, rephrasing the question: can truth be poetry?

Definitely not, according to Plato, to whom nothing is farthest from truth than poetry and poets. If truth is understood as “true being” goodness, virtue, then nothing is more prejudicial to society than the poet, who, by means of his artifice, turns our attention away from reality. In *The Republic*, in a famous passage, Plato discusses the nature of representation, and accuses poets of deforming the audience’s minds (344). The poet, as “image-maker,” “a representer,” “understands only appearance,” while reality is beyond him. What he delivers as “facts” are only “appearances of truth.”

Plato, as we know, claims the existence of two realms: the real and the appearance. The real is identified with the immutable realm of ideal Forms, of eternal being. The world of senses, however, is made of appearances that are always changing, that delude us. When a poet writes a poem, or a painter depicts a landscape, he is dealing with the realm of appearances; he is depicting the sensual and not the rational world, not the “real thing.” Worse, the poet presents as truthful things which he does not even know how to use. “A representer knows nothing of value about the thing it represents; representation is a kind of game,” says Plato (Ibid. 358). By stimulating people’s emotions and feelings, fears, and desires, poetry activates only the lower part of our minds, while reason is left aside:

Now we can see how right we’d be to refuse him [the poet] admission into any community which is going to respect convention, because we know which part of the mind he wakes up. He destroys the rational part by feeding and fattening up this other part. [...] At a personal level, he establishes a bad system of government in people’s minds by gratifying their irrational side (Ibid. 359).

Before banishing the poet altogether from his idealist Republic, Plato reminds us of the old quarrel between poetry and philosophy and asserts that, if poets become more rational, if they begin to present their poems sustained by a rational argument, they can

have the chance of being readmitted into the community. In Plato's realm of ideas—where even real objects were considered mere secondary imitations of ideal forms—poetry was thus an imitation of an imitation (the manufacturer, and images): poetry is, thus, three times removed from Truth. Notoriously, it was this deceitful, artificial nature of poetry that justified Plato's banishment of the poets from his ideal republic. Poetic discourse was, in short, not only nontruthful but also manipulative of people's emotions, therefore dangerous to the order of the state. Poets were a threat to happiness, defined by Plato as freedom as well as the lack of fear and pain.

In twentieth-century philosophy, the question of poetry and truth resurfaces in the mid-1930s, but this time in a more positive way. Heidegger attempts to breach the gap between poetry and philosophy, which he saw as being mistakenly considered as separate realms, as different practices. He argues that in Herakleitos and Parmenides—whose “philosophy” occurred before conceptual language and before any systematization had set in—there was no such distinction. For instance, when Herakleitos says “The beginning of a circle is also its end” (*Herakleitos* 29) or, “One cannot step twice in the same river, for the water into which you first stepped has flowed on” (14), he is using language as the mediator of a truth-value statement; the poet-philosopher is thinking and poetizing at the same time. This makes Heidegger posit that “Thinking is primordial poetry, but also prior to the poetics of art, since art shapes its work within the realm of *language*. All poetizing, in this broader sense, and also in the narrower sense of the poetic, is in its ground a thinking” (*Pathmarks* 139).

This led to Heidegger's formulation of the concept *truth* in relation to art and poetry. In “The Origin of the Work of Art” and in other essays, Heidegger developed a concept of art as truth by recalling the etymological root of the Greek word for “truth”: *alētheia*, or the “unconcealment of beings” (51). Through his essay, Heidegger recovers the idea of poetry as a primordial language which, in the artistic act, reveals Being, by founding

a new reality. The idea of the poet as a demiurge, as capable of calling forth things by the power of his language, draws back to the myth of Orpheus. Heidegger sums up this position in his famous words, in "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry":

The poet names the gods and names all things in that which they are. This naming does not consist in something already known being supplied with a name; it is rather that when the poet speaks the essential word, the being is by this naming nominated as what it is. So it becomes known as being. *Poetry is the establishment of being by means of the words.* (*Existence* 281, my emphasis)

With words, the essence of language, the poet not only communicates a truth which is already established outside ("The sky is blue," "the door is open"); he does not only reproduce what he sees. By naming, he makes things visible, he produces, reveals, he brings things anew, into existence. By thinking through language he creates human meaning. Language, shared by all human beings, must not be thought of as something outside but "the means by which the world is constituted," as Bernstein reminds us (*Content's* 61). We speak language, but language also speaks us, since it stands as the occurrence of meaning, which is intrinsically human. It is only through language that the human world is revealed and acquires meaning. That is the truth of language. Or, As Riding puts it in "Come, Words, Away:" "But never shall truth circle so / Till words prove language is / How words come from far sound away / Through stages of immensity's small / Centering the utter telling / In truth's first soundlessness" (*The Poems* 136). Here, as in the poem "Truth," we see truth as something that cannot be easily heard or "caught." And, more importantly, Riding was committed to poetry "as the path of resolution of the truth-problem that language opened to the powers of human experience and understanding" ("I wrote this poem" no page).

It is through this humanistic rethinking of language that Heidegger is able to call our attention to the truth-value and philosophical status of poetry. "Language is not a mere

tool, one of the many which man possesses; on the contrary, it is only language that affords the very possibility of standing in the openness of the existence. Only where there is language there is a world" (*Existence* 276). Heidegger argued that the differentiation imposed between poetry ("poetizing") and philosophy ("thinking") since Plato had the effect of impoverishing both activities, which, for him, are simultaneous.

For Heidegger, what defines the first-rank poet is a resistance to using words as mere instruments to make us "go along" with the world, or to conceal or distract us from the world. Through the art of language the poet wants to go beyond the established and conventional language in order to unconceal the world, to make it exist anew, to charge it with meaning. Poetry is, thus, the occurrence of "truth," of "what it is." Like philosophy, poetry is a hermeneutic process: it discloses and exposes the hidden meanings of human existence. Thus, against Plato, Heidegger asserts:

[p]oetry looks like a game and yet it is not. A game does indeed bring men together, but in such a way that each forgets himself in the process. In poetry, on the other hand, man is re-united on the foundation of his existence. There he comes to rest; not indeed to the seeming rest of inactivity and emptiness of thought, but to that infinite state of rest in which all powers and relations are active. (*Existence* 286)

Or, as Riding will say, in the 1938 preface to her collected poems, "to go to poetry is the most ambitious act of mind" (*Poems* 410).

As we have seen, the idea of poetry as the unconcealment or uncovering of truth—understood here as a step by step process of linguistic discovery—developed by Riding in the 1930s has many points of contact with Heidegger's existentialist philosophy. Riding is also engaged in breaching the gap between "thinking" and "poeticizing."¹⁴ That is why, in almost all of Riding's poems, we have the impression that we are listening to language

¹⁴ Thus Richard Aldington, the imagist poet, remarks of Laura Riding: "Miss Riding gives me the feeling of someone thinking aloud and very intensely. The simplicity and directness is very pleasing" (qtd. in Cunard 108).

speaking itself: "To my lot fell / By trust, false signs, fresh starts, / A slow speed and a heavy reason, / A visibility of blindedness—these thoughts— / And then content, the language of the mind / That knows no way to stop" (*The Poems* 107). Language is an unstoppable process, since it is present even when sleeping. It is in this process of pressing language into reality that the poet "finds" and gives meaning to the world. The task becomes not only to recognize a previous reality, but also to find and found a new one.

In "Poetry and the Literary Universe" (1928), Riding sums up her existential and humanistic approach to poetry:

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 the undifferentiated quantitative appetite and thus changes accidental emotional forms 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. [...] Poetry forces words to the limits of language. It is to want to make words mean more than they express (*Contemporaries and Snobs* 9).

Against Poetry

As we have seen, in 1938 Laura Riding believed in poetry as the way to achieve truth. Everything changes sometime in the early 1940s when she begins to write under the signature of Laura (Riding) Jackson (the parenthesis now clearly demarcating her past existence as poet). Only in 1962 we have her first public statement touching on the reasons for her rejection of poetry. Riding's renouncing of poetry is contemporary to Theodor Adorno's famous statement that it had become impossible to write poetry after

the Jewish Holocaust.¹⁵ However, Riding's motives are not exactly political, but mainly linguistic, humanistic, and moral. In fact, a paradoxical situation appears: if Heidegger and Plato are seen as being in the extreme opposites regarding poetry and truth, the same applies to the case of Laura Riding and Laura (Riding) Jackson.

In a 1976 essay, (Riding) Jackson pointed out that "Where language is converted into the mere instrument of an art, it loses its virtue as the expressive instrument of humanity" ("Poetry as" 72). But, if language was, according to her own belief, what differentiates human beings from other animals, why should the possibilities of poetry, the human capability to manipulate language artistically, be rejected? Her argument sometimes seems circular, not to say tautological: she argues, responding to Joyce Wexler, that "the art element in poetry [...] defeated over & over the full potential of poetry" ("Comments" no page). We might ask: if, by nature, poetry is *poiesis* (to make), how can we expect poetry to deny its nature, as being language in state of artifice, of play? Riding pushed poetry to its limit, it is true, but in this process she was caught in a circular argument, because the limits she found in poetry were the ones she herself posited, in the first place.

Ironically enough, one strong counter-argument to Riding's position is exemplified in Sidney's "An Apology for Poetry," the same text that seems to have inspired some thoughts presented in her first published essay on poetry. There Sidney states that poetry, as any other medium, can also be misused. I think that (Riding) Jackson's accusation that all poets lie is rebuked, for instance, by Sidney's idea of the poet as someone who—by the very nature of the medium of his work—is incapable of lying:

Now, for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth. For, as I take it, to lie, is to affirm that to be true which is false. So as the other artists, and specially the

¹⁵ Adorno's phrase appears in the essay "Cultural Criticism and Society" (1949): "Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And it corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely" (*Prisms* 34).

historian, affirming many things, can in the cloudy knowledge of mankind, hardly escape from many lies. But the poet (as I said before) never affirmeth. The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes.[...] And therefore, though he recounts things not true, *yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not.* (249, my emphasis)

The problem, according to Sidney, has less to do with poetry itself and more with what uses human beings make of it. He even argues that Plato did not so much criticize poetry in itself at the end of *The Republic*, but “upon the abuse” (Ibid. 255). It is not poetry that abuses us, as (Riding) Jackson came to think, but we abuse poetry. It was Riding’s project that rendered poetry and words as instruments to a utopian “perfect speaking, each word faithful to the motivation of truth of utterance, faithfully used” (“Comments” no page).

A series of questions can be raised at this point: Who defines if words are or are not being faithfully used? How can one know if language is always changing and whose truth-values—if they exist—are unavoidably linked to cultural and historical circumstances? Maybe it was (Riding) Jackson who abused poetry, by expecting it to be the purest expression of truth, the final word. Or “we can use;” at this point, what Riding wrote previously to question (Riding) Jackson’s premises: how can the poet be a liar if he, ideally—not wanting to write a poem merely to display his craft or transform his poem in a commodity—has exactly the mission of uncovering truth, of revealing and making known things that, if not for the poet’s intervention, would remain unknown? Aren’t the limits one sees in things (such as poetic practice) those which one has imposed on them? The poet does not pretend to tell the truth; therefore, he isn’t lying.

By forcing the task of poetry to its limit—as embodying in its linguistic occurrence nothing less than truth—Riding was forced to an increasingly abstract language where words are so literal, general, purified of artifice, reference, musicality, sensuality, and metaphor, that it seems that nothing much lasted, only a blank and arid landscape, in a

sort of Barthesian “writing degree-zero” (an example of this point of no return in her poetry is the extraordinary, hybrid piece “Poet: A Lying Word,” as we shall see in Chapter 4). In order to attain her goal of achieving truth through language, Riding ended up rejecting one defining feature of poetry in relation to other discourses: its *artifice*. In the 1970 “Preface” to the first selection of her poems to be published after 1938, (Riding) Jackson made it clear that the problem was poetry’s artifice. She tells of her “becoming so much aware of a discrepancy, deep-reaching, between what I call the *creed* and the *craft* of poetry—which I might otherwise describe as its religious and ritualistic aspects—that I perceived the impossibility of *anyone’s* functioning with consistency in the character of a poet” (*Selected Poems* 414, my emphasis).

In condemning poetry’s craft—its “verbal rituals that court sensuousity as if they were the judge of truth” (Ibid.)—(Riding) Jackson was not only echoing Plato’s old critique, but also falling into the same error diagnosed by Eliot: dissociation of sensibility. By separating the creed from the craft of poetry (Riding) Jackson ended up stressing a dissociation between thought and feeling (manifested in the senses, perceptions, the body). She seemed to be imposing a binary opposition onto the realm of poetry, separating something that, by nature, came and existed together: mind and body, form and content, creed and craft. The religious and ritualistic aspects of poetry were a single one, since the beginning, as the ethnopoetic anthology of Jerome Rothenberg, *Technicians of the Sacred*, wonderfully demonstrates. Moreover, there is a whole range of poeties that simply do not differentiate the craft (the technique of poetry) from its creed (its religious, interconnecting aspects) as presented in hymns, spells, hieroglyphs, oral narratives, dreams, and visual patterns disseminated around the globe. For the shaman, technique is fundamental for the accomplishment of the spiritual task. In denying analogy, ambiguity, play, the sound of words, and all the devices accumulated through the human experience of poetry, from ancient times to our days, (Riding) Jackson seems to be devaluing the

richness and diversity that poetic language can express.

What happened was that (Riding) Jackson found the dissociation operating not only in the poet's minds, but in the medium of poetry itself. But by accusing poetry's sensual verbal rituals, she is repressing the sonorous, emotional, unconscious, and the Dionisiac (in Nietzsche's sense) aspects of human experience, as if to grasp Truth one needed, forcibly, to do away with Beauty. That she was coherent enough in her project of abandoning poetry for moralistic and ethical purposes is laudable, but this does not give her the right to exclude and forbid poetry from the life practice of poets and readers. This authoritarian position caused many people to move away from her poetry. If she claimed to have gone to the limits of poetry (as in some way she did), it seems a distortion to transform that limit into a *sine qua non* for the reasons other people might find in reading and writing poetry. If poetry is the art of language itself, as I believe it is, why did (Riding) Jackson come to deny this special status, this difference of human utterances, as expressed, for instance, in metaphors, puns, slangs, rhythms, rhymes? If language is not only something that follows but in fact constitutes the world, as Laura Riding and Heidegger believed, why deny other potential aspects of thought, such as manifested in dreams, in memory, shamanic trances, slips of tongue? Are they not all manifestations of language, of what is the most intrinsic in us? If poetry, as Riding defended, "is an attempt to make language do more than express" (*Contemporaries* 9), why deny the power of devices to defamiliarize so-called ordinary speech, to test the limits of our words? What would be a "natural" use of words, as she argues in *The Telling*? Paul Auster, among the best commentators of Riding's poetry, has an incisive insight into this topic in his book *The Art of Hunger*. "If the truth in language she is seeking is a human truth, it would seem to be contradictory to want this truth at the expense of what is human" (68). Precisely. And we have to admit that—in seeking poetry as "that perfection in speaking which is truth" ("The Road to" 68)—she was courageous enough to take this risk, and then to reject and

renounce poetry. Auster continues:

For in order to sustain the high degree of intellectual precision necessary to the success of the poems, Laura Riding has been forced to engage in a kind of poetic brinkmanship, and she has often lost more than she has won. *Eventually we come to realize that the reasons for her break with poetry are implicit in the poems themselves* (*The Art* 67, italics mine).

Surprisingly enough, although (Riding) Jackson rejected poetry, she did *not* reject the poems written by Laura Riding. In her essays and statements, she makes it clear that she considered them as indications of the limits of poetry, of how far it can take us. And she writes in the last paragraph of her 1970 preface: “My meanings have not changed, there, fundamentally, from what they were *in my poems*.” (*Poems* 419, italics mine). Therefore, the challenge for the critic becomes to uncover the germ of this decision in the poems themselves, and see how this rejection of poetry matches the progressive process of “demetaphorization,” the questioning of the referent, and “de-poetizing” present in Riding’s poetry up to that breath taking piece named “Poet: A Lying Word.”

CHAPTER 4

MINDSCAPES: THE POETRY OF CONSCIOUS EXPERIENCE

Thought is the occasion of language.

((Riding) Jackson, *Rational* 569)

[L]anguage is the material of both thinking and writing. [...] Just as language is not something separable from the world, but rather the means by which the world is constituted, so thinking cannot be said to ‘accompany’ the experiencing of the world in that it informs that experience. It is through language that we experience the world, indeed through language that meaning comes into the world and into being.

(Charles Bernstein, *Content's* 62)

Geography contains many errors, but history corrects these errors—which are, indeed, the substance of history—by passing. Lessons in geography are really quite unnecessary. [...] The truth is a world that lives forever, and the strong people do certainly exist for a certain time. But to exist for a certain time in a world which lasts for ever can only mean to be somewhere—here or there or there—in it; only *she* is everywhere in it.

(Riding, “A Last Lesson in Geography” 251)

In the previous chapter I argued that the negotiation between mind¹ and reality, thought and feeling, is a mark of Riding’s epistemological poetry. Then I defined her poems as mindscapes, written spaces where thought and language aim at becoming one. In this chapter I

¹ Riding defined mind as “an organ of thought having the functional potency of an autonomous consciousness” (“Engaging” 14).

intend to show that her poems are telling demonstrations of an amazing writer to whom “the mind thinking becomes the active force of the poem,” as Bernstein aptly posits in relation to the writings of authors such as René Descartes, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jack Kerouac, Paul Celan, and Wallace Stevens (*Content's* 66). Keeping this contention in mind, in the present chapter I concentrate my reading on five poems: “The Map of Places,” “Beyond,” “Elegy in a Spider Web,” “The World and I,” and “Poet: A Lying Word.” The limitation of my corpus does not at all imply that relevant passages of other poems will be overlooked. Contrarily to what an orthodox close reading might claim, with its idea of organic unity, I will choose fragments of other poems that, by themselves, are illustrative of the points I believe Riding is making in her poetry as a whole. I have decided to work with this specific corpus because, in my view, it is in these poems that the idea of the poem as a mindscape not only is foregrounded but also dramatized: poems become, in fact, “performances of the mind,” as Riding herself would put it. The corpus discussed is taken from *The Poems of Laura Riding—A New Edition of the 1938 Collection* (New York: Persea Books, 1980).

The impulse to create the text as a field of attention, where total awareness is asked of the reader, goes hand in hand in the poems analyzed with the goal of questioning the nature of reality, the concept of time, history, human identity, and poetry itself. This critical impulse is revealed by a full use of paradoxes, neologisms, repetition, as well as through a radical process of de-metaphorization. It is not that images² cease to exist in her poetry; the strategy adopted by the poet is that what is visible must be immediately filtered and processed by the intellect. In this sense, as we have seen, Riding's poems are exemplary of an obsessive attempt to fuse

² The term *Image*, here, is used in its broadest meanings, as W. J. T. Mitchell exemplifies in the form of a family tree, we would have the following categories: 1. Likeness, resemblance, similitude. 1.1 Graphic: pictures, statues, designs. 1.2. Optical: mirrors, projections. 1.3. Perceptual: sense data, “species”, appearances. 1.4. Mental: dreams, memories, ideas, fantasmata. 1.5. Verbal: metaphors, descriptions (10).

thought and feeling. Time, places and natural images, when they appear in Riding's mindscapes, are never merely descriptive of an outer world of things, pure and simply, or even a Wordsworthian "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." On the contrary: they are always being questioned, made paradoxical, manipulated and, ultimately, surpassed by thought's presence in the process of trying to make meaning of the world, in the process of measuring it. In Riding's increasingly stripping out of concrete references, natural objects and phenomena become wholly abstract, almost concepts.

In "Sea, False Philosophy," for instance, "Sea / Is the spurned dust. / Sifted into a metaphor / A slow dilution" (*Poems* 106). This is what happens also in the long meditative poem "The Why of the Wind": "When the wind runs we run with it. / We cannot understand because we are not / When the wind takes our minds / [...] / We must learn better / What we are and are not. / We are not the wind. / We are not every vagrant mood that tempts / Our minds to giddy homelessness" (*Ibid.* 293-94).³ Like the wind, things exist outside us, but we cannot measure our beings by merely comparing ourselves with nature, as the Romantics, Impressionists, and Imagists believed. On the contrary, things can only acquire meaning, Riding, when incorporated in the fabric of thought. It is only by virtue of human language that things can participate in the performance of thought enacted by the poem that Riding decided to write. Thus, in the logic of Riding's mindscapes, it is self-knowledge, and not merely sensory perception and thinking in images, the best way to understand reality. Therefore, vision is defined by Riding as the achievement when one goes beyond the seen, when one transforms

³ As Riding writes in *The Telling*, the difference between the outer and physical world and the inner and human consciousness must be emphasized: the human being is marked by a continual experience that is the experience of being alive, of having a thinking mind. However, (Riding) Jackson explains, "the nature of our being is not to be known as we know the weather, which is by the sense of the momentary. Weather is all change, while our being, in its human nature, is all constancy" (63). Riding's view has points of contact with Parmenides's philosophy that assumes that reality is eternal and changeless.

the seen into a “performance of the mind” (“Looking Back” 41). Thus, the poem invites us to trust more our minds than our eyes: “The succession of fair things,” she writes in “There is Much at Work,” “Delights, does not enlighten. / We still know nothing, nothing. / Beauty will be truth but once” (*Poems* 79). Thus, in Riding’s poems, as Benjamin Friedlander has well observed, “[t]he visible world is a synecdoche for thought—it’s as if things were actual pieces of the intellect” (“Laura Riding” 37).

In the mindscapes of Riding’s poems, differently from the surrealist irrational dreamscape or the imagist image-centered poem, the here and now of language are posited as her humanistic and poetic goal: Riding manipulated time and space in order to question the relativity of historical time, space, and subjectivity, constructing poems that can be read as “scenes of thought.” As we shall see at the end of this chapter, in the masterpiece “Poet: A Lying Word,” the text becomes, “literally,” a wall of words to be either faced or rejected by the reader. As a clear extension of her poetics, here the reader is challenged to take a more active role in the reading act, or, as the text invites, to “speak as you see,” and to be aware of the representations that surround us. In my view, “Poet: A Lying Word” is indisputably Riding’s last attempt to prove that “existence in poetry” could become more real than “existence in time” (*The Poems* 412). Moreover, this poem previews her future and radical critique, because it accuses poetry, from its title, of being *a barrier* (“a lying wall”) between human beings and the reality of the mind. Grounding poetry, initially, as a place where a transcendental and never sufficiently explained signifier (Truth) could be achieved, Riding ended up creating in “Poet: A Lying Word” an impasse, which she tried to solve by renouncing poetry altogether.

Focusing on Riding's Mindscapes⁴

Thought looking out on thought

Makes one an eye.

One is the mind self-blind,

The other is thought gone

To be seen from afar and not known.

Thus is a universe very soon.

(*Poems* 95)

In the course of my investigations of Riding's poetry, and influenced by Charles Bernstein's essays "Thought's Measure" and "Writing and Method," mindscapes appeared as an apt concept to describe those poems that are, in my opinion, Riding's most successful ones: mindscapes are *maps of awakened consciousness*.⁵ I use the term to distinguish it from the more familiar "landscape," which is closer to the idea of an outdoor scenery and to a more referential poetics⁶ (a piece of land that can be seen in a single look).

The key concept of mindscape—implying that *what we think is our reality*—allows also a connection with the poetics of Gerard Manley Hopkins and his notion of "inscapes."

⁴ Consulting the MLA bibliography and the archives of Cornell University and Arizona State University, I find that the only reference to this word (besides a few studies in the area of psychology) is George G. Slusser and Eric S. Rabkin's *Mindscapes: The Geography of Imagined Worlds* (Carbondale: Southern UP, 1989). In this book, however, "mindscape" is discussed solely in the context of science-fiction.

⁵ "The term consciousness is ambiguous, referring to a number of phenomena," writes David Chalmers, who continues: "Sometimes it is used to refer to a cognitive capacity, such as the ability to introspect or to report one's mental states. Sometimes it is used synonymously with 'awakeness.' Sometimes it is closely tied to our ability to focus attention, or to voluntarily control our behavior" (*The Conscious Mind* 6).

⁶ As Heffeman explains, "[landscape] was at first used as a technical term for a picture presenting natural inland scenery, then it was also used to mean a particular tract of land that could be seen from one point of view, as if it were a picture, and finally it came to mean the whole of natural scenery" (3 my italics).

Although this poet (whom Riding greatly admired) never defined it categorically, “inscape” can be explained in terms of a compositional method that is discovered *only on route*, in movement, in process.⁷ The mindscape-poems—as the first paragraph of “Opening of Eyes” quoted in the epigraph demonstrates—attempts to follow the gradual steps of rational thought, capturing the life of the mind in its challenge of making meaning of what is inside and outside itself.

It is exactly this aspect of a poetry that aims at capturing the thinking movement that approaches *inscape* and *mindscape*. Moreover, the latter term translates Riding’s humanistic, logocentric, and spatial understanding of language. These three points are encapsulated in the following statement made by Riding in *Rational Meaning*: “Language may be said to be the mind’s comprehension of the universe as the humanly occupied; and the occupation by the mind of language may be said to be the occupation by it of the universe in *active, consciously organized presence*” (492, emphasis added). From this view, as I shall demonstrate, Riding’s poems set as a goal that of being new places in thought. The goal of her reflective poetry is observed more clearly, in terms of poetic form, in the rejection of traditional forms and meters and the adoption of measure not as a given, but as something the poet discovers in the process of writing the poem (see Chapter 3). The writing places activated by Riding’s poems, however, refuse to be landscaped for the reader, presented with picturesque vistas, or translated in terms of analogies (or even described in its minute details, as the Imagist doctrine had set). Riding, as we have seen, was against the common-sensical view of language as a transparent window through which we can see the world. Conversely, in her mindscapes the reader is constantly

⁷ We cannot forget, also, that, in *A Survey*, Riding and Graves elected Hopkins, then recently re-discovered, as a true “modernist” poet: “We call him a modernist in virtue of his extraordinary strictness in the use of words and the unconventional notation he used in setting down so that *they had to be understood as he meant them to be, or understood not at all* (this is the whole crux of the whole question of the intelligibility of ‘difficult’ poetry” (*Survey* 90 italics original).

frustrated in his desire to have something visible to hold on to (“blindness” and “blind” are recurring words in her poems).⁸

Speaking of Riding’s poems, Lisa Samuels correctly observes that “Riding’s struggle with language’s ability to be the best place for humans to live is played out in self-questioning poems and self-dismantling fictions” (*Poetic* 67). We will see plenty of examples of this in the next pages. Anastasia Anastasiadou, from a more feminist viewpoint, observes that “space constitutes for [Riding] a major means of self definition” (133). Commenting on the several geographic dislocations forced on Riding by personal and historical circumstances (U.S.-Egypt-England-Majorca-England-France-Switzerland-U.S.), Anastasiadou says that they mark “her constant preoccupation with space which serves as a metaphor for her quest for the recuperation of truth” (133). This can be confirmed, I would add, by means of the several spatial modes that she uses to articulate her mindscapes (besides the mind, of course). Riding uses extended metaphors typical of the Metaphysical poets, where a same metaphor is worked out and questioned along the poem: the head (in “Pride of Head”); a newspaper page (in the earlier “The Fourth Estate”); a book (in “The Troubles of a Book”); a map (in “The Map of Places”); a web (in “Elegy in a Spider Web”); an island (in “The Map of Places,” “Laura and Francisca,” “There is no Land Yet”); earth itself (in “Earth,” “World’s End”); and, finally, a wall (in “Poet: A Lying Word”). It is interesting to observe that the majority of these models are somewhat connected with writing surfaces: the newspaper, the page, the book, the map, and the wall. This idea of the poem as the articulation of a challenging and alternative place (a mindscape), where an utopian condition of existence (truth) could be lived, is expressed in these lines from “Laura and Francisca”:

⁸ Note how the process of creation and de-creation (pointed out by Samuels) operates in the last lines of “There is No Land Yet”: “And the dry land not yet, / Lonely and absolute salvation— / Boasting of constancy / Like an island with no water round / In water where no land is” (*Poems* 188).

But I think this is enough to show
 My poem is not travel whimsy,
 Or that mind's masquerade called fiction,
 But a poem, that is, a fact
 Standing alone, an island,
 A little all that more grows
 According to the trouble you can take.

(*Poems* 348)

Each poem aims at becoming, thus, a limit-experience of language, which the reader can or cannot decide to join. The result of this spatial and rational understanding of language is a poetry dense and highly intellectual, procedural, and that has the tendency of progressively stripping off itself from external references (thus the "abstract" quality of Riding's poetry). All the procedures undertaken by Riding's mindscapes have the very precise goal of delivering a deeper and universal truth: that we, as human and thinking beings, are in a permanent condition called language. The following poems exemplify how far Laura Riding went in order to achieve this limit condition.

"The Map of Places"⁹

Conventionally, maps are a way to organize geographic or spatial data to be used in human activities. A map functions as a mediator between a person and the environment, helping the person to manage or navigate the environment. It seems precisely the dismantling

⁹ For the reader's convenience, the full text of the five main poems which constitute my corpus is herein enclosed as an Appendix.

of this traditional and referential view of mapping—and, therefore, of language—that is approached in “The Map of Places.” The poem is a suitable entry to Riding’s mindscapes, since it has taken on the task of discovering new human places that do not exist on any map.

The poem begins with a paradox: this map, although fixed on paper, not only physically moves but also “passes,” so that now even its own body is tearing apart (with the element of “death,” thus, implicit in the very first line). The reader is informed that land and water are not what they were “before ships happened there.” But where is this “there”? When did ships “happen”? And what is the “all” that is found? How can the reader possibly locate him/herself in what is being mapped? The poem gives no clues. Moreover, in this Adamic, tautological place, things have intrinsic meanings: they “are” literally what they “are.” Words inhabit this meaningless “here,” before Man has “found” this here as a new land, and, in the process, has transformed the “here” into a “there” (perhaps, a British colony?)¹⁰. Time is uncertain: the shipwrecked stand “now” on “naked names,” but even the paper, we are informed, is read “anciently” (as when we find an old newspaper with “news” that became “old”). The consequence for the reader is to be found in the same position of the shipwrecked: lost in this non-place (thus u-topian), standing on “naked names”(?), left with “no geographies in the hand” to map oneself. The stanza articulates, I believe, a primordial condition of existence where meaning does not exist yet, before the actual naming by new-comers, as if it were a sand-beach without inscriptions. But, what is next?

Curiously, the second stanza begins with the adverb of *time* (“Now”), a word that reappears in the last line, curiously linked with the indicative of *place* (“here”), forming

¹⁰ Is Riding making, on a subtle level, a critique of England’s colonialist project? I think so: in “Laura and Francisca,” where Riding meditates on her life in the island of Majorca, we have the following lines: “England is knowledge’s self-doubt: / Whatever lies beyond makes *here* / An island in a sea of *there*. / From England sailed *shy heroes* / To stretch an empire of interrogation / As far as man could think— / Without forgetting the way back to *silence*” (*Poems* 345 my italics).

“nowhere.” To complicate matters, the last word of the poem can be read, paradoxically, as a “now-here” that is, in the same breath, a “no-where.” As the *OED* defines it, “nowhere” means “not anywhere,” “not in or at any place,” “a place that does not exist,” “an unknown place,” but also “an inhabited place, many miles from nowhere, on a dismal desert island.” Thus, the sense of temporal indeterminacy and spatial displacement is again mimicked by the words that make this “map of places.” When everything is mapped out, the poem ironically seems to be asserting, all that remains is a feeling of being nowhere. However, this place can be potentially filled with human meaning, with the awareness of the mind at work.

Another possibility of a close reading of “The Map of Places” can be found in the strategic use of italics. Rare in Riding’s poetry, they seem to complicate the problem of space and mapping that the poem articulates: the words *here* and *here* are italicized in the same line, right after the word *reads*. E. A. Levenston reminds us, in his book *The Stuff of Literature—Physical Aspects of Texts and Their Relation To Literary Meaning*, that in the long story of its use, italic has maintained some basic meanings: firstly, as a typographical representation of handwriting; secondly, for presenting words in languages other than English (usually Latin); thirdly, for “occasions in plays when characters are reading messages or letters” (93); and, in recent prose writing, to convey thought. In short, italic is used in a text as an extra-device of meaning, calling our attention onto a particular word. That is why one can say that the italic, in “The Map of Places,” is *strategically* placed in the stanza in order to “involve the reader’s visual encounter with the text, in the arguments which the text is making,” as McGann suggests in another context (*Textual Condition* 105). This idea of change of places *in* language is demonstrated even at the level of sound play: isolating some words, the reader can see how this articulation of displacement is being dramatized in the poem:

are

Are where were

When *here* *here*

there.

everywhere.

nowhere.

This exercise in “deformative reading” shows that, unlike “pointers” in a map, the demonstratives have not much use for readers looking for specific references, in the expectation of something to happen. The group of words, detached from the rest of the text, makes clear how they are being charged to reinforce, in their own physical features, the global problem of “The Map of Places.” Here, italics are being used to emphasize the “nowness” of language implicit in Riding’s poetics. They are referring to the very words in front of the reader in the moment of reading this specific poem, which has the paradoxical character of a fleeting map (the words of the poem in the white space of the page, the time of reading). The displacement of temporality in this poem—which is also a displacement in the temporality of reading—reinforces the idea of the poem itself not merely as a “map of places” but as a place in its own right: the space of language, where the articulation of meaning takes place, but where each word inhabits a specific and proper site. The fixed location of words on the page is activated by the reading process, and indicates not points of reference but a shifting ground, one that is always postponed. In language, “places” can pass. In language, one can be *here* and “out there” at the same time. Thus, the poem calls the reader’s attention to the paradoxical

play of presence and absence made possible in the writing process. Therefore, all the graphic and verbal apparatus of meaning at work in Riding's poems—the use of italics, the play of adverbs, paradoxes—is not only part of the poem's argument and structure, but also embodies the relativity of our cognitive mappings of reality.

Near the end of the poem, we are faced with another obstacle: we are informed that now “Death meets itself everywhere” and, as consequence, “Holes in maps look through to nowhere.” How to solve the enigmatic nature of this last line? What to make of it? I suggest that these “holes,” following the metalinguistic level of the poem that I see as being articulated, can be taken not only as the person's eyes—“eyes in nights are holes,” she writes in another poem—but also as the words being read. As a map, this poem stands between the reader/explorer and the environment, but here

H●les in maps l●●k thr●ugh t● n●where.

My intervention is made to emphasize what Riding's mindscape is doing here: the attempt to lead the reader to a place outside history and time, as if to a place “behind the page.” This image of paper as a “flimsy wall” (presented in an early poem, “The Fourth Estate”), as well the “literal” wall of words in “Poet: A Lying Word,” reinforces my point. To support my reading of this last line, consulting the *OED* I have found, for instance, that *look-through* refers to “the texture and formation of a sheet of paper when examined by transmitted light.” Illustrative of a self-deconstructive or de-creative aspect of her poetics, the line seems to indicate that the place the reader is examining through to these “black holes,” at the end of the poem, is a place of darkness, or death, the very absence of language. Or, as we find in another poem whose subtitle is, ironically, “How the Poem Ends”—“For death's now like earth on which you stand / And only readable by looking near” (*Poems* 356)—what the reader finds on

this map are not points of reference but only “holes” through which one can find not reality, but a “nowhere.”¹¹

In manipulating the extended metaphor of maps in “The Map of Places” and other mindscapes, Riding developed a radical critique of representation. She writes in *Epilogue* that we have failed in trying to express entirety (as in maps, history, dictionaries) rather than covering them up, as “a map is covered with places instead of *being places*” (“Politics and Poetry” 16, my italics). That is the advantage of poetry over any traditional mapping. It can be a place *in fact*, instead of merely a representation of piece of land in its entirety. Only the poem *can be a place in its entirety*, because it injects this previously meaningless entirety with *meaning*.

In this specific poem, I believe, Riding is also subtly criticizing the quest for utopias, for power at any cost, the blind faith in progress, and the overwhelming political and historical pressure of the *Zeitgeist*. As the *Epilogue* thesis of the end of history demonstrates, Riding considered that the time-element alienated people from the task of self-knowledge, so crucial for her project. She also criticized our increasing dependence on the “news,” which served as a kind of modern substitute for history. Riding aimed at achieving a degree of self that she describes sometimes as “finality,” sometimes as “truth,” sometimes (as here in “The Map of Places”) as “death.” The price of this radical individualism, however, is a sense of isolation one finds in her poems. The poem demonstrates, in its own procedural moves, a problem felt by Riding and well identified by Lisa Samuels: that “continuing in the presently configured historical world will lead only to ‘death,’ to a finishing of the self” (*Poetic* 130).

¹¹ In a letter written in 1979, Riding makes a positive definition of death: “Death is the reality of the necessity of an end, for that which has a limit. But the coming to a term of the limited is not mere predestinated nullification: the mark of the end is the mark of rightness, and so death has, thus, aspects of significance and character which spell the perfect and true, not mortality and loss” (qtd. in “Laura (Riding) Jackson,” by Alan J. Clark).

A striking statement made by Riding in *Epilogue* might help to clarify what I believe to be another key to “The Map of Places”: Riding writes that “*to try to know truth through historical knowledge is like trying to see death with living eyes*” (*Epilogue* II, 4-5 my emphasis, qt. in *Poetic*). Let us try a parallelism, using the words of the poem: “Holes in maps” (“historical knowledge”) look (“with living eyes”) through to nowhere (to “death”). Thus, the dismantling of reference and the incisive critique on the constraints of the *Zeitgeist* observed in the poem advance a post-modern moment of suspicion: the failure of historicity as well as of language to name the world truthfully. Or, as Riding writes in one of the epigrams of “Echoes”: “. . . cheated history – / Which stealing now has only then / And stealing us has only them” (*Poems* 73).

Mapping other Mindscapes

Riding’s definition of the poem as having the capability to create a vacuum in experience, as we have seen in Chapter 3, and poetry as a condition of “finality”—a continuous poetic habitation—clearly reflects her existentialist sense of language as an alternative and permanent place, able to make room for a truer human self, less fragmented by traditional and patriarchal hierarchies, as well as communicational, political, and gender boundaries. In poems such as “World’s End,” “Laura and Francisca,” “There is No Land Yet,” “Earth,” “Yes and No,” “Poet: A Lying Word,” and “Nothing So Far,” Riding created new verbal geographies, building, in the process, a kind of post-modern verbal displacement *avant-la-lettre*.

Riding’s radical notion of the end of history and the abolition of time—advanced during the period of her magazine *Epilogue* (1935-37)—must be taken into consideration for a better understanding of her mindscapes. Decades before the post-modern thesis of “the end of history,” Riding announced, in the pages of her magazine, nothing less than the “discovery” of

a post-historical world: “We plan to give all the news, and in the tranquility of there is no new news to come, and the leisure to open the files at any day, at any subject....All the historical events have happened” (“Preliminaries” 2).

The abolition of the historical time is frequently played out in her poems, indicating, at the same time, the discovery of the alternative time of the self and of consciousness, the time of individual/universal existence. In “Goat and Amalthea,” for instance, the speaker discovers to be living in a *fifth* season: “I have come with Amalthea in my veins / Into a fifth season. Time is more than slow. / For winter is over, yet I see no summer. / Now it is always snow” (*Poems* 47). Or, as a concrete poet would put it, emphasizing more clearly, through layout and spatialization, the materiality of language and its movement:

n o w

i t

i s

a l w

a y s

s n o w

In this deformative reading, one can literally follow the phonemes that form the words in the line literally “falling” through the white page (into themselves, so to speak). In the slow timelessness of the poem, “now” “snows.” This erasure of historical time and elements that bring temporal ideas (seasons, the weather, for instance) occurs simultaneously with a process of erasing of concrete reference. In “The Wind, The Clock, The We,” the speaker inhabits a place where “time becomes a landscape / Painted as fast as unpainted.” This is a place where “the wind has at last got into the clock— / Every minute for itself. / There’s no more six

twelve, / There's no more twelve, / It's as late as it's early" (Ibid. 181). After following the disappearance of time as well as of the things in this landscape—with men, sea, ships, wind, clock, and wind “swallowing” one another, so to speak—the speaker directly addresses the words, the only entities remaining in the vacuum created by the poem: “At last we can make sense, you and I, / You lone survivors on paper” (Ibid.).

This dismantling of chronological time within the poem as well as the impulse to create, by means of the poem's difficulty, a vacuum in experience, occurs in many other poems. In one of them, whose title is, ironically, “Tale of Modernity,” the speaker finds that “Time was a place where earth had been” (Ibid. 139). In “Midsummer Duet,” the poet is “cooled in a timeless standstill / As ourselves from house to sea we move / Unmoving, on dumb shores [...]” (Ibid. 141). In a poem whose paradoxical title is “Autobiography of the Present,” after announcing to have survived “the time extreme,” the speaker reports her next goal after the experience of “death”: “Yes, she remembers all that seemed, / All that was like enough to now, / To make a then as actual as then. / To make a now that succeeds only / By a more close resemblance to itself” (Ibid. 174). In Riding's utopia of language, there is the suggestion that historical time be replaced by the “nowness”¹² of mind at work. Not surprisingly, as I have counted, the word “now” appears nothing less than 230 times in the 181 poems of *Collected Poems*. She defined this condition of “now” as “a vivid reality of thought” (“Preliminaries” 5).

In order to arrive at a better understanding of Riding's mindscapes (such as “Elegy in a Spider Web,” “Earth,” and “Disclaimer of the Person”), it is interesting to know something about the personal and historical context in which they were written. After her suicidal attempt in 1929—when she miraculously survived from a fall from the third floor of a building, and

¹² Riding coins the word “nowness” in the beautiful autobiographical poem “Memories of Mortalities,” where “death” appears as a kind of Bergsonian duration: “Then comes pure death, the grace compelled,

after spending months recovering in a hospital bed, after several surgeries—Riding believed she had actually died, and that she was experiencing what she refers to, in a poem, as a “suicidal resurrection.” This tragic event led her to the decision of reconstructing herself: to build a purer and more spiritual self (Wexler xvii). With the move to the Spanish island of Majorca, where she lived and worked for seven years in a small village, surrounded by followers and “disciples,” Riding’s utopian and apocalyptic¹³ sense that historical time had ended echoes the post-modern consciousness of history as a barbaric and monumental collection of data. In those extremely ideological times, Riding was annoyed by the fact that people were either becoming increasingly “media-ized,” or subjecting too easily to ideologies and relying more on “images of experiences” than on factual experiences. As a prophet, at this time she believed that thought (through a world web communication), and not political action, is what could save the world (then on the verge of World War II) from the imminent chaos. The irony is that the *Epilogue* thesis—which predates the recent, post-Cold War debate—was dramatically interrupted by the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936). This historical fact, which forced both her and Graves back to London, was followed by the outbreak of World War II, in 1939, which may have influenced her decision to return to the United States, in the same year.

Paradoxically, and especially for an intellectual who rejected the *Zeitgeist* so violently, the apocalyptic tone of mindscapes such as “World’s End,” “Earth,” “When Love Becomes Words” and “The Life of the Dead”¹⁴ not only captures the sense of imminent catastrophe but

/ Duration cleansed of day-change. // In such rhythm of nearness, nextness, nowness, / From present arrestation borne a motion / Motionless toward present progress” (*Poems* 255).

¹³ *Apocalypse* means, etymologically, an uncovering, a revelation, or a discovery. It is also the name of certain Jewish or Christian prophetic writings, which, as we know, contain terrifying revelations concerning humanity’s destiny.

¹⁴ This poem, placed separately in the *Collected Poems* in the section ‘Histories,’ is a striking experiment: Riding asked a painter, the friend John Aldridge, to execute a series of tableaux that she had imagined.

is also indicative of a more general crisis (of the human being, of representation) at the core of modernism. "How do we know that history no longer exists? By the degree that history exists in thought rather than in things," (20), she argues in "The End of the World, and After," published in *Epilogue III*.

The idea of the end of history, time, and the attempt to make language capture a utopian "now and here" appears again and again throughout the *Collected Poems*. In "World's End," the Biblical moment of Apocalypse is presented not as the destruction of the world, but as the death of the individual self (body and mind):

The tympanum is worn thin.

The iris is become transparent.

The sense has overlapped.

Speed has caught up with speed.

Earth rounds out earth.

The mind puts the mind by.

Clear spectacle: where is the eye?

(*Poems* 111)

In this stark landscape, the human mind has failed to articulate the meaning of existence, to think by itself. Why? By trusting more in what came from the outside than exercising its power to inject meaning in the world. Thus, the end of the world is when the organs of the senses are wasted, when one cannot locate even oneself in space (not even the I/eye). The consequences for this are clear, and tragic:

All is lost, no danger

Forces the heroic hand.

Riding then wrote, in French, a poem to each picture. Then, she "translated" her own poems into

No bodies in bodies stand
 Oppositely. The complete world
 Is likeness in every corner.
 The names of contrast fall
 Into the widening centre.
 A dry sea extends the universal.

(Ibid.)

In this post-historical situation, however, Riding presents humanity as standardization and failure. There is no more individuality, only a sameness. Instead of visibility and light, we have blindness and darkness. Interestingly enough, Robert Graves decided to close his war autobiography with this poem.

In "Earth," the theme of language's timelessness and the obsession with language as a place of thought returns:

1 Have no wide fears for Earth:
 2 Its universal name is 'Nowhere'.
 3 If it is Earth to you, that is your secret.
 4 The outer records leave off there,
 5 And you may write it as it seems,
 6 And as it seems, it is,
 7 A seeming stillness
 8 Amidst seeming speed.
 9 Almost the place is not yet,

English.

10 Potential here of everywhere—
 11 Have no wide fears for it:
 12 Its destiny is simple,
 13 To be further what will be.

 14 Earth is your heart
 15 Which has become your mind
 16 But still beats ignorance
 17 Of all it knows—
 18 As miles deny the compact present
 19 Whose self-mistrusting past they are.
 20 Have no wide fears for Earth:
 21 Destruction only on wide fears shall fall.

(Ibid. 150)

As a mindscape, “Earth,” in my view, not only expands the theme of “The Map of Places,” but also highlights some self-destructive (or self-deconstructed) aspects of Riding’s poems. As an accumulation of historical and mnemonic data, the past miles (official history) deny the “compact present” that the speaker is building for her self (although this self is presented as still ignorant of itself). Only those who fear to face themselves, the poem seems to be claiming, must be afraid of the world’s end. In the logic constructed in Riding’s poem, self-knowledge appears as a cure for the self-blindness of the *Zeitgeist*.

Lines 5-8 show that, although Riding claimed to have rejected music and imagery in her poetry, in passages such as this she was very close to the ideal set by Paul Valéry of poetry as the hesitation between sound and sense:

And you may write it *as it seems*,

And *as it seems, it is*,

A *seeming stillness*

Amidst seeming speed.

(Ibid.)

Here we have sound not as merely ornamental, but engendering meaning, intensifying the poem's content. The beautiful sequence of consonances and assonances, with words saturating one another, points out to what Roman Jakobson has called the poetic function of language: when language calls attention to itself, to its own "being" and occurrence, to its own movement of meaning.

One is able to describe earth by describing it *as it seems*, by being truthful to what earth really is: movement and stillness, appearing to be in inertia and in motion simultaneously. Words themselves achieve this feature, for instance, in line 14: "Earth is your heart" (emphasis mine). After the brief interval that comes after reading "earth" ("is your"), comes the word "heart." By a slight shift in the position of a letter (/h/), earth becomes a heart. The "h" at the edge of the word "earth" disappears, so to speak, reappearing in the beginning of the word "heart" (thus making a striking image: the heart as a rotational earth!). In this poem, language is not only able to imitate earth's movements (rotation/translation), but also to absorb it, linguistically, as Riding does with the play of earth/heart¹⁵. Moreover, the sibilant sequence (with its *s*'s and *l*'s) heightens this idea of speed. Sounds recur, but always bringing a slightly different meaning. As "now" and "snow," "word" and "world," the words "earth" and "heart"

¹⁵ I add here what Bernstein says in *A Poetics*: "That's what poems map: how you get from one detail to another—one morpheme or moment or element to the next. *A poem*, to appropriate Duchamp's phrase, *is a network of details or stoppages*. Or else maps define and prefix—sclerotize—the domain of poetic activity" (168).

contain each other in their graphic features. In the mindscapes, this is a common device to display the double nature of language, as well as to show its capability to appear to be motion and stillness at the same time. Words seem to be fixed on the page (“a seeming stillness”), but they also seem to begin to move as soon as we begin to read them (“a seeming speed”). The alliterative and consonantal play illustrates the paradox Riding saw present in poetic meaning: movement as permanence, writing as a still motion, a constant deferral (maybe willing to achieve what Eliot has called, in “Burnt Norton,” the “still point of a turning world”?) (*The Complete Poems* 14).

In “Earth,” again, one is thrown in a paradoxical atmosphere of permanence and flux: “in a time before Earth was,” making “you” (the reader? Language?) move “Toward perfect now.” However, as with many other poems, this promise of language as redemptive, as a “perfect now,” is deconstructed in the next stanza: “Almost the place is not yet, / Potential here of everywhere.” Traditional measuring (the “mile” of memory, so to speak) is insufficient to capture “the compact present” desired by the powerful self, who declares that its “destiny is simple. / To be further what will be.” The past must be wholly rejected so that language as a place of permanence is achieved. In Riding’s utopia, truth had to come in the process of language itself.

The reader may ask why I have concentrated my analysis on “The Map of Places”. I do so because this poem is a synthesis of the problems set by Riding in the majority of her poems. It would contribute to my discussion to add here Benjamin Friedlander’s insight on this specific poem. He points out that “The Map of Places” is a meditation on a Jewish theme, that of the exile, and observes that “it describes a homelessness that has nothing to do with nationalism.” [...] Her best poems have that mix of anger, resignation, and common sense I associate with the Jews of the diaspora” (“Letter” 164-5). To my knowledge, Friedlander is the

only scholar who has placed Riding's mindscapes in the context of the Jewish tradition. Expanding Friedlander's insight, I would apply it to all the poems mentioned and discussed so far. Mallorca, curiously, was the place where the early Jewish mariners established a homeland, and Riding knew that. It would be interesting to contextualize Riding's strange mindscapes within a marvelous heritage of displacement and exile that marks the Jewish tradition along history. The Jewish element of Riding's mindscapes works almost as a metaphor, related more to the sense of exile and displacement one senses in reading her poems, as well as in her building of a visionary poetics that claims a universal mind, which inserts these poems in the tradition studied by Jerome Rothenberg in *Exiled from the World*¹⁶.

In their attempt to do away with historical, Christian time, Riding's mindscapes ended up replacing the *Zeitgeist* of the moderns with the Benjaminian *Jetztzeit* (*nunc stans*), thus creating a model of what the latter called "Messianic time." For Riding, the "death" of history had to be simultaneous with the birth of an atemporal and universal mind, of a finality of consciousness. There is no "once upon a time" in the "time of the now" enacted by her poems. In order to offer alternative models of perception, she invites the reader to replace the concept of time and history for space and for the mapping of language that occurs in the experience of thought. In order to overcome the *Zeitgeist* and the constraints of space, nationalistic, and political borders, Riding had to found her own linguistic utopia, to find new geographies, "to reach somewhere while it's still now" (*Poems* 152). During the 1930s Riding was reaffirming the superiority of poetry over history as a form of knowledge: "A poet," she states in *Epilogue*, "purifies his age of historical appearances. He translates time into a condition

¹⁶ Rothenberg includes in this ancient tradition elements and sources as the following: stories such as Lilith's, apocalyptic visionaries, the visionary poetry of the Jewish, Christian and Gnostics, Kabbala, discourses and mystic hymns, the magical tradition of a poetry of naming and invocation, which Rothenberg identifies, in contemporary America, in poets who frequently present an experimental and

of meaning, replaces 'objective' experiences with poems. Poems are the structural parts of permanent entirety" ("Politics "19). Riding's view is wholly against the stream of the hegemonic poetic discourses circulating in the 1920s and 1930s, marked by Auden's political poetry, Eliot's mythical method, as well as Pound's investment on history.

Poetry as Thinking

"Our relation to reality," wrote Wittgenstein, "is accomplished in the activity of thinking. The doubling of I and world is mirrored in the activity of thinking. Accordingly language is the authentic medium in which world and I double one another. [...] When I think in language there are not 'meanings' going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions; the language itself is the vehicle of thought" (qtd. in Brand 329). The idea of thinking as action, as stated above—thinking not as a previous entity whose content is separate from its form but that is achieved in the act of performing language—is one of the main investigations of Laura Riding's rational poetry. Different from an irrational surrealist poem or the Imagist epiphany, to name only two poetic manifestations at Riding's time, her poems enact a poetics of awareness, of total attention to the words that are being uttered, as this crucial passage of "By Crude Rotation" reveals:

To my lot fell
 By trust, false signs, fresh starts,
 A slow speed and a heavy reason
 A visibility of blindedness—these thoughts—
 And then content, the language of the mind

apparently anti-Jewish approach, such as Gertrude Stein, Louis Zukofsky, Allen Ginsberg, Jackson

That knows no way to stop.

(*Poems* 107)

The language of the mind that knows no way to stop. Could there be a better description of Riding's obsessive poetics? Does not Riding's mindscape aim at capturing "the feeling of what happens," that is, the workings of consciousness? It is necessary to be blind to acquire visionary insight, Riding asserts. Thought is affirmative and active by nature, as William Blake remarked.

Riding was critical of the pictorial view of language and, specifically, of the view of poetry as image (accused of being "false signs", in this poem). As we recall, she and Graves defined the poem as something that does not render "a picture or idea existing outside the poem, but presents the literal substance of poetry, a newly created thought-activity: the poem has the character of a creature of itself" (*Survey* 118). As a creature, this organism moves by "fresh starts," although its "crude rotation" is doted with "slow speed" and a "heavy reason," and it is unstoppable. For Riding, thus, poetry is less a painting or a photograph, less a description and more a process of discovering things in the act of discovering them, in the act of speaking and writing them out. It is something that can only become meaning when read. Riding is more interested in capturing the physical and mental phenomena of consciousness ("the feeling of what happens," as Antonio Damásio so aptly described it (28)).

Beyond the Web

The stuttering slow grammarian of self

(*Poems* 254)

As I have been discussing so far, the unification of words (as linguistic actualities) and thought (their uses and meanings) is taken by Riding as a poetic and humanistic goal. As the main human communication medium, words could unify the dualities of mind and body in the experience of poetry. One of the procedures used by Riding to achieve this aim was the combination of the meditative mode, together with repetition, and syntactical displacement. In the mindscapes “Beyond” and “Elegy in a Spider Web,” these procedures allow the reader to follow a mind thinking, with its hesitations, doubts, repetition, and ideas. The result is poems such as “Beyond,” where words are transformed into echo chambers of meaning, while their “progress” displays the simultaneous phenomena of linguistics and bodily experiences. In “Elegy in a Spider Web,” “Beyond,” and, I would add here, “Disclaimer of the Person,” words vibrate with the minimalism not unlike the poems of Gertrude Stein and the later Samuel Beckett. On the other hand, repetition could be used, according to Graves and Riding’s praise of the use of it in Stein, for its effect of “breaking down the possible historical senses still inherent in words” (*Survey* 285). In these two poems, repetition and difference become simultaneously possible, part of the poem’s rhythmical basis, good examples of how Riding’s poetry pushes meaning to its limit.

BEYOND

- 1 Pain is impossible to describe
- 2 Pain is the impossibility of describing
- 3 Describing what is impossible to describe
- 4 Which must be a thing beyond description
- 5 Beyond description not to be known
- 6 Beyond knowing but not mystery

- 7 Not mystery but pain not plain but pain
8 But pain beyond but here beyond.

(*Poems* 128)

The poem has the structure of a mantra, or a meditation. The minimal choice of words is evident from the start: in its seven lines, “pain” is repeated three times, “describe” and “description,” five, and “beyond” is repeated six times (including the title). Breaking the normal syntax, the permutation of phrases proliferates meaning while articulating what could be called a grammar of sensations. Abstract words, thus, by being used minimally, are presented almost as if they were concrete entities in this mindscape. Although “pain” and “plain” have similar sounds, it is their *different* meanings that is emphasized. Each line of this mindscape is repeated in the next with a slight variation, altering the precedent statement, thus mimicking the process of thought (“knowing”) and sensation (“pain”) undergone by the thinking subject. If we read it aloud, we can also hear words “pealing” through the reiterated dental and labial consonants (*d*’s and *l*’s, *p*’s and *b*’s), thus embodying the leitmotiv of the poem: the duration and the knowledge of pain. This “pealing” effect can be better described if we highlight the sounds through capitals and bold:

- 1 **PAIN** is IMpossible to describe
2 **PAIN** is the IMpossibility of describ**ING**
3 Describ**ING** what is **IM**possible to describe
4 Which must **be** a th**ING** **beyONd** descripti**ON**
5 **BeyONd** descripti**ON** not to **be** kn**OWN**
6 **BeyONd** kn**OWINg** but not mystery
7 Not mystery but **PAIN** not **PLAIN** but **PAIN**
8 But **PAIN** **beyONd** but here **beyONd**.

At the same time, the structural technique of “beginning again and again” is apt to describe the nowness of language and of the physical experience the poem is capturing. Through this graphic emphasis, one can also perceive that words such as “be” and “being” echo through the poem. The physical and sonorous similarity between *pain* and *plain* point out, again, to the physicality of meaning: pain is produced by the body (thus a private experience), although it cannot be properly described (made understandable), because it is far from human reach. Although the words have similar sounds, the poem adverts the reader to take each as each, as though unambiguous, as if they had only one meaning. Each word has to preserve its linguistic integrity. However, we are wrong if we think that we can properly define a sensation such as pain only by looking inwards. In the logic of Riding’s mindscape, “pain,” like “truth,” or “self,” is characterized by the impossibility of description. These concepts are always paradoxically here and beyond (the poem’s original title was “Here Beyond”): it may be a sensation for one who expresses it (it is “here”), but even then its “meaning” is always escaping from oneself (“beyond”)¹⁷ (In Riding, explanations of “pain” or “truth” are always postponed), as a paradigm of conscious experience (which includes visual, auditory, emotions, visual experiences etc.) “Pain” cannot be explained because words are inherently limited in what they can communicate. It is the most private experience that human beings can experience, and the most difficult to explain. “Pain” must be taken literally and not as something mysterious or be translated into something else. Even its individuality as a word must be respected: “pain” is “pain,” it is neither “plain” nor translated into anything else.

¹⁷ It must be added that “Beyond” establishes a subtle dialogue with a poem of Emily Dickinson’s: “Pain— has an Element of Blank— / It cannot recollect / When it begun—or if it were / A time when it was not— / / It has no Future—but itself—Its infinite contain / Its past—enlightened to perceive / New Periods—of Pain” (*Poems* 324).

“Beyond” articulates, thus, a paradox inherent in language: to describe what cannot be described, what is in the body (here) and in a realm beyond the body (beyond). As a creature in itself, this poem is able to reunify thought and feeling and to demonstrate how mind and body cannot be separated in the experience of pain. Like truth, and the mind, pain is intangible. The poem, instead of being about someone in pain, not only rejects description but also prefers to make language incorporate in its movement the experience of pain itself.

In the 151 lines of “Elegy in a Spider Web” the poetic text is literally transformed in a web of multiple utterances that are continually rupturing one another, with syntax making every meaning and word alter one another:

What to say when the spider
 Say when the spider what
 When the spider the spider what
 The spider does what
 Does does dies does it not
 Not live and then not
 Legs legs then none
 When the spider does dies
 Death spider death
 Or not the spider or
 What to say when
 To say always [...]

(*Poems* 91)

Again, the “elegy” (originally a death poem) gives Riding the opportunity of, textually, dramatizing the limits between speech and silence, self and other, life and death. From the title,

we are adverted that what we will read is an elegy *within* a spider web, and not *about* a spider web. As with the use of the metaphor of map in "The Map of Places," Riding has chosen the web as a spatial model for her mindscape. During its reading, by means of the poem's syntax and lack of punctuation, it is difficult for the reader to determine where the "lyric I" begins and "the other" ends. What is being said? Is the "I" the spider? "Death" itself? The Genii? In the poem's language, the subjects keep changing positions, when they are not linked by force. While one "voice" seems to be trying to say "What to say when the spider dies," the flow is always interrupted, interrogated by other "voices": "The spider does what?," "The dying of oh pity / How through dies." The hallucinatory polyphony obtained in the text, as in minimalist music, is made through the adding of successive layers-lines, thus causing syntactical displacements that allow new meanings. Sentence fragments are introduced and blended with what was already said ("the genii who cannot cease to know," "legs legs than none"), thus progressively enlarging and complicating the previous statements:

When I or the spider
 Dead or alive the dying of
 Who cannot cease to know
 Who death who I
 The spider who when
 What to say when
 Who cannot cease
 Who cannot
 Cannot cease
 Cease
 Cannot

Death
 I
 We
 The Genii
 To know
 What to say when the
 Who cannot
 When the spider what

(Ibid. 91)

Repetition, in the case of this poem, always brings difference. Or, as Riding speaks in “Then Follows”: “There is always difference somewhat / When meanings differ somewhat” (Ibid. 168). The poem clearly indicates that, for Riding, identity and subjectivity exist only in the movement of meaning, as a process. Or, as the poem interrogates itself: “Who say the I.” In fact, what marks the poem is the successive shift of subject positions: “When I or the spider,” “No I and I what,” “Death I says say,” “The spider / Death / I / We / The genii / To know / What to say when the.” In “Elegy in a Spider Web,” the text tries to bring the presence of language and the mind’s experience to the fore. Language becomes a matter of life and death. There is life only where there is language, that is, human presence. Sentence fragments are shuffled together, causing a discontinuity, as if the poem were a collage of itself. It becomes difficult to tell, in the traditional sense of the word, what the poem is *about*. That is why a paraphrase of this poem could only be made by reading the whole poem all over again, as Riding instructed us to do in *A Survey*. She thought that one can only understand “the feeling of what happens” in a poem (its consciousness, so to speak), by reading the poem itself.

Rather than finished, as a “well-wrought urn,” the poem’s performance is simply left in suspension, open-ended.¹⁸ These are the last lines:

Before after here

Life now my face

The face love the

The legs real when

What time death always

What time the spider

(Ibid. 91)

We are left without knowing what has happened to the spider, the I, and the other elements of the poem. As the poem’s open-endedness seems to indicate, one “dies” only when language stops. Although the context of Riding’s personal life is not disclosed in an autobiographical way, some personal historical context might be helpful here. Riding wrote the poem while recovering, in a hospital bed, from her almost fatal suicidal attempt.¹⁹ She was also undergoing treatment with morphine to placate the terrible pains from her fall.²⁰ Riding herself described the poem “as a one-time experiment in concentration on expressing with suitable economy intricate thought-experience in an occasion of feeling on a little (spider) subject having yet a tragic connection with larger subjects (“Comments” 21).

¹⁸ This goes against the idea of the poem as a “well-wrought urn,” a closed artifact, as promoted by the New Critics.

¹⁹ Replying to Robert Fraser’s commentary on this poem, Riding seems to recognize that this is a more autobiographical piece: “Its being an elegy *in* a spider web is integral with the nature of the poem. The peculiar character of this verbal movement is directly related to the location of the poem-composition within the compass of the web, the ‘in’ accounting for the uniting of the sense of the spider as having died with the sense of myself the poet as a creature of a kind that can, also, die. [...] There is no reticence here, [...] only a fidelity to the difficulty of saying something when a spider dies” (“Reply” 89).

²⁰ “Under the influence of morphine,” writes biographer Deborah Baker, “Laura entered that strange land of being dead and not dead” (180).

Although her poetics rejected the mythic impulse common to many modernists, “Elegy in a Spider Web” can be said to rearticulate the myth of Arachne, but from a revisionist viewpoint. Arachne was a young and ambitious weaver who defied Reason’s goddess, Athena, for the task of representing the Olympus: Arachne wins the contest but, because of her arrogance, is transformed by furious Athena into a spider in order to escape death. As a result, she has her mouth and eyes shut by the divinity, and is condemned to weave forever. Thus, in my view, and having the myth as a tool for understanding this poem, Riding’s poem deals not only with the relationship between life and death, but with creation and silence. However, instead of writing *about* suicide or the creative act, Riding manages to articulate these experiences not in a referential mode, but in the very fabric of her poem. The poem does not speak of “Arachne” or “Athena,” for instance, being itself a critique of poetic representation. What the poem, as a typical mindscape, reinforces, is the idea of language as “the knowing of always,” the conscience that to stop thinking/webbing/writing is a kind of “death.” We are, in short, like Arachne, webbed in the durational experience of human language.

In the absence of punctuation, use of repetition and the creation of an atmosphere of “continuous present,” as well as the reliance on a minimal use of words, we can detect that Riding was very much aware of Stein’s experience with the continuous present, as we have indicated, with her technique of “beginning again and again.” Many lines are compounded of sentence fragments that refuse temporality, unity or closure: temporal markers are blended in lines such as “Now before after always,” as it happens with the “Who say the I,” “When who when the spider.” More importantly, in “Elegy In a Spider Web,” the text becomes an articulation of its own birth process, exhibiting itself as pure *poiésis*—the Aristotelian idea that the poem is, above all, a thing which is *made* by the poet *and* the reader. This is “the scene of language,” as she defines as its ideal, with each word’s meaning coming to the fore: “My

particular preoccupations with words was with words as the internal content of language. [...] I saw word as language's apparatus of meaning," Riding reveals in *Rational Meaning* (15). The idea of text proposed in "Elegy" embodies Roland Barthes's ideal of the text in *The Pleasure of the Text*: "In this tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving: lost in this tissue—this texture—the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web" (64). The subject of the poem, if there is only one, and using what Nancy Miller says in her attempt to define a feminist theory of the text ("Arachnology"²¹), "is not fixed in time and space, but suspended in a continual moment of fabrication" (*The Poetics* 270).

In the "scene of language" that Riding's mindscape activates, language is affirmed as pure immediacy, a pure presence, "the link of meaning that human life has with the fact of existence" (*Rational* 36). In this process, the text becomes the very texture of our lives. Clearly, the metaphysics of presence²² underlies her poetical project. Let us repeat what Riding says in the same book: "Language may be said to be the mind's comprehension of the universe as the humanly occupied; and the occupation by the mind of language may be said to be the occupation by it of the universe in *active, consciously organized presence*" (492; emphasis added).

This problem is enacted more clearly in the poem "Disclaimer of the Person," where the poet offers a version of Genesis from the woman's point of view: the world, argues the poem, begins only when the awareness of the individual, as expressed in thought, begins. When the "I," immediately present, can actually utter its being:

²¹ "A critical positioning which reads against the weave of indifferentiation to discover the embodiment in writing of a gendered subjectivity; to recover within representation the emblems of its construction" (272).

²² According to Derrida, the origin and foundation of most philosopher's theories is presence (the same could be said in the case of poetry). But Derrida denies the possibility of this presence and in doing so removes the ground from which philosophers have in general proceeded. By denying presence, Derrida is denying that there is a present in the sense of a single definable moment which is 'now.'

I say.

I say myself.

What is now?

Now is myself.

Now is when I say.

What am I?

I am what I say.

Who am I?

I am who I say.

Now is where I am.

Where am I?

I am in what I say.

(Ibid. 229)

The movement of the mind and the de/re-construction of the textual and actual “self” along the poem is a key to understand Riding’s mindscapes. Taking what Perloff says on Beckett’s associative monologues, one could say that repetition is used here “to present the process of ‘working out an idea,’ of getting at a meaning” (*Intellect* 145). Riding’s belief in the total presence of a self—in the here and now of language—is what deconstructionists would name a logocentric instance: that is, as Madan Sarup explains, “the belief that the first and last thing is the Logos, the Word, the Divine Mind, the self-presence of full self-consciousness” (39). However, it is important to observe that in Riding’s mindscapes, as well as in her general thought, there is always an interest in expressing and articulating the interconnection she saw existing between mind and body (with everything resulting from this bondage, be it pleasure or pain).

In another early mindscape, "Pride of Head," the focus is the physical head (and the brain and, by extension, the thoughts it produces). Here, the head is in its proper position, exact. The speaker is the embodied mind that celebrates itself as being distinctively human: it has "no precedence in nature / Or the beauties of architecture." From this "place of pride," it commands naming and meaning. "My head is at the top of me / Where I live mostly and most of the time, / Where my face turns an inner look / On what's outside of me / And meets the challenge of other things / Haughtily, by being what it is" (*Poems* 23). The "I" is, ironically, an idol of the "head," "Gem of the larger, lazy continent just under it" (the body) which now, personified,

Watch and worry benignly over the rest,
Send all the streams of sense running down
To explore the savage, half-awaked land,
Tremendous continent of this tiny isle,
And civilize it as well as they can.

(Ibid.)

Riding's poetry of mind, self-exploratory, is almost didactic in lines such as these, which makes the reader consider her poetics as a radical application of Descartes' rationalist²³ stance—"I think, therefore I am." In this sense, "Pride of Head," as a typical mindscape, can be defined as a celebration of the mystery of human consciousness, of "the feeling of what happens." On the other hand, a deconstructionist would agree with Riding's assumption that the basic fact of human existence is the stoic acceptance that there is no outside language. The ideal poem, for her, should create a vacuum in experience, a mindscape in which even "the wind's boldness and the clock's care / becomes a voiceless language" (*Poems* 181). Rephrasing

Descartes, we exist as humans because we think the world. In writing it, we materialize it, we transform it in a live “thing,” into a “creature” of words, as Riding called it. By thinking it, we give it consistency, life, meaning. The ideal poem, for Riding, would be marked by a utopian desire to capture “the language of the mind / That has no way to stop” (Ibid. 107). She saw subjectivity as a process, and asked the reader to attend to each word of a poem in order to enable the nowness of language to establish itself: *this* moment. Riding saw poetry as production, and as a challenge, demanding an effort to overcome our inertia as passive consumers of images and pre-packed “feelings,” being “subjects” again, co-producers of meaning and the process of “defamiliarization,” being aware of our own perceptive automatism regarding images and pre-received certainties. As Paul Auster has written, in “the exceptional quality of Riding’s poems is the astounding display of consciousness confronting and examining itself” (“The Return” 36).

In “Beyond,” “Elegy In A Spider Web,” and “Poet: A Lying Word,” we see how Riding may be seen as belonging to the tradition of radical poetics that Marjorie Perloff discusses in *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*, in which “the Image as referring to something in external reality is replaced by the word as Image, but concern with morphology and the visualization of the word’s constituent parts: this is the mode of Concrete Poetry” (78). Before the advent of Concrete Poetry, Riding envisioned an anti-referential mode, breaking with normative syntax, and centered her attention on the weight and concreteness of each word, in the materiality of the words themselves. This was achieved, as we have seen, through syntactical displacement (play with the order of words), neologisms, and through a heightened metalinguistic impulse (the poem meditating on its own birth). This is paradoxical, in Riding’s case, because her poetry is traditionally viewed as being “abstract.” Experiences such as the

²³ In philosophy, a system of thought that emphasizes the role of reason in obtaining knowledge, in

ones that were articulated in these poems are symptomatic of Riding's desire to push meaning to its limit, in order to prove that thought could be as concrete as things.

Finally, it becomes clear that self-reflection as well as instances where the nature of language and reality are questioned are paramount in Riding's mindscapes. Riding's goal reaches, at this point, a dangerous limit: she wanted "poetry brought into view—into stark view—the debate of human consciousness with itself on what is possible and what is impossible" ("Engaging" 8). Instead of proving the authority of the sensorial and the imagination (Romanticism), or electing the Image as a new totem (Modernism), Riding's programmatic mindscapes aimed at emphasizing language's presence and its process.

Word / World / I

"The World and I" addresses the general problem of truth and poetry that is at the core of Riding's poetics. How truthful can be the world when mediated by language, specifically by poetry, the art of language? Is the relation between language and reality a harmonic or a tense one? Does poetry approach or distance us from the world? "The World and I" is another fine example of how Riding was able to overcome both the Romantic and the "High-Modernist lyric mode" of her time, by making language the core of her poetic investigation. As such, hers is a poetics that takes the mind at work, in its struggle to make meaning, the very "stuff" of the poem.

In a two-stanza structure, following a rhyme scheme *aabbccddeeffgg*, in its apparently simple diction, the poem presents itself as developing a philosophical argument: the relationship between word and world, language and reality. Word ambiguity is slight: Riding

contrast to empiricism, which emphasizes the role of experience, especially sense perception.

has chosen the most neutral and general words, as if suggesting to us to take them at face value, as words, and *not* in any metaphorical sense. As I have indicated in my subtitle, the poem seems to argue that there are slashes separating word/world/I. The questioning of metaphor as a tool to gain knowledge, the poem's lack of precise visual images, is what most strikes us in a first reading.

The form of address adopted now is that of a soliloquy, in which we have the impression of following somebody's thoughts, somebody silently "speaking" to oneself. Since there is no private language in poetry—which is always an event between two persons—the reader has the privilege of over-hearing what is being thought. If there is a figure of speech in the poem, such figure is personification. The "world" assumes the character of a person, as capable of love and meaning (the world and the I are "doubtful if ever/ Was a thing to love the other", lines 12-13). The blending of material and concrete qualities is present again in the overall pattern of the poem: both entities, world and the word, assume each other's condition of existence in line 5: the world is humanly "awkward," while human words are considered mere objects, even nuisances ("hostile implements of sense") for the anonymous and majestic "I" that governs the poem.

The title promises a narration of the relationship between the speaker and "the world"²⁴ and the effect it has on our minds and bodies. Although Riding uses simple words, her highly abstract language, almost emptied of external references, forces us to focus on the possible meanings of the general words being used. Although "word" and "world" do rhyme and "meet" in the last two lines, the poem's argument denies such possibility of an encounter.

²⁴ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "world" refers not only to the earth, but also to human society. "The world" can mean both "the earthly state of human existence," "the pursuits and interests of this present life," and "the affairs and conditions of life." In a Biblical sense, "the world" assumes a moral meaning, as referring to "those who are concerned only with the interests and pleasures of this

Thus, the problematic relationship between the world, the I, and the words, is the leading theme of the poem.

Right from the beginning questions arise: How can we trust language when we are not sure even of the words being uttered (line 1), when language seems to be capable only of tautologies (line 2), with "This," this very utterance, not being exactly what one means? Can or cannot poetic statements correspond to truth? The latter question seems to be the point articulated in the poem. Doubt permeates the poem, with several words expressing this condition: "not exactly," "how," "approximately," "awkwardness," "perhaps" (twice), "doubtful," "nearly sure." Changes in the speaker's attitude must also be noted: if in line 13 the speaker is doubtful of his relationship with the world, in line 14 he/she is nearly finding out that such a "meeting" is an impossibility. When used affirmatively in the poem, the word "exactly" points to a failure and a difficulty: that of making the world, the I, and words coincide, "meet." From then on, the poem describes a conflict between an internal reality (the I, the thinking self, language) in relation to what is assumedly outside the self. The ideal of blending word/world/I in a single, unified self, is not possible, according to the poem. Words, the I, and the world, again, as three dramatic entities, are condemned to live separate lives. Other set of irreconcilable contradictions are presented: language/reality, proximity/distance, meaning/nonsense, thinking/living, hate/love, success/failure. The whole poem, then, dramatizes itself in terms of paradoxes.

All these features would make Riding's poem a perfect case for close reading along New Critical lines. However, Riding's paradoxes are *not* resolved in her poems, but always left

life or with temporal and mundane things." The tone of the poem (meditative, inquisitive) seems to heighten this last definition.

suspended, open.²⁵ The poem suggests also that maybe the awareness of this condition can be a step further, as suggested in lines 7-8: “Perhaps this is as close a meaning/ As *perhaps* becomes such knowing.” The *OED* tell us that “perhaps,” indicating a slight possibility, a chancedoubt, non-certainty, the condition of not-knowing, is what describes us as human beings, always trying to “make meaning” of life and what surrounds it. Isn’t doubt a condition of knowledge? The poem acknowledges that there is a gap between the world and the words that the I can never manage to overcome. The desire is to make them coincide, but their mutable nature, their indeterminacy, cancels out each other. In the last lines, one has the impression that the speaker realizes that it is better to recognize the unreachable span between the world and an I. All one can do is to realize the limits of language, this “place” where the world and the I “[f]ail to meet by a moment, and a word” (or, as Wittgenstein would put it, it is better to recognize that “the limits of one’s language are the limits of one’s world”). In the *OED*, “to meet” has the meaning of either “to fit tightly” or “to encounter.” Thus, by calling our attention to words and their etymology, in this mindscape Riding invites us to consider how we make meaning of the world, while pointing out to a crucial question in her poetics: the nature and the limits of human language, and the conflicting relation between poetry, language, and truth.

In the context of the poetics of the period, Riding’s mindscapes, in their critical approach to the image, in their critical suspicion of metaphor, analogy, myth, and symbols, exemplify a dissident aesthetics at the core of modernist poetry. She is also undertaking a criticism, through poetry, of patriarchal and dominant ways of writing, with poetry seen in terms of a specific male modernist tradition in Anglo-American poetry (be it Eliot’s “objective

²⁵ As Jeanne Heuvig reminds us, while for the New Critics the paradoxes had the final task of achieving a final balance or equilibrium through “the ultimately harmonious relations poems brought into being, [f]or Riding, paradoxes were often irresolvable contradictions, attesting to the irreducible disparities between diverse entities. [...] Meaning itself was highly problematical, best intimated through sense eclipsed by the materiality of signification” (199).

correlative" and mythical method, Yeats's "symbol," Pound's "doctrine of the image," or Stevens's "supreme fiction").

In "The World and I" and, I must add, "Poet: A Lying Word," instead of the poem as the occasion of an aesthetic or hedonistic affirmation, or even a religious unity, a "luminous detail" (Pound), we get a kind of philosophical negation, a nihilistic fragmentation, a void. One feels in this poem an unbreachable gap between the physical "senses" (the affects) and "sense" (reason). The senses (images, natural phenomena) are ornaments in Riding's rational theater; they distract us from the "truth" (that is, the perfect match between the world, the words, and the I). The only problem is that, as Riding herself realized in the poem "Truth" (see Chapter 3), "truth cannot be seen" nor "caught." If language is a condition of thinking, the process of encountering the world should be always under control, but it is not.

"The World and I" synthesizes "the drama of meaning" presented in so many of her poems, and presents a limit attitude towards poetry which would make her renounce (and reject) poetry for good after the *Collected Poems* (1938). Her dilemma, encapsulated in the poem, is: can poetry, as the art of language, breach the gap between the outer "world" and the inner "I"? How to give a *permanent* meaning—the seal of Truth—to what it is always changing? We cannot, according to Riding, and we have to admit that it is maybe this very undecidability—this "perhapsness"—which marks human existence. Thus, "The World and I" and many of her poems open room for a discussion of a problem that poststructuralism would re-address: the indeterminacy of meaning inherent in language. If there is a theme in "The World and I" such theme is later alluded to (by (Riding) Jackson) in *The Telling*: "the common risks of language, where failure stalks in every word" (126).

“Truth begins where poetry ends”²⁶: the Wall of Writing

Laura Riding’s attack on the Romantic, Symbolist, and even “modern” poetic discourses that she saw as dominant in the modernist poetry of her time is pursued by means of a metapoetics, exemplified in the tour-de-force “Poet: A Lying Word.” In its twenty paragraphs, this prose-piece is highly relevant to my thesis because it explicitly engages in a cerebral criticism of poetic discourse. Riding’s dissatisfaction with Romantic and even modern lyric conventions demonstrated in this piece (be it the “well-wrought” urns of New Critical poets, the imaginative flight of the late Romantics, or in Stevens) foreviews her later decision of rejecting poetry. At the same time, the poem is an eloquent demonstration of an original method aimed at the deconstruction of what Perloff has called “the High Lyric Mode” of Anglo-American modernist poetry. The poem can also be read as well as an aggressive manifesto of poetry’s “impossibility”: that of saying the truth. In “Poet: A Lying Word,” instead of an imaginative lyric, we have the building of an impermeable anti-lyric, a block of text defying the reader. In my opinion, the poem is unique in the history of modernism for pointing out to a crisis of language and of “High Modernism” itself.

Lyric has been traditionally defined as a literary category distinguished from narrative or drama. Most importantly, since its beginning the word (derived from *lira*, the musical instrument) has been connected with singing, chanting, or with *melopeia*, “words set to music,” as Pound has defined. With Romanticism, *poetry* and *lyric* became synonyms. The Romantics recharged the power of music present in this aspect of great poetry by defining it, as in Wordsworth’s famous words, as a “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (“Preface”

²⁶ In the preface of *Selected Poems*, Riding writes: “I know of 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 (or, as I said in introducing a BBC reading of my

337). Poetry had to be “emotion recollected in tranquility” (Ibid.) and to emphasize the musical, sonorous aspects of speech, coloring it with a subjective experience. As Perloff reminds us, even today poetry is taken as essentially lyric, that is, “a short verse utterance (or sequence of such utterances) in which a single speaker expresses, *in figurative language*, his subjective vision of ‘the truth of moments, situations, relationships,’ *a vision culminating in a ‘unique insight’ or epiphany that unites poet and reader*” (Intellect 174, my emphasis). For a Romantic poet such as Wordsworth, whose key subject is nature, the poet’s traveling mind was seen as being naturally “the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature” (“Preface” 341), having the function of constructing an accurate analogy between nature and human nature. Wordsworth blends man’s passions and feelings with “storm and sunshine, with the revolutions of the seasons.” In his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, he utterly rejects the device of personification as being “a mechanical device of style” (Ibid. 342). Then he defends the imagination, that makes man create “the goings-on of the Universe” where he does not find them” (Ibid). And then Wordsworth asks: “Taking up the subject, then, upon general grounds, let me ask, what is meant by the word Poet? What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him?—He is *a man speaking to men* [...] (339 my emphasis).

The ideology exposed previously takes a critical dimension in “Poet: A Lying Word.” Firstly, instead of a male, solitary “I” expressing fate in the realm of nature, in this piece we have language itself addressing the reader. The poem is wholly metalinguistic and its form can be seen as clearly political, in the sense that “Poet: A Lying Word” deconstructs traditional assumptions and lyric expectations *concerning the nature of representation in poetry*. In this poem, again, instead of a landscape, we have a mindscape.

poems, that, for the practice of the style of truth to become a thing of the present, poetry must become

Secondly, the choice of prose, instead of verse (language in lines usually justified on the right margin), is relevant in Riding's work for being her only prose-poem. I think that the option for prose, in a moment of crisis, points out to Riding's purposes aimed in the text, that is, the deconstruction of lyric: a block of prose would indicate that it is a wall of writing/reading built in front of the reader, in the process of being erected. One could say that, in this meditative mindscape, this wall is the "consciousness" of the text itself, the words erecting themselves in the process of signification. This wall of text addresses constantly the reader, challenging and provoking him. The poem in prose begins with the following words:

You have now come with me, I have now come with you, to the season that should be winter, and is not: we have not come back.

We have not come back: we have not come round: we have not moved. I have taken you, you have taken me, to the next and next span, and the last—and it is the last. Stand against me then and stare well through me then. It is a wall not to be scaled and left behind like the old seasons, like the poet who were the seasons.

(*Poems* 216)

We can see here to what extremes Riding took her ideal of making poetry nothing less than the location of truth. But here there is no room for "recollections in tranquility." Instead of beautiful vistas and fleeting landscapes, whereby the poet's words conduct the reader to an imaginary place—injecting on him memories of childhood, lost love, and the transitory existence, for instance—the poem casts an "I" that is being presented, literally, as a wall of words, defying its own intelligibility and negating the "pleasures" that lyric poetry has conventionally obliged to give. The "I," it becomes clear now, is both the speaker and language, the "you" being the reader (whose "historied brain" and eyes are "rolled up in white

a thing of the past" (15).

hypocrisy”). More than that, this poem represents, in Riding’s poetic career, a kind of limit in the experience of reading, a point of no return:

Stand against me then and stare well through me then. I am no poet as you have span by span leapt the high words to the next depth and season, the next season always, the last always, and the next. I am a true wall: you may but stare me through (Ibid.)

At this point the poem makes clear that it is itself a wall: the wall of reading/writing. This wall, however, is presented as being of two kinds: the selfish wall built by “the Poet,” and the wall of the text that is being constructed and, simultaneously, is deconstructing itself: “It is indeed a wall, crumble it shall,” the poem adverts. The sentence “I am a true wall: you may but stare me through,” repeated nine times along the poem, functions as a refrain, as a reminder that the text, language, is addressing the reader. At the same time, the mindscape creates expectations that are always frustrated, which inserts this piece in the tradition of enigma-texts:

The work of enigma could be defined as a mechanism whose paramount function is to promote this expectation of meaning, while at the same time maintaining a steady embargo on the transmission of meaning. The effect on the reader or receiver may be seen as a combination of, on the one hand, an intuition that sense is somehow imminent, and on the other, the half-certainty that sense may never materialize. (Cardinal 45)

Besides this heightened self-referentiality—predating the post-modern and “writerly” text—the anti-absorptive effect of “Poet: A Lying Word” occurs in the fissure it causes in the so-called fourth-wall of reading: instead of the presentation of a traditional scene, with words functioning as mere vehicle pointing to a thing, the poem deconstructs the transparency of language so the reader can check out its own backstage and devices, its making, the reading process itself. Thus, in this case, the model adopted for the construction of this mindscape is

that of the wall, which works as an extended metaphor for the experience of reading and thinking. This mindscape also interrupts the oniric and fictitious aspects of lyric by constantly and directly addressing the reader: "You have now come with me." "Why have you come here then?" "I am not builded (sic) of you so." A false or lying wall of writing, according to the poem, is one in which language functions as a protective screen, with the reader transformed into a passive spectator/consumer of beautiful images and emotions. Or, better, a false wall is presented as a kind of hill that, after being climbed, allows the viewer to see the changes of seasons, the transient world of appearance. A "true wall," on the other hand, aims at being a place of permanence, a kind of final season: it threatens the reader by presenting itself as a limit. "This body-self, this wall, this poet-like address, is that last barrier long shield of your elliptic changes," the poem declares. This is a wall to see "into," not "through."²⁷ On this wall, time and referentiality have been abolished: "no more a poet's tale of a going false-like to a seeing. The tale is of a seeing true-like to a knowing." "Like wall of poet here I rise, but am no poet as walls have risen between next and next and made false end to leap. A last, true wall am I: you may but stare me through." As with the last line of "The Map of Places," on this wall "holes" look through to nowhere. The text presents itself as a limit: after it there is only an abyss. In a crucial passage, the text itself warns the reader of the danger of being absorbed by it:

It is not a wall, it is not a poet. It is not a lying wall, it is not a lying word. It is a written edge of time. Step not across, for then into my mouth, my eyes, you fall. Come close, stare me well through, speak as you see. But, oh infatuated drove of lives, step not

²⁷ According to the *OED*, the expression "to read the writing on the wall" means to interpret the signs of the times, to learn from contemporaries happenings or tendencies a lesson for the future.

across now. Into my mouth, my eyes, shall you thus fall, and be yourselves no more (Ibid.).

This mindscape is a fine example of what Bernstein has called an anti-absorptive text: “Rather than absorb the reader in the poem, the poem radiates out, project-like, against placid ear, pseudosensitive politesse—‘contesting the social ground’ without abandoning a commitment to the social constitution of meaning“ (*Artifice* 25). The reader is made aware by the text itself that “it” is only a text, but at the same time is more than a text: it is language itself speaking. The passage mocks Romantic sensibility (“oh, infatuated drove of lives”) and presents itself as “a written edge of time” or black hole—after which there is an abyss: death itself. In order to avoid being “readerly” sucked by it, the text adverts, the reader has to learn “to speak as you see.” That is, to resist being absorbed by the physical lyrical properties of the words on this wall: “Does it seem I ring, I sing, I rhyme, I poet-wit? Shame on me then!” “This Wall reads Poet: A Lying Word” (Ibid. 218). Paradoxically, the last words of the poem are “I say, I say.” By rejecting the transparency of language and pointing out to its own process of occurrence, the words themselves are presented not as mere conductors or pointers to a reality supposedly “outside the text.” By being self-referential, this text presents the reader with the challenge of “speak[ing] as you see.” “The page before the first page tells of death, haste, slowness: how truth falls true now at the turn of the page, at time of telling” (Ibid.).

The aim of poetry, according to the poetics outlined in this mindscape, is not to be reduced to being an art of landscape, that is: the skill to “recreate the life of natural objects in pictures or in words” (Heffernan xvii). It is, strategically, to point out to language itself, as a human phenomenon, and to advert the reader as to the limiting aspects of lyrical utterance. Thus, Riding’s poem is not only emblematic of the problematics of human meaning at the core of modernism, but advances a moment of suspicion more typical of post-modernism.

In *Black Riders*, Jerome McGann takes “Poet: A Lying Word” as an example of the “visible language of modernism”:

Language-as-such rises up as the poem’s central subject, therefore, and it rises up as a wall of joking and lying words. These words do not lead the reader anywhere, do not take the reader ‘false-like to a seeing.’ The poem is not allowed to point toward any truth beyond its own interactive features, its own textuality. The truth of the poem has become utterly literal. But in doing so it is not also set apart from the reader in some aesthetic condition of disinterest. [...] The argument is to avoid entering a language (on the reader’s or writer’s side) as if it were to be a ‘mortal simulacrum’ of lying words pointing elsewhere (the deceptions of deep feeling, perhaps, or visionary elsewhere) (129).

As the poem has well demonstrated, for Riding, language was not merely a tool that people and poets use to describe the world. Here, the reader is asked not to approach words at face value, but to face the reality of the words themselves. Riding’s poems, in short, exemplify a poetry in search of human meaning. Or, as she wrote in “Continued for Chelsea”: “The most serious character poetry bears is that of being a mode of expressing what would be otherwise inexpressible” (6). If poetry is an attempt to push words and meaning to their limits, if poetry’s goal is to figure out what it means to be alive, in a human body and mind, Riding’s name must figure in the rank of poets who, in our century, have taken on such challenge.

Coda

Ah, the minutes twinkle in and out

And in and out come and go

One by one, none by none,

What we know, what we don't know.

(*Poems* 30)

As has been shown throughout this chapter, in Riding's mindscapes, "the mind thinking becomes the active force of the poem" ("Thought's" 67), to use Bernstein's formulation. Riding herself allowed us to analyze her poems in such terms, referring to them as "performances of the mind" ("Looking Forward" 41), as "expressive articulation of the mind's experience" ("Comments" 25). However, Riding knew that, without the body, mental experience (and self-knowledge itself) would be physically impossible. Let us consider this example: in the reading act, one is not only mentally but also bodily present (as much as the words printed on the page are to their meaning). Instead of positing a dissociation between thought and feeling, the poem was seen by Riding as a creature in itself, a creature of language, represented by the body of the words (signifiers) and their mental existence (signifieds) in the process of making meaning.

I make this remark in order to correct Joyce Wexler's thesis that Riding's poetry rejected sensory perception, and that there is no emotion in her work. Agreeing with Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels, I believe Riding had an integrative view of the mind/body problem. Riding herself has stated, in response to Wexler, that "[m]ind is not something to 'separate off.' It is the deliberative element in being, and what one does to be by the actualities of being, to the possible full, involves the recognition, by body, of mind, by mind of body" (Ibid.). Samuels has correctly observed in Riding "a unified sensibility that includes the physical world: the body of the temporal world contained within the languaging human mind" (*Poetic* 120). In this sense, Riding's view of mind is akin to recent studies that have demonstrated that any understanding

of reason and consciousness that detaches mind from the body is wholly inadequate.²⁸ A mindscape is a place where the unity of mind and body—the awareness of being—is incessantly lived. A mindscape, thus, is a poem that aims at capturing, along its articulation, “the feeling of what happens,” affirming language as a place of struggle, the place of our human condition. By emphasizing the here and now of language—as a distinct and human phenomenon—Riding focused on the fact that the human being is constituted as a peculiar union, a constant exchange, between mind and body. A poem of hers is not to be passively watched, but to be actively thought out. Moreover, her mindscapes indicate a pervasive question that will continue to face us: how to explain the mystery of consciousness. As the speaker of the long meditative poem “Disclaimer of the Person” realizes at the end:

If I my words am,
 If the footed head which frowns them
 And the handed heart which smiles them
 Are the very writing, table, chair,
 The paper, pen, self, taut community
 Wherein enigma’s orb is word constrained.
 Does myself upon the page meet,
 Does the thronging firm a name
 To nod my own, witnessing
 I write or am this, it is written?
 What thinks the world?
 Has here the time-eclipsed occasion

²⁸ I would include here studies such as Mark Johnson’s *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987), David J. Chalmers’s *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996).

Grown language-present?

Or does the world demand,

And what think I?

The world in me which fleet to disavow

Ordains perpetual reiteration?

And these the words ensuing.

(Poems 236)

CONCLUSION

No canon is immutable or innocent. More than the result of a “natural” selection, the process of canon formation is always a complex and ideological one. Since the height of New Criticism, what is understood as the canon of American poetry has undergone due expansion and revision. Interventions such as Jerome Rothenberg’s anthologies, or the remapping of the canon undertaken by feminist literary critics, among many others, have helped to alter our understanding of the striking range of poetic experiences in the United States, as well as to expose the problems with the selective and institutionalised versions of modernism. Until recently, when the topic was the poetic production of the first half of the twentieth century, the names mentioned, discussed, eulogized, taught, and published in Anglo-American anthologies, were those of Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Frost, Stevens, Williams, and Auden. Even nowadays some critics seem still worried about deciding if our era belongs to Pound, Stevens, or Eliot. Furthermore, due to the institutional influence of canonical critics such as Helen Vendler and Harold Bloom, it is safe to say that the “official verse culture” is still feeling the effects of the New Critical construction of a modernist Anglo-American canon within the academy.

As argued in the Introduction, Michel Foucault’s concept of discourses— ideological and institutional practices that attain hegemonic power during a specific historical period—can be instrumental in understanding the formation of the modernist canon. In order to comprehend Laura Riding’s disappearance from the official history of Anglo-American poetry it is absolutely necessary to comprehend also the powerful discourses that circulated in the literary establishment during her career as a poet-critic (and even after it): the New Criticism (with its canonical “Corpus”, rules, values, and regulatory features), and the dominance of T.

S. Eliot (both as a poet, critic, and canon-maker). The fact is that, as a discursive formation, New Criticism was responsible for the imposition within the academy, during and after World War II, of a modernist canon formed by a restricted list of major authors. Moreover, these authors were examined under the lens of a method of close reading that became a standard instrument in the evaluation of “modern poetry and the tradition” (to use Brooks’s title). Such a canon presented a relatively conventional and “tamed” version of literary history and of modernist poetry, but it was powerful enough to maintain its institutional power. In order to understand this context it is important to remark, as Alan Golding does, that in the United States the academy is “a central canonizing force in American poetry” (*From Outlaw* 70).

In his seminal study *Repression and Recovery* (1989), Cary Nelson has shown that modern poetry was hardly the monolithic program that the New Critical canon presented. From our present view (the turn of the twentieth century) it is possible to observe the diversity (understood here as oddity, conflict, and not as mere eclecticism) of the poetic production of the time. This oddity is expressed, for instance, in the range of different movements (Objectivism, Black poetry, political poetry, as well the American assimilation of European avant-garde), and in the force of individual poets (Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, Muriel Rukeyser, Laura Riding, Lorine Niedecker, to name a few female modernists). As I argue in Chapter 2, the construction of modernist poetry by the hegemonic New Critics during and after World War II blocked access and visibility to movements and authors that represent counter-versions of modernism. One such author is Laura Riding.

The reasons that may explain why Riding is not a canonical writer are many. For one thing, she, no doubt, would deny that she ever wanted to be so. However, no single, isolated reason can explain the unique circumstances in which Riding was erased from the records of modern poetry and criticism. Beyond either the apparent difficulty of her poems or the traits

of her “difficult” personality, a series of facts must be accounted for to explain why her poetry is little known, praised, and taught today. Riding’s case is a striking one, in terms of literary history as well as illustrative, in terms of cultural authority: firstly, after being hailed in the 1920s by the future New Critics—who published twenty one of her poems in their magazine and praised her work as the product of “a new figure in the American poetry” for its “variety of form,” for its “play of imagination” and for combining “a sound intellectuality and a keen irony” (*The Fugitive* III, 130), she was later wholly excluded from any appreciation or even literary mentioning in canonical studies and anthologies. And then, even graver and more ironic: Riding was marginalized—both as poet and critic—by the same poet-critics who most benefited from the method of close textual analysis she had helped to foster (as was later acknowledged by William Empson and Cleanth Brooks). As I have shown, the erasure of Riding’s name from Empson’s acknowledgements in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* is evidence of one insistent attempt to minimize the range of Riding’s contribution. Besides, her partner Robert Graves also began to drop Riding’s name from their collaborative works: in *The Common Asphodel*, for instance, a book of essays signed by him, he published parts of *A Survey* without ever mentioning Riding. Furthermore, as I have argued in the Introduction, what is surprising is not only her exclusion from the canon of American poetry as shaped by the New Critics and their disciples, but also from literary feminist criticism, not to mention several studies and anthologies that propose alternative and revisionist literary historical accounts of modernist poetry.

There is yet another reason to advance Riding’s case as unique: if poets canonize poets, as one version of the process of canon formation posits, why not consider that some poets can effectively “decanonize” themselves? It is possible to say that, in fact, Riding herself greatly contributed to her exclusion from literary history (as Jo-Ann Wallace and K. K. Ruthven have

observed): notoriously, Riding ceased to write poetry in 1938, suspended the republication of her poems, and published almost nothing for three decades. At the same time, her books (poetry, stories, criticism) went progressively out of print: the public had to wait until 1970 to have a selection of her poems, the first since *Collected Poems* had appeared in 1938! It must also be remembered that, as an independent editor, in the 1930s, Riding began to print and publish her own and others' books. After 1938, she refused to include her poems in anthologies (especially those restricted to gender, as well as "compilations governed by any other social ideology"), while at the same time she began to require that republication of her poems should be done only if the publishers included a statement wherein she explained the reasons for her decision to renounce poetry. This extremist and ethical position regarding her work complicated the accessibility and visibility of her poetry.

I believe that Riding's polemic critique of "the forced professionalization of poetry," of literary institutions, and of feminism, also contributed to academic resistance to her work. In fact, she antagonized even important critics and academics sympathetic to her work, while at the same time managing to create around her work a protective and untouchable "aura": authority over Riding's work could only be exerted by herself. She refused to let her poetry be interpreted and institutionalised, representing, as Wallace has well pointed out, the case of "a writer who has been effectively *decanonized* because of her insistence upon being the ultimate referent of her own work and because of her refusal to cede either interpretive or descriptive authority over her own work" ("Laura Riding" 111).

As presented in Chapter 3, Riding's poetics asserts the independence of the poem. This independence is twofold: the modernist poem had to be free, firstly, from any literary tradition as well as from the *Zeitgeist*. Secondly, once written, the poem begins a life of itself. Being a fully presented process of thought, the poem in Riding's poetics is considered "a new and self-

explanatory creature" (*Survey* 124). Instead of an Eliotian "impersonality" of the poet, Riding emphasizes the personality of the poem. Against Eliotian, Auden, and Poundian poetics, Riding's view of poetry opposed religion, myth, politics, and history. Instead—not unlike Henri Bergson's concept of duration and then recent theories of the mind—she proposed a poetry of conscious experience, an achievement of an ahistorical and timeless self. As she writes in *Epilogue* III: "[t]he immediacy of poetry is dateless, self-sustaining, not dependent on historical interest" ("Politics" 7). If poetry was to be understood as an alternative language system, it was necessary to make of every poem a fresh event, an independent life, neither limited by the constraints of the *Zeitgeist* nor dependent on a literary tradition. As Riding writes, "No one seems to realize that the destruction of poetry *as a tradition* would not destroy poetry itself" (*Contemporaries* 142, my emphasis). It was necessary to focus on language as poetry's material, and not only as a descriptive and confessional tool.

In Chapter 3 and 4, I foregrounded Riding's emphasis on the poem itself (how language works) and its peculiarity: that of being a reality of words. In order to escape "the spirit of the times," Riding tried to transform the poem into a timeless scene of thought. Thus, she represents a perfect paradox: her modernist poetry rejects the modern *Zeitgeist*, while promoting a "nowness" of language. Focusing on the conscious experience and the durational time of thought, her poetry emphasizes the "nowness" of self-consciousness. The linguistic task of poetry is, according to her, nothing less than "the articulation of our humanness" (*Telling* 70).

Since her first published essay, "A Prophecy or a Plea" (1925), Riding defended the view of poetry as a mode of rational investigation. Yet, her poetics is from the beginning informed more by a humanistic than an aesthetic impulse. In *A Survey*, she writes that the poet is inspired "to discover things which are made by his discovery of them" (126). In this spirit, Riding envisioned poetry as an exploratory activity. As she retrospectively writes: "the poem [...]"

derives its authority from its fidelity to its kind of experience. The form of the poem is to be governed only by the course of discovery pursued. The discovery of new realities of experiences is the true source of originality in poetry" ("Commentaries" 61). As I have argued, as regards poetic form, her poetry tends to reject traditional forms and meters and to adopt measure not as a given, but as something that is discovered in the process of writing the poem. This approach sets Riding on a central position in the modernist impulse as described by Rothenberg and Joris, with individual poets "acting off a new permission to write a poetry freshly invented—reinvented—in each succeeding poem" (*Millennium* 5).

In 1938, in the preface to *Collected Poems*, Riding asserted that poetry was an "uncovering of truth." In poem after poem of Riding's, one sees a fundamental assertion: that if there is a human truth, it resides in the fact of language. Riding's project is epistemological in its impulse: it reflects on the nature and conditions of knowledge, self, and of existence, and takes up problems that have belonged more traditionally to the province of philosophy (from Plato to Nietzsche, Heidegger and Wittgenstein). Her project was to deliver a universal truth, i.e., that we, as human beings, are in a common and permanent condition called language: "No poet other than myself has cared about poetry, language, and truth, in one integrated caring" ("Some Notes" 22).

Two other features mark Riding's poetics: close reading and the problem of the reader. Defending the difficulty of modernist poetry, in 1927, Riding and Graves raised the problem of the reader and called attention to the necessity of reading poetry *as poetry*, i.e., the reader had to understand that, as an alternative discourse, poetry was a radical experience of language ("to go to poetry is the most ambitious act of the mind," Riding remarked in the preface to *Collected Poems*). The difficulty of the modernist poem, they explained, was a measure of the poem's resistance to be commodified, transformed into something else (thus its "unparaphrasability").

Moreover, one needs to dispose one's self to face the complexities and challenges presented by modernist poetry. *A Survey* demanded a critical attitude from the reader, who needs to abandon the consumerist view of poetry and become a producer of text (previewing, thus, Roland Barthes's formulations). One of the principles that guide the tandem's comprehensive criticism is the close examination of poems. Riding and Graves's exercise of close analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 became famous for the direct influence it had on Empson (who admitted to have derived his method from *A Survey*). Although Riding and Graves recognized that the experiment's value lay in the possibility of transforming the reader into a poet—foreseeing postulates of New Criticism, Structuralism, Reader Response and Deconstruction—the authors were cautious enough to say that the transformation of any method into orthodoxy could be damaging to poetry, and they warned against the transformation of such close readings in one more commodity in the literary and academic market: “It must be admitted that excessive interest in the mere technique of the poem can become morbid both in the poet and the reader, like composing and solving cross-word puzzles” (*Survey* 25).

In Chapter 3 and 4, I worked with the concepts of “mindsight” and created the concept of mindscape further to explain Riding's poetry and poetics. For Riding, poems are acts of mind: “I dedicated myself to poetry because of the promise it held out of a larger in scope & yet more definitive performance of expressive articulation of the mind's experience” (“Commentary” 25). As a concept that appears early on in Riding's work (1925), “mindsight” places emphasis on the mind as a shaper and not only a passive receiver of the outside world; it is poetry's power to affect the outside world rather than being merely affected by it. Language, in Riding's poetics, is understood not as something that merely describes the world and the experiences, but as the very source of those experiences. If language is thought and thought is

language, poetry's aim is to capture the mind's moves, its life. In the experience of poetry, the mind escapes from the world and creates another reality.

Many of Riding's poems celebrate the embodied, discerning mind. Accordingly, I formulated in Chapter 3 the concept of mindscape to describe both Riding's poetic project as a whole, and also her poems themselves: thus mindscapes are "performances of the mind" (to use a recurring expression in her writing), written spaces where thought and language aim at becoming one. The concept of mindscapes emphasizes a poetry interested in bringing into view, as Riding wrote, "the debate of human consciousness with itself on what is possible and what impossible" ("Engaging" 8).

In Chapter 4, I concentrated on Riding's poems in which "the mind thinking becomes the active force of the poem" (to follow Bernstein's brilliant formulation). Next, and following Riding's method, I pursued close readings of five poems: "The Map of Places," "Beyond," "Elegy in a Spider Web," "The World and I," and "Poet: A Lying Word." The introspective, procedural, and "abstract" quality of Riding's poems is achieved through many modes: the mixture of (anti)-pastoral and prose-poem in "Poet," the minimalism of "Elegy," the metalinguistic soliloquy of "The World and I," the meditational and permutational mode of "Beyond," and the extended metaphor of "The Map of Places." Several techniques were also observed in the making of these mindscapes: paradox, repetition, verbal permutation, word-invention, philosophical argument, and extended metaphor.

It is interesting to note that, although Riding progressively stripped her poems of images, she could not escape metaphor altogether. As she well knew it, "all word-use employs some figurativeness" ("Commentaries" 51). In these and other mindscape-poems I began to note how Riding has chosen spatial models to shape these outlines of awakened consciousness: the map, the web, and the wall (of writing) are some of them. In other poems, as I have shown, the

“settings” for the mindscapes are, for instance, the head, the newspaper, the book, the island, Earth, and the very piece of paper upon which she is writing, and we are reading. This seemed to confirm Anastasia Anastasiadou’s suggestion that “space constitutes for [Riding] a major means of self-definition” (133). As I have argued, these “scenes of thought” refuse chronological time, history, Romantic confession, and myth. They are new spaces that exist as articulations of conscious experience; they intend to articulate “a vivid reality of thought.” The poems aim at achieving a perfect “now,” a word obsessively present in Riding’s poems. As a shifter, the word “now” clearly indicates a textual present (not unlike Barthes’s idea of the perpetual present of the writerly text). This radicalization of a “textual condition” (to use McGann’s term) arrives at a limit in “Poet: A Lying Word”: there, Riding dismantles not only Romantic and modernist poetics, but the idea of language as a mere descriptive tool. She asks the reader to pay less attention to what is “behind the wall” of language, and more to the reality of the words themselves (“no more a poet’s tale of a going false-like to a seeing. The tale is of a seeing true-like to a knowing”). Thinking as material is, therefore, at the core of Riding’s poetry, the content of which, as she writes in “By Crude Rotation,” is “the language of the mind / That knows no way to stop”.

In this thesis I have tried to show how in Riding’s work theories become extensions of her poetic praxis and vice versa. From the beginning, criticism and poetry were integrated in her linguistic project. Her essays, criticism, letters—all informed by ethical and linguistic principles—increase our understanding of the peculiar problems Riding was trying to solve in her poetry. A telling example of this reciprocity is demonstrated by the close reading she does, in *A Survey*, of a poem of her own, “The Rugged Black of Anger.” The analysis is a clear demonstration of how she managed to integrate poetic theory and poetic performance.

Riding's rejection of poetry, as I have tried to argue, was consequence of her extremist poetics. In fact, as Paul Auster and Charles Bernstein have well observed, her early work has plenty of clues indicating that such renunciation might come one day, that it was, in some way, unavoidable. Premonitions of her future rejection are detected most clearly in the masterpiece "Poet: A Lying Word" (1933), a prose-poem that criticizes poetry for being a barrier between human beings and the reality of the mind. From the beginning there is a discomfort with poetry as an art and as a tradition, a set of conventions and techniques. From "A Prophecy or a Plea" and on, Riding asked from poetry nothing less than the responsibility of delivering truth through language. After 1938, however, she began to assert that poetry—language in state of artifice, essentially metaphorical—was unable to deliver the truth.

As I have tried to demonstrate throughout this thesis, Riding played a fundamental part in the development of contemporary literary criticism. There are several reasons to consider her one of the most important theoreticians of poetry of the twentieth century. The range and seriousness of her critical and poetic achievement should not be discarded in any serious book dealing with modernist poetry. Firstly, as we have seen, *A Survey* not only scattered the seeds of what would become known as close reading but was also among the first books, in the Anglo-American context, to define modernism as a conflicting category, and to dare to emulate the experimentalism of modernist poetry. By doing close analysis of poems from different time-periods (from Shakespeare to Cummings), focusing on the text itself, *A Survey* also has the merit of advancing a theory of the "synchronicity" of literary works (in terms of their textual condition, all poems are contemporary). Finally, Riding's method of poem-scrutiny (published two years before I. A. Richards's *Practical Criticism*) showed that close attention to every feature of a poem had to be at the basis of poetry criticism.

Following Marjorie Perloff's discussion on recent moves of the North American avant-garde (*Radical Artifice—Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*), I believe that Riding, in her attacks on imagist doctrine, and in a postmodern move *avant-la-lettre*, was among the first to deconstruct the equation poetry = image, criticized in Perloff's book. Riding's relevance to contemporary poetry and poetics lies in the paradigmatic shift her poetry promotes: from image-centered to language-centered poetry. Riding's poetry overcomes the dualistic model of the modernists: tension between the image and the real, elements which become related to each other as the two sides of a sheet of paper. Her mindscapes go beyond the image, deeply into the reality of language itself. Riding thought that language could not be reduced to a descriptive tool or a translation of an experience (be it in the form of an "objective correlative" or an "image"), but that it is rather experience itself. I find it surprising that a critic so well informed as Perloff does not recognize either the importance of Riding's attack on imagist doctrine or her language-centered poetics. Moreover, the suspicion of metaphor and image-based poetry, and the deconstruction of Romantic lyric discourse undertaken by Riding, among other moves, are not unlike the suspicion that animates the project of the Language poets Perloff has so brilliantly defended. It comes as no surprise, however, that the so-called Language poets (like Barrett Watten or Charles Bernstein, one of whom wrote a thesis on Riding), or poets associated with the movement (John Ashbery, Michael Palmer) are so interested in Laura Riding.

Her work, as a whole, advances problems later addressed by New Criticism, Feminism, and Deconstruction. As Wallace so aptly synthesizes:

Riding's work had what could perhaps be called points of strategic similarity to the three most important critical movements of the last sixty years. She shared with New Criticism a strategy of close textual analysis, with feminism a strategy of exploring female

difference, and with deconstruction a strategy of rigorous linguistic analysis; and yet, although her strategies were similar, her intention was always quite different. (“Laura Riding” 120)

Another key characteristic of Riding’s poetry, as I have argued, is that it sits firmly within the never-ending debate between poetry and philosophy that marks the philosophical tradition, from Plato to Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Like the last two, Riding has a project that aims at breaching the gap between “thinking” and “poetizing.” This is one of the peculiarities of her poetry.

Indifferent to poetic systematizing and critical of literary movements, Laura Riding formed neither a school of criticism nor an aesthetic movement. But, although difficult to trace, the impact of her poetry is undeniable. Her early influence on John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate and other “Fugitives” is a story that still needs to be written. Her diction is also evident in the poems of the early W. H. Auden, and the “truth-impulse” of her poetry is felt in poets such as James Reeves and her partner Robert Graves. In the 1950s, poets such as Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, and Charles Tomlinson recognized the importance of Riding’s achievement for their own poetry. In the 1970s, John Ashbery mentioned Riding among the three main sources of his early work, praising her “abstract expressionism,” her procedural poetry, and placing her achievement at the core of “an other tradition” of American poetry (Lehman 6). The impact of her poetry and pronouncements on one of the most radical poetic movements in the U. S.—Language poetry—has been also evident. Her presence can be detected, for instance, in the work and essays of Bernstein and Palmer, and in the speculations of Watten and Silliman. The names listed above are a clear indication of how Riding’s work has been disseminated to authors so different among themselves.

From the moment Riding renounced the writing of poetry, she began to sign her name “Laura (Riding) Jackson,” the parentheses indicating that her personal identity as a poet was a thing of the past (but still visible in the present). This renunciation, however, has been more debated than her poems. In the 1960s, (Riding) Jackson began to formulate a radical critique of poetry that is Neo-Platonic in its impulse. She considered that “poetry, by promising to present truth, can only be an artificial version of human reality” (*Telling* 116), and that “literary reality is reverently shrouded as if it were the real thing” (*Ibid.*). The problem of poetry, according to Riding, is in its craft: “The liberty of word that poetry confers is poetry’s technique not truths” (*Telling* 66). The reasons presented against poetry are ethical and aesthetical ones: if until 1938 Riding considered poetry the best vehicle to achieve, in language, the “potentialities of perfect expression in words,” after 1938 she felt that poetry, because of its artificial and illusory nature, was not able to tell the truth (that is, to match word and thought). “There can be no literary equivalent to truth. If, in writing, truth is the quality of what is said, told, this is not a literary achievement: it is a simple human achievement” (*Telling* 116).

A possible response to Riding can be found, ironically, in one of the early sources of her poetic thinking. Sidney writes in his “An Apology for Poetry” (1580?) that poets do not lie, because they never affirm anything as fact, which history, for instance, does. On the other hand, one might say that the writing of truth is not the province of poetry. Is poetry, the art of language, obliged to deliver such truths?

For (Riding) Jackson, the problem of poetry lies exactly in its textual, artificial condition: she criticizes poets for being overly interested in perfecting their styles, and poetry as a stock of “styles” and “special effects” available to tradition. However, how can we imagine poetry—where what is said is always connected with how is said—as an art that does not employ all the available linguistic resources (metaphor, imagery, rhyme, sound etc)? Wasn’t it Riding herself

who asserted that in a close reading all the features of a poem are important? Isn't poetry language that calls attention to itself? Didn't she speak, in *The Telling*, of "the common risks of language, where failure stalks in every word"? (66). Isn't this risk implicit in the writing of poetry? Didn't she say that poetry is to make words do more than express, that it is a pushing at the limit of language? In this respect, it is interesting to hear Paul Auster's position:

Laura Riding is clearly interested in problems that extend beyond the scope of poetry, and by dwelling on these problems as if they were poetry's exclusive concerns, she only confuses the issue. She did not have to renounce poetry because of any objective inadequacy in poetry itself—for it is no more or less adequate than any other activity—but because poetry as she conceived of it was no longer capable of saying what she wanted to say. She now feels that she had 'reached poetry's limits.' But what really happened, it would seem, is that she had reached her own limit in poetry. (The Art 69)

There are several aspects of Laura Riding's work that were not covered by this study. In order to show the full importance of Riding's work to contemporary poetry, fiction, and criticism, other studies on Laura (Riding) Jackson are necessary. Susan Sontag, Helen Vendler, and Harry Mathews were some of the critics able to recognize Riding's achievement as a writer of fiction. However, there are few studies on this aspect of Riding's work. A study on the collection of short stories *Progress of Stories* (1935) as well as *Anarchism is Not Enough* (1925) would increase the range of appreciation of the peculiarities of Riding's essays and narrative methods. Another turning point of Riding's career as a writer is the prose work *The Telling*, which she calls "a personal evangel" and where she undertakes her linguistic project of the language of the mind, aiming at a "zero-degree of writing," or a styleless style, so to speak. Her subject in this book, as she says, "is all ourselves, the human reality" (49).

In the area of gender studies, an interesting research might focus the complex relationship between her work and feminisms, as well as her position on the topic of gender, as expressed in the historical novel *A Trojan Ending* (1937), in the study *Lives of Wives* (1939), and in *The Word Woman and Other Related Writings* (1993), wherein she criticizes the cultural construction of gender. Because modernism is too often thought of as a male movement, the fact that women were not mere co-participants in the modernist adventure but were often enough main players (be it as poets, critics, editors etc.) has been occluded. A study on the tradition of subversion in American poetry, experimental at its core, might begin with Emily Dickinson, encompass Gertrude Stein, Muriel Rukeyser, Laura Riding, Lorine Niedecker, and reach contemporary poets such as Norma Cole, Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian, and Juliana Spahr, clearly demonstrating alternative versions of modernism and postmodernism.

For my part, my forthcoming book *Mindscape: Poemas de Laura Riding*, to be released by Editora Iluminuras in the beginning of 2001, containing thirty eight translations of Riding's poems into Portuguese, will be a direct contribution to the field. In the year of her centenary, the book will be the first collection of her poems to be published in book-form outside the U. S. and Great Britain. The book, bilingual, has the following structure: 1) An introductory essay, based on my findings in the present thesis; 2) Thirty eight poems, collected from *First Awakenings*, *Collected Poems*, and from the broadside "How a Poem Comes to Be" (1980); 3) Gallery: a section of photographs; 4) Bibliographical references; and 5) an Appendix of short critical texts on Riding's poetry by invited authors (Elizabeth Friedmann, Charles Bernstein, Mark Jacobs, John Nolan, Michael Palmer, Ben Friedlander, Jerome Rothenberg, Pierre Joris, and Lisa Samuels). I hope this thesis and the forthcoming book can contribute to making Laura Riding's work more visible and known.

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APPENDIX¹

THE MAP OF PLACES

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

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

¹ The reproduction of the poems herein included is authorized by The Board of Literary Management of the late Laura (Riding) Jackson.

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

ELEGY IN A SPIDER WEB

What to say when the spider
 Say when the spider what
 When the spider the spider what
 The spider does what
 Does does dies does it not
 Not live and then not
 Legs legs then none
 When the spider does dies
 Death spider death
 Or not the spider or
 What to say when
 To say always
 Death always
 The dying of always
 Or alive or dead
 What to say when I
 When I or the spider
 No I and I what
 Does what does dies
 No when the spider dies
 Death spider death
 Death always I
 Death before always
 Death after always
 Dead or alive
 Now and always
 What to say always
 Now and always
 What to say now
 Now when the spider
 What does the spider
 The spider what dies
 Dies when then when
 Then always death always
 The dying of always
 Always now I
 What to say when I
 When I what
 When I say
 When the spider
 When I always
 Death always
 When death what
 Death I says say
 Dead spider no matter
 How thorough death

Dead or alive
 No matter death
 How thorough I
 What to say when
 When who when the spider
 When life when space
 The dying of oh pity
 Poor how thorough dies
 No matter reality
 Death always
 What to say
 When who
 Death always
 When death when the spider
 When I who I
 What to say when
 Now before after always
 When then the spider what
 Say what when now
 Legs legs then none
 When the spider
 Death spider death
 The genii who cannot cease to know
 What to say when the spider
 When I say
 When I or the spider
 Dead or alive the dying of
 Who cannot cease to know
 Who death who I
 The spider who when
 What to say when
 Who cannot cease
 Who cannot
 Cannot cease
 Cease
 Cannot
 The spider
 Death
 I
 We
 The genii
 To know
 What to say when the
 Who cannot
 When the spider what
 Does what does dies
 Death spider death
 Who cannot
 Death cease death
 To know say what
 Or not the spider

Or if I say
Or if I do not say
Who cannot cease to know
Who know the genii
Who say the I
Who they we cannot
Death cease death
To know say I
Oh pity poor pretty
How thorough life love
No matter space spider
How horrid reality
What to say when
What when
Who cannot
How cease
The knowing of always
Who these this space
Before after here
Life now my face
The face love the
The legs real when
What time death always
What to say then
What time the spider

THE WORLD AND I

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

POET: A LYING WORD

You have now come with me, I have now come with you, to the season that should be winter, and is not: we have not come back.

We have not come back: we have not come round: we have not moved. I have taken you, you have taken me, to the next and next span, and the last—and it is the last. Stand against me then and stare well through me then. It is a wall not to be scaled and left behind like the old seasons, like the poets who were the seasons.

Stand against me then and stare well through me then. I am no poet as you have span by span leapt the high words to the next depth and season, the next season always, the last always, and the next. I am a true wall: you may but stare me through.

It is a false wall, a poet: it is a lying word. It is a wall that closes and does not.

This is no wall that closes and does not. It is a wall to see into, it is no other season's height. Beyond it lies no depth and height of further travel, no partial courses. Stand against me then and stare well through me then. Like wall of poet here I rise, but am no poet as walls have risen between next and next and made false end to leap. A last, true wall am I: you may but stare me through.

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

It is not a wall, it is not a poet. It is not a lying wall, it is not a lying word. It is a written edge of time. Step not across, for then into my mouth, my eyes, you fall. Come close, stare me well through, speak as you see. But, oh, infatuated drove of lives, step not across now. Into my mouth, my eyes, shall you thus fall, and be yourselves no more.

Into my mouth, my eyes, I say, I say. I am no poet like transitory wall to lead you on into such slow terrain of time as measured out your single span to broken turns of season once and once again. I lead you not. You have now come with me, I have now come with you, to your last turn and season: thus could I come with you, thus only.

I say, I say, I am, it is, such wall, such poet, such not lying, such not leading into. Await the sight, and look well through, know by such standing still that next comes none of you.

Comes what? Come this even I, even this not-I, this not lying season when death holds the year as steady count—this every-year.

Would you not see, not know, not mark the count? What would you then? Why have you come here then? To leap a wall that is no wall, and a true wall? To step across into my eyes and mouth not yours? To cry me down like wall or poet as often your way led past down-falling height that seemed?

I say, I say, I am, it is: such wall, such end of graded travel. And if you will not hark, come tumbling then upon me, into my eyes, my mouth, and be the backward utterance of yourselves expiring angrily through instant seasons that played you time-false.

My eyes, my mouth, my hovering hands, my intransmutable head: wherein my eyes, my mouth, my hands, my head, my body-self, are not such mortal simulacrum as everlong in boasted death-course, nevelong? I say, I say, I am not builded of you so.

This body-self, this wall, this poet-like address, is that last barrier long shied of in your elliptic changes: out of your leaping, shying, season-quistling, have I made it, is it made. And if now poet-like it rings with one-more-time as if, this is the mounted stupor of your everlong outbiding worn prompt and lyric, poet-like—the forbidden one-more-time worn time-like.

Does it seem I ring, I sing, I rhyme, I poet-wit? Shame on me than! Grin me your foulest humour then of poet-piety, your eyes rolled up in white hypocrisy—should I be one sprite more of your versed fame—or turned from me into your historied brain, where the lines read more actual? Shame on me then!

And haste unto us both, my shame is yours. How long I seem to beckon like a wall beyond which stretches longer length of fleshsome traverse: it is your lie of flesh and my flesh-seeming stand of words. Haste then unto us both! I say, I say. This wall reads 'Stop!' This poet verses 'Poet: a lying word!'

Shall the wall then not crumble, as to walls is given? Have I not said: 'Stare me well through?' It is indeed a wall, crumble it shall. It is a wall of walls, stare it well through: the reading gentles near, the name of death passes with the season that it was not.

Death is a very wall. The going over walls, against walls, is a dying and a learning. Death is a knowing-death. Known death is truth sighted at the halt. The name of death passes. The mouth that moves with death forgets the word.

And the first page is the last of death. And haste unto us both, lest the wall seem to crumble not, to lead mock-onward. And the first page reads: 'Haste unto us both!' And the first page reads: "Slowly, it is the first page only."

Slowly, it is the page before the first page only, there is no haste. The page before the first page tells of death, haste, slowness: how truth falls true now at the turn of the page, at time of telling. Truth one by one falls true. And the first page reads, the page which is the page before the first page only: 'This once-upon-a-time when seasons failed, and time stared through the wall nor made to leap across, is the hour, the season, seasons, year and years, no wall and wall, where when and when the classic lie dissolves and nakedly time salted is with truth's sweet flood nor yet to mix with, but be salted tidal-sweet—O sacramental ultimate by which shall time be old-renewed nor yet another season move.' I say, I say.