Of Sonnets and Archives: Robert Graves, Laura Riding, and the Erasure of Modernist Poetry

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Abstract

Keywords: Collaboration; Authorship; Self-Archivization; Gender.

In the nearly eighty years since Laura Riding and Robert Graves ceased their collaborative endeavors there has been much speculation as to the nature and extent of their literary partnership. Graves retold the past to his biographers, constructing Laura Riding as a queen yogi figure. In response to these accusations Riding returned fire with volley after volley of "corrective" letters which she sent to Graves's biographers as well as any magazine or student that she found to be sympathizing with Grave's account of the creative partnership. At the time of her death in 1991, Riding was embroiled in multiple epistolary exchanges of which the primary object was the restoration, perhaps better identified as the recreation, of "Laura Riding". These exchanges with friends, enemies, and editors of little magazines demonstrate her efforts to dispel what she considered incorrect characterizations of her "collaboration", "connection" or "association" with Robert Graves. If we settle too easily into the entrenched positions of the Riding-Graves conflict we put ourselves in danger of continuing to debate Riding's role in terms of a model of authorship that strictly delineates between creation and revision, authors and editors, and which, in turn, demands that Riding's contributions be either credited or discredited. But "collaborators" often do not share the same conception of authorship, nor do they have fixed roles or rigid definitions of their own creative work. This essay reconsiders Robert Graves and Laura Riding's collaborative practice and revision techniques and the ways in which their very different self-archivization practices shaped their reception, first, at the institutional level of the collections, then, through forensic examination of manuscripts, diaries, and correspondence. Anxieties about authorship attribution and reception in the Riding-Graves archives, as they represent an expanded authorial corpus and a record of early twentieth-century collecting practices, demonstrates the ways in which modernist form, composition, revision, and self-fashioning techniques reveal the archive as the modernist scene.
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Abstract
In the nearly eighty years since Laura Riding and Robert Graves ceased their collaborative endeavors, there has been much speculation as to the nature and extent of their literary partnership. Graves retail the past to his biographers, construing Laura Riding as a queenly sage figure. In response to these accusations Riding returned fire with volley after volley of "reactionary" letters which she sent to Graves's biographers as well as any magazine or student that she found to be sympathizing with Graves's account of the creative partnership. At the time of her death in 1972, Riding was embroiled in multiple epistolary exchanges in which the primary object was the denigration, perhaps better identified as the recreation, of "Laura Riding." These exchanges with friends, students, and editors of little magazines demonstrate her efforts to clarify what she considered incorrect characterizations of her "collaboration," "conscience" or "association" with Robert Graves. If we weep too easily into the intersected positions of the Riding-Greaves conflict we put ourselves in danger of contradicting to others Riding's role in terms of a model of authorship that strictly delineates between creation and reception, author and editor, and self, in that Riding's contributions be either omitted or discerned, that "collaborators" often do not share the same conception of authorship, nor do they have fixed roles or rigid definitions of their own creative work.

This essay re-encounters Robert Graves and Laura Riding's collaborative practice and reception techniques and the ways in which their very different self-identification practices shaped their reception, first, at the institutional level of the collections, then, through various manifestations of manuscript, edition, and correspondence. Anxiety about authorship attribution and reception in the Riding-Greaves archive, as they represent an expanded authorial agency and a record of early twentieth-century collectible practices, demonstrates the ways in which readers, editors, critics, and self-publishing techniques reveal the archive as the modernist scene.

Keywords: collaboration, authorship, self-association, gender.

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By Laura Riding and Robert Graves. (Heinemann. 7s. 6d. net.)— It is not easy to see what Mr. Robert Graves and Miss Laura Riding hoped for in writing this book. In part, it is an attempt to gain the sympathy of the "plain man" for some sophisticated, American-English fashions in poetry: in part it is an attempt to explain why no "plain man can expect to sympathize with them—they are addressed "to the univer- pity," rather than to him. Perhaps the best chapter of the book is the one which describes the attitude of mind implicit in "modernism": the pretense that one belongs to a lost generation, in which all standards and all tradition have vanished, and the poet is left as a dead soul laughing a little sourly at himself for being so dead. It. Laura Riding Jackson - Poet - Born in 1901, the poet Laura Riding Jackson authored many books of poetry and prose, including works on textual analysis. That same year, Riding and Gottshalk divorced, and she moved to New York City. While in New York, she became friends with various writers, including the poet Hart Crane. She and Graves co-wrote A Survey of Modernist Poetry (Heinemann, 1927), and from 1935 to 1938 they edited Epilogue, a journal in which they explored new principles of textual analysis that were to influence the development of the New Criticism. In 1941, having returned to the United States, Riding married Schuyler Brinckerhoff Jackson, a poet, critic, and former poetry editor of Time magazine. A Survey of Modernist Poetry has 1 rating and 0 reviews: Published January 1st 1969 by Haskell House, 295 pages, Hardcover. In 1926 he took up a post at Cairo University, accompanied by his wife, their children and the poet Laura Riding. He returned to London briefly, where he split with his wife under highly emotional circumstances before leaving to live with Riding in Delia, Majorca. There they continued to publish letterpress books under the rubric of the Seizin Press, founded and edited the literary journal Epilogue, and wrote two successful academic books together: A Survey of Modernist Poetry (1927) and A Pamphlet Against Anthologies (1928). In 1927, he published Lawrence and the Arabs, a commercially successf