**Laura (Riding) Jackson (1901-1991)**



Laura (Riding) Jackson was a poet, critic, novelist, publisher, and editor. Her writing eschewed cultural reportage in favor of exploring what she called truth or human experience. She was the sole woman member of the FUGITIVES, and later the collaborative partner of ROBERT GRAVES. In their fourteen-year literary and intimate partnership she and Graves established and operated the SEIZIN PRESS first out of London and then from their home in Majorca, Spain. In 1941 she renounced poetry, claiming it did not provide an adequate basis for truth. Around this time she broke off her connection to Robert Graves. From 1941 until her death in 1991 Riding lived in Wabasso Florida where she and her husband Schuyler Jackson worked on a collaborative linguistic and philosophic project *THE DICTIONARY OF RELATIONAL MEANING: A NEW FOUNDATION FOR THE DEFINITION OF WORDS*.

Born Laura Reichenthal, Riding grew up in Brooklyn before attending Cornell University on a scholarship. She met and married her history instructor, Louis Gottschalk and moved first to Urbana, Illinois and then Louisville, Kentucky, never obtaining her degree. In 1923 her first major published poem appeared under the name Laura Riding Gottschalk in *The Fugitive* alongside Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Hart Crane. In 1924 she won the Fugitives’ Nashville Poetry Prize for her poem “Dimensions” and also that year, after meeting Tate and other members of the Fugitives, Riding began fundraising on behalf of the magazine. A year later she and Gottschalk divorced and she moved to Greenwich Village in search of work in publishing. Here she socialized with Hart Crane and Kenneth Burke. In 1925 her satiric poem “The Quids” inspired Robert Graves to invite Riding to join him and his wife Nancy Nicholson, the British painter, feminist, and fabric designer, in England. Shortly thereafter Riding and Graves entered into an intimate and creative partnership that lasted fourteen years.

During this period she published under the name Laura Riding. Her first book of poems, *THE CLOSE CHAPLET (1926)*, was published in England by Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s HOGARTH PRESS and in the United States, by ADELPHI. Also in that year Riding’s *VOLTAIRE: A BIOGRAPHICAL FANTASY* was published. Riding and Graves’s collaboratively written *A SURVEY OF MODERNIST POETRY* (1927) has been credited with inspiring the methodology of the NEW CRITICISM. Following this successful work of collaborative criticism, their co-authored *A PAMPHLET AGAINST ANTHOLOGIES* (1928) appeared, as well as Riding’s *CONTEMPORARIES AND SNOBS* (1928), *LOVE AS LOVE, DEATH AS DEATH* (1928), and *ANARCHISM IS NOT ENOUGH* (1928). *ANARCHISM*, a work of modernist poetics or unconventional criticism, articulates RIDING’S theories of language, among them, that through poetry one can seek truth and that poetry’s pursuit of truth inevitably results in failure. ANARCHISM has been classed with EZRA POUND’S *GUIDE TO KULCHUR (1938)* and CHARLES OLSON’S *CALL ME ISHMAEL (1947).*

Together, Riding and Graves founded the SEIZIN PRESS, which they operated in London from 1927-30. In 1929 Riding threw herself from a fourth story window of her home in St. Peters Square, Hammersmith. Following Riding’s recovery, she and Graves left for Majorca together where they reestablished the SEIZIN Press (1930-1937). On this press they published, in addition to their own writing, GERTRUDE STEIN, LEN LYE, and JAMES REEVES.

In the following productive years she published *POEMS A JOKING WORD* (1930), *EXPERTS ARE PUZZLED* (1930), *THOUGH GENTLY* (1930), *TWENTY POEMS LESS* (1930), *LAURA AND FRANCISCA* (1931), *POET: A LYING WORD* (1933), and *THE LIFE OF THE DEAD* (1933). NANCY CUNARD’S HOURS PRESS published *FOUR UNPOSTED LETTERS TO CATHERINE* (1930), Riding’s only children’s book, which had been written for Graves and Nicholson’s eight-year old daughter and dedicated to GERTRUDE STEIN. This collection of letters, in its style reminiscent of STEIN, offers in simple language a young child’s guide to living. RIDING admired STEIN’S use of language, but in later years decided that Stein’s writing attempted too much immediacy and their friendship disintegrated. Sometimes described as a metaphysical poet, Laura (Riding) Jackson’s poems of the 1930s are intellectual and cerebral. They avoid lyric conventions, aiming instead for precision in abstraction. As with her poetry, Riding sought in *PROGRESS OF STORIES* (1935) to make the nature of story-telling and the nature of truth-telling as closely related as possible.

Until 1936 RIDING and GRAVES remained in Majorca, hosting numerous English and American writers from their home, Canellun, and engaging in various collaborative projects including the collaboratively-written magazine *EPILOGUE: A CRITICAL SUMMARY* (three volumes, 1935-1937) and *14A* (1934) with GEORGE ELLIDGE. With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, Riding, Graves, and friends fled Majorca, leaving behind such manuscripts as *THE WORD WOMAN*. A final collaborative project with Graves resulted in *THE LEFT HERESY IN LITERATURE AND LIFE* (1939, with HARRY KEMP, RIDING, GRAVES, and ALAN HODGE. From London, Riding’s *LIVES OF WIVES* (1939), a woman’s revisionist history of the Persian Empire, was published by Cassell. In her preface to *POEMS* (1938)Riding distinguished poetry from art and religion, claiming it as neither metaphorical imitation nor spiritual idealism, but as spiritual realism. In 1939 Riding and Graves traveled to New York. Shortly thereafter Graves returned to England and the two never met again.

In 1940 Riding renounced poetry, citing its failure to communicate truth. In 1941 Riding married *Time* magazine poetry editor, SCHUYLER JACKSON, and in 1943 moved to Wabasso, Florida where she and Jackson operated a citrus farm. She began work on a linguistic project with Jackson, *RATIONAL MEANING: A NEW FOUNDATION FOR THE DEFINITION OF WORDS*, which was published posthumously in 1997. In her short essay “On Change,” (Riding) Jackson described this dictionary project as revealing “the existent instrumentality of change.” The dictionary project sought to make language fit rational principles and embody spiritual ideas. Between 1939 and 1963 Riding lived in relative seclusion and published no new work. Two years after her husband’s death, Riding returned to poetry writing with *SELECTED POEMS, IN FIVE SETS* (1970). Her “personal evangel” on the personal basis of truth, *THE TELLING* was published by ATHLONE Press in 1972and reestablished her name in poetry circles. During the 1960s and 1970s (Riding) Jackson wrote essays on language, history, and the nature of literature and between 1968 and 1991 Riding wrote hundreds of letters to writers and scholars in order to recharacterise her legacy. She received the Mark Rothko Appreciation Award in 1971, a Guggenheim Foundation grant in 1973 to aid in the completion of *RATIONAL MEANING*, and in 1979 a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts to support the writing of her memoirs. She agreed to the republication of *PROGRESS OF STORIES* (1982), *A TROGAN ENDING* (1984), and *LIVES OF WIVES* (1988). Shortly after receiving the Bollingen Prize for poetry (Riding) Jackson died in Wabasso at the age of 90. The recovered manuscript for *THE WORD WOMAN*, Riding’s study of gender, was published posthumously in 1994.

Over the course of her life, Riding used the names Laura (Riding) Jackson, Laura Riding, Laura Gottschalk, Laura Reichenthal and the pseudonyms Madeleine Vara, Lilith Outcome, and Barbara Rich (the last is a co-author pseudonym with Robert Graves for *NO DECENCY LEFT*). From 1927-1940 the name Laura Riding appeared on her publications. This is used to refer to work published prior to 1941. For subsequent work, she used Laura (Riding) Jackson.

**Chronology of Works***The Close Chaplet* (Hogarth, 1926)

*Voltaire: A Biographical Fantasy* (Hogarth & Adelphi, 1927)

*Contemporaries and Snobs* (Cape, 1928)

*Anarchism is Not Enough* (Cape, 1928)

*Love as Love: Death as Death* (Seizin Press, 1928)

*Poems: A Joking Word* (Cape, 1930)

*Four Unposted Letters to Catherine* (Hours Press, 1930)

*Experts are Puzzled* (Cape, 1930)

*Though Gently* (Seizin Press, 1930)

*Twenty Poems Less* (Hours Press, 1930)

*Laura and Francisca* (Seizin Press, 1931)

*The Life of the Dead* (Barker, 1933)

*Poet: A Lying Word* (Barker, 1933)

*Americans* (Primavera, 1934) [Limited to 200 numbered copies]

*Progress of Stories*, (Seizin Press, 1935; published in an expanded edition by The Dial Press, 1982)

*Convalescent Conversations*, published under pseudonym Madeleine Vara (Seizin, & Constable, 1936)

*A Trojan Ending* (Seizin Press, 1937)

*Collected Poems* (Cassell, 1938)

*The World and Ourselves* (Chatto & Windus, 1938)

*Len Lye and The Problem of Popular Films* (Seizin, 1938)

*Lives of Wives* (Cassell, 1939)

*Selected Poems, In Five Sets* (Faber, 1970)

*The Telling* (Athlone, 1972)

*Description of Life* (Targ Editions, 1980) Limited to 350 copies)

*The Word ‘Woman’ and Other related Writings* (Persea, 1993; Carcanet, 1994)

*Under the Mind’s Watch* (Peter Lang, 2004)

*The Failure of Poetry, the Promise of Language* (University of Michigan Press, 2007)

**Collaborations***A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, with Robert Graves (Heinemann, 1927)

*A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, with Robert Graves (Jonathan Cape, 1928)

*No Decency Left*, with Robert Graves, published under the pseudonym Barbara Rich (Cape, 1932)

*Everybody’s Letters,* with Norman Cameron and others (Baker, 1933)

*14A*, with George Ellidge (Barker, 1934)

*The Left Heresy in Literature and Life*, with Harry Kemp, Robert Graves, Alan Hodge and others (Methuen, 1939)

*Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words, and Supplemental Essays*, with Schuyler Jackson, ed. William Harmon, Introduction, Charles Bernstein (University Press of Virginia, 1997)

**Edited Works***Focus I-IV* (Deya, 1935)

*Epilogue: A Critical Summary* Volume I- III, with assistant editor Robert Graves

**Translations***Anatole France at Home* by Marcel Le Goff trans Laura Riding Gottschalk (Adelphi, 1926)

**Collaborative Translations***Almost Forgotten Germany* by Georg Schwarz, trans Laura Riding and Robert Graves (Seizin & Random House, 1936)

**Memoirs**  
*The Person I Am: The Literary Memoirs of Laura (Riding) Jackson* (2 Volumes, 2011)

**Biographies of Laura (Riding) Jackson***A Mannered Grace, The Life of Laura (Riding) Jackson*, Elizabeth Friedmann, Persea Books, (2005)

*In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding*, Deborah Baker (1993)

**Archives** (selected list of 25 repositories holding Laura (Riding) Jackson materials)

Columbia University: Laura Riding Papers <http://clio.columbia.edu/archives/4079265>  
Cornell University: Laura (Riding) Jackson and Schuyler B. Jackson collection, 1924-1991 <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM04608.html>Washington University, St. Louis: Laura Riding Jackson Collection <http://library.wustl.edu/units/spec/manuscripts/findingaids/VMF220.html>

New York Public Library, Berg Collection: Laura Riding Collection of Papers <http://archives.nypl.org/brg/19260>

Northwestern University Library: Laura Riding (Jackson) Collection <http://findingaids.library.northwestern.edu/catalog/inu-ead-spec-archon-501>

University of Florida: Laura (Riding) Jackson Papers <http://www.library.ufl.edu/spec/manuscript/guides/Jackson.htm>

University of Indiana

University of Maryland: Laura Riding Jackson Papers <http://digital.lib.umd.edu/archivesum/actions.DisplayEADDoc.do?source=MdU.ead.litms.0003.xml&style=ead>

University of Leicester: Riding Papers <http://www2.le.ac.uk/library/find/specialcollections/specialcollections/riding>

University of North Carolina: Laura (Riding) Jackson Papers 1974-1989 <http://www2.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/j/Jackson,Laura(Riding).html>

University of Victoria: Laura Riding <http://www.uvic.ca/library/locations/spcoll/findaids/riding_inventory.pdf>

University of Virginia: Papers of Laura Riding Jackson 1970-1989 <http://ead.lib.virginia.edu/vivaxtf/view?docId=uva-sc/viu00515.xml;query>=;

Vanderbilt University: The Laura Riding Collection <http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/speccol/findingaids/ridingl.pdf>

**References and Further Reading**  
Adams, Barbara Block. *The Enemy Self: Poetry and Criticism of Laura Riding*. Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 1990

Billitteri, Carla. *Language and the Renewal of Society in Walt Whitman, Laura (Riding) Jackson, and Charles Olson: The American Cratylus.* Palgrave MacMillan, 2009

Jackson, Laura Riding. *The Laura (Riding) Jackson Reader*. ed Elizabeth Friedmann. New York: Persea, 2005.

Wexler, Joyce Piell. *Laura Riding, a Bibliography*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1981.

Wexler, Joyce Piell. *Laura Riding’s Pursuit of Truth*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1979

**Foundations**  
Laura (Riding) Jackson Foundation <http://www.lauraridingjackson.com/>