

12 NEVER SUCH LOVE (May 2019)

Warning: This is (partly) the story of yet another 'Trans-Atlantic Alliance' (following the Ted & Sylvia saga of February), and I fear I may have been a little carried away in this tempestuous tale of torrid tribulation. The truth is that before setting out I knew very little about Laura Riding, other than the bare bones of her story and that she was a minor American modernist poet. I've now become much more curious about her, her poetry, her criticism and her hold over people, physically, emotionally and intellectually. If you can stick with me until the end I come to a few conclusions, but, as I see it, the debate is still open. Was she a fiendish perpetrator wreaking havoc wherever she went, or a female victim struggling to be allowed her voice and ideas in a very masculine world? And intellectually, is her poetry (I can't yet answer for the criticism), that of a slick fraudster homing in on the chaotic free-for-all that modernism sometimes was ("Anything goes..." as Cole Porter blithely sang), or has she got hold of something quite interesting, which she worries away at in her poetry before suddenly switching to 'philosophical' criticism after 1939. Auden thought she was the nearest thing to a 'philosophical poet'. How does she measure up to this assessment?

I first came across Robert Graves with his memoir of the First World War called "Goodbye to All That". This was long before Monty Python or Blackadder and at the time (I was 14 or 15) it seemed quite shockingly funny, particularly since this was the 'Great War' of serious, even 'holy' memory. Of course, as an active and remarkably courageous participant, he had a perfect right to point out and laugh at all the ironic and preposterous absurdities, not only of army life, but of British life.

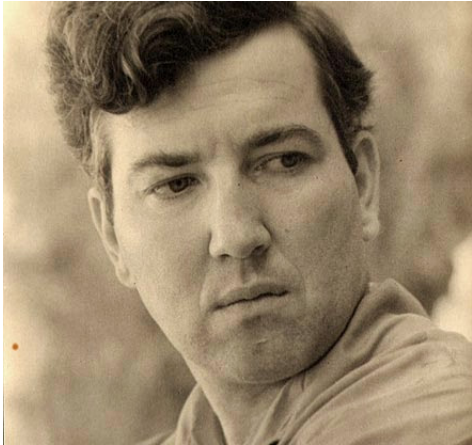
Robert Graves was an outsider from the start. His mother's family was German and his name was really Robert von Ranke Graves. In his early days and during the First World War (even the Second World War), his German ancestry caused him some problems. He joined the Royal Welch (*not* Welsh) Fusiliers at the outbreak of fighting in August 1914. I still remember funny scenes such as a Welsh private's courtmartial for "committing a nuisance" on the parade ground ("I was caught short..."), and the apocryphal morse code messages sent over by the German machinegunners who supposedly removed bullets (cartridges) from their machine gun belts to create comically abusive messages about their enemies' women. Here is one excerpt to give a flavour of the book.

The most unusual charge was against the regimental goat-major (a corporal); it was first framed as 'lèse majesté' but this was later reduced to 'disrespect to an officer: in that he, at Wrexham — on such and such a date — did prostitute the Royal Goat, being the gift of His Majesty the Colonel-in-Chief from His royal herd at Windsor, by offering his stud-services to , --- Esq., farmer and goat breeder, of Wrexham.' The goat-major pleaded that he had done this out of kindness to the goat, to which he was much attached. He was reduced to the ranks and the charge of the goat given to another.

He linked the snootiness and idiocy of his public school (Charterhouse) to the equal stupidity and absurdity of the war. An eccentric figure, who was romantically in love with a boy (called 'Dick' in his book there and throughout the war, he was a rebel from the outset and saw conventional British attitudes as the source of the lunacies of the war. Charterhouse was not all bad, however, for it was there that he struck up a friendship with George Mallory, a young English teacher, who introduced him to literature and rock-climbing. Mallory later died on

Everest in 1924, having quite possibly reached the summit; his body was discovered in 1999 and it is not clear whether he made it or not. See:

<https://secretsoftheice.com/news/2017/04/02/everest/>



Graves had a strange, at times nonsensical war (he actually read his own obituary in the Times after being very badly wounded) and he helped Siegfried Sassoon when the latter made his dramatic public protest. But it was not just the war Graves was disgusted with – really, he had had enough of Britain: its smugness, its snobbery, its insularity. (*Oh, dear, where have we heard all of **that** recently?*). Not that Robert Graves wasn't himself a pugnacious and unpredictable person. He thought that the only sports worth practising were boxing, football and rockclimbing. He fell out with many of his friends and family and had spats with TS Eliot and most of the

poets of the period.

Back then, of course, I had no idea that Graves had written this book in order to pay for the hospital bills sustained by an American poet he was living with: Laura Riding, his muse. It is only quite recently, and through her association with Graves, that I came across her at all. She figures in none of the various anthologies I have around the house, not even my 1954 *Penguin Book of Modern American Verse* (in which there is no female poet other than Emily Dickinson, who is grudgingly allowed a seat at the modernist table, though in reality, Dickinson's 1860s' verse is quite conventionally written with rhymes, often, and ballad-style stanzas – ha! *Modern American Verse??*). Yet in 1926, Laura Riding's star was riding (!) high. For those who don't know the story it is worth the re-telling.



By 1926, Robert Graves, fresh from Oxford and before that, the Great War, was married to Nancy Nicholson (the sister of the painter Ben Nicholson and herself a feminist and a good fabric designer), with four children. Suddenly, he became enamoured with the modernist and avant-garde poetry of someone called Laura (Riding) Gottschalk. He had read a poem of hers called "The Quids" in an American avant-garde magazine, *The Fugitive*.

She was, in fact, born Laura Reichenthal, of German-Jewish parentage. Aged 19, she had married Louis Gottschalk, a history professor at Cornell University, where she was studying, and it was about then that she started to be noticed by a group of poets, the Fugitives, who were making a splash in the modernist landscape with a new magazine, Allen Tate's *The Fugitive* (1922-25) – showcasing southern poets, mainly: Robert Penn Warren,

Hart Crane, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate himself and others, including Laura. She quickly made a name for herself, quite literally, becoming Laura Riding Gottschalk and winning a prize for her first published poem. Clever and out to charm, Laura was invited by the group down to Nashville. They were all men, a male coterie; she was brashly self-confident and came over 'strong', finally accepting their invitation to join the group in 1925 (the year she divorced Gottschalk to become Laura Riding).



At the start, she appeared as a complex, vital, modernist writer, very much inspired by Gertrude Stein. More importantly, perhaps, she was a *woman*, young, striking, charismatic, seemingly totally self-assured, though she came from a relatively lowly Austrian-Jewish immigrant family. Looking back now, the thing that strikes one about the whole Modernism project (or projects - Vorticism, Imagism, Futurism, Dadaism, Cubism, Surrealism *and all that jazz*) is its strange *lack* of women, both in America and Britain. You might have thought that Modernism – breaking the rules (“Make it new!” asserted Pound) - would have embraced women (!) and offered more scope to them, particularly in poetry - the genre of “feeling” (?) - but back in the early Twenties, Modernism was still a very male preserve.

Were the men, then, simply falling for the suggestive name, the cute assertiveness, the heavy black eye-make-up and the self-absorbed pout? The ultimate paradox of Laura Riding and her *supposedly* dazzling poems, seems to be that ultimately she was what we would now call a “control freak”, a fussy perfectionist, obsessed with tidiness and desperate to control. She ruled the roost, temperamentally, over men (even hard-boiled, sulky-looking boxers!), increasingly inhabiting a fantasy universe where she assumed the mantle of a mythical female Muse, an Atalanta, Diana the Huntress, Aphrodite, in short, *the* prototype for Graves’ later preoccupation with his mythical “White Goddess”.

Her problem as a poet, wishing to have power over every *body* and every *thing*, turned out, paradoxically and deeply ironically, to be *words*. Words are notoriously difficult to dominate and “control”. They slip and they slide and have emotional meanings, resonances and are linked to context, usage and change over time. All of this Laura Riding rejected – for her, words *had to have* exact meanings (that she could control), and there *had to be* inherent, *intrinsic* meanings to words, meanings that could not be altered in any way. Once her *Collected Poems* had been published in 1938 (all 477 pages - and she was still only in her thirties!), she suddenly and astonishingly gave up poetry altogether.

Poetry lied.

She is still known now more as a poet than a critic; nevertheless she is credited with being a precursor for the New Criticism (pioneered and popularised at Cambridge University by I.A. Richards), where text is subjected to close textual scrutiny. (*To be checked out...!*)

Later, after ditching Graves finally in 1939, to take up with and marry in 1941 yet another poet in the USA, Shuyler Jackson, she and he embarked on what she saw as her life’s *real* intellectual mission, a dictionary of “*exact meanings*.” It never appeared in her lifetime and she died in 1991 on her late husband’s fruit farm without much to show for her later years.

Back in 1925, however, she and her poetry were turning heads.

Her very first collection of poems was enticingly called “*The Close Chaplet*”. It was published in 1926 in the USA and simultaneously in Britain by – guess who? - Leonard and Virginia Woolf in their recently established Hogarth Press (which they set up initially to promote Virginia Woolf’s own work because she suffered so much anxiety at the hands of traditional publishers). The title, “*The Close Chaplet*”, was, itself, a quotation from Robert Graves’ sensuously sexy poem, “*The Nape of the Neck*”, and Riding boldly quoted from this poem for her epigraph:



*To speak of the hollow nape where the close chaplet
Of thought is bound, the loose ends lying neat*

*In two strands downward, where the shoulders open
Casual and strong beneath, waiting their burden,
And the long spine begins its easy journey:
The hair curtains this postern silkily,
This secret stairway by which thought will come
More personally, with a closer welcome
Than through the latticed eyes or portalled ears.*

Hardly any wonder that both Graves and Riding were burning to meet each other! Moreover, Laura Riding (no longer Gottschalk) dedicated this first collection (lifted mainly from *The Fugitive*) to her sister (well, why not?) and... guess who again?... Graves' wife, Nancy Nicholson!

I believe that the poem which tipped the balance for Graves was "The Quids", which we will look at later. Without more ado, Graves invited Laura Riding over to England and met her off the train at Waterloo (legend wickedly has it that he took one look at her heavily made-up face and... gulped..., but this may hardly be fair to her. Gossip can be vicious and snide: Allen Tate, with whom I think she had a fling, reported apparently that she was all right from the neck down). Graves and Riding swiftly set themselves up in a basement flat in 9 Ladbroke Square, while Nancy and the children lived on a barge which was moored on the Thames and was owned by Graves. Thus was born the notorious *ménage-à-trois* which Graves termed the 'Trinity'. Nancy was believed to be quite happy with the arrangement, though this is perhaps open to question (- she was probably well out of it!).

With Laura Riding, Graves made an important contribution to the debate about Modernism with their "*Survey of Modernist Poetry*" (1927). Their story then becomes more complicated and there have been various versions. Steering around them, what seems to emerge is the following.

Two years later, a young Irish poet, Geoffrey Phibbs apparently wrote to Graves stating that Laura Riding's poetry was the most important thing in his life. This excited Laura, so Graves and she subsequently invited Phibbs, who was married to Norah McGuinness, an Irish painter, to come over to England and stay with her and Robert. Phibbs was desperate for his poetry to be noticed but he had no particular interest in Laura Riding *per se*. When the couple arrived at the flat in Hammersmith where Robert and Laura had moved to, Laura is said to

have welcomed Geoffrey with open arms and packed Norah off to a room in a hotel that she had booked for her, thrusting into her hands a bottle of brandy and declaring, "Drink this and forget your tears!"



Geoffrey was aghast to find that staying with the couple involved sharing their bed. Laura's dominatrix antics and posturings (cabbalistic mantras and sign-language games, or even games involving mystery journeys by bus and seemingly haphazard routes chosen at random, magically, by the 'goddess') only succeeded in making poor Geoffrey totally impotent. Norah, meanwhile, had been off, having an



affair with the bisexually priapic writer, David Garnett. He was the Bloomsbury Group lover of the artist Duncan Grant – and the husband, later on, of Duncan Grant’s own *daughter* by Vanessa Bell, Angelica Bell - it really doesn’t get more tangled than THAT!

Norah then took off for France. After eight weeks, Phibbs managed to make his escape from the Hammersmith love nest, travelling to Paris, where he was happily reunited with his wife. From there, they set off for Rouen to celebrate with a “second honeymoon”.

Unluckily, the couple had only two days of blissful peace, for Phibbs had unfortunately sent Laura a postcard to explain his departure, and the postmark showed ‘Rouen’. Post was extremely fast in those days, unbelievably so, and Robert had friends in high places, so that, after travelling hotfoot after them via Dieppe, the ‘Trinity’ were able to locate the runaway couple on Saturday 6th April, bursting in on them at their hotel in Rouen.

Robert, Laura and Nancy invited the couple to lunch at their own hotel just outside the city. It had been a hospital during the war and was, interestingly the place where Robert was sent after he had been so badly wounded at High Wood in the Somme offensive in 1916. Norah and Geoffrey, following an excellent lunch, went for a walk in the woods, having been *commanded* to come to a decision. The Trinity very much wanted Norah, now, to become a part of their *ménage*. Norah, however, in the woods told Phibbs, who unbelievably seemed still under the spell of Laura and found the idea of a complete break with the trio too intimidating, that she, Norah, was having none of it and that she wanted to retain her sanity rather than return to the Hammersmith flat that was becoming such a madhouse. He eventually agreed.

When they reported back after the walk, Laura reacted with a ragingly hysterical fit, hurling herself to the floor of the Public Lounge in front of the shocked residents, kicking her legs up in the air and screaming blue murder. Geoffrey and Norah left them to it and hurried back to Paris to collect Norah’s things, after which they both set off immediately for Ireland and Lisheen, the family home near Sligo.

Geoffrey, however, was still upset, the more so in that it turned out that Laura had slyly written to him from the station at Rouen, and later sent him a series of little cabbalistic objects in the post: twisted wire, ribbons, small coins.

A ‘spell’.

She also had the bright idea of sending Nancy to Sligo to bring him back, rather than going herself. Phibbs was keeping to his bed and having a sort of nervous breakdown, so his family tried to keep Nancy well away, but eventually Phibbs got dressed and came downstairs and he and she walked in the garden (where his father shouted out, “Keep away, you scarlet woman!”).

The upshot of all this was to throw Nancy and Phibbs together and he then told Norah that he had changed his mind, wishing now to go back to London to try to settle the matter. Norah, however, decided at this point that she was leaving Phibbs forever and returning to Paris. The couple stayed on unhappily for another week before finally taking the train to London, from where Norah continued on to Paris.

Phibbs, however, instead of going straight to the Hammersmith flat as planned, chickened out yet again, and took off to visit ...*David Garnett* in Hilton, near Cambridge! From there, he sent a telegram to Laura saying that he would *not* return to live with her. Robert Graves then phoned to say that he would personally *kill* Phibbs if he didn’t return immediately to Laura, who then peremptorily dispatched Robert to Hilton to ‘bring Phibbs back, by force if necessary’. Robert Graves burst in noisily while David Garnett was consuming vintage port (an odd detail – this was the middle of the day!), and showering Garnett with vile (soldierly!) oaths he, Graves, hauled poor Phibbs off back to London.

That Friday evening, at the flat in Hammersmith, there began the infamous night-long debate between the four of them up in the 4th floor flat at 35A, St Peter's Square Hammersmith. This is an elegant, terraced London house, but there was nothing elegant about the night's proceedings.

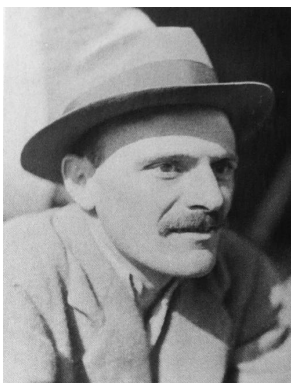
Unfortunately for the 'Trinity', Phibbs dug his heels in, declaring that he was now in love with... wait for it!... *Nancy*. The arguments and re-cremations went on all night, with Laura shrilly doing her best to dominate as usual. Phibbs, however, was for once adamant and would not bow to her demands. Laura, for perhaps the first time in her life in her life, did *not* get her way.

In the early hours of Saturday the 27th April 1929 (that year of other great falls!), Laura was perched in her nightclothes, casually, on the windowsill of the open window at the rear of the building; they all thought she was engaged in her usual emotional badgering, bullying and bluffing games. The talk and arguments had gone on all night. When Phibbs declared his love for Nancy and his absolute refusal to stay with Laura, suddenly she drank off some lavatory cleaning fluid called Lysol (it had been in the news recently in connection with a suicide, but Laura obviously didn't drink enough for it to do her very much harm). Then, shouting out, "Goodbye, chaps!", she leapt dramatically out of the 4th floor window, dropping 50 feet to the stone terrace below. Robert Graves, panic-stricken, rushed down one flight of stairs to the third floor, and, pausing to pull open a window, evidently assumed she was dead, whereupon he also dived out, desperately, to follow his supposedly lifeless Muse.

She survived, however, breaking four vertebrae in her back (Graves miraculously seemed to get away with remarkably little damage), and it was to pay for the resulting expensive hospital bills, that Graves wrote and completed in just three months his highly entertaining, but scandalous memoir, "Goodbye to All That".

He and Laura then set off to make a new start for themselves in a house in Mallorca just outside a small coastal village called Deya. There they lived and held court to scores of famous literary visitors until Franco came to power in 1936, when they upped and left for the United States and Florida. Nancy was left to bring up the children on her own, Robert never having spent much time or trouble over them, and even less after the arrival of Laura, who merely feigned an interest in his children. Nancy and he didn't divorce, however, until 1949.

Laura discovered her next poet in 1939. She and Robert moved in with a couple they had never met before, the poet Schuyler Jackson and his wife Katherine or Kitty. By the end of the visit, extraordinarily, Kitty was committed to an asylum after having tried to strangle one of her daughters. Laura Riding then left Robert Graves for Jackson, whom she married in 1941. He died in 1968.



Some story!

What, though, of the poetry?

I declare a liking for some of Graves' poems and a growing curiosity about Laura Riding's poetry along with her phobia for inexact words. (Whoever thought that words could or should be *exact*...?)

Let us start, then, with Graves, who is a good, if not spectacular or highly lauded poet, and one who never fitted easily into the modernist mould. He has more affinity at times with the rhapsodies of Elizabethan or Jacobean lyrical verse. He is also interesting in his ability to have recast himself poetically as more than just a "war poet". Here is a good poem, though, from the Great War, strangely not chosen by Jon Silkin in his definitive anthology of First World War poetry. He chose only two poems of Graves – but perhaps there were rights' issues...? This one, however, I think has very much of the hard-hitting directness of the best of Sassoon's or Owen's poetry.

A Dead Boche

To you who'd read my songs of War
 And only hear of blood and fame,
 I'll say (you've heard it said before)
 "War's Hell! " and if you doubt the same,
 Today I found in Mametz Wood
 A certain cure for lust of blood:

Where, propped against a shattered trunk,
 In a great mess of things unclean,
 Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
 With clothes and face a sodden green,
 Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
 Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

It really is "stunk", though it should grammatically have been "stank". The mistake (for the rhyme?) actually lends more weight and power to the word. There is a plainness and starkness throughout that makes the poem very telling.

As well as being a First World War poet, who influenced both Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, Graves became a prolific, if minor, modernist poet in his own right. The "I, Claudius" books (and eventually TV dramas) followed, as did his increasing obsession with the "White Goddess", his mythically charged and classically idealised conception of "Woman".

Hmmm!?

What of this next poem, though?

She Tells Her Love

She tells her love while half asleep,
 In the dark hours,
 With half-words whispered low:

As Earth stirs in her winter sleep
 And puts out grass and flowers
 Despite the snow,
 Despite the falling snow.

I like the sobriety and simplicity of this poem. Never mind the ‘glorification of Woman as Mother Earth’ idea. The shape of the poem is satisfying, creating a mirror effect. There is some ambiguity about the word “tells”. Is the woman ‘telling’ *of* her love, or telling her love, as in speaking *to* a lover, or even *counting out* her love – reckoning, as it were? “As Earth...” is also more ambiguous than it might seem. It can be read as ‘in the same way as...’ or else read as ‘while...’. The solemnity of the final line is also impressive. The poem avoids slick banality and achieves, for me, an elegant beauty. Vulnerability is hinted at throughout with the repeated “half”. Love, here, is seen as a strong and female power, but it is also up against the negative, though natural, force of “snow” – beautiful, but cold and deathly.

I also like the next poem, which is not readily available in anthologies. It picks up Robert Graves’ eternal fascination with love and the erotic, but plays with it and is lightheartedly ironic (surely he is having a laugh at *himself* here?).

NEVER SUCH LOVE

Twined together and, as is customary,
 For words of rapture groping, they
 ‘Never such love,’ swore, ‘ever before was!’
 Contrast with all loves that had failed or staled
 Registered their own as love indeed.

And was this not to blab idly
 The heart’s fated inconstancy?
 Better in love to seal the love-sure lips,
 For truly love was before words were,
 And no word given, no word broken.

When the name ‘love’ is uttered
 (Love, the near-honourable malady
 With which in greed and haste they
 Each other do infect and curse)
 Or, worse, is written down...

Wise after the event, by love withered,
 A ‘never more!’ most frantically
 Sorrow and shame would proclaim
 Such as, they’d swear, never before were:
 True lovers even in this.

I have set this for pupils to respond to critically in 80 minutes (a very hard task!) and this is what I wrote many years back in 60 minutes, while they were at it (to share their pain!). I knew nothing yet of Laura Riding and was simply trawling through the text as a unique, uncontextualised poem.

The title “Never such Love” might suggest at first a poem about the excitement and happiness of “true love”, with the typical assumptions we might have that, when it happens, life must be wonderful. In fact, however, characterising love as “the near-honourable malady”, this poem presents a very sceptical view of love, from its first excessive “rapture”, to the “sorrow and shame” of its ending. The last line ironically and paradoxically concludes that the lovers referred to were “True...even in this”, in other words acknowledging that “true” love comprehends rapture as well as sorrow and, more grimly, deceit. There is a game, in other words, being played with the words “true” and “love”.

*Set in four stanzas of five lines, the poem appears very traditional at first, with phrases such as “Twined together” - which seems a little archaic and offers a rather stereotypical metaphor of lovers binding themselves to each other like plants. Nevertheless, the form of the poem is less traditional than it might seem, and the absence of regular rhyming could mark it out as twentieth century. Another surprise, possibly, is the lack of any detail concerning the lovers themselves. Who **are** they, following this pathetically comical route from ecstasy to despair?*

*We quickly see that the poet’s real interest is not the details of the love affair, or the characters concerned, but more the connotations attached to the word “love” itself. The word “love” is seen as problematic from the outset. The lovers are described as “groping” for words to describe their rapture, and the sentence “Never such love ever before was” is syntactically forced and artificial, as if their love was equally artificial from the beginning. The interruption “swore” also hints at excess and future rupture, as if they **have** to swear love to each other because otherwise they might be aware of love’s ephemerality. The word “registered” is rather ominous, as if love cannot exist without some official acknowledgement.*

In the second stanza, the interest in the language of love continues. The word “blab” seems to poke fun at the language of the lovers. Blabbing sounds babyish; the poem thus suggests that love is threatened by language. Feelings, says the poem, come first and language introduces a negative element (“love was before words were”). “Worse”, suggests the poem in the third stanza, is the writing down of the word “love”. Now the poem is beginning to suggest an irony which will inevitably involve the very poem itself, which itself is writing about love. The behaviour, finally, of the lovers at the end, “frantically” filled with “sorrow and shame” suggests an almost laughable reversal, which was hinted at in the “heart’s fated inconstancy” early on.

*We finish, thus, with the paradox of the “truth” of love. All lovers, typically, the poem concludes, seem to swear undying love to each other, proclaiming their rapture as if it were unique, only to find that “true” lovers can never and will never be constant. To be a “true” lover you must be prepared to start the whole process over again, always thinking that **this** love is the **really** true one! The parallel syntax, at the end, of “Sorrow and shame... never before were” echoes the rhetorical artificiality of the first “rapture”.*

The reader is left puzzling somewhat over the tone of the poet: ironic, aloof, slightly amused, looking down at the posturings of “they”. How does he or she know so much of all this? Is the poet not implicitly included in the “they” of whom he seems to know so much and yet hide so much as well? How “wise after the event” can one be, if it will start all over again? In its detached amusement and its rather archaic phrasing the poem seems to be a modern game, playing with the traditional theme of the inconstancy of love, but providing a refreshingly ironic and paradoxical perspective. Love cannot exist without language, but language itself apparently destroys love. Seen from the inside, love is serious; but from the outside it is a joke. A love poem like this, then, using the language of love to criticise the language of love, should therefore be something of a logical nonsense. Perhaps, therefore, we ought not to take this one too seriously, nor should we ever trust the idea of “true love”!

On the whole, I think I prefer Graves’ poetry of the more playful kind. The next poem, which is much anthologised, is delightful and funny. I wonder if these “things” are derived from “The Quids” – see later on.

WELSH INCIDENT

'But that was nothing to what things came out
 From the sea-caves of Criccieth yonder.'
 'What were they? Mermaids? Dragons? Ghosts?'
 'Nothing at all of any things like that.'
 'What were they, then?'
 'All sorts of queer things,
 Things never seen or heard or written about,
 Very strange, un-Welsh, utterly peculiar
 Things. Oh, solid enough they seemed to touch,
 Had anyone dared it. Marvellous creation,
 All various shapes and sizes, and no sizes,
 All new, each perfectly unlike his neighbour,
 Though all came moving slowly out together.'
 'Describe just one of them.'
 'I am unable.'
 'What were their colours?'
 'Mostly nameless colours,
 Colours you'd like to see; but one was puce
 Or perhaps more like crimson, but not purplish.
 Some had no colour.'
 'Tell me, had they legs?'
 'Not a leg or foot among them that I saw.'
 'But did these things come out in any order?'
 What o'clock was it? What was the day of the week?
 Who else was present? How was the weather?'
 'I was coming to that. It was half-past three
 On Easter Tuesday last. The sun was shining.
 The Harlech Silver Band played Marchog Jesu
 On thirty-seven shimmering instruments
 Collecting for Caernarvon's (Fever) Hospital Fund.'

The populations of Pwllheli, Criccieth,
 Portmadoc, Borth, Tremadoc, Penrhyndeudraeth,
 Were all assembled. Criccieth's mayor addressed them
 First in good Welsh and then in fluent English,
 Twisting his fingers in his chain of office,
 Welcoming the things. They came out on the sand,
 Not keeping time to the band, moving seaward
 Silently at a snail's pace. But at last
 The most odd, indescribable thing of all
 Which hardly one man there could see for wonder
 Did something recognizably a something.'
 'Well, what?'

'It made a noise.'

A frightening noise?'

'No, no.'

A musical noise? A noise of scuffling?
 'No, but a very loud, respectable noise —
 Like groaning to oneself on Sunday morning
 In Chapel, close before the second psalm.'
 'What did the mayor do?'

'I was coming to that.'

Lastly, I must include another light-hearted poem of his, discovered by Philip Larkin for his quirky '*Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse*' (1973). It's very Larkinesque!

A Slice of Wedding Cake

Why have such scores of lovely, gifted girls
 Married impossible men?
 Simple self-sacrifice may be ruled out
 And missionary endeavour, nine times out of ten.

Repeat 'impossible men': not merely rustic,
 Foul-tempered or depraved
 (Dramatic foils chosen to show the world
 How well women behave, and always have behaved).

Impossible me,: idle, illiterate,
 Self-pitying, dirty, sly,
 For whose appearance even in City parks
 Excuse must be made to casual passers-by.

Has God's supply of tolerable husbands,
 Fallen, in fact, so low?
 Or do I always over-value woman
 At the expense of man?

Do I?

It might be so.

Turning, finally, to Laura Riding... and not having ever had any of her poems to hand (*mental note to get hold of the "Collected Poems" AND Graves' and her "Survey of Modernist Poetry"*), I'm forced to judge her just by what I have found on the internet (always dangerously open to glitches and errors). She is hardly embraced, I think, by feminism, but there is nowadays more interest in her search for 'meaning' and in the complexities arising from that, along with curiosity about her distinctive voice as a female poet. She is less likely nowadays to be dismissed as simply incomprehensible or just showing off. Whatever one thinks of the weird 'ménageries', her undoubted self-absorption, and her vicious domination of people, there can be no doubting the seriousness of her output as a writer nor the respect she has gained from some critics.

Let's start with one poem which I think works well:

In Due Form

I do not doubt you.
 I know you love me.
 It is a fact of your indoor face,
 A true fancy of your muscularity.
 Your step is confident.
 Your look is thorough.
 Your stay-beside-me is a pillow
 To roll over on
 And sleep as on my own upon.

But make me a statement
 In due form on endless foolscap
 Witnessed before a notary
 And sent by post, registered,
 To be signed for on receipt
 And opened under oath to believe;
 An antique paper missing from my strong-box,
 A bond to clutch when hail tortures the chimney
 And lightning circles redder round the city,
 And your brisk step and thorough look
 Are gallant but uncircumstantial,
 And not mentionable in a doom-book.

The poem is well structured and there is a key idea being explored throughout. As in Graves' "Never Such Love", there is a strong mistrust of the language of love. Rather than having words of love spoken, the poet humorously wants sworn testimony. The urgent repetitions, as well as being funny, because overdone, also hint at vulnerability. The final lines for me are a *tour de force* – the phrasing of "when hail tortures the chimney And lightning circles redder round the city" creates potentially scary moments calling for a "bond to clutch", but more importantly, the persona's lover's "brisk step and thorough look" seem to be in the same league. He may *look* male and capable, but the gestures are "gallant but uncircumstantial". The ending "And not mentioned in a doom-book" brings us back wittily to

the inventory of love she is after, but the “doom-book” is satisfyingly ambiguous, for it hints also at death and endings.

I’m quite happy, because, like any good poet, Laura Riding is here, surely, *exploiting* wittily the slipperiness of language. “I do not doubt you”, the poem begins, but then it weighs in with all the doubts. As people are complex, so good poetry is complex and sometimes more so, shifting and writhing under what Eliot might have recognised as the “pressure” of poetic “fusion” (*cf* “*For it is not the ‘greatness,’ the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts.*” Tradition and the Individual Talent 1921)

I cautiously tick the next one also.

The very title suggests that language is not exact and definitive. Is *she* the “animal unzoological”? If so, she seems to be resisting the impulse to anatomise her - “Its private history intact Against the travesty Of an anatomy”. The imaginary animal seems to be trying to escape *from*, or perhaps *to* (“fly its ground Out of fancy into light) its “unwritable decease”, ie. death. It suggests writing both as an escape or protection from death *and* as a recognition that death cannot also be “written” but must be just accepted. The last stanza, whimsically, calls into question “What we know, what we don’t know.”

Is that just a cop-out ending (utterly banal?), or is it playful but serious? The title seems to point to both.

Yes And No

Across a continent imaginary
Because it cannot be discovered now
Upon this fully apprehended planet—
No more applicants considered,
Alas, alas—

Ran an animal unzoological,
Without a fate, without a fact,
Its private history intact
Against the travesty
Of an anatomy.

Not visible not invisible,
Removed by dayless night,
Did it ever fly its ground
Out of fancy into light,
Into space to replace
Its unwritable decease?

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.

I hesitate between thinking that this might be just banal rubbish, but then catch myself also wanting to believe that there IS some serious thinking poetically going on – playing with ideas that shift, twisting and turning. There are some flashes of brilliance – “Across a continent imaginary... Upon this fully apprehended planet... Ran an animal... Without a fate, without a fact.” Brilliant or banal? Meaningful or absurd? Yes and No. Playful or serious?

Well, perhaps *that* is the point. Evasiveness. The poem’s, the poet’s, perhaps *language’s*, refusal to be pinned down. Why “Alas, alas”? Just *what* is being regretted?

I worry about the sheer triteness of the final four lines. Yet, if this is a poem about “this fully apprehended planet” (ironic surely?), then the oppositions (“come and go... What we know, what we don’t know”) do actually work to show up the fact that language *fails* to fully apprehend. You could argue that this is all about the *failure* of words, of language. The poem somehow enacts that failure. Hmmm!

Does this necessarily make her a failure as a poet? \$60,000 question.

Staring into a mirror at one’s face could seem very *self-regarding*, but the next poem seems to me about more than just that.

With The Face

With the face goes a mirror
 As with the mind a world.
 Likeness tells the doubting eye
 That strangeness is not strange.
 At an early hour and knowledge
 Identity not yet familiar
 Looks back upon itself from later,
 And seems itself.

To-day seems now.
 With reality-to-be goes time.
 With the mind goes a world.
 With the heart goes a weather.
 With the face goes a mirror
 As with the body a fear.
 Young self goes staring to the wall
 Where dumb futurity speaks calm,
 And between then and then
 Forebeing grows of age.

The mirror mixes with the eye.
 Soon will it be the very eye.
 Soon will the eye that was
 The very mirror be.
 Death, the final image, will shine
 Transparently not otherwise
 Than as the dark sun described
 th such faint brightnesses.

The first stanza slips and slides, but I get the sense of someone wondering just *how* identity (who we really are right now) will pan out if viewed from a future perspective. Well-structured and syntactically perfectly comprehensible, the poem ends forcefully, “Death ...will shine... not otherwise Than as the dark sun described With such faint brightnesses.” Though the tone is rather urgent, it reminds me of Wallace Stevens, another “philosophical” poet, whose territory is language and the extent to which language can or cannot describe reality. Like Stevens, Riding seems to be playing games with her poems, showing the limits of thought in words. These are not poems to which we are used. I think they are odd, but I don’t think they are necessarily banal or mindless.

“Likeness tells the doubting eye That strangeness is not strange.”

I find this line quite haunting – suggesting that our eye wishes to interpret what it sees as “similarity”, because this is less disturbing. If we see all people as similar, somehow, that is less threatening than if we truly see their differences. Difference is surely more interesting and enlightening than similarity, no? The poem slips and slides, but there is plenty to try to fathom out, and in compelling phrases.

For me, finally, the writing, showy, self-conscious, nevertheless has considerable authority and verve. The persona’s “eye” is the mirror she holds up to herself and to the world. There is sober disquiet in what she sees, rather than much pride and flaunting.

I admit that so far I am pleasantly surprised and the voice seems calmer and more interesting than I had been led to expect from the disturbed and disturbing personality of the dominatrix (few seem to quarrel with that idea of hers) of the ‘Trinity’!

The Simple Line

The secrets of the mind convene splendidly,
 Though the mind is meek.
 To be aware inwardly
 Of brain and beauty
 Is dark too recognizable.
 Thought looking out on thought
 Makes one an eye:
 Which it shall be, both decide.
 One is with the mind alone,
 The other is with other thoughts gone
 To be seen from afar and not known.

When openly these inmost sights
 Flash and speak fully,
 Each head at home shakes hopelessly
 Of being never ready to see self
 And sees a universe too soon.
 The immense surmise swims round and round
 And heads grow wise
 With their own bigness beatified
 In cosmos, and the idiot size
 Of skulls spells Nature on the ground,
 While ears listening the wrong way report
 Echoes first and hear words before sounds

Because the mind, being quiet, seems late.
 By ears words are copied into books,
 By letters minds are taught self-ignorance.
 From mouths spring forth vocabularies
 To the assemblage of strange objects
 Grown foreign to the faithful countryside
 Of one king, poverty,
 Of one line, humbleness.
 Unavowed and false horizons claim pride
 For spaces in the head
 The native head sees outside.
 The flood of wonder rushing from the eyes
 Returns lesson by lesson.
 The mind, shrunken of time,
 Overflows too soon.
 The complete vision is the same
 As when the world-wideness began
 Worlds to describe
 The excessiveness of man.

But man's right portion rejects
 The surplus in the whole.
 This much, made secret first,
 Now makes
 The knowable, which was
 Thought's previous flesh,
 And gives instruction of substance to its intelligence
 As far as flesh itself,
 As bodies upon themselves to where
 Understanding is the head
 And the identity of breath and breathing are established
 And the voice opening to cry: I know,
 Closes around the entire declaration
 With this evidence of immortality—
 The total silence to say:
 I am dead.

For death is all ugly, all lovely,
 Forbids mysteries to make
 Science of splendor, or any separate disclosing
 Of beauty to the mind out of body's book
 That page by page flutters a world in fragments,
 Permits no scribbling in of more
 Where spaces are,
 Only to look.

Body as Body lies more than still.
 The rest seems nothing and nothing is
 If nothing need be.

But if need be,
 Thought not divided anyway
 Answers itself, thinking
 All open and everything.
 Dead is the mind that parted each head.
 But now the secrets of the mind convene
 Without pride, without pain
 To any onlookers.
 What they ordain alone
 Cannot be known
 The ordinary way of eyes and ears
 But only prophesied
 If an unnatural mind, refusing to divide,
 Dies immediately
 Of too plain beauty
 Foreseen within too suddenly,
 And lips break open of astonishment
 Upon the living mouth and rehearse
 Death, that seems a simple verse
 And, of all ways to know,
 Dead or alive, easiest.

Oh, dear! I included this to show that perhaps all is *not* so wonderful. This is long, turgid and, although there are inklings of ideas, they are scattered amongst (for me at least) woolly, flabby lines of... *twaddle!*

With the next, however, we are back on course again, I hope, with a pithy exploration (I think) of how language cannot quite capture reality and how we need to achieve some sort of exactitude in language. Yet again, she is playing with ambiguities while she does this, for the word “becomes” can be read in two ways – as developing an identity, but also as beautifying appropriately (“that necklace becomes you” or *Mourning Becomes Electra*).

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 is 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.

This has a satisfying structure, falling into four parts of four lines, each creating an argument of sorts. It is interesting that she sees herself, finally, as so pitted *against* the “world” and its “hostile implements of sense”. Is this how she sees herself, I wonder, pure and exact, while all around her, threateningly, lies a muddied world of feigned love - suspicious and suspect?

Can we agree, at least, that as a poem it is perfectly understandable, well formed and well formulated, like a pot well thrown on the potter’s wheel? It is occupying the same territory as Wallace Stevens’ poetry and in many ways reminds me of him, though at his best I find him more oracular, entertaining and moving.

But this poem is fine by me.

Now, here is the moment when, had you not already done so, you may gracefully abandon ship if you are getting tired, bored or deeply frustrated. You have indulged me quite enough by getting this far. However, there are still just three more poems which intrigue me further. The fact that I remain intrigued seems (to me at least!) a sign that her poetry has some worth. I suppose I would almost have been happier to have discovered the opposite, consigning her to the dustbin and writing her off - as a poet at least.

The Poet’s Corner

Here where the end of bone is no end of song
 And the earth is bedecked with immortality
 In what was poetry
 And now is pride beside
 And nationality,
 Here is a battle with no bravery
 But if the coward’s tongue has gone
 Swording his own lusty lung.
 Listen if there is victory
 Written into a library
 Waving the books in banners
 Soldierly at last, for the lines
 Go marching on, delivered of the soul.
 And happily may they rest beyond
 Suspicion now, the incomprehensibles
 Traitorous in such talking
 As chattered over their countries’ boundaries.
 The graves are gardened and the whispering
 Stops at the hedges, there is singing
 Of it in the ranks, there is a hush
 Where the ground has limits
 And the rest is loveliness.

And loveliness?
 Death has an understanding of it
 Loyal to many flags
 And is a silent ally of any country
 Beset in its mortal heart
 With immortal poetry.

I feel I need to unpick this carefully. Some of it sounds so good, but what is it really saying? What “game” is being played out here?

The poem seems to take issue with poetry in a world - the Twenties and Thirties - beset with political rhetoric - “pride beside And nationality”. There is wit and humour in the idea of libraries behaving like armies (“for the lines Go marching on, delivered of the soul.”) There are plenty of ambiguities (which I think the poem exploits). Is the “delivery” to do with birth? Is “delivered of the soul” positive, or negative and darkly ironic, the soul being involved in militarism and aggression? The “battle” in the “poet’s corner” (corner of a Robert Graves’ boxing ring)?

Here is a battle with no bravery
 But if the coward’s tongue has gone
 Swording his own lusty lung.

For me, this makes sense only when “But if” is read as meaning “Unless”, and then it seems to be calling on the poet to fall on his/her sword and turn away from poetry altogether (which is what we know Laura Riding finally did).

In the second stanza, I take “they” to refer back to the “lines” of poetry, which, similar to lines of soldiers, are behaving like modern day troops. I love “the graves are gardened and the whispering Stops at the hedges”. The images are sharp and evocative, mixing positives with negatives. After all, she is using poetry treacherously to undermine the idea of poetry! She is making war on herself, but at the same time warning of political dangers internationally as well, surely.

And loveliness?
 Death has an understanding of it
 Loyal to many flags
 And is a silent ally of any country
 Beset in its mortal heart
 With immortal poetry.

I read this as ironic: death is negative, yet ‘he’ is “loyal” and an “ally”. How do we read “Beset”? Ironically, surely? “Immortal poetry”, a seeming positive, here represents a threat to any country’s “mortal heart”. As it goes, I find the poem working very gracefully (paradoxically gracefully) to set out its idea and explore it obliquely and suggestively. The underlying thesis (seemingly), that poetry is dangerous and undermines a country, is curious but understandable when applied, say, to propaganda. Think of the swooning dangers of all that Rupert Brook-style poetry at the start of the Great War. The only weak line is “And the rest is loveliness”, which could be taken as further irony, for it is undercut immediately in the final stanza. (cf. “The rest is silence.” In *Hamlet*?)

So, I find the poem really quite compelling.

We now come to the strange poem which is supposedly the one that first caught Graves' attention. I know there has been some controversy over it. It's called oddly "The Quids" – not £££s, but quids as in "quiddities" – the "thinginess" of things, from the Latin "quid" meaning "what" or "that".

The Quids

The little quids, the million quids,
 The everywhere, everything, always quids,
 The atoms of the Monoton—
 Each turned three essences where it stood
 And ground a gisty dust from its neighbors' edges
 Until a powdery thoughtfall stormed in and out,
 The cerebration of a slippery quid enterprise.
 Each quid stirred.
 The united quids
 Waved through a sinuous decision.
 The quids, that had never done anything before
 But be, be, be, be, be,
 The quids resolved to predicate
 And dissipate in a little grammar.
 Oh, the Monoton didn't care,
 For whatever they did—
 The Monoton's contributing quids—
 The Monoton would always remain the same.

A quid here and there gyrated in place-position,
 While many essential quids turned inside-out
 For the fun of it
 And a few refused to be anything but
 Simple, unpredicated copulatives.
 Little by little, this commotion of quids,
 By threes, by tens, by casual millions,
 Squirming within the state of things—
 The metaphysical acrobats,
 The naked, immaterial quids—
 Turned inside on themselves
 And came out dressed,
 Each similar quid of the inward same,
 Each similar quid dressed in a different way—
 The quid's idea of a holiday.

The quids could never tell what was happening.
 But the Monoton felt itself differently the same
 In its different parts.
 The silly quids upon their rambling exercise
 Never knew, could never tell

What their pleasure was about,
 What their carnival was like,
 Being in, being in, being always in
 Where they never could get out
 Of the everywhere, everything, always in,
 To derive themselves from the Monoton.

But I know, with a quid inside of me,
 But I know what a quid's disguise is like,
 Being one myself,
 The gymnastic device
 That a quid puts on for exercise.

And so should the trees,
 And so should the worms,
 And so should you,
 And all the other predicates,
 And all the other accessories
 Of the quid's masquerade.

The poem slowly reveals its inner logic. There are little sprightly quids, similar but all comically thinking they are different. They gambol and frolic, little atoms of something vaster, the Monoton (not monotonous but rather a singular cosmic force - 'mono' equals One). The Monoton "doesn't care" and "would always remain the same". Is it Nature? The cosmos? Whatever it is, it seems to view with careless indulgence the antics of the little quids, who think themselves so free.

Then comes the chilling realisation:

But I know, with a quid inside of me,
 But I know what a quid's disguise is like,
 Being one myself,
 The gymnastic device
 That a quid puts on for exercise.
 And so should the trees,
 And so should the worms,
 And so should you,
 And all the other predicates,
 And all the other accessories
 Of the quid's masquerade.

The tone has been quite flippant up to now, but the voice becomes dryer – the repetitions of "And..." thud out rhythmically and involve us as well. We are part of this "masquerade" of *tadpoley* things gambolling happily in our weird "gymnastic devices".

I find it amusing to hear,

And a few refused to be anything but
 Simple, unpredicated copulatives.

Was she including herself in this cohort? It's hard to know where the poem is going with this strange interpretation of the world – a mixture of Sci-Fi, warped motherhood (?), an allegory of behavioural determinism? Does it explain the heavily made-up eyes? (!)

At all events, this is a significant poem for me, particularly in the carefully shifting tone of voice and the poet's direct involvement in this "masquerade". Is the *poem* part of the masquerade – if it is, then there is a subversive undermining of the very terms of the poem going on. If it isn't, then it looks very much as if one of the "quids" (herself) has finally escaped the hold of the Monoton (which is somehow logically not possible).

(So, now I have formed a picture of Robert Graves at Waterloo Station, wondering to himself what his "quid" is going to look like and whether she might be an "unpredicated copulative". I would like to think Laura had a sense of humour, for this poem strikes me as darkly funny.)

And, here is my final offering. Very Gertrude Stein.

Will you reject it out of hand? Read it out aloud....! It's quite weird.

Elegy in a Spider's 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

Yes, that IS the ending!

Here at last, language, or what we *think of* as language, appropriate poetical discourse, breaks down. And it's hard to dismiss this as just gobbledygook babbling. This poet has already shown both seriousness of purpose and control of technique – a little odd maybe, but technique in the modernist style - think Cubism, more - think “Finnegan’s Wake”.

To put it another way, one way to read this poem is to see us all as trapped in webs... webs of *language(s)*. And trapped in the web, herself, the poet is imagining a breakdown of both language and thought as expressed in language (for how else do we think?).

I admit to feeling disturbed by the utterly inconclusive ending, which subtly alters the chanting litany of incomplete questions about death, entrapment, *non-sense!*

Pity is again invoked, as it has been before. Even flies may have feelings... This is not a poem *without* feeling.

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

Inconclusive, unending, unpunctuated, freely revolving but also tightly constrained around endless repetitions, the poem is an inchoate, modernist nightmare that enacts its own, the poet's own, our own, *entrapment*.

I won't say this is all brilliant but I will say it creates an effect of slewed craziness – the craziness of feeling you are caught in a web and that at some point you will be killed and eaten. “The legs real...”

To dismiss it out of hand as absurdity is, I think, to miss the point.

My conclusion at the end of this Odyssey, is that Laura Riding tried to control the language of poetry and she thought that her failure resided in and was determined by the slipperiness and inexactitude of language. I think, however, that she was a better poet than she knew, precisely *because* at its best, her poetry reveals, and revels in, *imprecisions*, just as all poetry should. She ought to have attended to William Empson, the pupil of I.A. Richards, whose “Seven Types of Ambiguity” was so seminal when published in 1930. Instead of railing against inexactitude, she should have realised how her poems, consciously or unconsciously, *do* exploit ambiguity and how by using language's oblique “indirections”, she could have revealed more of the *diversity and the plurality* of the world around her than her talents allowed her to do. Ultimately, I think, she wanted to narrow the world down so that she could better control it.

Here is a useful essay by Jenny Turner in the LRB, some time back, reviewing a biography of Laura Riding. She is very scathing and concludes that Laura Riding is artistically a failure. I'm not so sure. Within the idiom and cast of Modernism, I think her poetry, as seen here, is more interesting and *better* than might seem to be the case. I'm just glad I don't have to argue the toss with Laura (Riding) Jackson (the name she finally ended up with).

My deepest apologies if you have followed me this far and feel (exhaustedly) that you have been cheated and led up a literary garden path with no flowers.

But, hey, “what a *falling-off* was there!” (*Hamlet* - my italics).

<https://www.lrb.co.uk/v16/n05/jenny-turner/lauraphobia> ‘