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

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

Margaret Konkol

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 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.

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

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I. 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 first recounted the relationship to his biographers, constructing Laura Riding as a queen yogi figure wielding an almost sinister influence. 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 person she found to be sympathizing with Graves's account of the partnership. At the time of her death in 1991, Riding was embroiled in a number of contentious epistolary exchanges of which the primary object was the restoration, perhaps better described as the recreation, of "Laura Riding". These exchanges with friends, enemies, and magazine editors demonstrate her efforts to dispel what she considered to be incorrect characterizations of her "collaboration", "connection", or "association" with Robert Graves. Indeed, the dispute between Laura Riding and Robert Graves is a well-rehearsed one that has tended to impel critics to place their allegiance with one or the other party[1]. Those who champion Riding credit her with the real poetic talent, evaluating her as a major (and Graves as a minor) poet. Those who support Graves argue that Riding had little discernable impact on Graves's work and was, if anything, a fanatical figure who enthralled rather than inspired Graves.

If we settle too easily into the entrenched positions of the Riding-Graves conflict we put ourselves in danger of continuing to determine 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. In the 1930s Riding and Graves appeared to be united in their affirmative attitude toward collaboration and also in their aversion toward

[1] Recent work by Amber Vogel (2007) and Carla Billitteri (2007) begins to balance the debate. Marjorie Stone and Judith Thompson's co-edited *Literary Couplings and the Construction of Authorship: Writing Couples and Collaborators in Historical Context* (2007) provides an invaluable transhistorical approach to the larger theoretical question of collaboration.

the "scientific" study of authorship. By 1960, when he agreed to sell his papers to the SUNY Buffalo Poetry Collection, Graves espoused a far more traditional sense of authorship than the one he and Riding had articulated in the 1930s[2]. By reading sites of conflict as they are made visible in archival documents – but without thereby attempting to resolve the debate – this essay examines anxieties about authorship and reception in the Riding-Graves archives; more specifically, it looks to explore the ways in which the revision process of a single sonnet, "The History of the Word", displays a spectrum of Riding and Graves's ideas about authorship – from collaborative revision to the construction of literary legacy through archivization.

In her 1937 reply to the request of Charles Abbott, Curator of the Poetry Collection at the University at Buffalo, for "the contents of her dustbin", Laura Riding writes:

> I don't believe in this "manuscript" view of poetry—either in its commercial or scholastic aspects (it is the finished poem alone that matters, released from the circumstances of its composition). Poetry is not a proper subject for "research"; the order of knowledge required for its understanding is of an altogether different kind[3].

Riding explained that, "I should be willing to please you for the friendliness of your general attitude to your prospected collection. But I generally destroy my manuscripts; what little I may have is locked away in my home in Mallorca for the

[2] The University of Buffalo Library was able to purchase Graves's library and papers thanks to a generous donation from Mildred Lockwood Lacey, the widow of Robert B. Lockwood, who had himself been a significant benefactor for the library during his lifetime.

[3] Letter to Charles Abbott, 1937, Laura Riding Jackson Letters, Box 5, Poetry Collection, SUNY Buffalo. Abbott describes his fledgling "poetry project" as a "kind of laboratory where the study of that 'intellectual activity which gives birth to works themselves' may be encouraged" (1948: 5). Riding was not the only poet to refuse the request for manuscript material. Poets' opposition to the study of manuscripts followed an understanding of the work of art in its published form as an autonomous aesthetic unity. Riding in particular feared that studying the process of creation would lead critics to a method that regarded the poem as a reflection of social and material conditions.

unfortunate present"[4]. In a conciliatory gesture, Riding sent drafts of an address she gave at Oxford in 1936 with the further comment that, "It may be of interest to you to know what the prose manuscript of a poet looks like". In this same letter she responded, on Graves's behalf, to a similar request that Abbott had addressed to the latter. She writes that Graves "has no poem manuscripts on hand" either but could send prose instead. That she was "writing on behalf of Robert Graves" speaks volumes. His concerns were very much her own and she willingly entered into written communications designed to address questions and requests directed to him. But the fact that Graves sold his manuscripts to Buffalo in 1960 indicates that he no longer (if ever) shared Riding's stance toward the study of manuscripts; whereas Riding destroyed most of her drafts, Graves kept his.

Graves, in preserving his manuscripts, managed his own literary legacy, ensuring for future scholars a window into his workshop and creative process. In his May 15th, 1960 speech at the dedication of his papers to the Buffalo Poetry Collection, Graves spun an artful account of his self-collecting practices:

> Generally unknown to my family in the attic where they never go, which is up a very rickety ladder and not very worth penetrating, I have for some supersititious reason put away all my manuscripts of poems. Sometimes I keep manuscripts of prose stuff, but not always, but the poems go up there and it was a sort of superstitious habit and I'll tell you how I developed [it]: that when I wrote a poem, when I got to the end of it, it might be as much as ten or fifteen or as many as thirty five drafts, and you'll see evidence of this in these cases, I very often wished to go back to the start to see if I had left anything out by changes that should be put back again and so the things got put together and then put away[5].

In his concluding remarks he equates the archive with a tomb and his papers with his body: "This will really be my grave here. My

[4] Letter to Charles Abbott, 1937, Laura Riding Jackson Letters, Box 5, Poetry Collection, SUNY Buffalo.

[5] "Presentation of the manuscripts of Robert Graves to the University at Buffalo, May 15, 1960" (Recorded on 7 inch scotch reel to reel tape), Poetry Collection Audio Archive, Poetry Collection Recordings, PCR129. Copyright Linda Shaughnessy. Used with permission.

tomb. The grave of Graves, you might call it. I think I'll be very comfortable here"[6]. The analogy that Graves draws here between his body, his manuscripts, and his grave would have heightened the air of mystique surrounding the papers at Buffalo – and, arguably, their monetary value.

Importantly, within these acts of preservation there is a hidden act of obfuscation. Despite this self-mythologization of the author as solitary genius who carefully documented the evidence of his creativity, the manuscripts for *Collected Poems* (1938), stored at the Buffalo Poetry Collection, show that multiple pairs of hands were involved in the creative process: Graves shared his drafts with Riding, who made various editorial suggestions. On the contrary, Graves's self-presentation of his personal attic-archive, and of his meticulous collecting practice, seems to accord the author full accountability in regards to his archive. His dramatic 1960 remarks leave out reference to his collaborations with Riding or the presence of others in his personal manuscripts (perhaps understandably given the acrimonious conclusion of their association and the kind of occasion on which he uttered them).

Unlike Riding, who in later years wrote to editors and fellow writers in order to "correct" literary history – that is to say, their assessments of the nature of her and Graves's partnership – Graves "corrected" the historical documents themselves. Roughly three quarters of the manuscripts of *Collected Poems* (1938) contain significant signs of erasure. Erasure is uncharacteristic of Graves's known composition and revision practice at this time. Rather than erasing, Graves typically crosses out the unfavourable word, thereby preserving the record of creation. As a rule Graves composes in a series of versions, each of which is typed, then revised by hand, before he begins his next version[7]. But in the drafts of *Collected Poems*, a stray word here and there that has not been entirely obliterated reveals that Laura Riding had been writing between lines, in the margins, and in the spare portions of

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] In later years, especially after Karl Gay became his secretary in 1947, Graves often had his assistants read over work and suggest alterations that he would erase, ignore, or use.

the page – and that Graves has erased her writing. This alteration of the manuscripts is an important moment in the textual history and therefore in the examination of their literary partnership, as it operated and as it was viewed by each of them in subsequent years[8]. Graves wanted to preserve his poetry manuscripts while Riding did not want to preserve her own; importantly, the Graves manuscripts look like records of a single master craftsman who enjoyed the editorial suggestions of lesser writers. Textual evidence of the collaboration of two, latterly estranged poets could apparently, for Graves, be silently removed from the historical record.

II. "The History of the Word" had been published previously in Graves's *Ten Poems More* (1930), and in June and July 1937, in preparation of *Collected Poems*, Graves invited Riding to make suggestions for its revision[9]. According to Graves's diaries during those summer months of 1937, Riding was reading and reworking his writing on a daily basis. In these instances she enters the process of authorship after Graves commits the initial creative act. Riding left no extant record of these months so it is difficult to establish the role that Graves played in her writings. Though his diary mentions only her involvement in his work, it is clear from the evidence we have that their conceptions of authorship were in a state of flux[10].

[8] Renewed interest in modernist archives has led Dunston Ward (2007: 114) to examine the Graves manuscripts, including the drafts of *Collected Poems* (1938), in relation to which he concludes that Riding's annotations are "editorial, critical, but not actually creative". However, he does not address what these acts of erasure and partial reconstitution mean for the legacy of either poet. I am not interested in arguing for or against the importance of Riding's contributions, here or elsewhere in Graves's work. Indeed, I find Ward's argument about Riding's role in *Collected Poems* (1938) largely compelling.

[9] The University of Victoria, under the copyright provisions of the St. Johns College Robert Graves Trust, has digitized Robert Graves's 1935-1939 diaries. University of Victoria Special Collections had purchased the diaries in 1970, and the trust approved the digitization project in 2001. When Riding and Graves's relationship ceased Graves felt he no longer had any reason to maintain the diary.

[10] Riding and Graves co-authored *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) and *A Pamphlet against Anthologies* (1928), and translated *Almost Forgotten Germany* by George Schwarz (1936). In late 1938 they worked on, but eventually abandoned, *The Swiss Ghost*. Graves was not Riding's only collaborator – indeed, scores of young writers flocked to Deya to learn from Riding. She co-authored *The Left Heresy of Literature and Life* (1939) with Harry Kemp, Alan Hodge, and Robert Graves, and *The Moon's No Fool* (1932) with T. S. Matthews. She edited James Reeves's first book of poetry and Len Lye's collection of letters, *No Trouble*. Nor was Riding Graves's only collaborator. During this period Graves co-authored *The Long Week-End* (1940) with Alan Hodge.

By applying modern scanning technologies to the pulp fibers, dust, oil, graphite, and ink marks the archivist can conjure up the spectral marks left by Riding, revealing erasure in the archive as a productive site for inquiry into ideas of authorship as Graves and Riding first mutually conceived of it in the 1930s, and recording (in erasure) how Graves's ideas had diverged by 1960. Using a TWAIN scanner and omnipage proImage editing software I have created TIFF files which reconstitute Grave's erasure of Laura Riding's role in the development of his poetry. **[See Appendix One]**

Notice that with the interlinear markings Graves has recopied Riding's comments, matching as nearly as he can the size of Riding's letters, but he has not recopied her marginalia. For a poet so fastidious with the preservation of his drafts, it is telling that before depositing these drafts with the Buffalo Poetry Collection, Graves erased Riding's contributions and partially reconstituted them as his own to diminish the material trace of their collaborative partnership **[See Appendix Two]**

The first thing Graves would have read upon Riding's return of the manuscript was perhaps the large block of text below the poem (which Graves erased and did not reconstitute):

> What I feel about this very knowing poem of yours is that there is more self-satisfaction in saying the fine thing than reverence in your subject. This results by curious effect of complex lesson well learned and endowing it with a humouristic [sic] obviousness which isn't real or a part of its character.

Critiquing the way Graves has turned a serious issue of existence into an academic sleight of hand, Riding's piercing comment addresses the apparent lack of respect and responsibility Graves gives to his subject. Riding treats the bottom half of the manuscript as a communicative space for character assessment through critical

analysis, not just in this instance, but in many of the *Collected Poems* manuscripts. In the manuscript itself she targets the poem's unresolved position vis à vis everyday language as salvation, or as the sign of the fallen and irremediable state of the world as evidenced in a now impotent religious myth.

"The History of the Word" is a sonnet that weaves together a discussion of the promise and failure of language with the Judeo-Christian myth of creation. The poem forecasts an end-time near at hand brought on by the proliferation and desecration of the original un-interpreted word. The "various" lexicon is "impotent"[11]. Ironically, given the poem's nostalgic lament for a less "wordy" time, Riding has written "make simpler / clearer" in the margins beside lines five to seven, and beside line eight she has written "not clear". Riding is exhorting Graves to relinquish neutrality and observation, the latter being typical of his poetry, and to take a risk, to present argument and critique, this being typical of Riding's poetry.

At line five Riding underlines and changes "Which, by interpretation's freedom cursed" to "Which, by a lax interpretation cursed". The first incarnation proposes that the freedom interpretation affords is a dangerous activity and therefore an accursed gift to mankind, for it leads not only to joy but to devastation as well. Riding's alteration emphasizes the possibility and danger of flabby erroneous interpretations, but does not blame interpretation as a practice, so much as bad interpretations. The revision forces the poem's hand – as if to say, "this observation alone is not sufficient, the poem would be stronger if a defense of interpretation would follow". Riding's specific suggestion for how to make it "simpler" and "clearer" draws the poem out of an ambivalent and ambiguous position regarding two forms of knowledge – doctrinal learning and humanistic education – and sets the argument of the poem in favor of humanism and the Enlightenment ideals of exploration and experiment. When revised, the *description* of the mytho-historical process becomes an *argument* claiming that the Enlightenment project is also doomed to undermine itself.

[11] The lines of the poem read: "But now the various tongue-tied Lexicon / In perfect impotence the time nearing / when every ear shall lose his sense of hearing".

Riding's next alteration – a substitution – may have been determined by the political climate. Land claims, deeds, and property would have been weighing heavy on Riding's mind in 1938, and this registers in her suggestion to replace "name" with "claim". With the storm clouds of World War Two blowing towards Mallorca in 1936, Riding and Graves decided that their shared property of *Canellun* ought to be transferred into her name. They reasoned that, as an American, Riding would be less likely to have land confiscated than would an Englishman. Just as physical deeds and the claims of words (in the eyes of the law) were pressing issues to both poets, line eight originally reads "Than fall to Letters and each name a letter". To name is an Adamic impulse at possession through recognition. The revision of "name" to "claim" makes the power dynamic explicit. Whereas one might name an object to differentiate it from other similar objects, one might claim in order to assert a right to possession. The name "Riding", solely affixed to their shared property, was an expedient agreement forged for the eyes of the law that was not descriptive of the true deed of shared possession.

In the second draft and final printed version, Graves does not retain all of Riding's alterations. Rather, some serve as intermediary terms, a sort of semantic displacement whereby Riding's terms inspire another term not directly associated with the original one. The final couplet, as it appeared in *Ten Poems More* (1930) reads:

> In perfect impotence the time nearing
> when every ear shall lose his sense of hearing.

Riding exchanges "ear", which serves as metonym for man, for "mind", an opposition to the body, and changes the gender specific pronoun "his" to the neuter "its". The line that originally read, "When every ear shall lose his sense of hearing", now reads "When every mind shall lose its sense of hearing". "Ear" invokes the body, physical, carnal, and sensual. So too, "his" restricts the experience to the male subject position. It is characteristic of Riding's work to aim for the universal just as it is characteristic of Graves's work to attend to personal experience. Riding's suggestion to replace "mind" for "ear" and "its" for "his" guides the poem away from statements of

gender and subjectivity and towards a more suprapersonal line of reasoning.

In the margin next to the penultimate line Riding makes her fourth and final interlinear alteration. Having written in the margin across from line thirteen, "something 'neater'", she crosses out "mind" and "deafness" and replaces them with "ear" and "language" respectively. The couplet originally read:

And every mind by deafness be close-shuttered—
But two or three, where first the Word uttered.

Now, they read:

And every ear by language be close-shuttered—
But two or three, where first the Word uttered.

Earlier in the poem Riding wished to deemphasize the sonnet's focus on the body; now she encourages the bodily and auditory association. Though the switch from "mind" to "ear" produces consistency in the figurative language, producing a sustained conceit, this is not the object of the revision because Riding crosses out "deafness" and introduces "language". Deafness signifies either disability or willed ignorance, as of people stopping up their ears to avoid unpleasant truths. Substituting "deafness" with "language" replaces an evaluative term with a categorical one. Whereas "deafness" identifies a deficiency, "language", the material of a fallen world, is the imperfect matter of everyday life. These revisions guide the poem out of a single physical body and into abstraction, namely the cultural state of linguistic dwelling. Whereas Graves had proposed the body as a house "close-shuttered", Riding's intervention produces a Heideggerian proposition: language as the house of being. In this case Riding's suggestion of "language" never makes it out of the drafting stage, but this does not diminish its importance as an intermediary term: "language" serves Graves as a necessary stepping-stone for the final word "knowledge". The final incarnation of the line produces the effect of a darkened stage populated by a few Beckettian characters left chattering in the darkness – a bleaker ending than the one proposed by Riding, but one which Graves would not have arrived at had he not had Riding's intermediary word "language".

Although the contributions of Riding in this instance do not compare to the essential role she played in Grave's *The White Goddess*, the sonnet is still the better for her creative efforts. In her contributions to it she persistently calls for the clarification of the poem's logic, and simplification of its layered connotations, often focusing her attention on the final stanza – exchanging sermonizing abstractions for images of concrete particulars. This demonstrates a sensitivity to Graves's poetic project, as Riding's own work is pure logopoeia: her alterations do not attempt to control the Graves poem so much as work within "The History of the Word"'s own logics to improve it. As a result of their collaborative revisions for Graves's *Collected Poems* (1938) the poems achieve a more powerful play between abstract and particular, argument and parable. In the instance of "A History of the Word", Riding's suggestions are as useful, if not quite as significant, as Ezra Pound's editorial suggestions were to T.S. Eliot's composition of *The Waste Land*. Of course, Eliot dedicated *The Waste Land* to Pound, acknowledging him as "Il Miglior Fabbro". She may not be the "better" poet, but Riding pushes Graves to write a better poem (or better poems).

III. Based on the relationship between the words recuperated and reassigned to the hands of Riding and Graves, and the actual 1938 published form of the "The History of the Word", we can adduce that at some later point, after their relationship had disintegrated, Graves wished to present Riding's alterations as his own and collapse the revisions (despite Riding's own sense of being only secondarily involved) into the act of a single author. The digitally reconstituted erasure makes it clear that in subsequent years Graves exercised a more traditional sense of authorship than Riding. Indeed, with the act of erasure and partial rewriting, it would appear that Graves later regarded their collaborations much like a business partnership or lawful marriage, an arrangement which could be dissolved, with property divided between the claimants. On the other hand, Riding's understanding of authorship continued to more nearly match the claims advanced in their 1926 collaboration, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*. In its prefatory note, Graves and Riding attest that "this book represents a word-by-word collaboration" (1927a: 5). In the *Survey* itself the authors compare poetic production to sexual

reproduction. They contend that making a poem is like making a child:

> The real poet is a poet by reason of his creative vision of the poem, as the real parent is a parent by reason of his creative vision of the child: authorship is not a matter of the right use of the will but of an enlightened withdrawal of the will to make room for a new will. (1927a: 127)

Just as it takes two to make a child, so too can a poem be born from intellectual union, a shared enterprise in which both authors agree not to exert authority or will over the product – each understanding the latter as arising out of their shared endeavor, not as the expression of the will of any one individual. Riding continued to see textual production as coextensive with sexual reproduction, and the products of the collaboration as progeny, unable to be dismantled and with a free and separate identity. Although both had in *Survey of Modernist Poetry* declared authorship as "the enlightened withdrawal of the will to make room for a new will" (1927a: 127), in later years Graves's position changed. He revised the percentage of the texts of *Survey* and *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* that would enable him to file for new copyrights and reprint the book as his own, "(with Laura Riding)".

The Martin Seymour-Smith Collection and Robert Graves Collection at Buffalo contain thirty-one Riding letters dating from 1939-1974, twenty-one of which are addressed to Graves and discuss property, publication rights, reflections on their collaborative relationship, and news of Riding's life in Wabasso (Potter 2000: 214)[12]. In letters between Riding and Graves in the late 1930s and early 40s, Riding intertwines intellectual property and land rights. She acknowledges that Graves and she each have "rights" to their collaborative works but that his rights "contravene" her own. Riding vows that she will work to suppress the *Survey* even if Graves wishes to reprint it, preferring the possibility of piracy to the reassertion of their former partnership. However, Riding also negotiates. In relation to *The Swiss Ghost* she gives Graves proprietary control:

[12] According to correspondence, Riding and Graves separated permanently in April 1939.

> *The Swiss Ghost*. I cannot go on with this. I have no excuse to offer for my protracted promise to complete it except my kindness to the deception we practised in each other in the beginning – that time did not matter. Time always did matter to you, and to me also—to each in different ways. You have really finished the book, and would have finished it long before you did if my trying to square it with other things with which it couldn't be squared hadn't postponed it almost perpetually. My wish about it is that you publish it as yours – it is basically yours, and sufficiently in the Antigua tradition not to seem otherwise – and accept my part in it with the generosity with which you have accepted my part in other things of yours[13].

In each case, Riding treats the products of collaboration as individual cases that require adjudication, but she does not seek to erase their prior existence. Some projects belong more properly to one than the other, but it is only in relinquishing proprietary hold that one author may advance without further need of the other's consent. The work is of dual possession until proven otherwise. For instance, Riding and Graves collaboratively authored "Midsummer Duet" for publication in *The Year's Poetry: A Representative Selection* (1934); however, as Riding explains in the appendix she drafted for her 1980 *Collected Poems*, she and Graves, though acknowledging co-authorship, collectively decided that Riding would include it in her 1938 *Collected Poems* (whereas Graves would not publish it under his own name)[14].

Perhaps realizing the necessity of establishing her own archival presence, Riding made an agreement with Cornell in 1965 to donate her papers to the Division of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Archives. Indeed, within these papers we can trace a similar urgency – as Graves had felt – to revise the archive. Riding was more generous with Cornell than with Buffalo not because she had a change of heart, but because she had found a way of presenting her poetry manuscripts so that composition and revision could not be observed (except for the most superficial of alterations). It is impossible to examine Riding's poetry manuscripts in the same way that we examine Graves's because she destroyed her early drafts, presenting Cornell only with clean

[13] Riding to Graves, December 31, 1939.

[14] See Riding 1938: 479.

poetry typescripts[15]. The state of the Cornell archive is evidence that Riding did not waver in her position: a poet's manuscripts were not fit material for scientific study. This closed-door policy on a poet's creative process did not, however, extend to prose. It is clear from the special essays written for inclusion in the archive that Riding was actively managing her legacy, and selecting and editing her materials accordingly. Essays such as "The Word Woman", as well as those assessing the work of fellow poets such as Eliot, Pablo Neruda, and Pound, are relatively uncorrected. They are gathered in the archive as relatively clean copies. By comparison, the "corrective" letters (letters that address the collaboration issue) are full of interlinear revisions. They bear the marks of intense scrutiny, self-revision, and manipulation. The struggle to articulate the terms of the collaboration is literally manifest on the page. Document after document on this subject painstakingly revises the state of collaboration between Graves and Riding, demonstrating that truth is a shifting ground. Similar to Graves with his attic-archive of poetry manuscripts, Riding kept mimeographs of every letter she wrote. Riding's desire to rewrite or revise the literary historical record is another iteration of her passion for exactitude, and the messiness of the letters and essay manuscripts that deal with her association with Graves attest to Riding's compulsion to revise accounts of their collaborative period.

Riding's letters in the Cornell archives acknowledge that the collaboration had a carefully-fashioned public face, but the they also attest to her frustration with either her initial generosity in sharing the recognition with Graves, or the overwhelming gender bias which had led critics unquestioningly to grant primary authority to a male writer. Riding's letters indicate that she had not anticipated the manner in which archival history could obliterate her significance,

[15] Letters between Riding and William Harmon were donated by Harmon to the Lois Round Wilson Library. In 2008 Mark Jacobs donated his twenty-year correspondence with Riding to Nottingham Trent University. Other scholars donated similar caches to universities in America and England. It requires further study to discern at what point Riding began to think of her letters as eventually bound for the archive, as this would indicate that she was thinking of herself as able actively to self-fashion (and not just "correct") her archival identity.

the manner in which Graves and others had written her out of the archive. She must have assumed that she was already part of the archive – part of history. It is as if she had not anticipated that the archive itself could be altered, documents removed and amended, and with them, history rewritten or forgotten. For all of her hopes for a "consensus of experience", for Riding, the past had unraveled into absences, disagreements, and accusations (Riding 2001: 346).

IV. The early years of the relationship between Riding and Graves were emotional, intellectual, and creative, and the shared life engendered a record of textual production. However, the story of the relationship as it continued to exist in a textual condition after 1939, when Riding and Graves no longer shared each other's society, is not one of collaboration so much as contestation. Each rewrites the other's authorial role. Graves effaces Riding's authority, literally erasing the pencil revision marks made by Riding on the manuscripts of the poems assembled for his *Collected Poems* (1938), while at the same time rewriting the comments in his own hand (without reinstituting her marginal comments). In his subsequent republication of works written during that period, Graves syntactically erases Riding, literally consigning her role to the parentheses[16]. In his *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poetry 1922-1949*, collaborations formerly jointly attributed are now attributed solely to Graves, and only in parenthetical disclaimers does the text acknowledge Riding's role as "(with Laura Riding)". Equally, Riding sought to write herself back into the archive with a series of epistolary exchanges in which she set down on paper, revised, erased, rewrote, and found the language that was missing from the physical archives, namely her and Graves's individual and collective acts of authorship. She intended that her carbon-copied letters would be preserved in the Cornell archive. It is in the years since the time of that initial collaborative process that Riding publicly sought to redefine her relationship to those works and to her former collaborator, and it is only in light of these efforts that she has emerged as an imperious and disgruntled figure, angry at her apparently

[16] For an analysis of Riding's own role in her marginalization, see Wallace 1992.

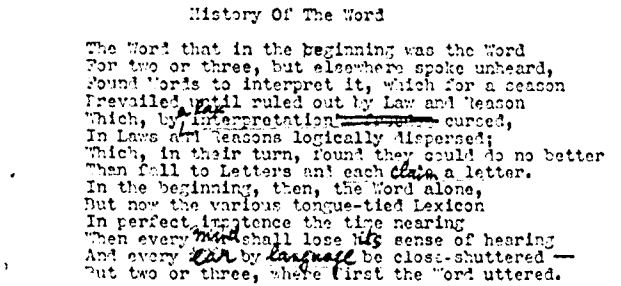
sidelined status and hungry for credit and attention. This is an unfair assessment of both the spirit of those collaborative acts and of the subsequent contestation of them. Riding's own messy, crossed-out, and revised "corrective letters" mirror Graves's literal and figurative acts of archival/historical revisionism. In this sense, our access to both "Laura Riding" and "Robert Graves" as authors recedes into history as each deploys a number of differing and multifaceted strategies in order to assert some measure of control over the archive.

Our captivation with this act of erasure in "History of the Word" lies at the root of what Derrida parses as the archiviolithic drive. The desire to record the act of creation – that is, the preservation of the manuscript – calls for the destruction of its contents. And yet, in describing the ghost of Hamlet's father, Derrida explains the power of objects to maintain the obscurity of the events that created them: "The armor may be but the body of a real artifact, a kind of technical prosthesis, a body foreign to the spectral body that it dresses, dissimulates, and protects, masking its identity" (Derrida 2006: 7). Allowing for Derrida's somewhat wrought terms, we can say that the archive is spectral. The archival "fact" is "neither present nor absent 'in the flesh' neither visible nor invisible, a trace always referring to another" (Derrida 1996: 84).

In other words, the archive is a site of haunting. Each document interned in the archive is submitted under the sign of its erasure from cultural memory. Ironically, Graves's act of literal erasure is itself a history of history. Simply put, with Graves's literal act of erasure, Graves has archived his *wish* to erase Riding. The case of *Collected Poems* (1938) makes clear that, like a tomb, the archive is not perfectly sealed. Excavations and removals always threaten its existence. Actually, the archive is not threatened so much as kept alive by such marauding since these acts indicate that the archive remains valuable to the present. Returning to the scene of authorship, namely the collaborative revision of "History of the Word", can revivify our understanding not only of that collaborative partnership – the fluid spectrum of authorship under which these authors operated – but also of that collaboration's eventual disintegration.

APPENDIX 1

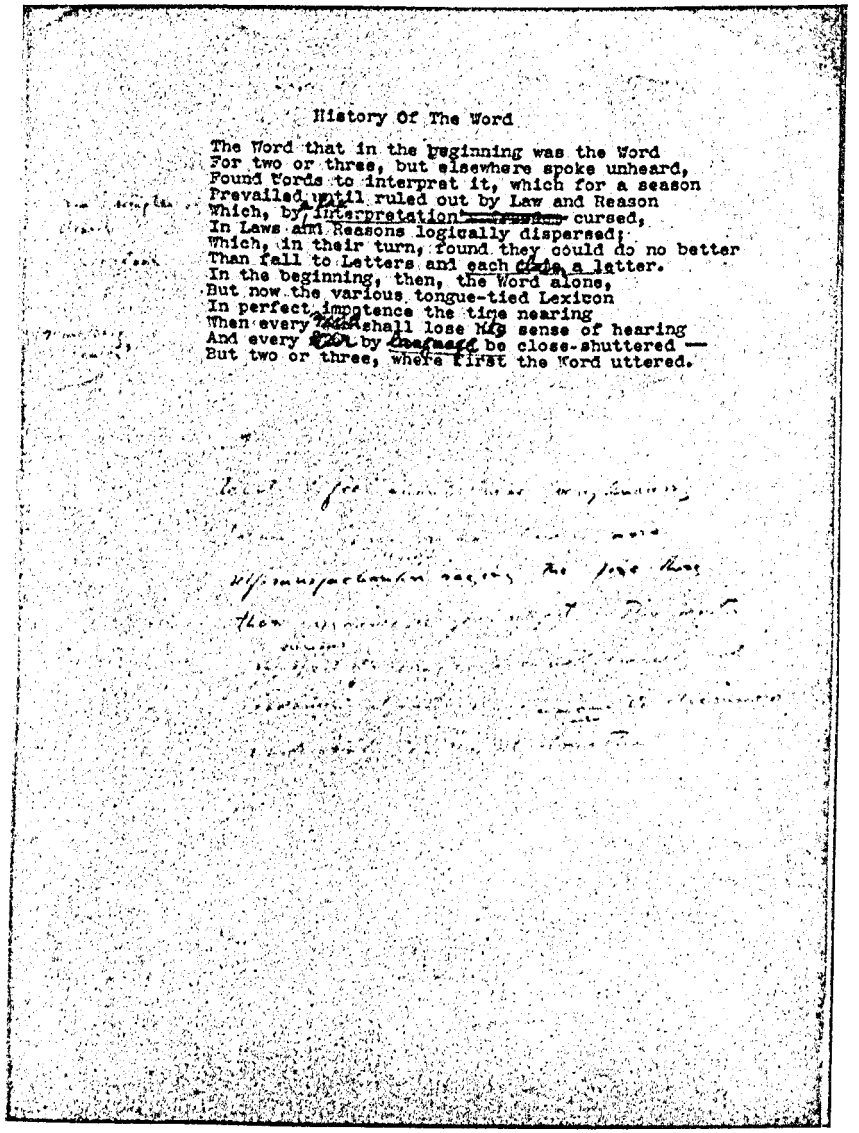
Robert Graves, "History of the Word". untreated scanned image



History Of The Word

The Word that in the beginning was the Word
For two or three, but elsewhere spoke unheard,
Found Words to interpret it, which for a season
Prevailed until ruled out by Law and Reason
Which, by interpretation [illegible] cursed,
In Laws and Reasons logically dispersed;
Which, in their turn, found they could do no better
Than fall to Letters and each claim a letter.
In the beginning, then, the Word alone,
But now the various tongue-tied Lexicon
In perfect impotence the time nearing
When every mind shall lose its sense of hearing
And every ear by language be close-shuttered —
But two or three, where first the Word uttered.

APPENDIX 2
Robert Graves, "The History of the Word". Digitally enhanced scanned image. Permission to reproduce this manuscript page has been kindly granted by William Graves



History Of The Word

The Word that in the beginning was the Word
For two or three, but elsewhere spoke unheard,
Found words to interpret it, which for a season
Prevailed until ruled out by Law and Reason
Which, by interpretation cursed,
In Laws and Reasons logically dispersed;
Which, in their turn, found they could do no better
Than fall to Letters and each [illegible] a letter.
In the beginning, then, the Word alone,
But now the various tongue-tied Lexicon
In perfect impotence the time nearing
When every [illegible] shall lose his sense of hearing
And every [illegible] by [illegible] be close-shuttered —
But two or three, where first the Word uttered.

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