

Robert Graves, Laura Riding, and William Empson

These notes are presented in the hope that they may help to clarify the influence of Robert Graves on William Empson's seminal work, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.

Empson, a brilliant mathematics graduate, began studying with I.A. Richards in 1928, his fourth year at Magdalene. Richards, whose library is still kept at the college, had collected all of Graves's prose works and poems and these were among the books discussed by them. Richards, in a 1940 introduction to a lecture given by Empson at Yale, gave this well-known account of how *Seven Types* came into being. The sonnet referred to is analysed in chapter III of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* [1927]:

At about his third visit he brought up the games of interpretation which Laura Riding and Robert Graves had been playing with the unpunctuated form of 'The expense of spirit in a waste of shame.' Taking the sonnet as a conjurer takes his hat, he produced an endless swarm of lively rabbits from it and ended by saying "You could do that with any poetry, couldn't you?" This was a Godsend to a Director of Studies so I said, "you'd better go off and do it, hadn't you?"

Empson was already interested by Graves' writings. In a May 1928 review for *Granta of Words and Poetry* by George Rylands, he described 'the Robert Graves school of criticism' as impressive 'when the analysis it employs becomes so elaborate as to score a rhetorical triumph; when each word in the line is given four or five meanings, four or five reasons for sounding right and suggesting the right

things.' Further than this, one of the examples chosen to illustrate the seven types was a Shakespeare sonnet.

The connection seems clear. The first edition of *Seven Types*, published in November 1930, acknowledged it plainly in the dedication where Empson wrote: 'And I derive the method I am using from Mr Robert Graves's analysis of a Shakespeare Sonnet, "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame," in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*.' An error slip was inserted. It is regretted that *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* is erroneously referred to as by Mr Robert Graves. It is by Miss Laura Riding and Mr Robert Graves.'

On February 24, 1939, Laura Riding wrote to William Empson from France, shortly before she went with Graves to America. In this letter, held in a private collection, Miss Riding took Empson to task. She told him, to paraphrase, that his delight in ambiguity represented no fundamental ambiguity in meanings but an ambiguity in himself. All of his seeming precision in the midst of apparent ambiguity was an inexactness of himself, in inexact apprehension of truth offered as criticism. Slightly wrong, she went on, was not almost true. He behaved as if he was the teacher, 'and you are not that.' This 'feeling' about him had crystallised and it was her duty to tell it to him. No answer was desired.

Did this letter perhaps contribute to Empson's decision to delete any acknowledgement to Graves or to Riding in the 1947 edition, and all subsequent ones, of his book?

Empson went further than this. In *Modern Language Quarterly* 27 1966, (p. 258), he cancelled Riding's influence by saying that the original 1930 acknowledgement had been erroneous. He had meant to acknowledge the influence of Graves's 1922 *On English Poetry*, written before he met Riding. It is not impossible. All Graves's writings were at his disposal in Richards' collection.

Miranda Seymour
London, UK