

Focus: An Extended Bibliographical Description

John Woodrow Presley

Throughout 1935, when Robert Graves and Laura Riding were almost wholly occupied with the lists of projects they envisioned being produced by the Seizin Press—Graves produced no book of his own that year—they began a project they called *Focus*, which has been referred to as the “newsletter” of the circle of friends most closely associated with Riding and Graves, and who filtered in and out of Deya for regular visits. *Focus* is typically thought of, if it is thought of at all, as a collection of letters. But it is much more: while some of the letters are obviously spontaneous, others are more studied, and some are among the best-written letters collected. *Focus* also contained some very interesting poetry, and contains many short essays. For example, in an early number, James Reeves published an essay titled “Myself and Napoleon,” and in the final number, seven of the Deya circle, prompted by Laura Riding, publish 16 short little essays on their “Likes,” about (as Riding instructed) “various people we liked (in history or literature or anywhere) from what we knew about them” (*Focus*, number 4, 34). Riding wrote about Elinor Glyn, and Graves wrote about John Kelsey, the mad evangelist; Mary Tofts of Godalming, who was said to have born a litter of rabbits; and the career of Pietro Torrigiano.

Recently, when a full set of four numbers of *Focus* was offered for sale by a dealer, the catalogue copy stated, “Not mentioned in Higginson & Williams. The idea was to distribute among friends ... *Focus* is almost totally ignored by the biographers.”

It is not surprising that *Focus* is not mentioned in Higginson and Williams’ *Bibliography*. In fact, though he was involved in the production of *Focus*, Robert Graves was merely one among a number of contributors. *Focus* was edited by Laura Riding, according to her

statements and those of the contributors. In Number 3, Riding says, “I have a feeling about not wanting to read the others before I have written mine—because the personal advantages of focal association are somewhat lost in the editorial advantages. If any editorial comment on the others is needed at the end I’ll appear there in subdued editorial guise” (7). In fact, this is precisely what she had done in Number 2, when Honor Wyatt ends her letter with, “This is rather a messy *Focus*. I do apologize to everyone, especially to Laura who will probably have to do a lot of correcting.” Laura responds, “[Nothing corrected. L]” (1).

All four numbers of the only volume of *Focus* ever produced, that of 1935, were printed in Palma de Mallorca by Esperanza Printers. There were apparently difficulties with the printer—the numbers of *Focus* are riddled with misspellings, for example—so much so that Karl Goldschmidt wrote that the printer’s sign above the shop should read “Lasciate ogni speranza [Abandon all hope, ed]” since “I felt it was just the same, entering Dantes’ Inferno, or this absolutely hopeless shop” (No. 2, 16).

As the letters or “sendings,” as Riding called them, were prepared for *Focus*, Riding would give them a “going over,” with Graves “doing some of the copying by hand” and “Karl types them as they come” (2.21). This production scheme apparently varied with the availability of help: for Number 3, “the typing of this *Focus* is being done in joint efficiency of distribution by Karl, Honor, Mary, Gordon, with Robert helping to check” (40).

Nor is it clear that *Focus* was meant only for distribution among friends. It is certainly true that the circle of Deya friends who contributed letters each received copies, but it is clear that some or all of them received multiple copies, and the practice of sharing *Focus* with friends who had not contributed was encouraged. James Reeves, for example, wrote in Number 2, “Thank you very much for the Second Leaf’s [Riding’s broadsides] and the *Focuses*...”. He goes on to say “John Cullen said that not knowing everybody in *Focus* he found it difficult to decide altogether which were people and which were cats”

(4). More telling still, Riding reports in the same number of *Focus* that “Harold Edwards—who has a book shop in the Charing Cross Road world—has sent a stalwart note for *Focus* ...”. Edwards writes, “I’ll send you something for *Focus*, which I enjoyed ... From now on I’ll jot down for you as things happen so there will be something for *Focus* ...” (11). A copy was also sent to Malcolm Thompson, “who lives in Barcelona.” Clearly, Riding was distributing copies of *Focus* to more distant friends, and probably to most or all of those who received *Epilogue* and the various Leaves. Perhaps this was done with a business eye, sending or arranging to send *Focus* to important people in publishing. Cullen, for example, was a friend of Eirlys Roberts, who, according to Martin Seymour-Smith, “eventually became chairman of Eyre Methuen” (246). Possibly, there may have been even bigger plans afoot for *Focus*. Len Lye, according to Riding, wrote that “*Focus* is on its way, isn’t it?” (3.36). It is not altogether clear that *Focus* was merely a “newsletter” as it has been called by Miranda Seymour (235).

Nor is it precisely true that the biographers have ignored *Focus*. Clearly, Miranda Seymour uses the numbers of *Focus* for background of her discussion of Riding’s life in 1935, quoting and paraphrasing from Riding’s *Focus* letters (235). And Richard Perceval Graves, in *Robert Graves: The Years with Laura*, makes frequent use of *Focus* as a source of detail about everyday life in Deya (see his footnotes 334, 362-365, 367, 373, 374 and 376, for example).

It is not at all surprising that the letters in *Focus* should be seen primarily as a source of quotidian detail: they are first, and most charmingly, letters between friends. Even Graves’ letters tend to be chatty, listing his activities such as chasing down the precisely “right” set of buttons for a new vest, providing details of planned improvements to the Canellun gardens, or the discovery of new graceful driftwood and the perfect fuel for his brazier. Graves writes at length about his new dog, Solomon; Riding includes news of the Canellun cats in nearly every letter. Riding’s letters mix personal mythology—“But the question ‘When London?’ is like Ghosts ... And London as we know is the latest Previous Place” (1.8)—with news of her writing and publishing projects, *Epilogue* and *The Dictionary of Related Meanings*, for

example, with details about maids, jewellery, and clothes. John Aldridge writes hilariously about “starting a local branch of the Labour Party” and about finding “it’s a pleasure to have all those letters to read in exchange for writing only one,” even though he does find some of the other letters “very intimate, quite embarrassing” (2.9-10). One can read in Number 2 about James Reeves’ first experience making a “gramophone-record” of his poetry: “Nothing...could have been more humiliating” (5). There is a continuing discussion about the superiority of the *Daily Telegraph* over the *Daily Mail*: “We have stuck to the *Daily Mail* for a long time because one wants the worst newspaper for the worst information” (2.21). And one can follow a rather arch debate between Graves and Riding and James Reeves, who initiated the discussion, over the use of *as though* and *as if*. All this is punctuated by Robert Graves’ lively reports on millstones being made into garden tables; on the negotiations to buy, remodel, and occupy La Posada; on his painting the new grape-arbour with creosote (inflaming his eyes); and story after story of his “button-insanity.” And, imbedded in all this detail, this very telling remark about his relationship with his editor-partner:

As for work since last *Focus*, I have written eight poems and destroyed three. Two of the survivors passed Laura’s scrutiny without a single query. This is a record (2.15).

Graves provides a very bad poem, “Neraeid,” which he says was sent to him by one Sidney W..., a “queerie” from Philadelphia. He also takes up the challenge from Reeves to provide variations on Felicia Heman’s “Casabianca” (“The boy stood on the burning deck...”); Graves provides five variations of the old chestnut. Letters from Gordon Glover and Honor Wyatt detail their travels and the joys of living with their newborn (later the two describe Gordon’s work reporting a London fire and Honor’s strangely clairvoyant dream the same evening). Tom Matthews describes how he arrived at his decision to leave *Time* magazine, and his writing plans.

As quickly as number 1, the correspondents began using “Focal” as an adjective, searching for just what Riding wanted these exchanges to be. In number 1, she expanded on the meaning of her

term:

I have enlarged profusely on many things of unquestionable personal interest in order to demonstrate that there need be no distinction between what is personal not if you are personal enough, not meaning to be greedy. From January Focus it will be easy for everyone to understand that the thing wanted is exactly that awkwardest kind of personal statement which is the easiest to write (11).

Gordon Glover quickly understood, he said:

Focal writing seems to be a very good thing for writers: it is non-competitive and written with the object which should be the object of all writing. Namely an unpretentious and unaffected conveying of things which one in some way, either by living them or thinking them, feels sure enough about to put into words. It is not a matter of saying things more cleverly, or beautifully, or wittily than other focal writers, but purely a matter of doing one's natural stent of self-accounting. This helps to keep one aware of the essential function of words—whereas in the literary world one is being constantly tempted to do “experimental” things with words. It's very good discipline to set oneself the simple object of saying specific things about oneself (2.2).

By Number 3, James Reeves was pleased with the aims of *Focus*.

I think I understood what Focus is, better, in the second number and I think we all did. It seems now to have an air of “mattering” without being “important,” which is why it was difficult at first because most of the periodical publications one reads have just the opposite appearance (3.1.).

The result of Riding's “scolding” and editing is, on occasion, some remarkably fine letters. (She had long been convinced that let-

ters were a superior method of communication, a genre that could be instructive, and a genre that should be collected and analysed and carefully presented. See her *Everybody's Letter* [1933] for another attempt at revealing character through letters— though on the whole, *Focus* is far superior).

For example, James Reeves discusses his job search:

I tried being the studious takes-his-job-very-seriously chap, the hearty lick-'em-into shape chap, the chap of unrecognized merit, the quietly efficient chap, the chap with no idea of "keeping order" but a good influence to have around the school. I tried the grey worsted suit with a monochrome tie and a blue shirt, the navy pin-striped with an old school tie and a white shirt, the flannel suit, flannel shirt, flannel tie. I tried carrying the Times and a black hat, an educational manual and a brown hat, the Daily Herald and no hat. I tried the modest voice, the blustering voice, the BBC announcer's voice, the disciplinarian's voice, the familiar, the respectful, the inconsequential (4.10).

Even Riding's usually opaque style becomes actually rather useful in these letters. After the death of T. E. Lawrence, she writes of their "rather thin" relations, since she had written to him about his criticisms of the Graves/Riding enterprise:

We both feel that you are playing a quite unnecessary game of simple-mechanic with us—and you make it quite difficult for us to play this game with you, as a game, because you do not stick to the simple mechanic attitude all through, being severe with us on points of style in a manner not strictly that of the simple mechanic. Having laid us low in this very unfair way, you give us a final stamping-on by requiring us to conform to Air Force technicalities; so we are quite lost (4.10).

The most surprising literary nuggets in *Focus* may be the joint poem "Majorcan Letter, 1935" by Graves and Riding in number 4, and

an early draft of the poem "The Christmas Robin," here titled more simply "Christmas" (noted in *Complete Poems* 2, 310).

"Majorcan Letter" opens Number 4 of *Focus* and is headed "Laura and Robert:" (1). Later in the same number, Riding notes, "Majorcan Letter: turned down as too long by the Kilham Roberts-Lehmann anthology for which, last year, we made an exception to our rule against anthologies—they wanted us to cut but we refused" (55). Riding's half of "Majorcan Letter" is certainly long, but length is the least of its problems. Hers is a long, rambling consideration of things modern. A sampling:

Communism is a mighty plan
 For turning bread into a doctrine
 And each shall have as much doctrine
 As bread: what could be simpler?
 Religion was never so accurate. (2)

or,

Ships do not merely no longer splash:
 The very ocean has become
 An abstraction whereon hotels
 Convey the traveller to hotels... (2)

or,

And Anthony Eden is, we know
 A clever young man who, without
 Other resources than tact and
 A virile English education
 And a flattering way of
 Being at ease among the great
 (So that the great exert themselves
 To be greater, so that Anthony
 May be still more at ease among them),
 Has established the superior

Virtue of that which is charming

Riding's poem is apparently about the necessity of occasionally reading journalism even though "It is a nice question whether / The whole dispatch of journalism / Is not, as far as we are concerned / A work of supererogation" (7).

The Graves half of "Majorcan Letter" is a light-hearted set of 12 rhyming quatrains, with a final sestet with three perfect rhymes. His is a sort of holiday greeting: "Regards to various people / Who may happen to read this verse" (8). Graves sends his regards to the rich man, the poor man, the patriot Lady Houston, going on in a comic catalogue of people who are in the news (perhaps there is a connection to the first half of the poem, after all!): to the "new blue gentleman-bobby," to Admiral Phillips, to the "hostesses of Mayfair," to the "miners of the Rhondda" and "the riveters of the Clyde." This excellent piece of light verse ends

Now kindest regards to these
 And our love to all the rest,
 And our homage to Mr. Baldwin
 (A Tory retort's the best),
 And a warning frown to each little bird
 In somebody else's nest.

There is a series of poems, each titled "Christmas" in *Focus* Number 4, by Graves, Riding, and James Reeves. Riding explains the series:

The Christmas poems: it started from some neat and ugly folders James got with photographs in them. They looked postal, and we thought of Christmas uses. But it's very difficult to write a poem that is only a Christmas use, so we here print rather than personally proffer as was originally intended (55).

Even in its early form, Graves' "Christmas" is a much more finished

poem than Reeves' or Riding's, both of which rather clumsily focus on private love ("tryst" in Riding's poem). Both Riding and Reeves published their Christmas poems, with minor changes, in their respective *Collected Poems* volumes. As noted in *Complete Poems 2*, Graves' early version is 18 lines, which became five four-line stanzas in the revised version published (and retitled "The Christmas Robin") in *Collected Poems 1938*. By the time "The Christmas Robin" was published in *Steps* (1958), Graves had deleted the first of these stanzas. Both the *Steps* and *Collected Poems 1938* versions are superb poems, and perhaps because of this, the apparatus provided in *Complete Poems 2* focuses on the difference in these two late versions, ignoring the earliest form of the poem in *Focus*. I think study of the early version is justified, however, both by the beauty of the early form, and for an understanding of the poem's development.

Graves' earliest version of "Christmas" begins with that title; it purports to be only three sentences, and the threat present in the later versions is much less explicit in this version:

The Christmas of this year is now,
 While yet the name glitters with unfetched holly.
 But once the church-bells ring it has gone by:
 The snows of January will bury it
 Deep in the woods where grow, untended,
 The fir-trees of a future Christmas-time
 So distant that when, hand in hand plodding
 Between the frozen ruts, the lovers look
 And "Look, the Christmas trees!" cry out together,
 Their talk is soon of love in green old age,
 Of grandchildren in troops about their knees
 And coloured Christmas candles guttering down —
 Meaning, they once were these same grandchildren
 And so might be again, were Christmas now...
 It was a picture wet with nursery kisses,
 An all too poignant *Merry Christmas* thought—
 The wide-legged robin with his breast aglow
 In the spade handle scornful of the snow. (18-19)

The later versions of this poem certainly have more metric subtleties, and as the threats of the winter snows and the "murderous robin" become more emphasized, the themes of "The Christmas Robin" become more identifiably "late-Gravesian." But there is in the early version an attitude toward the annual marking of repeated cycles in nature, a surface clarity obscuring chronological ambiguity, and an evocation of the fear and love that the *fact* of grandchildren can bring which one might find evocative of Thomas Hardy at his scarily pastoral best, as in *Winter Words* (1928). As a young man, Graves considered Hardy a master; perhaps Graves' own mastery in later years obscured these early influences as he continually revised his early works, turning them into his late work.

All four numbers of *Focus* are printed on heavily textured, probably hand-laid paper, with a single-stapled binding. The cover of each number is simply another sheet of the same paper, with the title "FOCUS" centred in large capitals, the back cover blank.

Number 1 has the Roman numeral "I." lower left on the cover, and is 12 pages, 8 3/4 inches by 6 inches, plus cover. Page 1 is headed "JANUARY," and each letter is identified by the author's name following the text:

Honor WYATT
 Gordon GLOVER
 James REEVES
 Robert GRAVES
 Karl GOLDSCHMIDT
 Laura RIDING
 John ALDRIDGE

Number 2 has the Roman numeral "II." lower left on the cover and the date "1935." lower right; it is 24 pages, 8 inches by 6 inches, plus cover. Page 1 is headed "FEBRUARY-MARCH," and each letter is identified by the author's name following the text:

Honor Wyatt
Gordon Glover
James Reeves (also headed, "James writes:")
Thomas Matthews
Julie Matthews (also headed "Julie writes:")
John Aldridge
Harold Edwards
Robert Graves
Karl Goldschmidt
Laura Riding
John Cullen (also headed "A PORTRAIT")

Number 3 has the Roman numeral "III." lower left on the cover and the date "1935." lower right and is 40 pages, 8 inches by 6 inches, plus cover. Page 1 is headed "APRIL-MAY," and each letter is identified by the author's name following the text:

James Reeves
Laura Riding
John Aldridge
Honor Wyatt
Karl Goldschmidt
Robert Graves
Gordon Glover
Mary Phillips
Laura Riding

Number 4 has the Roman numeral "IV" lower left on the cover and the date "1935." lower right, and is 64 pages, 8 inches by 6 inches. Page 1 is headed "DECEMBER 1935," and each contribution is headed with the name(s) of the author(s):

Laura and Robert
James
Gordon
Robert
Tom

Honor

Laura

John

Robert

James

Laura

TOM'S 'LIKES'

ROBERT'S 'LIKES'

JAMES' 'LIKES'

GORDON'S 'LIKES'

LUCIE'S 'LIKES'

JOHN'S 'LIKES'

HONOR'S 'LIKES'

Karl

Laura

Works Cited

Graves, Richard Perceval. *Robert Graves: The Years with Laura*. New York: Viking, 1990.

Graves, Robert. *Complete Poems, Volume 2*. Ed. Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward. Manchester: Carcanet, 1997.

Seymour, Miranda. *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge*. London: Doubleday, 1995.

Seymour-Smith, Martin. *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*. Rev. ed. London: Bloomsbury, 1995.

**VISIT THE ROBERT GRAVES
TRUST, SOCIETY AND JOURNAL
ON THE WWW**

POINT YOUR WEB BROWSER TO: <http://www.robertgraves.org>

*You'll find the latest Trust and Society news, book seller
and book seeker notices, links to related
societies and organisations, indexes to holdings of
Gravesian material, reviews and more!*