

A Grand Conception of Ambiguity

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Ambiguities: Conflict and Union of Opposites in Robert Graves, Laura Riding, William Empson, and Yvor Winters by David Stuart Reid

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David Stuart Reid's *Ambiguities: Conflict and Union of Opposites in Robert Graves, Laura Riding, William Empson, and Yvor Winters* reflects what he takes to be a climactic order, but Gravesians will be most interested in its first section, and possibly its second.

To begin a backwards reading: Reid presents Yvor Winters as a heroic, if flawed, master of ambiguity and its creative uses. Most Americans know Winters as a critic rather than as a poet, but Reid carefully argues that Winters's critical writings illuminate his poetry: 'Yvor Winters's effort to discover and define in his criticism and realize in his poems an ideal of poetry that is more focused and thought-through than the efforts of the other poet-critics discussed in this book' (p. 213) is Reid's central insight in the text. Reid believes that Winters's 'idea of the rational poem developed in reaction to Eliot's ideas, or through revision of them'. Indeed, it is the 'rational' conception of the poem – 'spiky', as Reid calls it – that has kept Winters in the background of American poetry, I think. Reid makes a good case that Winters is a master of poetic techniques and craft, particularly metre; the resulting control creates a compelling tension in the poems between art and its message. Winters calls a poem successful 'in so far as it makes a defensible rational statement about a given human experience [. . .] and [. . .] communicates the emotion which ought to be motivated by that rational understanding of that experience' (p. 222). Frankly, I struggle to see that as a foundation for a reader's excitement – and even Reid uses language such as 'tiresome' and 'impercipience' to characterise Winters's criticism,

and terms such as ‘conventional’, ‘unobtrusive’, and ‘narcissistic jokiness’ to help him convey his analysis of Winters’ ‘generalities’, which ‘tend to the extreme and unqualified’ (p. 251). In fact, some of Reid’s inferences are far-flung and extreme. Witness his discussion of Winters’s dogs, ‘a presence in the poems’ and ‘impervious in their physicality to the incursions of the spirit’. Or consider his inferred meaning of the billy-goat in ‘Vacant Lot’: ‘It is hard not to think that Winters has put a lot of himself into the goat, enduring the cold in his “tough hair”.’ And further, ‘in his isolation, finding “no mate” and in male moroseness, nipping at the “bitter grass”, “hard-eyed and savage”’ (p. 249). But even these inferences are more grounded than is Reid’s description of ‘In Praise of California Wines’ with its ‘physical swimminess’ (p. 266). This exaggerated and odd language makes Reid’s praise for Winters sometimes hard to take seriously.

About Empson, another critic-poet, Reid is less effusive and more critical, but still claims that ‘almost all his writing was written while ambiguity was his critical preoccupation’ (p. 135). Reid performs entertaining close readings of the poems, but his opinion of Empson’s poetry – particularly in comparison with Graves’s and Riding’s – is low.

Almost all his poems are interesting and deal with something worth writing about, which cannot be said of Graves’s and Riding’s. But their [I take Reid’s ambiguous ‘their’ to refer to Empson’s poems as antecedent] style, so cerebral and ingenious, so indecorous, so unpredictable in tone, lacks aesthetic concentration. Sometimes their riddling seems merely corny. They come over as contraptions rather than as poems. (p. 136)

So Reid focuses on Empson’s criticism, especially on ambiguity, and the long-standing question of whether Graves or Riding was principal author of the inspiring (for Empson) interpretation of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129 in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*.

Rather than my rehearsing that long history here, or Reid's conclusion that Graves's idea of ambiguity is much simpler than Empson's (after all, simply consider the title of Empson's most famous book), I will quote Reid after his quite complex, problematised interrogation of the evidence: 'They are enough to sap Riding's claims to have been the "actual originator of [the] method of analysis" of Sonnet 129, but not enough to establish Graves's claim to have written all that analysis by himself' (p. 143). A rather middle-of-the-road conclusion after much answer-seeking, even new evidence, but Reid later offers another conclusion-observation: 'What Empson found, then, in Graves's early poetry is not so much a study of verbal equivocation as a theory that poetry rehearses psychological conflict and that the poet's psychological conflicts represent the conflicts of his society' (p. 144).

That Empson 'writes rather diminishingly about the range of such a theory', that 'analysis of equivocation is unusual in Graves', that 'he is more interested in drawing conflicting meaning from allegory' (p. 143), may be the reason Reid so 'diminishingly' describes the work of Robert Graves and Laura Riding. But 'there is no evidence that Empson was impressed by Riding's poetry' either. He apparently did not share, or was simply not interested in, the 'extinction of personality' in poetry. But Reid judges that Empson would have found in Riding's poetry innumerable and 'striking examples of types of ambiguity and of an ability to release complexities of words and also deep and strange enigmas made with these things' (p. 134). That seems a reasonable summary of Riding's ideas and achievements, but Reid expects Graves's readers to think of her instead as simply 'a monster of a woman who held their subject in thrall for thirteen years and then became an increasingly bitter enemy' (p. 92). Thus Reid focuses closely on Riding's criticism and on poems that show success in embodying her thinking in her art.

In poems like 'Rejoice, Liars' and 'The Flowering Urn', Reid finds Riding 'witty and funny' and that 'she disdained ambivalence' and 'the exploration of emotional conflict'. With

close readings of 'The Mask' and 'The Troubles of a Book' or 'They Pass Each Other in the Dance' (especially the latter) Reid shows that Riding 'writes with a highly developed awareness of multiple meanings of words and knows how to juggle wandering and hovering senses'. She is 'an anti-world poet' and speaks from a 'self usually oracular, riddling and elusive, hard to fix or bring down to earth'. But one feels that the hard work of comment here is done by Reid mainly because of Riding's role in reifying ambiguity in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* and because 'the most characteristic form ambiguity takes in her poetry is Empson's sublime seventh type, where opposites coincide' (p. 89). While Reid acknowledges that many of Riding's poems 'are not in the least benign', that many are poems of 'death and suicide', and that 'many are peremptory in tone and express delusions of grandeur' (p. 171), he nonetheless subscribes to Kirkham's belief that Riding is a major poet, Graves a minor poet. And while little of Reid's analysis of Graves's changing ideas over the years will surprise a Graves scholar, we may be surprised by what Reid judges to be Graves's under-achievement and fleeting ambition.

Reid divides Graves's career into periods in which he as critic offered contrasting definitions of poetry and its function. First, Graves believed that poetry 'expressed psychological conflict' and that the poet's 'various selves' represented 'warring identities in his culture'. During this period the 'necessary dreamwork of poetry' explored psychological trauma such as shell shock. Reid places Graves as critic by quoting Empson's crediting Graves as being among those who invented modern literary criticism. But Reid begins his slashing immediately after:

Graves is not an innovative poet and his discovery of 'what one should say' [. . .] is of an attenuated, old fashioned Romanticism with a taste for the minor and eccentric. He likes ballads and nursery rhymes and Coleridge and Keats because they exemplify for him the irrational elements he considers the essence of poetry. [. . .] He admires little. (p. 29)

With 'Dead Cow Farm' and 'Angry Samson' Reid begins an analysis of early Graves that admits that the 'rhythmic irregularities [. . .] are pleasing'. But the ideas are more frequently easy and unexplored. Perhaps since Graves's 'concern with conflict' is of course at this point 'a preoccupation with his own mind', these ideas are 'not worth exploring', says Reid. Even one of Graves's most widely-read and anthologised war poems, 'A Dead Boche', might 'be read as British war propaganda'. Between too few close readings as evidence for his summations, Reid offers inferences and paraphrases and bizarre diction, such as his dismissal of Graves's early work: 'poetry as ju-ju' (p. 37).

With his connection to Laura Riding, Graves entered his second period, emerging as a poet of 'ascetic discipline', Reid says. The 'duplicities of tone', the ironies, the inversion and paradox made simpler the exploration of an 'anti-world'. Now the poet 'is a hero, not because of warring selves within but because he is engaged on an ideal-quest, that is poetry as a way of perfection'.

Reid spends much energy on that perennial question of Sonnet 129. Finally, here in the Graves section at least, he believes that Graves wrote the analysis, that it was heavily edited by Riding, that Graves's last statement defending Riding's claims was based solely on chivalry, but in fact the analysis of Sonnet 129 embodied Riding's ideas about language and poetry. Reid argues that the editing would have been severe because the voice of the piece has 'the queenly tone of a precocious yet lonely self-sufficiency, like a child playing in a house alone', as Deborah Baker has described Riding's style. Reid apparently agrees (here) with Empson, who thought that whoever the basic author, Riding had a disastrous influence on Graves even if he analysed the sonnet on his own.

Reid argues that 'at this point, it is clear that Graves's former critical interest in psychological conflict has turned to the transcendence of conflict as the matter of poetry' (p. 58). 'Pure Death' and 'Oak, Poplar, Pine' are his primary evidence, but he eventually uses the first to underpin his idea that Graves's 'years with Laura Riding produced a thin crop', even if 'still the crop

contains some poems, witty and odd, like jokes that subvert familiar ways of seeing things'. In this latter category Reid places 'Oak, Poplar, Pine', since Graves's 'anthropological fancy', showing the classification of trees as in the title, is in fact – though Graves pretends it is exotic – the classification 'used by the British Army to locate targets'. This joke, the 'subversion of the familiar', is 'firmly rooted in English history, traditions, and conventions, which are then transformed by dreamwork' (pp. 64–65). Reid praises Graves's 'concentrated stare of poetry that makes strange compounds from the common tongue', especially what he calls the 'boasting' poems. Though Graves cut 'Oak, Poplar, Pine' from his collected poems, Reid contends it 'makes claims for poetry that Graves takes seriously' in this second period.

He may have dropped his theories that poetry was an irrational eruption from psychological conflict and not yet come to asserting that it was a survival of Neolithic religion, but still it is clear from the analysis of Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 that he held that poetry can break the boundaries of stock ideas such as lust and love, and straddle their contradictions. (p. 67)

Yet the seigneurial gesture of 'Be gone, have done! Down, wanton, down!' is one of many poems that 'celebrate [Graves's] ability to hit on things without knowing what he's doing'. But this praise is doubled, 'an intuitive way of arriving at the truth' or 'duplicity as social weapon' or 'psychological division', as 'ironic social distancing from oneself'. Reid offers 'Flying Crooked' and 'Gardener' as examples. He seems to genuinely enjoy and regard positively these playful poems of 'the Riding period'. He regards 'Lost Acres' as a high point, with its attachment to 'the loved British institution', the Ordnance Survey Maps, with the poem's anti-world 'just caught out of the corner of one's eye as a sort of joke' (p. 79).

But when the 'survival of Neolithic religion' in *The White Goddess* makes Graves 'famous' and 'the victim and celebrant of

the Muse', Reid's enjoyment of Graves completely disappears.

In the 'Muse worship' period, 'its working out as the true, hidden, tradition of theology changed the sort of poetry he wrote and left it a poorer thing' (p. 82). 'Epiphanies' and 'inventions' are replaced by a 'jungle of mythological and antiquarian lore'. Graves in this third career is 'the evangelist of his own religion', and the poetry 'has become stiffened with religious convention'. In one sense, this judgment contradicts Reid's when he admits that the 'language of religion is often ambiguous' or 'mysteriously indefinite', but 'the new drift is toward Muse-religion and with it the attenuation of ambiguity and ambivalence to the devout indefiniteness of religious mystery' (pp. 82–83).

Reid is very dismissive of Graves's Muse period. Here are samples of his diction and his opinions: 'the poetry is not of first rate interest', 'pretty flimsy and repulsive', '[h]e made himself obtuse but privileged with extraordinary inklings and flashes', '[p]erplexity suited him better', 'open to delusion and willful blindness'.

Reid's summation:

What matters is the sufferings that show he is chosen by the goddess and that he chooses with religious single-mindedness, without any of the irony or backsliding or being stuck in the entry to the anti-world that marked the poems he wrote when he was associated with Riding. (p. 84)

Equally dismissive of Graves's prose in this period, Reid calls 'the best pieces outside his poetry [. . .] social wheezes'. Some are 'excellent works', but still 'entertainments' that merely 'play sardonically with conventions of acceptability'.

Reid quotes only one of the Muse-period poems, 'The White Goddess', and only eight lines at that. His comment on the poem begins another repetition of his judgment: 'Splendid though this is, now that Graves is the evangelist of his own religion rather than the awkward and imperfect partner of Riding's utopian project, the tone has become stiffened with religious convention,

and the wit with which he engaged his intractably worldly self has gone' (p. 83). But Reid quotes the forewords and tables of contents in the 1945 and 1951 collections, in which Graves distinguished some of his earlier work from the later. 'I write poems for poets', Graves said in the Foreword to *Poems 1938–1945*, 'and satires or grotesques for wits'. Reid interprets this division: 'So the claim in *The White Goddess* to be more of an initiate with the Mother of All Living than the song-birds is sublime in its exalted submission, but without any irony' (p. 83).

Reid's objection, then, boils down to this: Robert Graves's late work lacks ambiguity.

While many Graves readers and scholars will no doubt believe that we could disprove this simplistic notion with close readings of as few as five of Graves's late poems, we need to understand the nature of Reid's project.

What must be noted is that the same framework which allows Reid to form these opinions derives from Reid's very complex notions of ambiguity. He does not mean simple verbal irony or doubled meanings, of course. By 'ambiguity' he means ambiguity in the poet's self, in the self-perceived questioning of the worth of the poet's ideas, morals, style; he means fear and rage in the same breath, both complacency and fevered resentment in the face of an absolute truth, and he values the questioning of such truth. Not just puns or contradictions, but deep epistemological, intellectual ambiguity of beliefs and history and being.

Reid's is a grand conception of ambiguity in very complex issues – a reader would be well-advised to consult the last pages first, to provide that multi-level framework for reading Reid's arguments and opinions. All these things, plus his sometimes over-the-top language, make *Ambiguities* very entertaining. Every Robert Graves scholar should read it – and will doubtless fill the margins with questions and refutations.

John Woodrow Presley has published almost forty pieces of scholarship on Robert Graves since his 1976 book *The Robert Graves Manuscripts and Letters at Southern Illinois University*. His new edition

of *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* by Robert Graves and Joshua Podro appeared in 2010.