

An Expense of Spirit: Graves, Riding, Empson and the New Critics

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The Birth of New Criticism: Conflict and Conciliation in the Early Work of William Empson, I. A. Richards, Laura Riding, and Robert Graves by Donald J. Childs

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013. 399 pp. £63/\$100. ISBN 978 0 7735 4211 2

In *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), that groundbreaking account of the problematic role of difficulty in early twentieth-century literature, Riding and Graves famously analyse Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 in order to demonstrate the importance of typology to the ways in which any poem, modernist or otherwise, might generate meaning. This very specific example of analysis has become a significant part of the story about the subsequent industry of literary criticism, to which this book on the origins of New Criticism, by Donald J. Childs, makes a significant addition.

Of course William Empson is in large measure responsible for the story, acknowledging as he did that the Riding-Graves analysis informed his own developing methodology of reading, which became brilliantly manifest for the first time in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930). The exact nature of who influenced whom, how, when, and to what extent, has become a matter of significant contestation, and especially so in the extensive subsequent correspondence between Riding and Empson on the subject over a period of decades. Much of this is well documented here and elsewhere, and it is somewhat surprising to read in the introduction that 'the extent to which their [Riding and Graves's] discussion of modernist poetry influenced *Seven Types of Ambiguity* has not received the attention it deserves'. There are many sources that Childs does acknowledge to contain such

discussion, but some others that fall below his radar. The Introduction to the Carcanet edition of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (which I admit to co-writing with Patrick McGuinness in 2002) discusses the extent of this influence, but receives no mention here, and nor does Jonathan Bate's deeply insightful commentary on precisely this relationship in his *The Genius of Shakespeare* (1997), possibly because Bate points out the many and important differences between what Riding and Graves were up to, and what Empson ends up doing as a result. Inspiration in this respect did not mean emulation, a point that Childs's book never really grasps.

Indeed, much of this book suggests a kind of seamless transition from the work of Riding and/or Graves into Richards and Empson. But Riding and Graves are always polemical in their critical writing, and the polemic is usually in defence of their own creative choices: they are poets first and foremost, who write theoretically in support of their own poetic ends. Empson is a critic who writes poetry and I. A. Richards a professional critic who primarily writes criticism. But there is no detailed acknowledgment of this difference in emphasis, nor a proper account of the relationship of any of the critical works under discussion to the poetry of those writing them. Perhaps this is partially explained in the case of Riding and Graves by a moralising but otherwise undeveloped personal observation by the author early on in the Introduction:

Although there is much about each [Riding and Graves] that I do not admire (in the lives they led, the letters they wrote, and the works they left), both deserve clear and careful study of their roles in the birth of close reading in particular and of New Criticism generally.

There's one really important characteristic that Graves, Riding and Empson do have in common: the concision and wit of their writing. Consider here Childs explaining a line by Empson from

Seven Types of Ambiguity:

Empson sums up psychoanalytical approaches to Keats in terms of Freud's thanatos and Oedipus: 'Keats's desire for death and his mother ... has become a byword amongst the learned.' [Childs's ellipsis]

But this is not so much a summary by Empson as a gentle joke against the *aperçus* of the learned (himself included) amongst whom such 'pat little theories', as Empson later calls them, have become a byword. His line is ironic and witty and manages to mean various, potentially conflicting things all at once, much in the manner of the literary texts that are the subject of his analysis. It's a fine point that I'm raising here, but it seems to me that a book about the history of close reading should be able to practise what it narrates.

It is even more disconcerting that the same line from Empson, albeit further redacted, is repeated two pages later with a reductive summary that manages to misrepresent the nuances of not only Empson, but Graves as well:

[Empson] writes that although 'Coleridge, it is true, relied on opium rather than the nursery', 'Wordsworth frankly had no inspiration other than his use, when a boy, of the mountain as a totem or father-substitute', 'Byron only at the end of his life ... escaped from the infantile incest-fixation upon his sister', and Keats's poetry is all about 'desire for death and his mother'. Empson trashes romanticism and psychoanalysis whereas Graves defends them. [Childs's ellipsis]

Empson's acknowledged pat little theory here about Wordsworth is also quoted two pages earlier by Childs, and these revisitings are far from uncommon. For example, in Chapter 1 Childs quotes Empson quoting the anonymous poem 'Cupid is winged and doth

range' and follows with a 140-word quotation from Empson's analysis of it. At 140 words this is one of the shorter quotations taken from the critical studies under scrutiny, but it is long enough for the reader to find it baffling when the same poem and lengthy passage of exegesis are quoted again in their entirety fifty or so pages later. One such repeat might be forgivable, but there are any number of such circularities: Empson on 'Eve of St Agnes' has a first outing on p. 57 and again on p. 76; Empson on 'rooky', pages 44 and 83; Graves on the deliberate and the unwitting, pages 101 and 103, and so on. There is a growing sense of reader frustration and claustrophobia as the same material keeps swinging by to no accumulatively insightful effect.

Having said all of that, there's a good deal to be learned from this book, and its properly original contribution lies in its considerations of how Graves's earlier works of poetic criticism and theory were equally influential in the forming of a loosely-described critical orthodoxy, and were in themselves influenced by other contemporary authors and directions of thought. In addition there is an interesting emphasis on the ways in which Empson's tutor I. A. Richards and other theorists within the New Critical school are indebted to Riding and/or Graves. The book opens further the way to a revisiting of those earlier critical works by Graves, from *On English Poetry* (1922) to *Impenetrability or The Proper Habit of English* (1926), and enables a greater awareness of how they relate to their contemporary intellectual contexts. But they also relate to Graves's poetry, and their significance and interest is not fully realisable without due consideration of this key relationship.

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