

# Never-Begotten Perfect Daughters: Laura Riding and Mina Loy's Steinian Inheritances

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that Gertrude Stein acts as a significant point of connection between poets Laura Riding and Mina Loy. Their critical responses to Gertrude Stein's work display similar praise of its newness and immediacy, whereby language is 'cleansed' of historical experience. This shared conception of Stein's anti-historical poetics complements their engagement with traditional influence in their own poetry, through which they both prioritise the new in a Steinian notion of a 'pure' language. The identification of this link illuminates the symmetrical preoccupations of their poetic careers, making it possible to situate Laura Riding in a network of her female contemporaries.

**Keywords:** Laura Riding, Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein, poetics, modernism

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Though most widely known through their thirteen-year partnership, Laura Riding was frustrated by her marginalisation in comparison to Robert Graves. In their foreword to *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (1928), they 'take a statistical pleasure' in exposing the 'vulgarity' of reviewers who had incorrectly listed Graves as the sole author of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) – a mistake they attribute to Riding's gender and Graves's more recognisable name.<sup>1</sup> This desire to correct misreading and misunderstanding persisted throughout Riding's career and is apparent in her editorial decisions. Riding's revisions and reordering of her work in her final *Collected Poems* (1938) obscure the chronology and contexts of its formation, placing her poetry outside of time and contemporaneity

– thereby rendering it, and her identity as a poet, something closer to pure, analytic truth than to a historically locatable (and therefore conditional) life's work.<sup>2</sup> Riding allows the date of publication no influence in determining the order of the collection. This avoidance of chronology, coupled with her infamous resistance to anthologisation (particularly as a 'woman poet'<sup>3</sup>) complicates any attempt to position her in relation to her female contemporaries. This refusal to be categorised, bolstered by the limitations she imposed on the republication of her poetry in anthologies following her declaration of its failure,<sup>4</sup> has limited the reading and reception of her work. There has been little critical discussion of Riding's affinities with other female modernists. However, while recognising this complication, reading Riding's poetry alongside that of her peers does much to contextualise this poet who so often seems outside of time. Here, this contextualisation takes the form of considering Riding alongside another once-neglected female poet: Mina Loy. Primarily, their shared interest in Gertrude Stein illuminates interrelations between Riding and Loy themselves and expands our understanding of their own thematic concerns.

Riding's and Loy's praise of Stein's newness and immediacy, which they jointly conceive of in terms of purity untainted by historical inheritance, makes it possible to read their own investments in 'cleansing' poetic language of its literary inheritances in tandem. This link between Riding and Loy, with their shared conception of Stein's anti-historical poetics acting as a point of relation, exemplifies their shared pursuit of a 'pure' language. Beyond this first point of relation, this situating of Riding and Loy as a pair opens up further points of overlap between their poetic lives and languages. The most significant years of Loy's poetry career coincided with the publication of Riding's first books. Loy's biographer Carolyn Burke comments that during 'the 1920s she was as well-known as Marianne Moore'.<sup>5</sup> Her first volume of poetry, *Lunar Baedeker*, was published in 1923 (p. 321), with Riding's first collection, *The Close Chaplet*, appearing three years later from The Hogarth Press.<sup>6</sup> Riding, whose father was a Polish-Jewish immigrant to America and whose mother was the daughter

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of German-Jewish immigrants,<sup>7</sup> ‘grew up in a household where English was not the only native tongue’ and so ‘[h]er earliest experiences of language were multiple and inflected, yet early on poetry may have seemed a way to a purer language “where the fear of speaking in strange ways could be left behind”’.<sup>8</sup> Loy’s background has much in common with Riding’s: her mother was English and Christian and her father was a Hungarian-Jewish immigrant to England (*Becoming Modern*, pp. 15-19). Being fluent in multiple languages, Loy claimed to have no understanding of ‘what pure English is’.<sup>9</sup> Instead of striving for perfect English, she tried to achieve ‘pure language’. Riding and Loy both identified this sense of ‘pure’ language in Stein, regarding her often non-sensical poetry as resistant to traditional associations and grammatical form. Their own poetry responds to Stein’s approaches, grappling with this ‘new’ and ‘pure’ language as a tool against the legacy of historical influence.

In her article ‘The New Barbarism and Gertrude Stein’, published in a 1927 issue of *transition* and reproduced in the concluding chapter of the *Survey*, Riding offered her critical appraisal of Stein’s work: it is ‘primitive’, her words ‘are bare, immobile, mathematically placed, abstract’.<sup>10</sup> In order to achieve what she terms ‘scientific barbarism’ poetry would need to be made more ‘sculptural or pictorial’ (pp. 273-74). The materials of visual art forms are able to resist the associative inheritances of their previous uses: ‘neither colour nor stone had been intrinsically affected by the romantic works in which they had been used’. In order to achieve a similar purification, language had to be

used as if afresh, cleansed of its experience: to be as ‘pure’ and ‘abstract’ as colour or stone. Words had to be reduced to their least historical value; the purer they could be made, the more eternally immediate and present they would be; they could express the absolute at the same time as they expressed the age. Or this was at any rate the logical effect of scientific barbarism if taken literally. (p. 274)

The difficulty of this shift demonstrates what Riding considers the ‘fallacy’ of comparing the linguistic and visual arts. However, she perceived the unique achievement of this barbaric language in Stein’s work: ‘Gertrude Stein is perhaps the only artisan of language who has ever succeeded in practising scientific barbarism literally’. In Stein, Riding saw a scientific mind which succeeded ‘by purging [language] completely of its false experiences’ (p. 281). Stein’s words are new, without history, of the present moment: ‘no older than the use she makes of them’. The ‘purer’ that words ‘could be made, the more eternally immediate and present they would be’ (p. 274).

The importance of Stein to Riding’s own work is evident. When Riding moved to England in 1926, she met modernist figures including T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Virginia Woolf.<sup>11</sup> The Seizin Press (run by Riding and Graves) also published Stein’s work in 1929,<sup>12</sup> and Riding’s interest in Stein’s work affected her own writing. As Jane Marcus notes, Riding ‘tried to purge poetry of metaphor, symbol and myth’ to achieve a purity of language informed by her affinity with Stein; Riding’s ‘kinship with Stein is clear’ (p. 298). In the view of Emily Stipes Watts, Riding is Stein’s ‘most direct literary descendant’.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Riding became an advocate for her work, being ‘one of the few writers and critics in the 1920s publicly and vehemently to defend Stein and then to adopt certain of her poetic techniques and attitudes’ (p. 168).

The Riding-Stein affinity is echoed in criticism of Stein and Loy. Sara Crangle acknowledges the aesthetic similarities of Stein and Loy,<sup>14</sup> while Burke calls Loy an ‘early and sympathetic critic’ of Stein.<sup>15</sup> It is clear from Stein’s writings that she too recognised Loy’s sympathies. Loy frequented her 1905 salon, and their friendship became ‘lifelong’.<sup>16</sup> Stein comments that Loy and her then-husband Stephen Haweis had been ‘among the very earliest to be interested’ in her work;<sup>17</sup> and in recounting a visit paid to her and Toklas by Loy and Haweis, she acknowledges Loy’s particular ability to understand her:

[Haweis] did however plead for commas. Gertrude Stein said commas were unnecessary, the sense should be intrinsic and not have to be explained by commas [...] Mina Loy equally interested was able to understand without the commas. She has always been able to understand. (pp. 144-45)

Despite the extent to which their creative lives operated within similar networks, Riding and Loy (as far as can be seen) make no explicit reference to each other in their writings. Neither appears to mention the other in their published letters; neither Deborah Baker nor Carolyn Burke, their respective biographers, makes note of any connection. However, links between Riding and Loy have (to a limited extent) been identified by various critics. In a 1981 interview, Kenneth Rexroth named them ‘the two long-lost major writers of the heroic age of American modernism’.<sup>18</sup> In his view, ‘both are utterly original, and both are capable of the most profound thought’. Marjorie Perloff quotes a 1997 edition of *Publishers Weekly*, which described Loy as a ‘forerunner’ to Riding and questioned whether Riding was in fact the superior poet.<sup>19</sup> In an essay for *Circle*, Rexroth does not place Loy within the received canon of American modernists but instead associates her with the international avant-garde, whose representatives include Stein, Arensberg, Riding, and Eugene Jolas (as noted by Virginia M. Kouidis).<sup>20</sup> In recognising Stein’s ‘paratactic modernism’, Burke mentions Loy and Riding in a list of ‘women writers whose work has not always seemed to conform to modernist tradition’, acknowledging that such a tradition has been largely based on work by men.<sup>21</sup>

Just as Riding applauded the ‘sterilization of words’ (*Survey*, p. 287), by which Stein purifies language of past influence to enable ‘[expression] of the absolute’ (p. 274), Loy, in an almost identical manner, constructed an image of Stein as a scientist. In Loy’s poem ‘Gertrude Stein’, we see Stein at work in her ‘laboratory’, applying the same process of purification:

Curie  
 of the laboratory  
 of vocabulary  
   she crushed  
 the tonnage  
 of consciousness  
 congealed to phrases  
   to extract  
 a radium of the word<sup>22</sup>

Riding's critical approach to Stein's barbarism comes to the same conclusions reached by Loy in this poem, published across the September and October issues of the *transatlantic review* (1924). This publication date means that Loy's poem was written at least three years prior to the publication of Riding and Graves' *Survey*. Whether Riding encountered Loy's poem is not known. Nonetheless, the affinities in their readings of Stein are revealing. In an accompanying letter,<sup>23</sup> Loy said of Stein:

It is the variety of her mental processes that gives such fresh significance to her words, as if she had got them out of bed early in the morning and washed them in the sun. They make a new appeal to us after the friction of an uncompromised [sic] intellect has scrubbed the meshed messes of traditional associations off them. ('Gertrude Stein', p. 307)

The rest of Loy's essay exhibits further evidence of this shared critical approach. Loy compares Stein's work to the 'primitive', echoing Riding's use of 'barbarism' (*Survey*, pp. 280, 306). Like Riding, Loy recognises the materiality of Stein's language and similarly associates it with the sculptural:

For Gertrude Stein obtains the 'belle matière' of her unsheathing of the fundamental with a most dexterous discretion in the placement and replacement of her phrases, of inversion of the same phrase sequences that are as closely

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matched in level, as the fractional tones in primitive music or the imperceptible modelling of early Egyptian sculpture. ('Gertrude Stein', p. 306)

Loy's poem unfolds with an assured carefulness. Steady, short lines convey a sense of focus and deliberation; Loy chooses her words like solutions added to a test tube. This tone of considered experimentation is further suggested by the slight indentation of 'she crushed' and 'to extract' (p. 305). This spatial hesitation before each verb embodies the meticulous nature of laboratory work, collapsing distinctions between poem and action. Rhyme, consonance, assonance and alliteration ('laboratory', 'vocabulary', 'tonnage', 'she crushed', 'consciousness', 'congealed') build like the congealed layers described, from which the essential 'radium of the word' may be extracted. These sound textures of 'c' and 'sh' generate tactile physicality by requiring full use of teeth and throat; the words are physicalised, just as they are made subjects of physical science. The moment of extraction is marked by newness: the action is indented, and the phrase is sonically discontinuous with those before. In a poem of repeated sounds, these final lines are the only ones containing uniquely used letters: 'x', 'm' and 'w'. By identifying Stein with Marie Curie, Loy positions her as a female founding-figure of an ameliorative scientific field. Loy identifies 'Curie' only by her surname and awards it singular status as the first line of the poem. She draws upon the word's various associations before highlighting how Stein succeeds in '[scrubbing] the meshed messes of traditional associations off' her words (p. 307). 'Curie' brings to mind 'cure', from the Latin 'cūrāre' meaning 'to care for', from which 'curator' is derived (*OED*). For Loy, Stein is not only a scientist but a medical researcher, discovering new 'cures' for poetry. More than providing a salve, her actions are salvific: Stein 'crushed | the tonnage | of consciousness' to extract an otherwise unrevealed essence. This essential element of language is identified with the luminescent; Loy presents Stein as revealing the self-illuminating. Rather than depending upon

external ‘traditional associations’ (p. 307), or ‘false experiences’ (*Survey*, p. 281), Stein’s words give off their own light.

The ‘purification’ of language by removal of inherited associations that Riding and Loy both praise in Stein is identifiable in their own aesthetics and poetry. In his notes on ‘Gertrude Stein’, Conover comments that Loy’s critical approach ‘applies to her own literary exercise’ (p. 203). Published in *Contact*’s first issue, December 1920, ‘O Hell’ is a foretelling of the ideas she would praise in ‘Gertrude Stein’. Loy depicts a natural landscape polluted by the waste of previous generations:

To clear the drifts of spring  
 Of our forebear’s excrements  
 And bury the subconscious archives  
 Under unaffected flowers

Literary innovation, coincident with seasonal renewal, can only be achieved by an active ‘clearing’ of historic influence. The ‘flowers’ of the new season are starkly contrasted with the ‘excrements’ of the past, an image similar to the ‘congealed’ ‘consciousness’ ‘crushed’ by Stein in Loy’s later poem (‘Gertrude Stein’, p. 305), and Riding’s depiction of Stein’s ‘purging’ (*Survey*, p. 281). Just as Loy later characterised Stein’s skill as purification by removal of received mental associations, ‘O Hell’ identifies history’s legacy as a mental inheritance. The ‘archives’ of the past are not only buried, but they are also already ‘subconscious’. The hard ‘c’ sound draws a link with ‘excrements’, reinforcing their placement in dirt. This dual burial transforms the natural landscape into a mental field. With the subconscious buried beneath, Loy invites us to read the ‘flowers’ of this analogy as artefacts of the surface-level conscious: thoughts expressed in language. Literary inheritance has a suffocating effect, limiting verbal expression: ‘Our person is a covered entrance to infinity | Choked with the tatters of tradition’.

However, this image indicates a layer of irony. Loy describes the flowers as ‘unaffected’ in a metaphor which would make this impossible. The ‘archives’ are positioned ‘[u]nder’ the flowers, and

the prior invocation of natural cycles causes us to question how a flower can be ‘unaffected’ by the conditions of the ground it grows in, or how conscious thoughts can form independently of the ‘subconscious’. Loy’s word choice is notable here. The work of the past is not *un* but *sub*-conscious, a reminder (made more explicit by the following line opening with ‘Under’) of what lies below the ground, and what ‘grounds’ new literary work. The title of the poem likewise directs the reader’s eye underground to the underworld. Apostrophe titles the poem ironically, as this clearing of the past influence opens with a literary convention so associated with the Romantic lyric.

As with Riding’s characterisation of Stein’s linguistic ‘newness’, her words ‘no older than the use she makes of them’ (*Survey*, p. 281), Loy considers the new in relation to youth in ‘O Hell’: ‘Goddesses and Young Gods | Caress the sanctity of Adolescence’. Nevertheless, Loy’s treatment of ‘Adolescences’ in ‘The Dead’, also written in 1919, (Conover, p. 194) strengthens the argument that ‘O Hell’ is at least somewhat ironic:

Among the refuse of your unborn centuries  
 In our busy ashbins  
 Stink the melodies  
 Of your  
 So easily reducible  
 Adolescence

Adolescence, for Loy, seems to have connotations of immaturity and uselessness rather than optimism or radicalism. Though the first line of ‘O Hell’ points towards the renewal of spring, references to natural cycles and youth simultaneously create a feeling of transience: ‘spring’, ‘flowers’, ‘Young’, ‘Adolescence’. The ‘rifts of spring’ emphasise this lack of permanence by associating the season with movement. Loy subtly draws attention to the transience of traditional systems by ironically positing them as eternally available for invocation. The words ‘infinity’ and ‘sanctity’ cannot be wholly taken seriously in a poem which has

already mentioned ‘excrements’. By placing the ‘Goddesses and Young Gods’ of ‘O Hell’ within the context of ‘flowers’, the ‘sanctity of Adolescence’ and imagery of the underworld, Loy takes the poem directly into the register of Greco-Roman mythology. The entrance of these seemingly revered deities is immediately preceded by the reference to ‘the tatters of tradition’, complicating the poem’s engagement with classical imagery. Might this poem act as a warning against straightforwardly invoking classical works (‘forebear’s excrements’)? The poem itself seems to choke. An interjection grammatically and visually interrupts the poem after the first stanza: ‘Indeed –’ is indented further than the other lines and is itself cut off by an em-dash.

Loy’s poetry does not outrightly reject the influence of tradition. She acknowledges and engages with the avant-garde poet’s struggle against tradition’s pervasion, like the ‘[stinking] melodies’ of ‘The Dead’. Loy believed Stein ‘scrubbed the meshed messes of traditional associations off’ words (‘Gertrude Stein’, p. 307). In poems such as ‘O Hell’ and ‘The Dead’, Loy is concerned with this scrubbing.

Joyce Wexler points to a distinction between the purposes of Stein’s and Riding’s ‘scrubbing’ of language. Riding’s method makes ‘language an expression of humanness’ (in the sense of a universal human nature), whereas Stein sought to make language expressive of ‘nothingness’.<sup>24</sup> Riding’s work was an attempt ‘to destroy the personal associations of words to make language a medium for the universal’, while Stein’s purifying method resulted in the word becoming a neutral medium in itself (p. 58). ‘The Flowering Urn’, first published in *Poet: A Lying Word* (1933) with an amended version included in the *Collected Poems*, demonstrates Riding’s engagement with poetic language as a means of transcending the personal. The poem opens with an invocation of biblical parable:

And every prodigal greatness  
Must creep back into strange home,  
Must fill the empty matrix of

The never-begotten perfect son,  
Who never can be born.<sup>25</sup>

The opening ‘And’ creates a sense of continuation which, when succeeded by two imperatives (‘Must creep’, ‘Must fill’), gives the poem a liturgical, authoritative voice. Literary talent is characterised as wayward and roaming (‘prodigal greatness’), contrasted with the restriction of the personal constraints it is contained within. The anaphoric repetition of ‘Must’ aligns the ‘strange home’ with ‘the empty matrix’, associating the personal and familial with the unnatural and the empty. This theme is underlined by the negation and paradox of ‘The never-begotten perfect son, | Who never can be born’; the ‘perfect son’ is one who necessarily does not exist. This paradox reveals the fruitlessness of any attempt to contain ‘greatness’ within the limitations of inheritance.

Riding splits the familiar concept of the biblical ‘prodigal son’ in two, disrupting an ancient narrative. The words are separated on the page: we expect ‘son’ to come after ‘prodigal’, but Riding delays this satisfying familiarity by three lines. This separation is emphasised by her placement of ‘son’ at the end of the third line, underlining the position it did not fill in the first. Riding denies the comfort of reading a recognisable phrase. Instead she breaks it down, drawing our attention to individual words. This separation is not only linguistic but conceptual: instead of a unified ‘prodigal son’, Riding offers a ‘prodigal’ entity which fills the confines of a ‘son’-shaped mould, one meaning of ‘matrix’ (*OED*).

‘Matrix’ is a useful example of how Riding gestures towards meaning in postulating the universal. By placing the word in close proximity with ‘never-begotten’, Riding points to the historical use of ‘matrix’ for ‘womb’, a meaning woven further into the poem by its references to ‘seed’, ‘fertility’s lie’, ‘flowering’, ‘fruits’ and ‘[t]he virgin sleep of Mother All’ (‘Flowering Urn’, p 129). Similarly, this natural imagery links with an obsolete use meaning ‘pith of a plant’ (*OED*). Through her interest in book production and her co-founding of The Seizin Press, Riding was likely to have borne

in mind the association of ‘matrix’ with the printing of words and letters, compounding her poetry’s frequent turn to the self-referential: it is the name for ‘a metal block in which a character is stamped or engraved so as to form a mould for casting a type’ (*OED*).

Loy often uses the same technique. To recognise the traditional influences buried beneath language, she continuously draws the reader back to the level of the word. Her poetry points to its own auditory and etymological echoes just as Riding, as argued by Wexler, ‘[tried] to wrench both cosmic and aural harmonies from language’ (p. 3). In ‘Poe’, first published in *The Dial* in 1921 (Conover, p. 196), Loy balances tensions between life and death upon links in sound and meaning. ‘Poe’ is a poem which, like ‘The Flowering Urn’, is also concerned with the relationship between the living and the dead, and literature’s endurance: ‘a lyric elixir of death | [...] sets | iced canopy | for corpses of poesy’. Loy’s poem ends: ‘Where frozen nightingales in ilix aisles | sing burial rites’. The sound of ‘ilix’ echoes the first line’s ‘elixir’, directing attention to the words’ similarities:

a lyric elixir of death

embalms

the spindle spirits of your hour glass loves

However, this lexical harmony invites a closer look at the various meanings of ‘elixir’, a word which encapsulates the poem’s complication of literature’s relation to change and eternity, life and death. The word can be used to refer to an alchemical preparation for ‘[changing] metals into gold’ (*OED*), as a subject becomes a poem. This sense of transformation appears again in the word’s use for the ‘supposed drug of essence with the property of indefinitely prolonging life; [...] More fully, elixir of life’. Loy’s alteration of the full phrase aligns the act of writing with death: poetry induces stasis, embalms and buries the ‘hour glass loves’ of the temporal living (‘Poe’). By describing an ‘elixir of death’, Loy makes ‘elixir’ contradict another of its meanings: ‘A sovereign

remedy for disease' (*OED*). Her echoing of 'elixir' and 'ilix' ('Poe') leads the reader to contemplate the various meanings of these words, which in turn troubles this invocation of an historical literary figure. Depending on our reading of 'elixir', the lyric poem, and the eternal death it awards its subjects, is transformative, redemptive, paralysing or murdering. By emphasising this single word's various uses, Loy indicates that these processes are simultaneous. Death ironically allows the past to endure, like the evergreen 'ilix', and to become beautiful:

sets  
 icicled canopy  
 for corpses of poesy  
 with roses and northern lights

'The Flowering Urn' presents a similarly ambiguous view of death in relation to poetry, in which death is paralleled with the transcendent universal. Riding makes explicit her concern with poetry's ability to express universality. While the 'prodigal greatness' ('The Flowering Urn') of poetry is confined by the personal, there is another process at work:

And every quavering littleness  
 Must pale more tinily than it knows  
 Into the giant hush whose sound  
 Reverberates within itself

The two stanzas are grammatically mirrored, showing two processes acting in unison. Language's 'greatness' (referring now to its expansive universality, in addition to its aspirant perfection) is inhibited by the confines of the personal, the 'littleness' of language (its specificity, or the word as particular) is subsumed into the human universality Riding strives for: 'the giant hush'. In paling 'tinily', language is broken down into its parts to become a 'reverberation' of sound and etymology. Characterised by both silence and 'sound', Riding's conception of shared universality in

‘The Flowering Urn’ is both absolute (beyond particular expression) and communicable. Death becomes the archetype for this absolute universality: Riding unifies its wholeness with the word itself (with ‘whole death’ amended to ‘death-whole’ in 1938),<sup>26</sup> making ‘death’ generative in an inversion of expected order. Fertility is a ‘lie’, while death is truth:

Will rise itself, will flower up,  
The likeness kept against false seed:  
When whole death is the seed  
And no new harvest to fraction sowing.

However, this inversion of natural processes and Riding’s repeated use of negation (‘never-begotten’, ‘never can’, ‘cannot improve’) suggests that we should not be too quick to read this poem at face-value. The final line finishes the poem with a note of impossibility: ‘The same but for the way in flowering | It speaks of fruits that could not be’. Death’s harvest does not bear ‘fruits’, only flowers which act as a reminder of what is lacking. This ‘flowering’ is false; like ‘fertility’s lie’ it speaks of what cannot be true. If the flowering urn does not speak truthfully, then perhaps we cannot trust ‘The Flowering Urn’. Though the poem may read as a consideration of language’s relationship to the universal and the particular, it may also read as a warning against the traditional, and an exploration of the relationship between art and reality. Literary tradition is, as in Loy’s ‘O Hell’ and ‘The Dead’, associated with ancestral inheritance and reproduction. The poet should not attempt to ‘fill the empty matrix’ of the ‘perfect son’: this is impossible, he ‘never can be born’. Likewise, the literary past is associated with death. The line ‘no new harvest to fraction sowing’ becomes ironic; the ‘sowing’ of already dead ‘seed’ takes precedence over innovation and newness. Mimicry of past poetry is unnatural: the ‘flowering’ of the ‘urn’ is only a surface beauty, promising ‘fruits’ that cannot be harvested.

It is clear that Riding places her poem in direct conversation with Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’. A comparison of Riding’s

final lines with Keats's first suggests that Riding intends the poems' similarities to emerge slowly. Riding's last stanza reads:

Will rise the same peace that held  
 Before fertility's lie awoke  
 The virgin sleep of Mother All:  
 The same but for the way in flowering  
 It speaks of fruits that could not be.

She draws upon the language used by Keats, associating her urn with 'peace' and the virginal:

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,  
 Thou foster child of silence and slow time,  
 Sylvan historian, who canst thus express  
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme.<sup>27</sup>

The Keatsian urn expresses 'A flowery tale', while the flowering of Riding's urn is a speech act itself. Both urns speak of the unattainable: Keats's speaker lacks the skill to write as 'sweetly' as the urn's expression, Riding's tells of what death precludes. However, Riding does not straightforwardly reference Keats. Instead, 'The Flowering Urn' acts as a poetic version of her argument that the modernists, through a hyper-awareness of their place within poetry past, present and possible, 'swallowed [themselves] up by [their] very efficiency' (*Survey*, p. 264). By invoking one of the most central poems of the Romantic movement, Riding offers an ironic warning against poetry that is hyper-aware of its literary inheritance or positions itself as a 'perfect son' of the past. Her poem argues that such writing grows from the 'seed' of 'whole death', decoratively 'flowering' without the 'fruits' of substance. Riding refutes Keats's famous statement that 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'. Her urn's 'flowering' is indicative of falsehood; '[i]t speaks of fruits that could not be'. Not only does Riding identify Stein as 'no older than her age conceived barbarically', using words 'no older than the use she makes of them'

(*Survey*, pp. 280-81), she, like Loy, broaches this anti-traditional theme in her own poetry by unsettling apostolic literary inheritance.

To conclude, Riding and Loy both identify Stein's movement against traditional influence, seeing the 'new' (in aesthetic and technique) as essential to poetry's development: her words are 'no older than the use she makes of them' and are given 'fresh significance'. Riding's 'The Flowering Urn' and Loy's 'O Hell' and 'Poe' demonstrate how they dealt with the legacies of the past in their poetry. Likewise, Riding and Loy show a shared desire for a 'purer', more material form of language and highlight linguistic malleability. In Stein's purifying methods, Riding and Loy identify a language capable of 'unsheathing [...] the fundamental' ('Gertrude Stein', p. 306) and '[expressing] the absolute' (*Survey*, p. 274) in a shared critical perspective which underlies the symmetrical preoccupations of their own poetry.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Pamphlet against Anthologies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Laura Riding, *The Poems of Laura Riding: A Newly Revised Edition of the 1938 Collection* (New York: Persea, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Jane Dowson, *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 96.

<sup>4</sup> Peter S. Temes, 'Code of Silence: Laura (Riding) Jackson and the Refusal to Speak', *PMLA*, 109.1 (1994), 87-89 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/463013>> [accessed 29 April 2021]

<sup>5</sup> Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), p. v.

<sup>6</sup> Laura Riding, *The Close Chaplet* (London: Hogarth Press, 1926).

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<sup>7</sup> Deborah Baker, *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding* (New York: Grove, 1993), pp. 19-22.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Bernstein, 'Riding's Reason: An Introduction to Laura (Riding) Jackson and Schuyler Jackson, "Rational Meaning: Toward a New Foundation of Words"', *College Literature*, 24.3 (1997), 138-50 (p. 139) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25112333>> [accessed 29 April 2021]

<sup>9</sup> Roger L. Conover, 'Notes on the Text', in Mina Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. by Roger L. Conover (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), pp. 175-218 (p. 173). Loy's poems discussed in my article are all taken from this volume.

<sup>10</sup> Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (London: W. Heinemann, 1927), p. 274.

<sup>11</sup> Jeanne Heuving, 'Laura (Riding) Jackson's 'Really New' Poem', in *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets*, ed. by Margaret Dickie and Thomas J. Travisano (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp. 191-216 (p. 193).

<sup>12</sup> Jane Marcus, 'Laura Riding Roughshod', *The Iowa Review*, 12.3 (1981), 295-299 (p. 298) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20155730>> [accessed 29 April 2021]

<sup>13</sup> Emily Stipes Watts, *The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978), p. 165.

<sup>14</sup> Sara Crangle, 'Mina Loy', in *A History of Modernist Poetry*, ed. by Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 275-302 (p. 275).

<sup>15</sup> Carolyn Burke, 'Gertrude Stein, the Cone Sisters, and the Puzzle of Female Friendship', *Critical Inquiry*, 8.3 (1982), 543-64 (p. 560) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343265>> [accessed 29 April 2021]

<sup>16</sup> Gillian E. Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers, *Writing for their Lives: Modernist Women, 1910-40* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), p. 113.

<sup>17</sup> Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1933; repr. 2001), p. 144.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Rexroth, 'An Afternoon with Kenneth', interview with Bradford Morrow, *Chicago Review*, 52.2 (2006), 176-89 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25742359>> [accessed 29 April 2021] (p. 188).

<sup>19</sup> Marjorie Perloff, 'The Witch of Truth', review of Laura (Riding) Jackson and Schuyler B. Jackson, *Rational Meaning*, ed. by William Harmon (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997); Laura

Riding, *A Selection of the Poems of Laura Riding*, ed. by Robert Nye, *Parnassus*, 23.1 (1998), 334-53 <<http://marjorieperloff.blog/reviews/laura-riding/#ixzz5LdtXIDPk>> [accessed 29 April 2021]

<sup>20</sup> Virginia M. Kouidis, 'Rediscovering our Sources: The Poetry of Mina Loy', *boundary 2*, 8.3 (1980), 167-88 (p. 168) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/302972>> [accessed 29 April 2021]

<sup>21</sup> Carolyn Burke, 'Getting Spliced: Modernism and Sexual Difference', *American Quarterly*, 39.1 (1987), 98-121 (p. 99) <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712632>> [accessed 29 April 2021]

<sup>22</sup> Mina Loy, 'Gertrude Stein', *transatlantic review*, 2.3-4 (September, October 1924), 305-09, 427-30 (p. 305).

<sup>23</sup> This material was reproduced in *The Last Lunar Baedeker* published by Jargon Society in 1982 and no longer in print. The relative rarity of the original publication has prevented Loy's essay from being widely discussed. Conover provides a few quotations (p. 203), but the full essay does not feature significantly in the critical literature.

<sup>24</sup> Joyce Wexler, *Laura Riding's Pursuit of Truth* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1979), p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> Laura Riding, 'The Flowering Urn', in *Poet: A Lying Word* (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 1933; repr. 2017), p. 129.

<sup>26</sup> Laura Riding, 'The Flowering Urn', in *The Poems of Laura Riding: A Newly Revised Edition of the 1938 Collection* (New York: Persea, 2001), p. 224.

<sup>27</sup> John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', in *John Keats: The Major Works*, ed. by Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 288-89.