

CREATING CRITICISM

An Introduction to *Anarchism Is Not Enough*

Death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death.

Walter Benjamin

The poem is at last between two persons instead of two pages. In all modesty, I confess that it may be the death of literature as we know it.

Frank O'Hara

DESIGNED WASTE

Anarchism Is Not Enough is a manifesto against systematized thinking, a difficult book by a famously "difficult" writer. The scope of its critical imagination makes it the most radical work of Laura Riding's early period. This period begins in 1923 with her first published poem, intensifies in late 1925, when she left America for Europe and Robert Graves, and ends in 1939, when she returned to America. Soon thereafter she renounced any further writing of poetry, married Schuyler Jackson, and published almost nothing for a quarter of a century.

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Published when Riding was twenty-seven, *Anarchism* is a kind of early *biographia literaria*. It begins with "The Myth," a defiant genesis tale that depicts poetry as a contrary baby who overthrows the socializing dictates of adulthood. The eleven subsequent pieces move through half-explained attitudes toward music, painting, collective literary consciousness, and the nature of language and poetry, as though Riding is turning over various cards of literary belief. Then comes a fully fashioned critical essay, "Jocasta," in which Riding questions the purposes of canon-making, representationalist fiction, and professionalized literary traditions and argues for the primacy of what she calls the "individual-unreal." After setting out her critical principles in the first thirteen pieces, the book moves into eight final pieces that enact these compellingly strange beliefs. These last pieces engage problems of identity – personal, authorial, and textual – by way of various narrative, familial, and sexual points of view. The book ends with a "Letter of Abdication," a triumphant declaration of its inevitable "failure."

Anarchism's iconoclasm and variety, its swings between intense authority and intensely felt self-exposure, are unique in Riding's early critical work. Two texts she wrote with Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) and *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*

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(1928), present more normative approaches to criticism. The *Survey* provided William Empson with some of the close-reading tools he developed in his highly successful *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930).¹ Riding's *Contemporaries and Snobs* (1928) shares *Anarchism's* antipathy toward critical systematizing and literary professionalism, but it is more single-minded, with no creative sketches enacting its beliefs. *Anarchism* might be thought of as the culminant dream of these other critical texts, a fuller realization of their antsystematic mandates.

Of course, an introduction such as this must do some of the very contextualizing that *Anarchism* wants to question, and of course *Anarchism* can be historically situated: it is an important example of unconventional modernist criticism, a criticism which insists on eclectic and subjective processes. Some well-known texts belong to this category of modernism — much of Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading* (1934) and *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), for example — but it is an unorganized “tradition” by its very nature. It extends into a twentieth-century body of work we might call the Other Criticism, including William Carlos Williams' *The Embodiment of Knowledge* (1930), Georges Bataille's *Inner Experience* (1943), Charles Olson's *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare* (1963), Angela Carter's *The Sadeian Woman* (1978), Charles Bern-

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stein's *Content's Dream* (1986), and Susan Howe's *My Emily Dickinson* (1989). All of these texts are self-conscious, at times quasi-mystical, about literary commentary, and all believe that attentive individuals (not just credentialed specialists) have the right to address literary and cultural experience. The language in these works shifts from prosaic to poetic, from critical to personal, refusing to be held to stable definitions. Such shifts are principled features of the landscape of creative criticism: like *Anarchism*, these are critical works by creative writers. Tellingly, while each of these texts can (albeit with difficulty) be individually described, the absence of a common project leaves us little choice other than to group them together as "Other." Individuality *is* their project.

Also tellingly – given that the aforementioned texts are mostly left out of the dominant stories of literary studies – this Other criticism recalls some of the "lost" modernist critics invoked in "Jocasta." Wyndham Lewis, Roger Fry, and Oswald Spengler are at a tertiary level of our literary history, behind T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards, behind Ezra Pound and even Ludwig Wittgenstein. The "losing" critical side of Lewis and Spengler is characterized by three commitments: to authoritative subjectivity (including the pursuit of value judgments), to interdisciplinarity, and to imagining the critic as a

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social thinker with the right – even the duty – to address all educated individuals in society, not just those involved in literary pursuits. Although she disagrees with the methods and conclusions of these two lost modernists, and although *Anarchism* is very different from the books they produced, Riding nevertheless takes her cue from their concerns, particularly those of Lewis.

This context bears on Riding's relative non-presence in stories of modernism and on her particular relevance today. It is commonly agreed that from the ascendancy of New Criticism until about the 1980s Anglo-American literary studies largely pursued a neo-classical and specialized approach to professional fields and methods. Consider for example one book Riding criticizes in *Anarchism*: Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1925), which, with intelligence and humor, promulgates methods for "understanding literature." Richards continuously asserts divisions and subdivisions in literary value and popularity, relying on the understandability of critical and aesthetic terms and working to link "the commonplaces of criticism to a systematic exposition of psychology" (3). Limiting the spheres of discussion, Richards crafts a book that succeeds on its own "systematic" terms.

Though many critical texts continue to be written within such scholarly and interpretive limits,

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in roughly the past fifteen years literary criticism has increased its interdisciplinary commitments. Writers now have more license to explore multiple perspectives: self-conscious subjectivity, for example, has renewed breathing room, and cultural studies validates access to a wide field of commodity and comment. We are giving ourselves more permission to act as human perceivers in a world that contains many different forms of artistic and expressive production.² This inclusive scope is reminiscent of the world of Riding's "lost" modernists. In books such as *Time and Western Man* and *The Art of Being Ruled*, Wyndham Lewis ranges from Russian ballet to the Bergsonian time-mind to Gertrude Stein to "God as Reality," exploring multiple disciplines in search of effective ways to think about art, language, philosophy, history, time (and the list continues).

Riding characteristically writes within this large provenance, in *Anarchism* and several other books of her early period, and notably in the major works of her later period, *The Telling* (1972) and *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words* (1997). But *Anarchism's* broad scope differs in a crucial way because its language and analysis are oriented to the *unknown*. Poetry and human beings are "true" for Riding insofar as they are permanently incommensurate with, always on the

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other side of, what we might say about them. The model *Anarchism* provides for our interdisciplinary age is partly one of generative indeterminacy, a script for further process. It combines Surrealist unknowability (though it doesn't mention the Surrealists³) with modernist authority (though not in order to establish a *system* of thought). It proposes that criticism can be "commentarial rather than systematic," a discourse of thinking rather than a record of thoughts, and (as Riding says poetry should be) "an incentive not to response but to initiative" (*Anarchism*, 114).

As this interest in the active reader indicates, Riding wants to provoke individualized human self-consciousness. In a 1974 critique of a dissertation about her work, she wrote that *Anarchism* "is concerned with the placing of poetry, the poet, and, centrally & most importantly, the nature of the person who seeks to treat of main things of being, in thought & expression from a position of self-reliance as against reliance upon definitions of things delivered from socially constructed or philosophically systematized frames of authority."⁴ Riding's "self-reliance" echoes Emerson and situates her book in a tradition of American idealism, setting it apart from the context that led Wyndham Lewis, the critic to whom Riding most often responds in *Anarchism*, to fascism. Indeed, the title

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itself argues a turn against any such systems: “Anarchism is not enough” because anarchism operates in reaction to the structures of (social and political) reality and so remains within their systematizing orbits. Such “anarchism” is like the Romantic resistance to classicism, or the experimental resistance to tradition: these are reactions to “real,” historically instantiated systems rather than self-reliant explorations of “main things of being.”

Riding believes that poetry, poetic language, and the fullest human potential can only be achieved in a space *Anarchism* calls the “unbecoming” or, more often, the “individual-unreal.” She resists common modernist binaries (classicism/romanticism, abstraction/experience) in favor of this “unreal,” which is a kind of synthetic shadow, an invisible syllogistic avatar, of those binaries. Riding insists that poetry has no truck with the real: it is not a cultural artifact. As *Anarchism* puts it, “[a] poem is made out of nothing by a nobody – made out of a socially non-existent element in language” (34). Poetry is unique among human activities because it turns language – the prime tool of cultural meaning and understanding – inside out. It takes language through the reflexive looking glass into uncapturable meaning and a saving inutility. In the critical work of *Anarchism*, as well as in *Contemporaries and Snobs*, Riding protests the conversion

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of the poetic *event* into the poem-urn, of poetic knowing into interpretive system, and of the reader into a consumer in search of an aesthetic delivery system. Poetry needs to be kept out of what she later called "wisdom-professions" if it is to retain its value as an asocial force.

It may seem at first paradoxical, given its non-productive character, that the "individual-unreal" is the place of highest seriousness for Riding. It is the sense of incommensurable self-awareness that human beings possess, the "consciousness of consciousness" (27) distinct from constructed socio-economic identities. It gestures toward the gift of mortality, toward the ultimate "uselessness" of individuals, and therefore toward the perfect *means* of their existence. Poetry, more than any other human creation, can engage this "unreal" as long as it is written within the realm of expenditure, or what Riding calls "designed waste." The true poetic word is an unreal thing made by an unreal individual, serving no tradition of reality. And poetry is a realm for engaging with unknowables, not an historical accumulation of improving points of view. As Riding remarks in *Contemporaries and Snobs*, "No one seems to realize that the destruction of poetry as a tradition would not destroy poetry itself" (141-42).

This remark can of course be read as a rejection

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of Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and indeed in *Anarchism* Eliot is made to exemplify the "collective-real," a category in which the superior group holds the talented individual firmly within ordering histories of tradition. Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is Riding's most extensive example of a second category, the "individual-real." Woolf's book "individualizes the simple reality of nature" (46), presenting the destiny of human beings, however interestingly, as a matter of biological psychology. In Riding's judgment, Lewis is also an individual-realist, insofar as he writes as a citizen in touch with cultural and political world-improvement, but he has some access to the crucial category of the "individual-unreal."

Riding believes that poetry can be saved only if it is written within this imaginative zone, where the writer is neither a superior being nor a member of an organized intellectual community. She sees Eliot and Woolf as exemplary participants in *reality*, either (group) political or (individual) aesthetic; Riding, by contrast, goes in search of various *unrealities*. The way to disrupt the process we now call "the marginalization of poetry" is to embrace this "unreal" realm. To this end, her odd rhetorics and neologisms are not used in the service of logical argument. True to their unreal aims, they slip and alter, and after *Anarchism* she never again refers

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to the “individual-unreal.” In this regard she may be thought of as carrying out the imaginative project of the Romantics rather than the critical project of the major Modernists. She is always personal and always looking for unfoldings of what the self cannot quite conceive. Her novelties are in the service of human and linguistic identity, not critical or aesthetic certainty. Her prose, then, is “critical” in its urgency; but it is imaginative in its reasoning, and Riding knows the latter combination to be impossible.

Like the Romantics – or like the Blakean and Byronic strain of Romanticism – Riding pays the price of invoking a project of impossibility. The informed utopianism of British Romanticism meets the capitalistic idealism of American Romanticism and leads her to a triumphant embrace of “designed waste.” Poetry is a “vacuum,” a “nothing,” the closest we can come in language, our keenest intellectual medium, to *Anarchism’s* ideal. Since “vacuum” and “nothing” are not *destinations*, this ideal is unreachable, as Riding readily admits. An important early passage embraces “failure” as a necessary starting point, a key part of the book’s operational machinery:

The only productive design is designed waste.
Designed creation results in nothing but the
destruction of the designer: it is impossible to

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add to what is; all is and is made. Energy that attempts to make in the sense of making a numerical increase in the sum of made things is spitefully returned to itself unused. It is a would-be happy-ness ending in unanticipated and disordered unhappiness. Energy that is aware of the impossibility of positive construction devotes itself to an ordered using-up and waste of itself: to an anticipated unhappiness which, because it has design, foreknowledge, is the nearest approach to happiness. Undesigned unhappiness and designed happiness both mean anarchism. (*Anarchism Is Not Enough*, 18–19)

Against such anarchisms poetry offers designed unhappiness, since only in reaching for such failure can we achieve positive “impossibility.” Poetry is “idle, sterile, narrow, destroying,” and “[t]his is what recommends it” (36). Georges Bataille gets at a similar idea some years later with his notion of “expenditure” in a “general economy,”⁵ and in our time Kathy Acker has acted out the paradox of creative waste with even more distraught urgency than Riding.

Riding’s vision of designed waste anticipates what has become a poetic strength, a way to rescue poetry from its supposed irrelevance. That this way has developed mostly through figures like Bataille and attendant Continental theorists speaks volumes

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about the frequent inattention of Anglo-American scholarship to some of its own strange poetics. *Anarchism* can help to fill a significant gap in our literary and cultural theory. Riding's effort to save poetry from a Western preoccupation with utility and tradition persisted for another ten years, up until the appearance of her *Collected Poems* in 1938. By 1941 she had renounced the further writing of poetry because it "adumbrated a potentiality that was not developable *within it*" (*Poems* [1980], 3) — because it promised, in other words, a salvation she felt it could not deliver. She turned almost exclusively to her growing concern, articulated at length in *Rational Meaning*, with saving the knowledge of the entire (English) language. Which is to say that she turned from one difficult project to an even larger and more general set of difficulties.

SOCIAL DISAPPEARANCE

Although Riding can be seen as a neglected ancestor (and a less politically troubling one than Lewis) of later interdisciplinary and poststructuralist writers, *Anarchism* never lets us forget its (avowedly) asocial ideals. And though we might associate Riding's work with a radical literary constructivism, she resists the demystifying impulses of much current criticism. She claims that the "accidental quality of reality" (104) is properly secondary, subject

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to the deliberate and deliberating qualities of the poetic mind. Here at the end of history, she claimed, human beings have access to an *unnatural* state of consciousness that must be cultivated through the unreal features of language. In the spirit of her empowered and apocalyptic hopes, she sometimes called herself Lilith Outcome.⁶

Riding meant her vision of achieved human agency to change the world. In an important way, and as she herself recognized, *Anarchism* takes seriously Lewis's improvement projects in *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926) and *Time and Western Man* (1927). But Riding's vision is not political. She set aside Lewis' civil solutions, and his paranoias, in favor of an imaginative actualization of human beings. In *The Covenant of Literal Morality* (1938), the implacably idealist and anti-political pamphlet she oversaw ten years later on the eve of the Second World War, Riding calls on individuals to follow what might be thought of as a beneficent Nietzscheanism, to be their best selves. The hope of *The Covenant* is that each person will be "morally conscious," and that independent thought and personal responsibility will make the world one that could not dream of war.⁷ In *Anarchism*, too, Riding wants to stop the real-world-making group-think that results in difference and conflict. Anarchism is not enough because anarchism operates

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with reference to reality-functions, distracting the individual from the unreal world.

For Riding, it is crucial to resist such distractions, to overcome our past connections with nature and history, not only to regain poetry as a force separate from socialized art, but also to interrupt what she saw as the fatalistic Darwinism of the historical sense. As a writer most active between the twentieth century's biggest wars, Riding wanted to escape the dictates of history. She judged that history and the "time-sense" had ended in the same period when Lewis was asserting that "the Great War and the wars that are now threatened are the result of the historic mind" (*Time and Western Man*, 275).⁸ And "nature" was no help: Riding resists nature because of its (lonely) individual and (oppressive) group dictates. Human agency need not be subject to any past orders. People, she insists, are "product[s] of the refined disintegration of nature by time," part of "conscious, contradictory nature" rather than "unconscious, consistent nature." She tries to set us straight in this summary passage from "Jocasta":

Self is poetic self. Nature, mathematical life, is the become, the eternally grown-up; History, logical life, is the becoming, the eternally childish.

The time advocate, whom I shall call the

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philosopher, does not see, or is afraid to see, that the become and the becoming are both mutually illusory Worlds of reality: that they are self-created refutations of individuality to which the individual succumbs from imperfection. He forgets, that is, that the individual is an *unbecoming* and that the categories “becoming” and “become” are really a derivation from him, a historical reconstruction. Unbecoming is the movement away from reality, the becoming unreal. What is called the become is therefore really the starting point of the unbecoming. What is called the becoming is therefore really a hypothetical opposition to the unbecoming. . . . [Both try to trap the unreal individual by making Nature suggest History. This is done by reading into Nature a necessity and inventing for the species man, a digression from Nature, an analogical Darwinistic Nature. The necessity of Nature is then called Causality, the necessity of History, Destiny. (73-74)]

Riding argues that the group mind tries to prevent the individual – “a digression from Nature” – from realizing its unreality, its “unbecoming,” its unnaturalness. The group mind does this by making history analogous to nature, trying to make social institutions seem inevitable. But once out of nature, Riding says, we should never take our bodily forms as *either* natural *or* civil things, be they aes-

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thetic civilities or otherwise. She can be seen as reacting against both Eliot's literary contextualizing and the evolutionary valuations following out of Darwin. She is also rejecting Spengler's claim that "*Nature and History* are the opposite extreme terms of man's range of possibilities" (*Decline* I, 94). Riding wants to forestall the increasing division of intellectual and artistic life into organizations based on historical and natural fact — a division whose *reductio ad absurdum*, that history is a temporal analog of nature, she challenges here.

One way to stop such destructive analogies is to keep changing the language, to imagine it as "un-becoming." Riding's resistance to a settled vocabulary is related to one of her primary criticisms of Lewis: "Mr. Lewis feels obliged to organize his unorganized view of wrong, which cancels the potency of his rightness, which is only valid so long as it is unorganized (that is, commentarial instead of systematic). So he becomes . . . the advocate of a vocabulary" (*Anarchism*, 42). Advocating a vocabulary, in Riding's view, encourages not only system-building but also (as contemporary critics might put it) a narrow subject-position; both in turn can indeed lead to the ravages of fascism. As Vincent Sherry writes in his study of Pound and Lewis, "the radical particularity of the Image underwrites the autonomy of the Self, a kind of heroic individ-

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uality. Antistatist and libertarian as this sign may be, it may serve the designs of the tyrannical, self-authorizing ego" (46).

It is important to see that Riding wants to avoid such a "self-authorizing ego" in *Anarchism*.⁹ She resists a stable vocabulary because the truest, poetic use of words unwrites the social self in favor of the "unreal" self. As she puts it: "[w]ords in their pure use, which I assume to be their poetic use, are denials rather than affirmations of reality. The word *hat*, say, does not create a real hat; it isolates some element in the real hat which is not hat, which is unreal, the hat's self" (98–99). These sentences may sound like twentieth-century Platonism, but however ideal it might be, Riding's concept of "self" is not metaphysical.¹⁰ She wants to make language the material key to a dialogue of unreality, in which "the hat's self" is summoned by the languaged human self that speaks it. Riding's self-in-language "denies reality" rather than making up a world within or "behind" reality because it is not *oneself*, nor the "hat's self," but the self itself that she wants to sing. A truly creative production is "discharged from the individual, it is self; not *his* self, but self" (97). Indeed, "so thoroughly 'unselfish' is the character of the unreal self that its just conclusion is a sort of social disappearance" (75). Together, the self of poetic words and the self

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of human beings can scour away their status as “means” and achieve their status as “ends.”

A seeming paradox of her belief in “social disappearance” is that Riding wants the creative act to generate other creative acts. A real poem is “a model, to the reader, of constructive dissociation: an incentive not to response but to initiative” (114). But what it initiates is *unreality*. Riding’s impulse is thus radically democratic – though it refuses organized social consequences – and dialectical, however critically essentialist or philosophically Heideggerian it might appear. Her world-changing impulses begin with the individual and move to other individuals through the medium of human language acts. A *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer of *Contemporaries and Snobs* saw (with evident delight) that Riding wanted to rejoin the work and the human being.¹¹

In addition to modeling interdisciplinary and eclectic criticism, then, Riding provides a text for recuperating authorial and readerly humanities. Self-reference is the foremost aspect of the “individual-unreal,” and the unreal self “is without value. It is more than anarchistic; it does not treat individually with values; it supersedes them” (78). She calls on people to remain grounded in their unique identities, as in this passage from “In a Café”:

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I, who am neither sluttish nor genteel, like this place because it has brown curtains of a shade I do not like. Everything, even my position, which is not against the wall, is unsatisfactory and pleasing: the men coming too hurriedly, the women too comfortably from the lavatories, which are in an unnecessarily prominent position – all this is disgusting; it puts me in a sordid good-humour. This attitude I find to be the only way in which I can defy my own intelligence. Otherwise I should become barbaric and be a modern artist and intelligently mind everything, or I should become civilized and be a Christian Scientist and intelligently mind nothing. Plainly the only problem is to avoid that love of lost identity which drives so many clever people to hold difficult points of view – by *difficult* I mean big, hungry, religious points of view which absorb their personality.
(138–39)

Riding insists on a *personalism* that accesses the unreal and refuses to be assimilable to psychological, natural, historical, or group projects. In advocating human agency, Riding is not promoting self-absorption or self-satisfaction, what she calls in *Epilogue* “the suicidalism of mere consciousness” (I, 16). Neither is she promoting practical individualism as it is often understood in America (as antisocial “rugged individualism” or socio-economic

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self-promotion). Her version of individual authority is an absolute spiritual imperative, compared to which the more common Western ideology of personal liberty is a temporal shadow. Riding wants each person to process the inexplicable continually and so to arrive at a condition (rather than a conclusion) that can access truth. Given such a goal, Riding's "social disappearance" most certainly has social consequences.

HUMAN CRITICISM

Riding's rigorous personalism is not an abstract proposition. She was adamant about using language according to her beliefs and not exactly gentle with contemporaries who failed to do the same. *Anarchism* was not the only work in which she launched provocative attacks against the literary scene she had joined, after a fashion, after returning with Graves from Egypt to London in 1926. Many writers in London countenanced their adulterous relationship, befriending her as his literary partner and providing many publishing opportunities for her work. Instead of demonstrating her gratitude, Riding wrote as she pleased about other critical and literary projects. Along the way she (and Graves) offended many, including Virginia Woolf, whose Hogarth Press had published two books of Riding's poetry.