CONTEMPORARIES
and
SNOWBS

Laura Riding

Edited by Laura Heffernan and Jane Malcolm
CONTEMPORARIES
and
SNOBS
MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY POETICS

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We would like to thank the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University for their assistance. Elizabeth Friedmann’s knowledge of Laura Riding’s life and letters is vast, and she provided us with crucial insight at key stages of our research. Charles Bernstein and Josephine Park were our earliest readers and supporters. Our thanks also to Jeremy Braddock, Lisa Samuels, and Rachel Buurma for their help along the way.
Laura Riding’s *Contemporaries and Snobs*, first published in 1928, drew a line down the center of the literary scene in the late 1920s. With characteristic incisiveness, Riding divided friends from foes: she counted as enemies those “snobs,” or critics, who sought to systematize and professionalize modern poetry. As allies, Riding counted all “contemporaries” who continued to honor poetry as an individual and eccentric practice. Yet Riding’s bold and uncongenial treatise was not merely a call to arms in and of the modernist moment. For readers today, it offers a compelling account—by turns personal, by turns historical—of how the institutionalization of modernism denuded experimental poetry. Most importantly, *Contemporaries* offers a counter history of the idiosyncratic, of what the institution of modernism left (and leaves) behind. With Gertrude Stein as its figurehead, the book champions the noncanonical, the “barbaric,” and the under-theorized. Riding’s nuanced defense of a poetics of the person in *Contemporaries* represents a forgotten but essential first attempt to identify and foster what is now a well-defined poetic lineage that leads from Stein to the experimental avant-garde.

Riding began writing *Contemporaries* in 1926, but the book did not appear until early 1928. The latter half of the 1920s was a prolific period for Riding. Her *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, written with Robert Graves, appeared in late 1927, followed by *Contemporaries* in February of 1928, *Anarchism Is Not Enough* (the creative sequel to *Contemporaries*) in May, and *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (also written with Graves) in July. *Contemporaries* is the most ignored of this varied bunch, perhaps because it responds so directly to the criticism and poetry of its moment. Riding takes her readers on a remarkably thorough tour through the “self-critical, severe, sophisticated” literary scene of the 1920s (53). Among other influential treatises,
she considers T. S. Eliot’s *The Sacred Wood* and his editorial essays in *The Criterion*, Allen Tate’s “Poetry and the Absolute,” John Crowe Ransom’s essays on the modernist poet, Edgell Rickword’s essays in *The Calendar of Modern Letters*, and Herbert Read’s posthumous publication of T. E. Hulme’s essays.

All of this criticism, Riding notes, gave modern poets a sheen of seriousness and professionalism, but was it good for poetry? Her decisive answer is “no.” Poets, taking their marching orders from criticism, had begun to churn out deadened, impersonal poetry that gave voice to an imagined “zeitgeist” rather than individual experience. *Contemporaries* was Riding’s attempt to stem this tide—to resist the consolidation of poetic experimentalism into monolithic modernism. Not only a critical diatribe, *Contemporaries* was also a self-help manual for those poets who wished to write “outside the shelter of contemporary criticism” (4). To sustain these “incorruptible individuals,” Riding builds a purely provisional canon of poets as persons, writers who use language to sense the unknown (4). Her perceptive reading of Stein forms the cornerstone of this revaluation of the personal in poetry, and she uses the example of Stein’s “barbaric” writing to question the very process of self-representation that language—Stein’s “arrangement in a system to pointing”—makes possible (*Tender Buttons* 245). At a moment when poet-critics were offering poets a loaded choice between naive expressionism and sophisticated impersonality, Riding denounced both as escapist. As modernism turned self-referentially inward, *Contemporaries* forged a pathway outward toward newly referential uses of language, toward an unknown and unsanctioned poetry of the person.

**From A Survey of Modernist Poetry to Contemporaries and Snobs**

Riding was better situated than most to reflect on modernism’s condensation. By 1928, she had come into contact with an astonishing number of modernist groups in Nashville, New York, London, and Paris. As an early member of John Crowe Ransom’s Fugitive Group in Nashville, she befriended Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren. Her poetry first appeared in the pages of *The Fugitive* in 1923 and later in Harriet Monroe’s Chicago-based *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*. In 1925, Riding moved from Louisville to Greenwich Village where she befriended Hart Crane and met Eugene O’Neill, Edmund Wilson, and Kenneth Burke. While in New York, Riding corresponded with Robert Graves who had written in admiration of her poem “The Quids.” She soon moved to England to live with Graves and his wife, Nancy Nicholson. Riding and Graves’s collaboration (and eventual romantic relationship) continued throughout the 1920s, when they moved between Egypt, Islip, Vienna,
Hammersmith, Germany, Paris, and Mallorca. During this time, Riding published creative work with Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press, was introduced to Gertrude Stein, exchanged work with Wyndham Lewis, and contributed essays to Eugene Jolas’s Joyce-centric little magazine *transition*. Of the three essays collected in *Contemporaries*, two had debuted in other venues. The second chapter and core of the book, “T. E. Hulme, the New Barbarism, and Gertrude Stein,” was published in *transition* in 1927 as “The New Barbarism and Gertrude Stein,” and again, in altered form, as the “Conclusion” to *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, while a version of the volume’s third chapter, “The Facts in the Case of Monsieur Poe,” appeared in *transition* as “Jamais Plus” and was given as a talk to the undergraduate Oxford English Club in March of 1927 (Friedmann 102).

Riding herself was one of the first critics to coin the term “modernist” to describe a group of contemporary poets, and she and Graves are cited accordingly in the Oxford English Dictionary’s entry. Their *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) was the first formal study to consider the work of E. E. Cummings, Hart Crane, Conrad Aiken, Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound, Vachel Lindsay, T. S. Eliot, John Crowe Ransom, Edith Sitwell, and Allen Tate as a single movement. In that volume, Riding and Graves set out to consider whether the “plain reader” was justified in his complaint that the modernist “poet means to keep the public out” (*Survey* 10). Selecting a few representative examples of modern poetry, Riding and Graves carefully considered the significance of the poems’ format, or the ways in which their radical formal departures, viewed together, came to signify a new modernist poetry. Through such close interpretations Riding and Graves modeled how the plain reader might “make certain important alterations in his critical attitude” in order to appreciate Cummings as much as Shakespeare, John Crowe Ransom as much as Wordsworth (10).

Though *Survey of Modernist Poetry* defends modernist poets from charges of willful obscurity, Riding and Graves resisted the urge to put forward an overarching definition or theory of modernism. Indeed, we can already see in that volume the beginnings of Riding’s fears that poetic theories were overtaking poetry. In frequent asides, the *Survey* warns poets about the danger of “granting too much respect to theories” or committing oneself to the “official programmes of such dead movements as Imagism” and expresses disdain for those “who need the support of a system” or adopt one as a way of “attempting to justify [poetry] to civilization” (*Survey* 126). In the “Conclusion” to *Survey*, a version of Chapter 2 of *Contemporaries*, Riding and Graves jettison the “contemporary sympathy” they have shown for modernist poetry in order to consider it as a movement that “may have already passed”: 
We have been writing as it were from the middle of the modernist move-
ment in order to justify it if possible against criticism which was not
proper to it. . . . It is now possible to reach a position where the mod-
ernist movement itself can be looked at with historical (as opposed to
contemporary) sympathy as a stage in poetry that is to pass in turn,
or may have already passed, leaving behind only such work as did not
belong too much to history. (258)

Here, at the end of Survey, we see Riding and Graves “leaving” modernism
“behind”: no longer defending it from the inside, they now scrutinize it from
the outside.

Contemporaries extends this newly skeptical perspective on a “modern-
ist movement” that, having just come into clear view, now seems about to
“pass in turn.” Indeed, the modernism of Contemporaries is markedly dif-
ferent from that of Survey. Where Survey presented close readings of indi-
vidual poems, Contemporaries takes a distant, multicentury view of modern-
ism’s development. Where Survey presented modernism as “unpopu-
lar” with contemporary critics and readers, Contemporaries finds evidence everywhere
of modernism’s newfound prestige, even—perhaps especially—among the
mainstream press and the middle classes. From the suburban Bournemouth
Poetry Society’s advertisement for a “paper by Mrs. Leslie Goodwin on ‘Fur-
ther Aspects of Modern Poetry,’” to the fact that the London Mercury dares
not question [T. S. Eliot’s] The New Criterion, (28) to the way Eliot’s poems
become instant classics upon their publication, all signs point to the sanctifi-
cation of modernism—a status that seems, in Contemporaries, as ill-deserved
as its negative reputation seemed in Survey (29, 28).

One way to understand the drastic shift in perspective between the two
volumes is to consider that modernism’s new recognition and popularity did
not extend to Riding herself. Having once felt herself working in concert with
many modernist groups and owing allegiance to none, Riding suddenly found
herself an onlooker to the mainstream of modernism—a mainstream domi-
nated by male critics. Indeed, Riding begins a 1927 letter to Wyndham Lewis
by explaining: “I belong (most decidedly) to no group.” Reviewers (most fa-
mously, William Empson) repeatedly failed to credit Riding as co-author of
Survey, despite Graves’s insistence that their collaboration had been “word
by word” (Friedmann 100). Riding’s correspondence from this era, preserved
in the Laura (Riding) Jackson archive at Cornell University, documents her
dogged attempts to make publishers and authors responsible for their er-
rors of attribution.
Riding's archive tells a similarly bleak tale about the publication and reception of *Contemporaries*. Though the book was a solo effort (written over several years and for various venues), Graves traded on his own success to secure its publication: when Jonathan Cape sought to publish Graves's popular biography of T. E. Lawrence, *Lawrence and the Arabs* (1927), Graves made it a condition of his contract that they also publish *Contemporaries* (Friedmann 107). In 1933, Riding's publisher wrote to request her permission to remainder the unsold copies from the modest print run of *Contemporaries*. Indeed, the volume was so under-read that no one would bat an eyelash two years later when Geoffrey West matter-of-factly adopted Riding's own opposition between the “philosophical” criticism of T. E. Hulme and T. S. Eliot on the one hand and Stein's writing on the other, in order to dismiss Riding herself. In *Deucalion: Or the Future of Literary Criticism*, written for Kegan Paul's To-Day and To-Morrow series, West announced that “philosophical critics” like T. E. Hulme and T. S. Eliot were “of greatest importance” to the future of literary criticism, “while reference may . . . be omitted to such isolated, unrelated phenomena as the smoky brilliances of Miss Rebecca West and the ultra-feminine Steinish incoherencies of Miss Laura Riding” (48–49).

Despite the chauvinism that Riding faced, *Contemporaries* hardly reads like a personal complaint, nor does the gossipy feel of the title extend to the essays. Graves wrote to T. S. Eliot in 1926 that “her critical detachment is certainly greater than mine” (qtd. Friedmann 78). Instead, *Contemporaries* offers perhaps the most distanced, historical analysis possible of how and why Riding's fellow modernists traded their individuality for the security of a professional institution. And though Riding advocates, in *Contemporaries*, for a poetics of the “person,” the volume's voice is hardly personable. Riding insists that readers understand her embrace of Stein and a poetics of the person not as feminist revaluations but as matter-of-fact corrections to modernists' symptomatic, even effeminate, attempts to escape from personality. Indeed, it is Riding's own detachment, imperiousness, and misogynist mud-slinging that makes *Contemporaries* such a fascinating document—a critical book that denounces criticism's growing influence. (The self-contradictions of Riding's position would only increase. After denouncing critical organs like *The Criterion* in *Contemporaries*, Riding would in 1935 found *Epilogue*, a little magazine which, as Joyce Wexler has documented, Riding edited with an iron fist in an attempt to institutionalize her very particular point of view.) These paradoxical positions, perhaps even more than Riding's specific argument, reveal a moment in which the range of avant-garde possibilities seemed suddenly whittled down into equally distasteful options: to become
an “affiliated member” (53) of modernism, which held a monopoly on intellectual seriousness, or to find oneself shelved with the book-club “poetry enthusiasts” (29).

The Argument of Contemporaries and Snobs

The opening sections of Contemporaries offer a broad historical account of how the rise of scientific empiricism has gradually marginalized poetry. Crucially for Riding, science and poetry are equal forms of knowledge but with different orientations to the world. Science uses what Riding terms “concrete intelligence,” which “regards everything as potentially comprehensible and measurable” (5). In contrast, “poetic intelligence” evinces “an accurate sensation of the unknown, an inspired comprehension of the unknowable” (5). Centuries ago, Riding argues, the two coexisted without rancor—each occupying its own “corner of human knowledge” (33). But over the course of the nineteenth century, which “showed a more material increase than perhaps any other preceding century in this mass-consciousness of human knowledge,” scientific empiricism began to take precedence and to popularize the false idea that all life might be measured and known (7). Riding describes, for instance, how concrete intelligence gives birth to “natural man,” a scientific specimen “who did not act originally; he did not act at all. It was his function to be observed” (2). This passive, statistical version of man takes the place of the “erratic person,” upon whose activity and unknowability poetry had thrived.

Turning to the twentieth century, Riding describes how poetry has gradually become ashamed of itself. In the face of natural man, it develops a distaste for idiosyncrasy and a “shame of the person” (11); in the face of concrete intelligence, it ceases to regard its “illuminating ignorance” as a species of knowledge at all (1, 5). Riding’s metaphors suggest that poets, within a rationalized modernity, have come to seem like unprofitable workers: society gives poetry its “dismissal papers” (28) and “Poetry, Out of Employment, Writes on Unemployment” (5). Like underemployed workers, poets begin to reflect upon their social position, develop a collective consciousness, and unionize in order to put themselves back to work. Riding describes how individual poets have, increasingly in the twentieth-century, gathered together under the auspices of the “public institution” of literary criticism. Rather than looking to their own erratic personhood for poetic inspiration, they look now to the collective, critical mandates of their time. Yet in the inhospitable atmosphere of rationalized modernity, these critical mandates have themselves become increasingly directive and systematized. Riding likens poetry to any
organization—“the army, or the navy, for example”—that introduces “greater internal discipline” when its “prestige . . . is curtailed” (53).

In the remainder of Chapter 1 and in Chapter 2, Riding looks to the modernist literature and criticism around her to offer an astonishing array of examples of literary culture’s increased discipline. She describes a new injunction to “write about nothing” or about the death of poetry itself (as in Edwin Muir’s *Chorus of the Newly Dead* or Eliot’s *The Hollow Men*) (8). She detects a new scholastic tendency to look back on the literature of the past as a continuous “tradition.” (She points here, among other things, to James Joyce’s “Oxen of the Sun” episode of *Ulysses* in which Joyce provides a catalogue of past literary styles.) Reviewing the table of contents for one issue of Eliot’s *The New Criterion*, Riding finds a new love of “pedigree, learning and literary internationalism” (25). She describes a new “emphasis on the medium as material,” as in Ezra Pound’s book on the sculptor *Gaudier-Brzeska* (72). She notes a new imperative for poets to express the “Zietgeist” to the point of “self-extinction,” as in Eliot’s “posthumous” poetry or Edith Sitwell’s “strict technical organization of her non-humanistic universe” (9). Above all, she finds a new philosophical inquiry into the function of poetry itself—Allen Tate’s philosophizing about “Poetry and the Absolute,” Pound’s “mathematical and geometric” metaphors, Eliot’s insistence that “in our time the most vigorous critical minds are philosophical minds,” and everyone’s elevation of T. E. Hulme’s “barbaric” criticism into a dogmatic philosophy of art (75, 25, 63). Riding regards all of the above as signs of the increasing and pernicious influence of literary criticism, which seeks to present poets as serious specialists and thus to win back a modicum of status from an uninterested society: “The reason why contemporary critics are so interested in inquiring into the nature of the function of literature is not, as Mr. Eliot suggests, because they do not wish ‘to take for granted a whole universe,’ but because a whole universe has given literature its dismissal papers” (28).

For Riding, then, the danger of this “forced” systematism is that it has begun to change how poets write. A “group poetic mind,” the book argues, lurks “at the elbow of the individual poet,” preventing him from writing authentically because he is burdened by a self-referential network of modernist institutions that dictate the terms of poetic composition (54). A “professional conscience dawns on the poet,” creation and criticism become folded into a single act (as Eliot had predicted), and the poet begins to edit himself in the process of writing (53). The results, in Riding’s view, are disastrous: homogeneous, vacant poetry that is “really more interested in maintaining a defensive attitude toward the literary past than in sponsoring a ‘new’ poetry” (4). Riding mentions a few poets—Arthur Rimbaud, Robert Graves,
and Hart Crane, for example—who have succeeded in avoiding these mandates, but the vast majority have succumbed to the imperative to write impersonally.

Impersonality/Personality

Riding's preoccupation with the dangers of impersonality critically shapes the argument in Contemporaries. The rise of an impersonal aesthetic and the waning of emotion in modernist poetry are, for Riding, symptomatic of an ironic romanticism, a need to "suppress the obvious because the obvious is often romantically (personally), therefore sentimentally beautiful" (70). Unlike many of her contemporaries, she did not believe that the surrender of meaning or the disappearance of the personal signaled bold shifts in literary practice. On the contrary, Riding argues throughout Contemporaries that poets who disavow their own "vulgar humanity" (75) are in fact ashamed of it and of the emotions that shape their "organic existence" as poets:

It is romantic to say, while denouncing as romantic the meanings which the creative mind gives to its fictions, that these can only be valid if they confess their meaninglessness. Is not a belief in the lack of meaning in organic existence merely a new meaning that art is to adopt for the sake of the prestige given it by the metaphysics from which it is drawn? (68)

Poets who “confess their meaninglessness,” to a certain extent do so in order to avoid the shame and human difficulty of modernity, which for Riding are precisely the realms poetry should confront.

Riding’s seemingly anachronistic reclamation of the person, of the poet as person, evinces her supreme ambivalence about modernism, and her reasons for promoting a poetics of personality are as fascinating as they are complex. Poets, Riding insists, might shed the “classical desideratum” of mentors likes Eliot and Pound by embracing emotion, personality, and embodied language as a condition of their art, so that poetry might tell the truth (70). Yet this definition of poetry seems contrary to the very underpinnings of modernism—the unstable “I,” the erased ego, the elevation of language over subject. Riding, whose own Survey coined the term “modernist” to describe a generation of poets invested in suppressing the “I,” declares that poetry should be personal, that we cannot “substitute poetics for persons” (47). This statement is perhaps the best condensation of Riding’s argument in Contemporaries, the closest the book comes to providing a rallying cry for her fel-
low poets. As a thesis it is controversial, to say the least, and in this respect, *Contemporaries* seeks to refute Eliot’s key assertion, in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), that “poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but is an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” (*Sacred Wood* 58). If Eliot welcomes impersonality as a creative reprieve, Riding laments it and the “general degradation of the person” as the compromised methodology of institutional modernism that “set about . . . exterminating the person” as a matter of aesthetics (68). Riding sees in this methodology a deeply rooted fear of innovation and understands the reluctance to produce truly new poetry as the inevitable result of a group mentality.

Throughout *Contemporaries*, Riding portrays poetic impersonality as the warped outcome of an intensely felt shame of the person. Thus, for instance, she depicts Eliot’s desire to “escape from emotion” and “escape from personality” as childish, effeminate, and fearful. Calling *The Waste Land* the “great twentieth-century nursery rhyme” (45), she argues that, by avoiding emotion, or as in Eliot’s theory of the “objective correlative,” displacing the weight of emotions onto objects rather than subjects, the poet compels his readers to engage in psychologically driven close readings, mining the poem for evidence of authorial trauma (45). Hard modernism, she explains, should confront humanity (a dangerously amorphous entity) in all of its emotional complexity. The poet as person should not seek to sever personality from poetics. Accordingly, Riding refers to Eliot, Joyce, and Co. collectively as “ladies” precisely because they “avoid the temptations to sentimentality inherent in the poetic faculty” and thus reject the humanity inherent in their medium, language (48). Riding’s ironic use of gender demonstrates the depth of her scorn for the calculated modernist (im)persona, even as it suggests that we should understand her reclamation of the poet as person not as the romantic agenda of an iconoclast woman modernist, but as the cornerstone of a grittier, more authentic, and truly hard (both difficult and obdurate) poetics in and of the modernist moment. Why insist upon and theorize the “difficulty” of modernist poetry,” Riding asks, when “well-written poetry is always difficult” (54)?

Riding’s ideal poet, then, displays true originality by refusing to reflect a shared modernist dogma, by casting aside a poetics of impersonality, and by acknowledging language itself as a unique medium (and burden), one “to accept . . . from humanity at large” (57). Indeed, Riding’s poetics of the person emerges in precisely this matter-of-fact way, as a kind of recognition and reminder that the poet and poetic language remain always embedded in unsystematized life. As Lisa Samuels explains, Riding “is always personal and
always looking for unfoldings of what the self cannot quite conceive” (Anar-
chism is Not Enough xi). For Riding, the “person” behind a poem cannot ever be “exterminated.” Poets are persons always, not persons when life is messy and poets when they are at work on clean and sharp angles. Nor does Riding’s emphasis on the person arise from a lyric expressivism in which poetry emanates from the poetic mind. Rather, good poets, for Riding, stand in a respectful and somewhat diminutive relation to their relatively independent poems: “The poem itself is supreme, above persons; judging rather than judged; keeping criticism at a respectful distance; it is even able to make a reader of its author” (23). In A Survey of Modernist Poetry, Riding and Graves likened the relation between a poet and his poem to the relationship between a “wise, experimenting parent” and child. Just as a parent would not wish to keep a child in “its place” by “suppressing its personality or laughing down its strange questions, so that it turns into a rather dull and ineffective edition of the parent,” poets are likewise “freeing the poem” and “encouraging it to do things, even queer things, by itself” (124–125). Riding continues this logic in Contemporaries, arguing that the role of poetry is to create “an ever immediate reality confirmed afresh and independently in each new work,” a reality “confirmed personally rather than professionally” (56). Only by fostering this relation of connection and freedom can poets write poems that are not mere copies of what already exists, but that bring, out of language, something new into being.

Gertrude Stein and the “New Barbarism”

Contemporaries finds its ambassador of the everyday, its poet as person, in Gertrude Stein. Riding first became familiar with Stein’s work in 1926 when the Hogarth Press published her own collection of poems, The Close Chap-
let, as well as Stein’s “Composition as Explanation,” a text whose influence in Contemporaries cannot be underestimated. Riding began writing about Stein in Survey, and the two became friends and frequent correspondents after “The New Barbarism and Gertrude Stein” appeared in the June 1927 issue of transition. (Stein was understandably pleased to have been so thor-
oughly championed by Riding.) That essay prompted Stein to send Riding and Graves a manuscript version of An Acquaintance With Description, which their Seizin Press published in 1929. The intensity of their relationship dur-
ing these years, particularly as reflected in Riding’s letters, translates into an equally intense critical devotion in Chapter 2 of Contemporaries, in which Riding explains and lauds Stein’s “barbarism.”

As a continuation of her essay in transition, the Stein chapter clearly re-
sponds to Eliot’s ominous denunciation of Stein in “Charleston, Hey! Hey!” a review written for Nation & Athenaeum in January 1927: “[Stein’s] work is not improving, it is not amusing, it is not interesting, it is not good for one’s mind. But its rhythms have a peculiar hypnotic power not met with before. It has a kinship with the saxophone. If this is the future, then the future is, as it very likely is, of the barbarians. But this is the future in which we ought not to be interested” (595). Riding seizes upon the word “barbarians,” upending Eliot’s dismissive analogy, and proceeds to sketch out a positive poetics of barbarism in Contemporaries (66). Riding argues that by “taking everything around her very literally and many things for granted which others have not been naive enough to take so,” Stein has fundamentally altered poetic modernism (78). She insists that “no one but Miss Stein has been willing to be as ordinary, as simple, as primitive, as stupid, as barbaric as successful barbarism demands,” and that Stein, by doing “what everyone else has been ashamed to do,” is the only modernist whose compositions are firmly rooted in the everyday (78). Because Stein writes so far outside the generic parameters of her contemporaries, Riding argues, she has managed to achieve authenticity, while at the same time subverting modernism’s prestige-obsessed institutions: “She has courage, clarity, sincerity, simplicity. She has created a human mean in language, a mathematical equation of ordinariness, which leaves one with a tender respect for that changing and unchanging slowness that is humanity and Gertrude Stein” (84). If Stein is a “barbaric” writer, or if, as Eliot warns, she is “going to make trouble for us,” for Riding this trouble will be the salvation of the avant-garde.

At least one reviewer of Contemporaries recognized that Riding was attempting, through a revaluation of Stein, to radically redefine poetic practice for the modernist moment. A 1928 Times Literary Supplement review finds merit in Riding’s preoccupation with the person and in her insistence that “poetry should be a humanity” (254). As a treatise “riding on the backs” (pun certainly intended) of contemporary poets, the reviewer argues, Contemporaries articulates a much needed theory of poetic practice wedded to personal language and the commonplace, to the “apples and napkins of poetry, associations of which no poet should be queasy” (254). Riding does indeed extol the “apples and napkins of poetry,” both in her insistence that poetry cannot be divorced from everyday language, and in her theorization of Stein’s radical poetics. Professional modernists, Riding argues, try to make language an external medium—like paint to the painter or stone to the sculptor. In so doing, modernists transform poetry into a specialist discipline—a rigidly defined cultural production, one “Art” among others. As Jerome McGann puts it, Riding replaced modernism’s vision of poetry as “an art of