

CONVALESCENT
CONVERSATIONS

BY

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(LAURA RIDING)

WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY GEORGE FRAGOPOULOS

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INTRODUCTION

VIRGINIA WOOLF BEGINS her 1930 essay “On Being Ill” with the following observation:

Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed...when we think of this, as we are so frequently forced to think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature.¹

“Novels, one would have thought,” Woolf continues, “would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia; lyrics to toothache.”² *Convalescent Conversations* can, in part, be read as Laura Riding’s answer to Woolf’s implicit challenge to create a literature that represents illness as part of the human

1 Virginia Woolf. “On Being Ill.” *The Collected Essays, Vol. 4*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), 193.

2 Ibid.

experience—although illness, in this particular novel, also serves as a metaphor for broader philosophical and political stakes that surpass the solipsistic confines of a single body. But unlike Woolf, whose aesthetic call is driven by realist tenets, Riding's novel is an attempt to break away from the realist tradition that pervades much of modernist literature.

Convalescent Conversations was published in 1936 under Riding's pseudonym, Madeleine Vara, by Seizin Press, which she ran with Robert Graves, who was at the time both lover and collaborator; this was the same year in which Riding and Graves would flee Mallorca and Franco's fascism. The novel tells the story of Adam and Eleanor, two convalescents in an unnamed sanitarium who begin a peculiar courtship. Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, first published in 1924, looms as an important precursor, at least in regards to the novel's themes. And much like Mann's novel, the backdrop of the sanitarium and the pervading sense of illness and decrepitude, both physical and spiritual, allow Riding to develop her own satirical take on the experience of living in modernity.

Following the dramatic form of Riding's earlier *roman à clef 14A*, which she co-wrote with George Ellidge and published in 1934, most of *Convalescent Conversations* takes place in dialogue: the developing relationship between Adam and Eleanor is presented in a series of philosophical discussions on topics including religion, the meaning of God, the nature of language, and relations

between men and women. There is no real plot to speak of, and even less action. The claustrophobia that Adam and Eleanor feel is often felt by the reader, too. At certain moments, Riding's protagonists seem like precursors to Samuel Beckett's clowns, existential figures confronting the absurd nature of existence itself. (Eleanor: "Everyone is really everyone else. And the answer is nobody.") We are never told what it is that Adam and Eleanor suffer from, a fact that further opens their illnesses to interpretation as metaphor—the rise of fascism in Europe being the most obvious, though certainly not the only, shadow narrative a reader might consider. Furthermore, and thinking beyond the thematic concerns that the novel presents its readers with, the experimental form of *Convalescent Conversations* allows Riding to examine the generic limitations of the modernist novel itself.

In her autobiography, *The Person I Am*, Riding writes of her disdain for what she views as the "impatience" of the modern world toward "the problem of human self-knowledge."³ This impatience, "peculiar to this century's intellectual modernism," has "developed into a cynicism of mistrust"⁴ in regards to how the realities of modern existence have been represented in literature, philosophy and the arts. For Riding, the

3 Laura (Riding) Jackson. *The Person I Am, Vol. 1*, eds. John Nolan and Carol Ann Friedman (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2011), 38.

4 Ibid.

realist novel is a symptom of this cynicism, part of what she calls an obsession with “modern psychological realism.”⁵ Riding views the actuality of the human, and of human experience, as ultimately resistant to literary representation, especially in the reified forms of realist fiction. This mistrust of modern psychology is also expressed through the novel’s less than subtle attacks on Freudian psychology. In addition to dismissive allusions to the talking cure (Eleanor’s last words are “Don’t talk so much”), *Convalescent Conversations* subverts the conventions of psychological realism through its extensive, almost exclusive use of dialogue, which allows Riding to avoid representing the psychological inner workings of her protagonists’ minds, a formal rejection of the kind of interiority championed by writers such as Woolf, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust.

Riding may be best known for a certain hermetic quality that renders, or attempts to render, her texts impervious to critical dissection; *Convalescent Conversations* is no exception to this aesthetic stance. For Riding, the trouble with critical discourse is that it often seeks to supplant the primacy of the text itself, transforming the literary object into something other than what it is. The irony of Riding’s skepticism about literary criticism should not escape us: Riding and Graves’ co-authored texts, *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* and *A Survey*

5 Ibid.

INTRODUCTION

of Modernist Poetry helped launch, if unintentionally, the New Criticism, one of the most influential schools of literary criticism of their century. Even if much later in life Riding would renounce much of her earlier work, both creative and otherwise, what remains, when all is said and done, is the work itself. May this return of *Convalescent Conversations* to print make the entirety of Riding's vision a little easier to glimpse.

— GEORGE FRAGOPOULOS

NOTE:

After marrying writer Schuyler B. Jackson in 1941, Riding officially changed her name to Laura (Riding) Jackson. We have decided to refer to the author as Riding and not (Riding) Jackson in this edition for two reasons: first, to maintain fidelity to the text as it was originally published; secondly, to emphasize the radical break between the Riding of the 1930s and the (Riding) Jackson who renounced most of her earlier work.

In almost all instances, this new edition replicates Riding's idiosyncratic style when it comes to typography, spelling, and punctuation. In only a few cases has the original text been modified, either to maintain consistency throughout the work or where the original seemed to contain an error.

ONE

DAVIS WHEELED ELEANOR far out on the veranda, to the left. Then she went in for Adam, wheeling him also far out on the veranda, but to the right.

‘Is that Adam?’ called Eleanor to Davis.

‘I’ll have a look,’ said Davis, bending forward to study Adam’s face. ‘Is that you, Seventeen? The lady in Five would like to know.’

‘Come, Davis,’ said Adam, ‘roll the lady along so she can see for herself.’

‘It’s not proper to roll ladies along to gentlemen.’

‘Then roll gentlemen along to ladies.’

‘That would also be against the laws of nature and courtship. Things must just seem to happen accidentally.’

‘Well, could you just make it seem to happen accidentally,’ said Eleanor, ‘leaving out the courtship?’

Davis wheeled Adam a little toward Eleanor. ‘You wouldn’t deprive us poor nurses of a little romance, now would you, Miss Five?’

‘You wouldn’t deprive us poor convalescents of the little sympathy we can give one another, now would you, Davis?’ Davis wheeled Eleanor within decorous talking reach of Adam’s chair.

‘Such as complaining to each other about the way us poor nurses abuse you poor convalescents.’

‘Only one poor nurse and two poor convalescents,’ said Adam.

‘And what about poor Trebble?’ asked Davis. ‘Doesn’t she count?’

‘Oh, she only has to stay awake while we sleep, and think her own thoughts—and read *our* books,’ said Eleanor.

‘Well, it’s no fun reading *your* books, Miss Five. “God help the nurse with an intellectual patient,” I always say. But there really ought to be a rule against patients having poetry books.’

‘Trebble can’t accuse me of poetry books,’ Adam said. ‘And she has a perfectly good crime story this week.’

‘Crime story,’ snorted Davis, ‘and poor Trebble just coming off an attempted suicide case.’

‘But that ended happily,’ Eleanor said. ‘Crime stories don’t end happily.’

‘Don’t they, now? It’s crime stories that have all the happy endings these days, and love stories all the tearful ones. I don’t know what’s come over the world all of a sudden.’

At this moment Miss Kenwood, the matron, made a stately appearance on the veranda. Davis immediately thought of tucking in their rugs more securely.

‘And how are our two healthiest patients this morning?’ asked Miss Kenwood, bending her head toward

them but not her body.

‘You’re not reproaching us, Miss Kenwood, are you?’ Adam answered. As a matter of fact, she was, rather. But equally she seemed to reproach the patients who were not her healthiest. It was Miss Kenwood’s faintly reproachful manner that kept patients of all degrees of illness from feeling themselves too much at home here. Miss Kenwood, for example, did not like patients suffering from nervous breakdowns. They always came prepared to stay; she liked patients to come prepared to go. Perhaps she was not the ideal nursing-home matron, but she certainly kept things moving. She regarded the nursing-home as a clearing-house; and her ambition for it and herself was probably that now and again it should be quite empty. Thousands of postmasters all over the world must have the same sort of impossible ambition: all the out-going letters in their sacks at the railway station, the collection-boxes empty, and the incoming letters not yet written, even.

Miss Kenwood, it was said, had been in *Variety* earlier in life. But now she wore a stiff black silk dress and a white lace collar, and was respectably stout. She gave the impression of knowing a great deal about life, and also of decently suppressing all she knew. One also felt that she knew a lot of jokes which she would never, never, tell again. All of which helped to prevent patients from feeling too much at home. The nurses might be ever so punctilious and condescendingly jolly, and the doctors ever