

EXPERTS ARE PUZZLED

BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1930 by Cape of London, *Experts Are Puzzled* remains one of Laura Riding's least understood and least read works. It is also one of Riding's more staggeringly inventive texts and a crucially important one for those who seek to understand the rest of her prodigious output, as many of the ideas and themes rehearsed in *Experts* inform and elucidate the rest of her varied oeuvre. Until now, however, the book in its entirety has remained out of print, with only a handful of its pieces reprinted since their initial publication, most prominently in the recently revised edition of *Progress of Stories* and the *Laura (Riding) Jackson Reader*. We hope that this new edition will bring readers back to an author that warrants a much larger audience.

One way to approach a book as unique as *Experts Are Puzzled* is to understand it as both a creative endeavor and as a critical exegesis on how Riding wanted her work to be read. While ostensibly a collection of short stories, *Experts* is also an extension of the author's literary criticism of the late 1920s. In a very short period of time, Riding published two collaborative texts she wrote with Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), and *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (1928), followed by

Contemporaries and Snobs (1928) and *Anarchism Is Not Enough* (1928). These books not only helped launch what would eventually become the New Criticism, they also laid the extensive groundwork for what would follow decades later in Riding's magisterial reflection on language and reality, the posthumously published *Rational Meaning* (1999), which she wrote with her husband Schuyler Jackson. *Experts* is a spiritual and intellectual sibling to such works. In fact, the most intriguing sections of the collection—including "Introduction to a Book About Money," "Obsession," and "An Address to America"—are essayistic in both form and content. How, then, to begin discussing what may at first seem a rather inscrutable and miscellaneous collection of prose pieces? Let us begin with the title itself. Who are these "experts" of whom Riding speaks? And what are they puzzled about?

Experts, we contend, is Riding's attempt to unravel and dismantle the academicization and professionalization of literary creation and of literary criticism. The eponymous "story" in this collection can be read as an allegory for such a deconstructive process:

Experts are puzzled by the legacy for the purpose of the handing down of which we seem to exist successively and respectively. We seem to exist to correct, in proper order, the minute derangements caused in the legacy by our existence. We on whom it is temporarily

bestowed find it strange and make it familiar and then find ourselves strange. The legacy has been handed on and we are left behind, strangers of a fixed old age. We stop here while the legacy passes on to the eternal puzzlement of experts.

The distinction the author establishes between these “experts” and the anonymous “strangers” is key. The experts, mandarins of knowledge who seek to control this legacy—the literary critical legacy, for instance, or the “Tradition,” as T.S. Eliot would have it—through their mastery are, in fact, the ones in “eternal puzzlement.” Why is that the case? Because these experts, the professionalized critics, have supplanted the truth of the work of art with the false knowledge that literary interpretation brings. What matters most for Riding is the singular uniqueness of the work of art as an act of creation, an idea that we will return to again below.

Note also the important communal language at play: “We,” as opposed to them, being the community of readers and artists marginalized by those in possession of a socially legitimized sense of cultural capital that the literary tradition bestows. We are simply “strangers of a fixed old age,” long-forgotten members of a time long disappeared. What we lack is the “knowledge” of the experts. So what is it that these strangers possess that the experts do not? The last few lines of the passage give us a possible answer:

At least, that is to say, I am a stranger of a fixed old age and I am not puzzled. Ask me anything you like and I will give you a not-puzzled answer. I will not give you an answer. I am a stranger. I do not live, I am only alive. I hear the birds with lice under their wings singing, but I do not understand because I am not a bird with lice under my wings singing. I am not an expert, I am not puzzled. I am a stranger. If you are in search of information you must listen to your own familiar voice singing and scratch your own young familiar breast where it itches. I am only a poor stranger of a fixed old age and not at all puzzled.

To be a stranger of “a fixed old age” is to remain unfettered and independent of the false and limiting logic of a time in which literature and art have become fields of professional study. For Riding, an “answer” is simply the product of a logic of thinking that divorces the thing, the text or the art object, from life and the world. In an analogous manner, one can hear the birds singing but never truly understand the meaning of that singing because the human mind can never inhabit another subjectivity; the bird’s song can only be understood on its own terms. Within the discourse of literature, it is criticism, especially of the academic kind, that ossifies the literary text. What has been lost in modernity is the autonomy of the art object, an autonomy that Riding, much later in her career, would associate not with the writing of poetry but with the clarity that could be found in language itself and

in the liberating study of linguistics.

This sense of writing as an act of true creation gives *Experts* a metaphysical aura, one that Riding herself is fully aware of and deploys to great effect. Consider, for example, her ongoing struggle with the question of God. Riding sees God not as a metaphysical proposition but as a very real and material concern. God, or the “idea” of God, as per the title of an essay she authored, is not the logical summation of a metaphysical system of order, but this very present question of what it means to be alive and to create art.

This is made clear in the last piece in *Experts*, “Their Last Interview,” where one of Riding’s aliases, Lilith Outcome, meets God and comes to the realization that she is a separate being, a being apart:

And in this last interview the prettiness of their mutual solicitude almost made one regret that their relationship did not justify anything more. But God was anxious to fade back into humanity, and Miss Outcome averse to any association that might lead her into other associations, being a concentrated identity and capable of behaving only concentratedly.

Miss Outcome is aware of how different from God she is, what Riding labels their “incompatibility” as singularly different beings. What Miss Outcome maintains, even when faced with her own creator, is an awareness

of her own autonomy and agency. Aside from providing her with an inroad into examining the nature of identity, the figure of God also allows Riding to highlight what is perhaps the central theme of *Experts*: the nature of the creative act itself. One sees in Riding's work and thinking a view of literature and the world that can, for lack of a better description, be categorized as "pre-modernist." To create literature in a world before modernity is to create a literature that can never be commodified. Riding viewed academic criticism as a symptom of modernity's insistence on turning art into yet another commodity. Hence why so much of Riding's writing seems somewhat archaic, or untimely, when placed next to that of her other modernist contemporaries.

In conclusion, Riding's work refuses easy classification because it actively resists the notion that a text can be understood through the kind of professionalized forms of literary criticism that would have started to flourish in the academy at the time she was writing. In the context of poetry, Riding spelled out the problems surrounding the rise of professional literary criticism at length in the chapter "The Making of the Poem" in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*. For Riding, criticism, or at least what passes for criticism in the early twentieth-century, is a dead end, a process of dissection, and nothing else. What Riding is attempting to reclaim, if even perhaps naively, is a sense of the the artistic creation as a sensuous object that can never be penned in by the boundaries

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of criticism. *Experts Are Puzzled* is a signal from a time and place when literature knew less of the division between artistic production and life. It is an early twentieth-century masterpiece that deserves to be rediscovered and reconsidered.

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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.

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In this place it is impossible to move from this place. It is after hours. The taxis wait outside the unfashionable houses of their drivers and cannot be hailed. We are old, besides, and cannot walk, or do not wish to walk. We are poor, besides. We are strangers, besides; we do not know the way, we do not speak the language. Life is impossible. Therefore we do not live, but are yet alive. We are strangers of a fixed old age and we are not puzzled.

Who are the experts? They are of the legacy, which is puzzled in its experts. What is the legacy? It is the ever-young continuance of puzzlement, the refuse of a fixed old age. We more and more establish its bewildered, expert familiarity with itself for the purpose of

establishing which we seem to exist and are left behind, strangers of a fixed old age. For the purpose of being left behind we are left behind, disinherited, thank God, and not puzzled.

At least, that is to say, I am a stranger of a fixed old age and I am not puzzled. Ask me anything you like and I will give you a not-puzzled answer. I will not give you an answer. I am a stranger. I do not live, I am only alive. I hear the birds with lice under their wings singing, but I do not understand because I am not a bird with lice under my wings singing. I am not an expert, I am not puzzled. I am a stranger. If you are in search of information you must listen to your own young familiar voice singing and scratch your own young familiar breast where it itches. I am only a poor stranger of a fixed old age and not at all puzzled.