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The Seizin Press of Laura Riding & Robert Graves

In the *Epilogue to Goodbye To All That*, Robert Graves reports that in 1926, when he and his wife and family returned from Egypt where he had been teaching at the University of Cairo, "new characters appeared on the scene." Graves and his wife parted soon after that and he and the poet Laura Riding set up home in Hammersmith in London. There in 1928 they established their own private press with an Albion printing press built in 1872, and some founts of Caslon type. Their early mentor was a private press printer and enthusiast, Vyvyan Richards, who taught them to print, advised them about the purchase of equipment, and oversaw their first efforts until they were competent enough to proceed by themselves. Richards incidentally had at one time been actively planning to print and publish books with his Oxford friend and contemporary T.E. Lawrence, but nothing came of that project.

Graves and Riding were determined to print books whose orientation was not towards particular kinds of writer so much as towards a certain kind of linguistic and artistic philosophy. Riding found the name for the press, extrapolating from the strictly lexical definition of "seizin" (possession of land and property by legal title) a sense of possession incurring obligation and duty. In this case, the obligation would be to use one's possessions well, so that Seizin Press came to represent a moral intention to use the facility for printing and publishing as a literary, artistic and humanistic tool. Will Ransom, writing of the press in his study of British private presses in 1929¹, cited its policy as one of printing "necessary books by various particular people," and in the first prospectus of the press, Seizin editions were advertised as "decidedly not addressed to the collector but to those interested in work rather than printing." Nevertheless, and despite this disclaimer, Seizin books should not be underestimated on the grounds of their

appearance, since neither of the principals would tolerate avoidable imperfections. As a consequence Seizin books, though not “fine printing,” are typographically elegant and well printed and bound.

All Seizin books were to be of the same *Seizin* series, identified by a number. *Seizin One* was Riding's *Love as Love, Death as Death*, an autobiographical poem commercially typeset and printed on good quality hand made paper. The book was published in an edition of 175 copies which were printed entirely by hand during 1928. It consisted of sixty-four pages, commercially bound, as all Seizin books were, in lettered linen buckram, and was sold at 11s.6d. (approximately one dollar in today's terms) through the London bookseller William Bain, who handled all their independent publications.

Seizin Two, the next year, was *An Acquaintance with Description*, a collection of essays by Gertrude Stein, numbered and signed by the author and published in an edition of 225 copies at 11s.6d. *Seizin Three* was Graves's own *Poems 1929*, which, at thirty-four pages, was the press's shortest book. It was published in an edition of 225 copies at 8s.6d. This was the last Seizin book published in England since personal circumstances now obliged Graves and Riding to look elsewhere for a home. They chose *Deja* in Majorca and shipped their press and belongings there in 1930, and it was from there that all future Seizin books were published.

At this time certain aspects of the work of the press changed. New plans were developed to publish bigger and more complex works in a more commercial way, and a fortunate alliance was forged with the London publishers Constable, with whom a number of these books were published up to 1937. Perhaps the most important of these was the critical journal *Epilogue* which Riding edited, with Graves's assistance as Associate Editor. Three volumes of this miscellany of literary, social and cultural criticism were published in 1935, 1936 and 1937, a venture which gave the Seizin Press a substantial impact on pre-war literary culture. James Reeves's poems *The Natural Need*, published in 1935 and Graves's early novel *Antigua Penny Puce* in 1936 were the other notable contributions to the Constable/Seizin series, and meanwhile the Seizin Press continued to edit and publish handmade volumes done entirely by Graves and Riding at their own private press in Majorca, and marketed in London by Bain.

Number four of their independent Seizin series was *No Trouble*, a collection of the letters of Len Lye, the *avantgarde* film maker, who designed the covers for Riding's poems, *Though Gently*, which was *Seizin Five*. *Seizin Six* was yet another collection of Graves poems, *To*

Whom Else?, published in 1931, and in the same year the last independent Seizin book was Riding's *Laura and Francisca*, making her the author of the press's first and last publications. *Laura and Francisca* is a long autobiographical poem which is particularly interesting in that it offers some evidence of their life and work in Majorca, especially in the often-quoted lines about their printing together:

How's that? How's anything you know or don't?
 you can't believe...on ordinary paper...
 Printed by myself, and Robert...

Yes, I ink, he pulls, we patch a greyness
 Or clean the thickened letters out...

Work with the Constable/Seizin project seems to have superseded independent publishing after 1931, and the final volume of this latter partnership was Riding's *The Trojan Ending*, published in 1937 in London, to which Riding and Graves had been obliged to return as a consequence of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. Three years after their return their relationship foundered and was dissolved, and with those events the Seizin Press program was discontinued, though Graves is believed to have used the name for at least two publications subsequently.

Though the press had concerned itself with a linguistic and artistic philosophy from the outset, and though it had largely published the work of its two principals, Seizin Press undoubtedly made an important contribution to the culture of the period. Furthermore the record of what was achieved with limited resources places the press firmly among the more influential private presses so that the later animosity between the two partners cannot obscure, or detract from, the quality of what they succeeded in producing.

A Checklist of Seizin Press Titles

1. *Love as Love, Death as Death*, by Laura Riding. 1928
2. *An Acquaintance with Description*, by Gertrude Stein. 1929
3. *Poems 1929*, by Robert Graves. 1929
4. *No Trouble*, by Len Lye. 1930
5. *Though Gently*, by Laura Riding. 1930
6. *To Whom Else?* by Robert Graves. 1931
7. *Laura and Francisca*, by Laura Riding. 1931

Seizin/Constable Titles

- Progress of Stories, by Laura Riding. 1935
 The Natural Need, by James Reeves. 1935
 A Mistake Somewhere, (anonymous) 1935
 Convalescent Conversations, by Madeline Vara. 1936
 Antigua, Penny Puce, by Robert Graves. 1936
 The Moon's No Fool, by Thomas Matthews. 1936
 Almost Forgotten Germany, by Georg Schwarz, trans. Riding and Graves.
 1936
 The Heathen, by Honor Wyatt. 1937
 Epilogue — A Critical Miscellany, edited by Laura Riding.
 No. 1. Autumn 1935
 No. 2. Summer 1936
 No. 3. Spring 1937
 A Trojan Ending, by Laura Riding, 1937.

NOTES

1. Will Ransom, *Private Presses and Their Books*. New York, 1929.