

Riding's Reason

That He another day woke to find himself speaking a strange language, in which everything was known and clear—as if all difficulties of the intelligence were difficulties of language alone: in this language He had but to speak to discover, as, for instance, the word for *horse* here not only stood for horse but also made plain the quality of horseliness, what it was.

Laura Riding, *Anarchism Is Not Enough* (1928)

The publication of *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words* brings to completion one of the most aesthetically and philosophically singular projects of twentieth-century American poetry. No North American or European poet of this century has created a body of work that reflects more deeply on the inherent conflicts between truth telling and the inevitable artifice of poetry than Laura (Riding) Jackson. This conflict ultimately led, in 1941, to Riding's renunciation of poetry; it is also the basis of this long *summa contra poetica*, which she wrote with her husband, Schuyler Jackson, over a near forty-year period starting around 1948.

No doubt *Rational Meaning* will be most appreciated by those who appreciate the body of work of its principal author. Although the book is co-authored by Schuyler Jackson, the distinctive style and preoccupations of Laura Riding (Jackson) are present throughout this book and the fate of the work is intimately tied to the fate of Riding's poetry.

I emphasize that this is a "poet's work" because the genre of the book is that of a treatise on the philosophy of language. At another level, however, the book is an *ars poetica*—a "creative" work rather than a work of linguistics, philosophy, or literary criticism as they are professionally practiced. Indeed, the authors intentionally reject, across the board, the major developments in all these professional fields. Nonetheless, *Rational Meaning* is hardly a defense of poetry in poetic prose, even as it sits in an anxious historical line with treatises and prophetic books by a number of earlier poets, from Sidney to Blake to Coleridge to Shelley to Poe. For this book presents a "rational" approach to meaning that is *opposed* to poetic approaches to meaning; in this sense it is not an *ars poetica* but an anti-poetics.

Anarchism Is Not Enough (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), p. 171.

Yet in its testing of our senses of meaning, in its insistence on "language as the ground of human intelligence",¹ *Rational Meaning* is a pursuit of poetry's love for language by other means; because, for the authors, the means of poetry delude. In this sense, its company might uneasily include other, more contemporary, if stylistically dissimilar, works: Louis Zukofsky's *Bottom: On Shakespeare* (which in its utopian impulse it most closely resembles), Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Walter Benjamin's "Doctrine of the Similar", Ezra Pound's *Guide to Kulchur* and *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, William Carlos Williams's *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, Simone Weil's *The Need for Roots*, and Gertrude Stein's *How to Write*. In making these comparisons, so against the grain of a work that insists that its contribution is precisely its noncomparability, I realize I am aestheticizing and historicizing this work in ways rejected by the authors.

Laura (Riding) Jackson was born Laura Reichenthal in 1901 in New York City. Riding's father was a Jewish immigrant from Galicia (Austro-Poland) and an active socialist; her mother was the daughter of German Jewish immigrants. She grew up in the Yorkville section of Manhattan and in Brooklyn, where she went to Girls' High School. Her background is quite similar to those of her immediate contemporaries Louis Zukofsky and Charles Reznikoff. And like them, she grew up in a household where English was not the only native tongue. Her earliest experiences of language were multiple and inflected, yet early on poetry may have seemed a way to a purer language "where the fear of speaking in strange ways could be left behind" and also "as a way of speaking differently from the untidy speaking of ordinary talk".² Some of her first poems appeared in the early 1920s, in publications associated with the Fugitives. From 1926 to 1939

1. Laura (Riding) Jackson, "Afterword", in *Lives of Wives* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1995), p. 325.

2. Laura (Riding) Jackson, "Twentieth Century Change in the Idea of Poetry, and of the Poet, and of the Human Being", in *P[oetry] N[ation] Review* 14, no. 1 (1987) (review supplement 1): 77-78. Quoted in Deborah Baker, *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), p. 37. The biographical and bibliographical information in this essay is based on Baker; Joyce Piell Wexler, *Laura Riding's Pursuit of Truth* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1979); Wexler, *Laura Riding: A Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981); and Barbara Adams, *The Enemy Self: Poetry and Criticism of Laura Riding* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990). I am also indebted to Jerome McGann's "The Truth of Poetry: An Argument", in *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), part of which appears as "Laura (Riding) Jackson and the Literal Truth", *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 3 (1992).

Some of Baker's biographical information is disputed by Elizabeth Friedmann, who is writing an authorized biography of Laura Jackson (personal communication, September 3, 1996). Friedmann believes that Laura Reichenthal's maternal grandfather was Dutch and not Jewish, in other words not a *Deutsch* Jew. She also feels it is important to state that Laura Reichenthal's father came from what was at the time Austria (but what is now Poland).

she lived, mostly with Robert Graves, in England and Mallorca, Spain (and briefly in Egypt and Switzerland and France), where she published numerous books of poetry, essays, and fiction under the name Laura Riding. Her work through this period is among the greatest achievements of any American modernist.

In 1939 Riding returned to America, where she met, and in 1941 married, Schuyler Jackson. Schuyler Brinckerhoff Jackson II was born in 1900 in Bernardsville, New Jersey, to an affluent, socially well-positioned family. He attended Pomfret, a Connecticut prep school, and then Princeton. His first published article was on Yeats, with whom he had a happy meeting; and he shared with Riding a special regard for the Victorian poet Charles M. Doughty, whose epic poem *The Dawn in Britain* (1906), with its archaic recasting of language modeled in part on Edmund Spenser's English, holds a singular place of honor in *Rational Meaning*. In the 1930s Jackson was, for a time, a follower of Georges Gurdjieff. An aspiring poet and editor, as well as farmer, Schuyler was also the poetry reviewer for *Time* magazine, for which he reviewed Riding's *Collected Poems* in 1938. In 1943 Riding and Jackson moved to Wabasso, Florida, where they lived, mostly without electricity or telephone, until his death in 1968 and her death in 1991.

After the publication of her *Collected Poems* in 1938 and two non-poetry books the following year, Riding published almost nothing for thirty years. In 1970, her *Selected Poems: In Five Sets* was published under the name Laura (Riding) Jackson. In the preface she explained her renunciation of poetry, saying that the craft of poetry distorted the natural properties of words and that the sensuousness of words blocked what she called, in her poem "Come, Words, Away", the soundless telling of truth that is in language itself. She puts it this way in "The Wind, the Clock, the We":

At last we can make sense, you and I,
 You lone survivors on paper,
 The wind's boldness and the clock's care
 Become a voiceless language,
 And I the story hushed in it—
 Is more to say of me?
 Do I say more than self-choked falsity
 Can repeat word for word after me,
 The script not altered by a breath
 Of perhaps meaning otherwise?³

The thirty-year pause in this life of writing, at least as reflected through a cessation of publishing, echoes the gap between George Oppen's *Dis-*

3. *Selected Poems: In Five Sets* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), p. 66.

crete Series (1934) and *The Materials* (1962). Oppen, just seven years younger than Riding, perhaps had not found a way to reconcile his left political commitment with his practice of poetry. But he did return to poetry, and with an epigraph that he could share with Riding: "They fed their hearts on fantasies / And their hearts have become savage."⁴ Riding, whose politics moved in the opposite direction from Oppen's, never returned to poetry, where meaning is always "otherwise" than intended, instead turning (for what poets do is turn) toward a way of meaning otherwise, that is not toward poetry but to a voiceless telling.⁵ The long poetic lacuna of these two "non-Jewish Jews" implicitly acknowledges the question later stated most famously by Theodor Adorno: can lyric poetry be written after—*much less during*—the systematic extermination of the European Jews? As far as I know, Laura (Riding) Jackson does not explicitly address this issue, but what she does say of 1938 and 1939 is significant: "Human sense of the human stood at last poised at the edge of an unignorable question about the human."⁶ Within this historical context, perhaps Oppen's commitment to a clarity and honesty ("that

4. *The Collected Poems of George Oppen* (New York: New Directions, 1975), p. 16. The lines recast Yeats's "We had fed the heart on fantasies, / The heart's grown brutal from the fare" in "The Star's Nest by My Window", part 6 of "Meditations in Time of Civil War", in *Selected Poems and Two Plays of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 107. The first poem of *The Materials* begins with a stanza that is close to Riding: "The men talking / Near the room's center. They have said / More than they had intended" (p. 17).

5. (Riding) Jackson did publish a poem or two after the *Collected*. She discusses her renunciation of poetry in *Rational Meaning* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), chap. 2, pp. 446–49 n. 2. Otherwise unattributed citations in this essay are to this edition.

6. *Lives of Wives*, p. 326. Riding's post-1938 renunciation of poetry and turn to "rational meaning" resembles, in many ways, the renunciation of Communism and turn to "core values" not uncommon among intellectuals in this period: one true belief changing to another true belief. Notable in this respect is Riding's 1939 tract *The Left Heresy in Literature and Life*, co-authored by "ex-Communist" Harry Kemp. In terms of *Rational Meaning*, note that "scientific socialism", like logical positivism and structuralism, has the same sort of extralinguistic logic that is the primary critical focus of the work. But so, for that matter, does capitalism, with its deterritorializing multinational logics that axiomatize meaning as decisively as any of the forms of reification denounced in *Rational Meaning*. From this perspective, Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze's critique of structuralism in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* makes a strange bedfellow for *Rational Meaning*. See also Riding's *The Covenant of Literal Morality: Protocol I* ([Deyá, Mallorca]: Seizin Press, 1938), which is a crucial document in understanding her perception of the crisis of the late 1930s.

In his 1949 essay "Cultural Criticism and Society", Adorno wrote: "Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely" (in *Prisms*, tr. Samuel and Shierry Weber [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981], p. 34).

truthfulness / Which illumines speech")⁷ that is expressible only though a highly delimited diction can be linked to (Riding) Jackson's recurrent concern for "right use" and "good sense" and frequent censure of what she experienced as linguistic violation. For the unnameable catastrophe of these years, with its rationalized but irrational logic of extermination, engendered a crisis of and for expression in which the abuse of language became inextricably identified with the abuse of the human.

Rational Meaning originated in a project of Riding's from the 1930s, first called *Dictionary of Exact Meanings* and later *Dictionary of Related Meanings*, which was to include "24,000 crucial words of the English language to be defined in such a way as to erase any ambiguity that might have accrued to them over years of improper usage." Oxford University Press turned down the proposal as "too individual and personal" and as an attempt to put words "into straightjackets".⁸ In 1938, Little, Brown agreed to publish the book, even after a dismissive readers' report by I. A. Richards and C. K. Ogden, who subsequently became targets of Riding's wrath. Riding and Jackson continued to work on the dictionary until at least 1948, when they turned their attention to *Rational Meaning*, which Laura Jackson continued to work on after Schuyler Jackson's death.

To claim that *Rational Meaning* can be understood primarily in the context of the poetic project of Laura Riding cuts against the heart of the Jacksons' thesis. For though I believe that the idealization of meaning demonstrated so passionately and so relentlessly in *Rational Meaning* is problematic, it is the longing for rootedness in language's intrinsic meanings that makes this work so resonant. For *Rational Meaning* charts, with thankless diligence, the radical antithesis of those deanimating views of meaning that have come to hold sway, in this century, in linguistics and philosophy and poetry.

Imagine theories of the meaning of words as occupying a vertical spectrum. The lower limit of this spectrum would be the theory that

7. Oppen, "Of Being Numerous", in *Collected Poems*, p. 173.

8. Baker, in *Extremis*, pp. 367-68, 406-7. Riding's original collaborators on this project were Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, and, earlier, according to Elizabeth Friedmann (personal communication, September 3, 1996), Jacob Bronowski. In her fax, Friedmann disputes Baker's facts, noting that the reader's report was not by Ogden and Richards but rather that they were cited in one of two anonymous reports, she notes that the reports were "respectful". Baker, citing Oxford University Press's reaction to the dictionary proposal, has "straightjackets" but should it be "straitjackets" (both are "correct" in my dictionary), or, as Friedmann identifies the source, "strait jackets"? It is a telling question, as words, and the facts that adhere to them, slip and slide, despite every attempt to get them straight, no chaser. Like a stick refracted in the water, it's gotta be bent to look strait.

the meaning of words is extrinsic or conventional: that words' meanings are determined only by linguistic, social, or historical contexts, or by means of their systematic differences from other words. The upper limit of the spectrum would be the theory that the meaning of each and every word is inherent in the word itself, nonrelative, self-complete. Much of the philosophy, linguistics, and poetics of the twentieth century, and especially in the postwar period, has moved toward the lower limit. In sharp contrast, *Rational Meaning* makes the case for the upper limit. By making this otherwise largely unrepresented argument, the Jacksons bring into full view the spectrum of views on the relation of meaning to language.

This work aims to restore the truth of language. While language, in the view of the authors, is "itself the anatomy of truth" (46), in modern times we have lost our rapport with language, ceasing to think of meaning as inhering in words and imagining instead that words have primarily psychological or social or historical or conventional meaning. This development is traced by the authors to a decline in the faith in reason. Their quest is "to make words tell all that human thought can hold, . . . to make human thought bring forth its all, for telling" (55).

The key concept of this book, and also the most elusive, is that words have intrinsic meaning. The authors decisively reject a Saussurean notion of the meaning of words as relative or differential. As early as 1928, in the dream story in *Anarchism Is Not Enough* quoted in the epigraph on "horseliness" above, Riding was flipping Ferdinand de Saussure's 1916 *Cours de linguistique générale* on its head. For Saussure is commonly understood to argue that "the relationship between signifier and signified is 'unmotivated' or arbitrary; that is, it is based purely on social rather than on natural necessity: there is nothing about a horse which demands that it be called 'horse', since the French call the same thing *un cheval*."⁹ For related reasons, the Jacksons explicitly reject the structuralist and taxonomical notions of the relation of language to meaning that they find in the work of Noam Chomsky, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, and others.

Rational Meaning also rejects analytic philosophy, finding that it is a "trimm[ing]-down" of the domain of human knowledge to the "scientifically observable"—a critique the authors share with a wide range of thinkers and one that makes it clear that the rationality of which they speak is anti-positivist (151). Logical positivism, like structuralism, separates logic from meaning and in so doing "dissociat[es] language from

9. I quote here from a dictionary definition of *sign* in Chris Baddick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 205.

the concept of truth", where *truth* means a "possessed awareness" in and through language (152, 379). When the authors complain of the scientific bending of terms like space, time, cause, and world, the comments resemble the critique of ordinary language philosophers without subscribing to J. L. Austin's or Wittgenstein's sense of the meaning of words in their use.

The perspective in *Rational Meaning* might seem closer to the linguistics of Charles Sanders Peirce, with his theory of icons, indexes, and symbols (suggesting, respectively, resemblance, linking, and conventional association between a sign and its object). Indeed, the Jacksons might appear to view the structure of the sign as something like iconic. But Peirce's linguistics is founded on an idea of inadequacy in the relation of the sign and its object that is inimicable to the thesis of *Rational Meaning*. Equally antipathetic to the Jacksons would be Peirce's emphasis on the social construction, and contestation, of meaning.

In arguing for rational, and against relative, meaning, *Rational Meaning* also makes a case against poetry and its reliance on metaphor and linguistic materiality (sound play, puns, and rhymes). This should not be surprising considering the terms by which Riding had renounced poetry's insufficiencies. Yet an argument for the intrinsic meaning of words would also be a defense of poetry if this argument interpreted the expressive quality of sound patterns as indicating an inherent relation of sound to meaning. But, for the Jacksons, if words are not Saussurean signs, with "arbitrary" relations of signifier to signified, neither are they the sound symbols of Roman Jakobson's linguistics. Words, in the authors' view, are meaning-entities not sound-entities. If we think of words as sound-entities (as poets may tend to), then we think of words as symbolizing rather than meaning. Word choice in poetry, the authors assert, is governed not by "linguistic rightness" but rather by the desire to induce "emotional states", as by word sounds and rhythmic manipulation. As a result the "truth-object" is at the mercy of a "professional requirement that the words have a physically attractive delivery and emotionally forceful impact" (171).

Although dictionaries are, for the Jacksons, the bibles of language, and far preferable to literature and linguistics, they hold that traditional dictionaries are of only limited help, since they define words in terms of usage and in terms of one another rather than through the intrinsic meaning of words. The Jacksons reject the notion that words are primarily the product of change and that meaning fundamentally shifts with time: "language does not change, in its fundamental make-up, and in its vocabularistic essentials" (611). In this respect, among the most remarkable parts of this

work are the definitional illustrations, for example of *cat* and *dog* in chapter 15 and of *truth* in chapter 18.¹⁰

In *Rational Meaning*, the Jacksons argue that our natural disposition to words, our innate trust in them, has been unlearned. Rules of an imposed and denatured "logic" of use ride roughshod over the "natural custom of the language" (88). For the authors, a key symptom of this alienation from language is the tendency to synonymize words, that is, to define words in terms of their likeness to one another rather than their distinctness. Their motto is "one meaning, one word": each word has "a meaning that is its own and no other" (257, 187). Indeed, if one word-sound (what they call "vocal") has several distinct meanings, the Jacksons would say that the one sound is, in fact, several words. Crucially, the Jacksons emphasize the distinctions between apparently similar words, a thorough demonstration of the poetic (they would say rational and nonprofessional) pursuit of *le mot juste*. Their efforts to distinguish *alter* from *change* from *modify* from *vary* bring to mind Austin's desire to show how ordinary language reveals crucial distinctions that philosophers mistake by trying to deduce such distinctions from an external logic. But the Jacksons' efforts aim at individual words and away from what they call a "vocabulary photograph of usage" (377). Their view is not that words have no meaning apart from use but that good usage elucidates true meaning and, moreover, that good diction has deteriorated because of literary indulgence, "linguistic libertarianism", and "vocabulary promiscuity" (97, 461).

For the Jacksons, the belief that only context determines meaning is a kind of nihilism; they are at pains to decry instances of "ordinary" word use that is loose and thoughtless—most touchingly when they note the destructiveness of the routinized use, in letters, of "Dear" and "Yours" (451–52). They maintain an even more negative view of novel or invented word uses, as by poets, which "breaking-up and nullifying" the meaning

10. "This rendering of 'cat' we offer provisionally—in trial of the possibilities of term-definition: 'familiar animal, small-statured, sleek and supple of body, quiet in presence.' In the same spirit we offer the following for 'dog': 'familiar animal, of varying size, generally smaller than the human, by nature animated, and intelligent to the extent of being capable of attaching itself to human beings companionably and protectively, and otherwise serviceably.' Something further might be added for 'cat', perhaps this, after 'quiet in presence': 'amenable to intimate domestication while retaining some predatory and other features of wildness'" (pp. 293–94).

"Truth, then, as inseparable in meaning from connection with the utterance of words, comprises in its meaning a certain quality of utterance, a quality of linguistic intelligence. It also comprises in its meaning a power of expression that must be associated with the gift of linguistic knowledge and competence: this is an enlivenment with moral purpose to utter words that will be a right expression of something for one's expression of which occasion exists—either by external prompting of one's own, or the two coinciding . . . Language is formed to meet the requirements of truth as the reason of its being; and words have a necessity of usefulness for truth impressed into their meanings" (p. 353).

configurations on which the rational use of words depends and thus compromise language's expression of what (Riding) Jackson in *The Telling* calls truth's "One"-ness.¹¹ Regrettably, their blanket rejection of all types of linguistic divergence or difference as an affront to "human self-sameness" elides distinctions between "bad" grammar, "broken" English, new words, acronyms, advertising slogans, obscenities, vulgarities, dialects, and slangs; nor do they consider how corporate and government manipulation of language differs from nonstandard language practices rooted in social resistance to the very axiomatizing of language that they rightly condemn.¹²

Rational Meaning does not argue for a mystical or theological foundation for words: the Jacksons see the formation of English as an historical event. They defend their recourse to Spenser's English (and to Doughty's) not as an archaic romanticism (Spenser was already archaic) but as a lamentable consequence of the decline of English diction.¹³ Equally problematic, they insist on the name-like character of language's most basic elements—a noun-centeredness that is the focus of critique both in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (specifically its opening sections) and in the poetics of Riding's one-time ally, Gertrude Stein.

At the same time, the Jacksons reject any external or transcendental vantage point from which language would acquire its truths. They return us, again and again, to language as an enactment, a telling. Truth, in this light, is never exterior to language (there is no extra-linguistic, "independent" reality), just as different languages are not exterior, but rather interior, to each other.

Indeed, *Rational Meaning* is at its best when decrying structuralist and positivist taxonomies that picture language as a nonhuman system, as a corpse, rather than responding to language as an actual site of human being. Objectification of language "tear[s language] out of the contexts

11. *The Telling* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 127; the main part was originally published as an issue of *Chelsea* in 1967.

12. Or, to put it another way, the Jacksons are themselves licentious in their moral censoriousness. I have argued for the value of a bewildering variety of nonstandard language practice, including Riding's, in *Content's Dream: Essays, 1975–1984* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1986), *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), and most recently "Poetics of the Americas", in this collection.

13. Doughty's *The Dawn in Britain* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1906) thusly beginith:

I chant new day-spring, in the Muses' Isles,
Of Christ's eternal Kingdom. Men of the East,
Of hew and raiment strange, and uncouth speech,
Behold, in storm-beat ship, cast nigh our Land!
New Light is risen upon the World, from whence
The dawn doth rise.

of . . . reason" (454), turning it into a dumb show of signs, so that words become mere codes, ciphers for a significance that is always elsewhere, as if meaning accompanies words rather than being revealed through them. Theorizing meaning in terms of codes, symbols, and systems undermines the actuality of language as a practice of immediacy by dislocating meaning from words and toward abstract and hypothetical logics; the result is an alienation of sense and a Taylorization of value. "The particulars of language and not, note, the 'depth structures' that 'underlie' 'all languages' require the attention of that which is neither incidentally nor accidentally related to the world."¹⁴ "Words have a necessity of usefulness for truth impressed into their meanings . . . they are made to tell, to tell thought well, and rightly" (353).

Yet the authors' aspirations can veer toward a neo-Platonic idealization: a "unitary personality of being" (443), in which language, "touching perfection",¹⁵ is emptied of social and historical tempering. According to the Jacksons, words have virtually immutable meanings, the only good language is clear and correct, and poems ought to be banished from the republic as the purveyors of the merely subjective or, worse, the willfully ambiguous. They never stop trying "To hurl life back into the thin teeth / Out of which first it whistled,"¹⁶ insisting that "nothing can have intellectual durability that does not involve an attempt to see the universe as a rational unity" (156).

Yet the vitality of this work is not in its intellectual durability and universality but in its fragility and peculiarity; not in its rational unity but in its utopian, obsessive unreasonableness, even its "idiotic defiance". Though perhaps it is not so much Athens as Sparta that is evoked; for if words make a journey through the world, the Jacksons seem to say, Come back with your words intact, unvarnished, soundless; or use them as shields, warding off all that is destructive and disorienting and vulgar, all that permutes and decays, all that voices frets with chatter. "Come, words, away from mouths," as Laura Riding writes in a poem,

. . . away to where
The meaning is not thickened
With the voice's fretting substance . . .
Come, words, away to miracle

14. I quote from my poem "Palukaville" in *Poetic Justice* (Baltimore, 1979), collected in *Republics of Reality: 1975-1995* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, forthcoming).

15. "[T]he creed offering hope of a way of speaking beyond the ordinary, touching perfection, a complex perfection associated with nothing less complex than truth" (Laura [Riding] Jackson, preface to *Riding's Selected Poems*, p. 12).

16. "The Wind, the Clock, the We", in *Selected Poems*, p. 66. The poem continues: "An idiotic defiance of it knew not what".

More natural than written art.
 You are surely somewhat devils,
 But I know a way to soothe
 The whirl of you when speech blasphemes
 Against the silent half of language . . .
 Centering the utter telling
 In truth's first soundlessness¹⁷

Rational Meaning is, to use Riding's words in a different context, "a hoping col^l".¹⁸ Perhaps it is the ultimate modernist testament to what Pound, himself in search of linguistic perfection, called "the plain sense of the word"; then again, perhaps it is postmodern testimony to what I would call *the pained senselessness of the world*. For if Pound believed that he could stare at a Chinese ideogram and unbare its meaning, Laura and Schuyler Jackson believed such self-evidence present in language's silently lucid pronouncements. For these poets of the anti-poetic, the truth is not in an exterior Idea of Forms but indwelling in the telling of human being in and as language.

Rational Meaning is the book promised in *The Telling*, Laura (Riding) Jackson's great philosophical work on the limits of poetry and the possibility for truth telling. If *The Telling* is (Riding) Jackson's *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*, *Rational Meaning* is her *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (to consider Kierkegaard in this context). *Rational Meaning* is far more cumbersome and argumentative, in its complex and exacting exposition, than *The Telling*, which is a masterpiece of anti-analytic, anti-"literary" diction that more closely resembles Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* or Stein's *Lectures in America*. If *The Telling* is evocative and concise, *Rational Meaning's* very length testifies to its commitment to thoroughness and argument; it eschews the invocativeness of *The Telling* as too poetic; its prose is determinately anti-aesthetic. The authors are at pains not to make their work into a modern *Zarathustra*; Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles* is more their model. Yet *Rational Meaning's* idea of rationality continually turns on the self-evidence of what the authors are telling about language. Thus the work tries to thwart the accumulative or positivistic aspects of much linguistics and philosophy. The Jacksons don't want to get anywhere with their prose; rather they want to return readers to basic facts whose importance they have neglected. "Words themselves are

17. "Come, Words, Away", in *Selected Poems*, p. 59; last two lines only in Laura (Riding) Jackson, *The Poems of Laura Riding: A New Edition of the 1938 Collection* (New York: Persea, 1980), p. 136.

18. *Everybody's Letters* (London: Arthur Barker, 1933), p. 119. Quoted in Baker, *In Extremis*, p. 34. Baker suggests the words are from a letter Riding wrote when she was 10.

the only actual means of rectifying what has happened to words in people's consciousness" (330).

As much as the authors are against "poeticizing", they also are against providing any explanatory paradigm or set of special terms that might be used as a formula or theory for understanding language. This is neither a theory nor a poetics of meaning but a "foundation" of meaning. They want nothing less than a complete turn from the ways that poets and philosophers, anthropologists and social scientists, have regarded—they would say disregarded—language. In the end, it might be best to say that *Rational Meaning* is neither theology nor linguistics nor literature: its work is ethical. It argues for an ecological approach to language, specifically for the value words have in human interconnectivity and the interdependence of language and human being; its call to return to language's "organic identity" echoes calls to respect the earth's natural inhabitations (418). This "green" dimension of *Rational Meaning* may also be worthwhile to consider in connection with the gender of its principal author;¹⁹ in any case, *Rational Meaning* is one of the few philosophical treatises on the nature of language and meaning to be authored, or co-authored, by a woman.

Rational Meaning is in many ways a frustrating work. It is so long, and so preoccupied with its own prophetic significance and panoptic dismissals, that few readers will avoid discouragement.²⁰ The book courts discouragement and irritation, offering strong and unflavored medicine to an ailing society. Palatability, of various contemporary kinds, is exactly what the authors see as a problem. Many prophetic works, especially by such self-styled prophets—"iconoclastic" is the nicer word we have for such artists—are destined to be resented by their "audience". The authors lecture to us as if we were children gone astray. They wish to call us back to the only true path of "the one life-story" of the "One Being" of an "Original Whole" (in the words of *The Telling*). They reject so much philosophy and poetry—all of structuralism and poststructuralism, all of modernism and postmodernism!—that it is foolish, even silly, to take personal offense. Yes, there are similarities between what these authors and what some others have said; but they are less interested in these similarities than in how they differ. This is the ground of their discourse.

If I disagree with much of what the authors say, I have found reasons other than agreement to appreciate what I question, knowing that the

19. See Laura (Riding) Jackson, *The Word Woman and Other Related Writings*, ed. Elizabeth Friedmann and Alan J. Clark (New York: Persea Books, 1993).

20. Critics have responded in kind to (Riding) Jackson's juridical pronouncements, characterizing her approach as "fascinating, frustrating, infuriating, illuminating" (Robert Gorham Davis), "uncompromising, intractable, intransigent" (Martin Seymour-Smith), as well as "dogmatic", "hostile", and "haughty". See Wexler's *Bibliography*, sec. H.

important thing is not to be persuaded by their arguments but to respond to them. The Jacksons stake out a powerful, often eloquent, often deliciously barbed, often achingly arched argument against the relativism of the modern age—one that goes much further in its critique than such anti-modern modernists as T. S. Eliot (as the authors are careful to note). I suspect it is an argument that, ultimately, will take a place of honor in the history of human thought.

This book settles nothing for me; it leaves me with questions that echo in my mind and on my tongue. Poetry—can it be?—a striving not for truthfulness but for truth? And what if all we do as poets—our forms, our structures, our love of sounds and patterns—moves us yet further from this singular truth? What if, that is, words have unitary meanings, call them rational meanings, and what if our poetry, our philosophy, our linguists, our dictionaries, lead us away from this grounded rationality of words—toward some evasive play of relative worth?

Laura (Riding) and Schuyler Jackson call us back not to some truth external to ourselves but to a truth available to all, a truth that is in every word we use, a “truth [that] requires language for its making” (364). They call us back to our rootedness in language, which is our human house, our destined home.