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Mrs. Jackson is Riding my Thought

by Barbara Henning

I'm going to begin with a few passages from Laura Riding's introductions to her poems, then I'll read a few poems, offer some thoughts on the legend of Laura Riding, a brief biography, and finally I'll try to tie all this together by addressing the questions Elaine Equi has raised about the relationship between gender, style and content. *I believed in the possibility of a transformation through poetic apprehension of the spiritual function of language and the natural force of the life-breath of the word-animating human mind, of ordinary verbal intercourse into a spiritually successful order of human existence. ("Introduction" *The Poems of Laura Riding*)

I think poetry obstructs general attainment to something better in our linguistic way-of-life than we have. I can only hope that the poems themselves will soften this inconsistency by making the nature of poetry, to which they are faithful, plainer, in its forced, fine, suspension of truth. ("Preface" *Selected Poems*)

Afternoon

The fear of afternoon
Is called afternoon
Old sleep up torn,
Not yet time for night-time,
No other name, for no names
In the afternoon
but afternoon.

Love tries to speak but sounds
So close in its own ear.
The clock-ticks hear
The clock-ticks ticking back.
The fever fills where throats
show,
But nothing in these horrors moves to swallow
While thirst

trails afternoon To husky sunset.

Evening appears with mouths When afternoon can talk. Supper and bed open and close And love makes thinking dark. More afternoons divide the night, New sleep up torn, Wakeful suspension between dream and dream-- We never knew how long. The sun is late by hours of soon and soon-- Then comes the quick fever, called day. But the slow fever is called afternoon.

From Echoes

23. Love is very everything, like fire: Many things burning. But only one combustion.

24. My address? At the cafes, cathedrals, Green fields, marble terminals-- I teem with place. When? Any moment finds me, Reiterated morsel Expanded into space.

25. Let us seem to speak Or they will think us dead, revive us. Nod brightly, Hour. Rescue us from rescue.

26. What a tattle-tattle we. And what a rattle-rattle me. What a rattle-tattle-tattle-rattle we-me. What a rattle-tattle. What a tattle-rattle. What a we. What a me. What a what a What a What I'm happy to be invited to talk about Laura Riding and her writing because I admire her work and I am always moved by her poetry into a thinking place (I team with place), thinking about what poetry is, how one's identity-in-process is shaped and formed through words (Reiterated morsel), in particular the grammaring of a woman's identity, and how love and loss are intertwined in this process (Expanded into space) as living linguistic idea-events, written, not described (When? Any moment finds me), of-being-written, not about. Riding's project as I understand it is to uplift her reader's word-experience, to undo the lying word and arrive at a primal experience with language, as an act of continually uncovering. For

some, her work is seen as too difficult, and often she is viewed as a very difficult woman. But born of that same spirit and strength of the difficult-woman, is her collection of beautiful thinking poems, eight books of fiction, eleven books of philosophical-critical-evangelical prose and many many letters to the editors of journals and reviews. As a difficult woman, the legend of Laura Riding, has taken shape in biographies, reviews, articles, letters and memoirs. The voices of W.H. Auden, Hart Crane, Nancy Cunard, Dennis Donaghue, Harry Mathews, T.M. Mathews, Kenneth Rexroth, Julian Symons, Allen Tate, Virginia Woolf among others: "Laura Riding Roughshod" "she wore a gold wire crown which spelled out Laura" "sybil of poetry" "beautiful in a ferocious way" "a superior and independent thinker" "poet, muse and occasional fury" "meticulous" "ruthless manipulator" "no worse than Pound, Eliot, Joyce or Gertrude Stein" "deep conviction" "unjustly neglected" "indistinctly supernatural" "a shallow, egotistical cock-crowing creature" "a damn bad poet" "takes to task" "belligerent spirit" "harsh and splendid in rigor and discipline" "sarcastic" "forbidding" "severe, obscure and hostile" "messianic" "bully" "queen bore" "hysterical temper" "a tough person" "bizarre personality" "an outsider" "the Jewess" "the American" "shrewd, avant gardist, brittle and more than a little superficial" "adversarial" "a feminist malgré elle" "refused to be one of the dead bodies of literature" "a contrary poet" "quite the most intelligent woman I've seen" "cruel" "a force of nature" (What a rattle tattle) "like lightning" "the affronted virago" (What a tattle rattle) "tyrannical home wrecker" "ardently romantic" "maddest woman I've ever met" "queen of modernist poetry" "self-righteousness" (What a we) "a transcendentalist" "a platonist" "apolitical" (What a me) "contempt for middle class values" "Laura was a witch" "the only living philosophical poet" (What a what a) "tendency toward extreme individualism and poetic isolation" (What a) "woman of vision" "greatest lost poet in American literature" "one of America's great modernist poets" (What) "I am tidy, quick, hard-working, good humored, and let

absolutely nothing go by" (1933).

*Laura (Riding) Jackson, Madelaine Vara, Barbara Rich, Laura Riding, Laura Gottchalk, Laura Reichenenthal was born in New York City. Her father, Nathan Reichenenthal, was a Jewish immigrant from Austria, and her mother, Sadie Edersheim, was New York born daughter of German immigrants. Both worked in sweatshops in the garment district. As an avid socialist and reader of theory, her father hoped Laura would become the American Rosa Luxemburg. She attended Girls High School in Brooklyn, began writing poetry at the age of fifteen, won three scholarships to Cornell, left college to marry a history professor, and somewhere along the line renounced socialism. She was recognized early on by the Fugitives who published her in their journal and gave her a national award. Allen Tate expressed hope in a letter that Riding would be the one "to save America from the Edna St Vincent Millays". In a private letter to Tate, however, John Crowe Ransom complained, "She had neither birth, subsistence, place, reputation nor friends, and was a very poor little woman indeed". Her collaboration with the fugitives was brief; she was too difficult, low class, bohemian and experimental. Within a short time, she divorced, moved to New York City and then to London with Robert Graves, his wife and children. After a suicide attempt in 1929 in which she broke her back leaping from a window, she and Graves separated from his family and eventually moved to Spain. Her first book was published by Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press. With Graves, she wrote criticism, founded a literary magazine, Epilogue, and Seizen Press, publishing Stein's *An Acquaintance with Description*. The Spanish Civil War forced Graves and Riding to leave Spain and relocate in the United States. In 1941, Graves returned to Spain while Riding married Schuyler Jackson, renounced poetry writing for life and moved to Wabasso Florida where she and Jackson worked together on an immense, life long project, a dictionary, linking language, spiritual knowledge and rational principles so to be exact and literal, in a poetic way.

Around the time of Schuyler Jackson's death in 1968, she allowed her poetry and prose to be republished but only with her renunciations attached. She stayed in Wabasso living alone for twenty-two years in a small house behind a citrus grove, far away from town, without any electricity. In the same year in which she died, 1991, at age ninety she was awarded the Bollingen prize for poetry from Yale.

*"riddling ambiguities" "syntax of the mind" "outsight"
"reminiscent of Dickinson" "impulse of emotions" "Puritan self-examining idealist"
Riding writes, "My muse is I" (from "Laura and Francisca". Yeats writes, "Riding's school was too thoughtful, reasonable and truthful . . . poets were good liars who never forgot that the Muses were women who liked the embrace of gay warty lads". To be a Riding-poet and to be woman is to be the muse musing on oneself. Riding doesn't take the warty lad as muse, and she doesn't fall into the mirror either because she refuses to become less than possible; she muses on the structure, form and word with which the woman-muse becomes her own subject. In her line, "The stuttering slow grammaring of self" (from "Memories of Mortalities") she places this initial grammaring between the mother and the daughter. Before the law of the father, in Riding there is the grammar of the mother. *

"algebraic in her logic, abstraction and economy" "a whole dictionary of un-words" "prosodically eccentric" "thinks as ideas" "a circular logic" "a new vocabulary" "quizzical and essentially discursive" "dead serious" "admirable" "extreme statement"-- As an intellectual working class woman poet, Riding gave up her paternal name and her husband's name, perhaps in an attempt to erase her cultural and class background or perhaps as a necessary unravelling and undoing. Prior to 1936 she wrote a series of essays on sexual difference.. "Women" she writes in *The Word "Woman"* "are strangers in the country of man," with very different characteristics, habits of mind and ways of thinking. But man

according to Riding has decided "that it is not a thought-process but merely an irritating peculiarity of women". "The standard of humanity" becomes maleness, in order to increase his confidence in the "universality of maleness". Twoness is truth, for Riding, not in terms of equality, but as a holding together of the difference of two. She writes, "Women suffering from man-fever must be regarded as absent from their identity". Riding knows that selves are constructed in language between encounters with each other, but at the border, women often smile, submit and compromise instead of meeting as two. Each poem she considered a part of her self-becoming, her "diary of identity": "A poem is an advanced degree of self". So, to the gentlemanly critics, reviewers and literary voices who misread her and modernist writing in general, she responds sharply and corrects with certainty, as far from feminine docility as possible. From "Memories of Mortalities": What will they write of me? They wrote nothing different, of course. I saw that I should have to go back And write my story myself. *

"precision and purity of thought" "intense and unflogging repetitiousness" "a blood relationship to the tone of Gertrude Stein" "vivid clash of opposites" "profoundly cerebral" "evocative phrasing" "extremism of paradox" "uncanniness" "repetition of phrase" "mystical"--Riding rescues "words from the socially habitual disordered thought" by working backwards to what she might call the primal play of opposites long obscured by the dualism inherent in the masculine narrative. While the Dadaists were working at destroying and overthrowing Western logic, she hammered with her words, lightly, heavily, believing that there was a humane woman-logic in the roots of language. While her purposeful and careful linguistic experiments sound a little like Gertrude Stein (and at one time they were friends), in fact, Riding wants to release this meaning rather than "rid it of all furniture of definition" (her critique of Stein).* "intellectual" "metaphysical" "regulated child mentality" "quickness and cleanness of thought"

"exhausting and cerebral" "obscure" "abstractions abound" "the most difficult and at the same time the most lucid" "lack of metaphor and imagery" "not scholastic" "no formal metrical structure" "no symbols" "almost complete renunciation of rhyme" "non-objectivist" "everything takes place in absence" "For in the end it as a poet that she will be read and remembered"-- Riding rejects modernist poetry with so much T.S. Eliot reference to past poetry. In *The Telling*, she calls his mythic method a "production of a cloud" . . . " a fake poetics". Her work is uncluttered with images, metaphors or symbols. The word in her poetry becomes the meaning-thing; rather than an image in the conventional sense, there is an enacting of self in plain unordinary speech. Don't confuse this plainness, however, with what she calls the typical or commonplace, suitable, that which is in fact a downlevelling of thought. In most of her poems she begins with the elementary, the simply stated, in order to teach, as she says in the 1938 preface to her *Collected Poems*, that the reason for reading poetry is not to be put into a poetic mood or to enjoy unusual illusions and drama, but instead " to uncover fundamental and general truths". She begins simply, and as we follow along, each word leads into more and more complexities. And the structure of her life work with the poems at the core expands after she renounces poetry into a discourse seeking the plain truth and yet circling back, explaining, rebuking, constructing a self who becomes more and more philosophical and complicated, verifying in fact the slipperiness of the words and her truth, as the seeking, not the found.

*We could say that Riding has been censored or missing in American literary history because she has received more critical attention in England or because she has been considered for the most part as a character in Robert Graves' life. And I am sure that these have been significant factors, but I think she was missing for the most part by her own choice and in response to her growing perception that the poem as she knew it put a limit to her seeking. She renounced poetry in 1939 for rest of her writing life, moved

away to a run down farm in Florida and for many years, refused even republication. She also created a network of negations in order to protect her "self" and her "project" which was spiraling away from "the poem". In her protection of her own authority, she purposefully excluded herself from many other projects. To allow her "self" to be rewritten or unfairly reviewed or even explained by a third party was to hand over the authority of her "self." Riding resented being reduced, defined and put into a critical or biographical framework which she saw as alien to her writing. To even those who admired her work, she often responded with sharp and precise corrections and disagreements. For example, when in 1974, Jerome Rothenberg included her in his anthology, *Revolution of the Word*, she included a "Statement of Disagreement" in which she criticized the title of the book, accused the other poets of "using poetry to give literary legitimacy to positions that are but variations on stock modernistic sophistications." She refused to acknowledge any relevance of her work to a redefinition and a questioning of contemporary poetry; she scoffed at the use of the word "revolutionary" and "avant garde". Her creed had been that of "right work and craft of sensuous phoneticalities". In the new Rothenberg and Joris anthology, *Poems for the Millennium*, she now has one poem and her poetics is referred to as "antimodernist". Perhaps Riding would have been pleased. She disliked all "isms" including "feminism, and even though she wrote extensively about how women think differently from men, she refused to allow her work be published in any of the feminist anthologies in the 60's and 70s . She consequently has been ignored by the major feminist histories of poetry. If she had lived to be sixty rather than ninety, I think she might have been represented as a woman writer of importance. But she spoke back instead, refused to let her story be commented upon or misrepresented, and so now we have her wonderful speaking back voice--so I began to live. It was outrageous, I made mortal mistakes, I did not mean to live so mortally.

But something must be written about me,And not by them.So I
began those mistold confidencesWhich now read like profanity of
selfTo my internal eyeAnd which my critic hand erasesAs the story
grows too different to speak ofIn the way the world
speaks.(Memories of Mortalities)Some Notes

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Collages are constructed from passages by Hart Crane, Jane Marcus, Barbara Adams, Julian Symons, Harry Mathews, Nancy Cunard, Richard Perceval Graves, Virginia Woolf, K.K. Ruthven, Joyce Wexler, Martin Seymour Smith, Geoffrey Grigson, Joseph Katz, John Graves, J.M. Bradbury, Jo Ann Wallace, Allen Tate, Dennis Donaghue, Paul Auster, Kit Jackson, W.H. Auden, Kenneth Rexroth, Laura Riding, M.L. Rosenthal, Sonia Raissez, T.M. Mathews, Ian Hamilton, Schuyler Jackson, Susan Schultz and John Crowe Ransom. Barbara Henning, 1/4/96