Laura (Riding) Jackson: The "I" Thing

"This is I, I: the I-thing"

---from "the Second Leaf"

Come, words, away from mouths,
Away from tongues in mouths
And reckless hearts in tongues
And mouths in cautious heads--

Come, words, away to where
The meaning is not thickened
With the voice's fretting substance,
Nor look of words is curious
As letters in books staring out
All that man ever thought strange
And laid to sleep on white
Like the archaic manuscript
Of dreams at morning blacked on wonder....

But never shall truth circle so
Till words prove language is
How words come from far sound away
Through stages of immensity's small
Centering, the utter telling
In truth's first soundlessness.

Come, words, away:
I am a conscience of you
Not to be held unanswered past
The perfect number of betrayal.
It is a smarting passion
By which I call--
Wherein the calling's loathsome as
Memory of man-flesh over-fondled
With words like over-gentle hands.
Then come, words, away,
Before lies claim the precedence of sin
And mouldered mouths writhe to outspeak us.

--from "Come, Words, Away"

Truth, thought, language: these are the building blocks of Laura Riding's (1901-1991) poetics. "A poem," she states in her preface to her *Collected Poems* (1938), "is an uncovering of truth of so fundamental and general a kind that no other name besides poetry is adequate except truth. Knowledge implies specialized fields of exploration and discovery; it would be inexact to call poetry a kind of knowledge." Riding's vision of the identity of the poet as truth-sayer is both venerable and radical. Along with other American expatriates, she participated in the debates over modernism. She, along with her collaborator Robert Graves, was a pivotal influence on William Empson and his treatise *Seven Types of Ambiguity,* as well as the development of New Criticism. Riding's literary persona was public and performative: as poet, critic, publisher of books and journals, modern woman (she scandalized many with her menage à trois arrangement with Graves and his wife, painter Nancy Nicholson) and, eventually, art-martyr, with her renunciation of poetry in the early 1940's. This paper attempts to come to terms with the slippery poetics of Laura Riding as articulated in her critical writings and as borne out in her creative work.

"Come, words, away" is the poet's imperative to flee the vulgar aspects of utterance: the physicality of "tongues in mouths"; the emotion-flamed petitions of "reckless hearts"; the unoriginal restraint of the common thinker. Words need escape from being weighted, need escape to preserve their essential embodiment, their meanings. In this poem, Riding constructs a cosmology for language in which words are the pulse of absolute values. Like the fruit that ripens around its seed, words gel around a soundless center. Words rarified then runically rendered: "as letters in books" they bear witness to all "man ever thought strange." This is the poet's function: to render "strange," to conceptualize in a new and precise way in order to achieve, at distillation's end, the removal of the emotional, corporeal discoloration. To codify thought the poet must bring back truth from the province of absolutes--the airy realm of dreams--back through the midnight travail, to fix it finally with all the totemic authority of revelation: "Of dreams at morning blacked in wonder." Thought/words, like animate spirits, migrate from the home-ground of Meaning "(t)hrough stages of immensity's small / Centering"; each, in effect, is tagged with its specific definition. Rebanding creates a congress of meanings--a communication, a language, a system: "the utter telling," Truth. "I am conscience of you": "I," the poet, forms order from the nimbus of meaning. In urgent call to elopement, words minister and prod the poet past rough passions ("Memory of man-flesh over-fondled") and imperfect dependencies ("betrayal") where meanings are corrupted into lies which move toward de/composition and toward death--the final dispersion of significance.

This interpretation is necessarily metaphysical, for so is Riding's entire premise and vision for poetry. The critic Joyce Piell Wexler summarizes Riding's poetry as "a way of thinking rather than just a method of writing" (15). Her poetry is a record of thought, its process, and the relationship of language to human consciousness. Like others, Riding moves through themes of selfhood, love, anger, and fear; however, her focus in the poetry is the mind's response to emotional states as opposed to their sensual evocation. In the essay "Poetry and the Literary Universe" (*Contemporaries and Snobs*), Riding explicates her distinctions:

> here is a sense of life so real that it becomes the sense of something more real than life. Spatial and temporal sequences can only partially express it. It introduces a principle of selection into the undifferentiated quantitative appetite and thus changes accidental emotional forms into deliberate intellectual forms; animal experiences related by time and space into human experiences related in infinite degrees of kind. It is the meaning at work in what has no meaning; it is, at its clearest, poetry (9).

Riding's inspiration occurs in the realm of the head and not the heart, as she states in her poem "Pride of Head": "My head is at the top of me / Where I live mostly and most of the time, / Where my face turns an inner look / On what's outside of me." In "Come, Words, Away," the creation of poems "is a smarting passion / ... / Wherein the calling's loathsome." The poet is words' conscience, for whom the endeavor is a "smarting passion," (figuratively and literally) a word play of pain and intelligence. Riding locates the reason for writing (and reading) poetry in "a tremendous compulsion that overcomes a tremendous inertia." This "loathsome" task is elaborated in her preface to the *Collected Poems:*

> It is quite true that when someone sits down to write or read a poem the amount of inertia to be overcome is greater than with any other activity. It is greater than with the most distasteful activity conceivable, with the activity that one knows before-hand will be most unpleasant in performance and most unprofitable in result.

In this Promethean effort, the poet gains a classical authority which Riding describes in her poem "Then Follows" (*Twenty Poems Less*):

> Ah, the pity of it for me,
> To be by name a poet,
> To make myself plain,
>
> And yet not to make myself plain
> Because of being by name a poet,
> A creature before man and beyond God.
> Yes, such a creature by name,
> But by nature like yourselves and God,
> Like God, a creature of mind,
> Like you, a creature of mouth.

And, prophet-like,

> ...the poet is called upon again to remind people what the universe really looks and feels like, that is, what language means. If he does this conscientiously he must use language in a fresh way or even, if the poetical language has grown too stale and there are few pioneers before him, invent new language (*A Survey of Modernist Poetry* 94).

As Riding envisions pure thought, so she constructed her poetry in distilled, compressed, and unadorned language. Word choice is often moralistic and philosophic. Syntax is contorted and sacrificed in favor of precision. As a rule, Riding avoids sense-based imagery and the poetic devices of analogy, metaphor, and symbolism as she seeks an expression of essential reality over its impressionistic or representative shadow. At times, the poetry maintains a suggestion of metrical pattern but more to the effect of ordering and less to enlist a reader's sensual response. When ordinary language cannot accurately describe the pioneering vision, Riding will invent new words: through compounding ("book-death"); by transforming adverbs into nouns ("an onlywhere of everywhere"); by creating polar meanings by prefixing "non," "un," "no" ("no-sense"); through personal graphics ("There is a T and I") (Wexler 58-63). Often written in the first person, Riding's poetry allows direct appeal yet maintains impersonality. This "I" is a universal identity and not the expression of individual experience: an "I-Thing." Likewise, time and place references are generalized. There is an enduring Classicism in Riding's search for universality, absolute values, permanence, and order. Riding explains the timeless quality of her poems: "Prose is slow poetry, poetry however is not quick prose. Poetry is not motion" (*Though Gently* 13).

Inspired Twentieth-Century modern or Platonic extremist? However defined, Laura Riding believed in poetry and participated passionately in the dialogue for its definition in the first three decades of this century. As an expatriate, poet, critic, and publisher, her life both paralleled those of other American writers of her time and diverged as the austerity of her poetic vision and her subsequent renunciation of poetry seemed to place her far beyond the company of any one poetic movement. Riding's idealistic zealotry plus the literary scandals attached to her name: the thirteen year association with poet Robert Graves, her suicide attempt, the loss of faith in poetry--all cut an engrossing public identity. Symbolic also of her obsession with accurate definition was Riding's curious transfiguration of her authorial name throughout her career. Riding's search for the "I-thing," the precise rendering of human consciousness and truth through poetry, extends to her evolving definition of the "I"dentity of the poet, the "I"dentity of poetry, and eventually the "I"dentity of language as a complete system of meanings.

Born Laura Reichenthal, the poet began publishing under the name Laura Riding Gottschalk. Riding was a self-appointed replacement for her father's surname, while Gottschalk was her legal name after her marriage to Louis Gottschalk in 1920. During the first half of the 1920s, Riding participated in New York literary circles, along with Hart Crane, Allen Tate, Malcolm Cowley, e.e. cummings, and Mark Van Doren. Van Doren, poetry editor of *The Nation,* accepted several of her poems for publication as did Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry*. With the encouragement of Allen Tate, Riding began publishing in *Fugitive,* a broadsheet for a coalition of rebellious Southern writers, and was awarded their Nashville Prize in 1924 as the one "to save America from the Edna Millays!" Riding's only real connection with the *Fugitive's* rather amorphous position was her efforts to forge a new breed of poetry (Wexler 10). Also associated with the Fugitives was the British poet Robert Graves. He and Riding became aware of one another through the journal, and they pursued a correspondence which uncovered shared poetic ideals. Graves invited her to England to collaborate on a book of modernist verse. Riding's acceptance limited what was to become a thirteen-year romantic and literary association.

Publishing then under the name of Laura Riding, she and Graves produced *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927). The book is important as an early statement of Riding's position on the importance of the word as the basic poetic unit of meaning and also for having laid the groundwork for a methodology of close textual analysis later espoused by the New Critics. Often accused of writing poems of unnecessary difficulty, Riding turned to critical writing as a means to articulate her position and to cultivate a more informed (and wider) readership. Riding saw education as part of the poet's role; however, responsibility was placed upon the reader to come to an understanding of the poems on the poems' terms and not according to conventional standards and forms. Through the Twenties she prolifically put forth her moralistic position on art as a "constant value" with the poet as privileged knower of truth. She produced three books of poetry: *The Close Chaplet* (1926), *Voltaire, A Biographical Fantasy* (1927), *Love as Love, Death as Death* (1928), plus numerous critical treatises, tracts, articles including *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), *Contemporaries and Snobs* (1928), *Anarchism Is Not Enough* (1928), *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (1928). In addition, Graves and Riding founded Seizen Press (1927-39) and were the editors and publishers of *Epilogue, A Critical Summary.* The decade ended with Riding's 1929 attempted suicide, the result of an unhappy love affair. The event came to have symbolic and poetic significance for her. As in T. S. Eliot's case, crisis provided fertile ground for the invigoration of new elements in the work. Riding came to view her survival as a "suicide resurrection." The betrayal of emotional reality further intensified her philosophic mind/body division: "a world and its shadow / The flesh. / The head one world / And the body is another" ("Because of Clothes"). Death, as a theme, became increasingly present in her work; and it achieved the heightened position of an absolute in her poetic universe:

"For they are dead. / They have learned to be truthful. / Respect for the truthfulness of the dead" ("Respect for the Dead").

While many modernist writers moved from aesthetic experimentation toward a poetry of commitment during the Thirties, Riding continued on her established path, however, with a new tone of suspicion toward language and the power of the poet to perceive and articulate truth. In her 1933 publication *Poet: A Lying Word,* she began to modify her commitment to poetry. Language is now seen as a seducer and betrayer. In the prose poem "Poet: A Lying Word," she states: "It is a false wall, a poet: it is a lying word. It is a wall that halts and does not halt." Riding increasingly employs paradox in her poems as a means to spell out truth. Things are known by their negation or contradiction, as in the poem "Benedictory Close":

> And we are not, least am I.
> First I was a woman, and I feigned.
> Then I was yourselves, and I fooled.
> Then I was a spirit, and I subtilized.
>
> Now I am not, utterly I am not.
> Utterly is that which is.
> Utterly I bring that which is.
> Least am I, quickest not to be am I.
> ...
> Therefore close all our eyes on us.
> And in such slow voiding do you wait.
> For into such slow voiding shall I bring.
> Quickly the indivisible.

In 1938 Riding issued her *Collected Poems* with an introductory preface at once so confident and defiant as to offend many of the collection's early reviewers. Riding begins with a defense of her work from charges of difficulty and inaccessibility. She states that the reader's purpose should be equal to the poet's; however, most readers have been miseducated in the "reasons of poetry": "Is it not astonishing that, *because* I am a poet who writes strictly for the reasons of poetry, I am in the position of having to justify myself for not having other reasons, for not appealing to readers who read poems for reasons other than those of poetry, even for not appealing to those who do not read poems?" Indeed, difficulty in this case is the stamp of the purity of her manufacture. In convoluted, highly abstract and theoretical language Riding moralizes upon the "good existence," "poetry positive, poetry actual." She makes assertions without explanation--for truth requires none.

> I am not going to give you a list of all the reasons of poetry. I am going to give you poems written for all the reasons of poetry--poems which are also a record of how, by gradual integration of the reasons of poetry, existence in poetry becomes more real than existence in time--more real because more good, more good because more true.

And she lashes out at her contemporaries for their misguided worship of false gods:

> ...dishonesty accounts for much of the neglect of the reasons of poetry. Poets have attributed the compulsion of poetry to forces outside themselves--to divinities, muses, and, finally, even to such humanistic muses as Politics. Thus W. H. Auden, unwilling to conceive that a large-scale compulsion may originate in the poet, has told me that I am "the only living philosophical poet"--my muse is, presumably, Philosophy, as his is Politics. . . And T. S. Eliot on leaving his university, wandered free without a muse until, his reasonlessness becoming unendurable to him, he made himself a tailor's dummy of Religion.

Laura Riding's poetic activities ceased with the outbreak of World War II when she and Robert Graves sailed to the United States to settle in New Hope, Pennsylvania. The ever-widening division in Riding's poetic schema between the sensate and cerebral had ended in an aesthetic stalemate. In 1939 her collection was favorably reviewed in *Time* magazine by the critic Schuyler B. Jackson. Jackson's concordance with her work and aims forged an amity which led to their marriage in 1941. In 1943 Laura (Riding) Jackson and her husband moved to Wabasso, Florida, where they isolated themselves from literary circles and survived as proprietors of a fruit orchard. The couple committed themselves to linguistic study and the preparation of "A Working Dictionary and Thesaurus." In a 1962 interview, Riding finally broke her silence regarding her rejection of poetry:

> I came close to achieving, in my poems, trueness of intonation and direct presence of mind in word. But, what I achieved in this direction was ever sucked into the whorl of poetic artifice, with its overpowering necessities of patterned rhythm and harmonic sound-play, which work distortions upon the natural proprieties of tone and word.

The decision to move from poetic compostion to language studies was consonant with Riding's values; and her renunciation can be seen as a kind of absolute enactment, a heroic martyrdom which Riding accused the public of not fully appreciating.

Almost thirty years after his break with Laura Riding, Robert Graves still hailed her as "not only the most original poet of the Twenties and Thirties but the only one who spoke with authority as a woman." A maverick voice certainly, yet literary predecessors may be traced for Riding's singular vision. She shares with Emily Dickinson a certain purity and distillation of expression, compression of form, suspicion of the unusual, and a focused spiritual exploration. Compare Dickinson's "I'm nobody. Who are

you? / Are you nobody too? / Then there's a pair of us. / Don't tell--they'd banish us, you know" with Riding's "I say myself. / Never was I not. / Never was I not. / Never has there been not now. / I am now because I never was not" ("Disclaimer of the Person"). A literary lineage can be traced through Romanticism's celebration of the self to Riding's epistemological articulations. Bypassing the imagination, she moves directly into the realm of thought--as invested in words, as revealed in language. A secular mystic, Riding mines language for evidence of consciousness and truth: "to know their inward nature they must know their words." In her voiced distaste for "mere period modernism," Riding did not directly participate in Imagism or other early experimental movements. Shared affinities, nevertheless, can be traced with several of her contemporaries. Along with Marianne Moore, Riding believed in a morality of purpose for poetry. Both she and e.e. cummings evidence an originality in word use and the desire to push language to the extreme in the interests of meaning. Despite her years abroad, Riding identified herself as an American poet:

> I was, indeed, an American poet. My birth-placement and scene of growing-up have had effect in the personal mood of my life and work. In my responses, to the course of circumstances, I am unreservedly open to impression, my feeling frank in the quality of their occurrence in me, and ready for call upon them to manifest themselves; I am prompt in my responses of feeling, in the American manner of treating what is immediately there as personally immediate (*Collected Poems* reissue 12).

Perhaps, in the end, Laura Riding envisioned her husband and herself a new Adam and Eve, the pioneers of linguistic boundaries: "I know of no one besides myself and my husband Schuyler. . . who has put feet across the margin on the further ground--the margin being the knowledge that truth begins where poetry ends" (*Selected Poems: in Five Sets* 14-15).

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