

# **Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words and Supplementary Essays.** **Laura (Riding) Jackson and Schuyler B. Jackson**

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pages.**

Originally begun as a dictionary, *Rational Meaning* became an extended lexicographical preface which aims to lay a universal foundation for the definition of words:

[This book] probes the nature of language and the principles of word-relationship, as the principles by which words mean what they mean, and exemplifies, in practical demonstration, the possibilities of distinct knowledge of the meanings of words and of lexicographically accurate definition of them. (39)

*Rational Meaning* is also an account of the authors' thinking during the lengthy process of completing the book for publication and a testimony to the self-professed difficulty of its declared project: 'Whether it is believed or not that words are definable, the necessity of making attempts to state meaning is universally recognised' (221). The tension between attempting new definitions and describing the aporia of defi-

tion, however, provides much of the vibrancy of the text. Although the argument that meaning is inherent in words rather than in contexts does not chime with contemporary cultural materialist theories, the publication of *Rational Meaning* is to be welcomed because it marks the end of a journey to publication which has spanned half a century.

The massive text is an evolution from, rather than an extension of, a *Dictionary of Exact Meanings* begun with Robert Graves in 1933 (initial helpers were Jacob Bronowski and Eirlys Roberts), of which the subsequent working title was *Dictionary of Related Meanings*. On her return to the United States in 1939, Laura Riding, joined by Schuyler Brinckerhoff Jackson (they married in 1941), worked on the dictionary 'until at least 1948', as Charles Bernstein's introduction records (xii), when they were driven to fundamental reconsideration of the project. It eventually became known to them as *Rational Meaning* and when Schuyler Jackson died in 1968 they were more than half-way through. It took Riding a while to know how to proceed without him but, helped by a 1973 Guggenheim Fellowship (10-11), she eventually completed the manuscript in the mid-1970s; she continued to try to get it published until her health failed at the end of the 1980s. In her Second Preface (28-9), Laura Jackson relates that it was at first accepted by an English publisher (probably J.M. Dent) who later withdrew the offer. After her death, her Board of Literary Management renewed the search for a publisher; their eventual success was aided by Charles Bernstein's endorsement of the book.

Although Riding's main pre-war collaborators were Robert Graves and Alan Hodge (from 1936), their part in the evolution of *Rational Meaning* is erased from the Jacksons' account. In a brief biographical sketch in the 'Introduction', Bernstein mentions Graves' interest and participation, but in the 'First Preface', Riding refers simply to her sense of growing distance from 'the helpers I had chosen'. The job of the helpers was to 'gather files of words, assist me in organising words into groups for related definition, and bring critical scrutiny to bear on my proposed definitions.' They were not, however, sufficiently rigorous:

There entered secondarily into the circumstances under which the first phase of the project failed manifestations of differences in attitude to the project between the helpers I had chosen and myself. There was not in them such impassionedness towards matters and problems of language as there was in myself. They went about their first labors in it with a certain lightness of mood, and with

more literary than linguistic sensitivity to the words they assembled. This eased the task, which had elements of drudgery in it, and created no immediate difficulties. But the differences were very strongly felt by me in conferences I asked over my first definitional ventures. There was no joint application to commonly perceived difficulties; my trial determinations met, all, with approval. I needed, for help, companionship in the work, as of its nature difficult, besides solemnity of feeling about words. (16)

Although Riding recalls that the work's objectives altered and enlarged when she met Jackson, the fundamental aim of *Rational Meaning*, to redeem words from 'improper usage'—which meant ambiguity and synonym, because these detract from the intrinsic meaning of words—was the impulse for some of her early work with Graves. For example, in one of the thirteen supplementary essays, 'On Ambiguity', Riding recalls her and Graves' analysis of ambiguity in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927). The essays which they published in *Epilogue* (1935-7), such as 'The Exercise of English' (vol. 2 Summer 1936), also demonstrate their thinking which was preliminary to *Rational Meaning*.

Another of the book's supplementary essays, 'The Matter of Metaphor', is a useful entry into *Rational Meaning* in that it presents the argument in miniature. As a term, metaphor represents the problem with all words in that it equates to an act of substitution and is therefore an act of approximation rather than of accuracy. Moreover, metaphor demonstrates the inadequacy of words to operate as signs and shows that, in a sense, all language usage is metaphoric:

It is, as a common feature of linguistic practice, an incidental expediency, a homely administering of first-aid by mother-wit to jams and halts in expression suddenly confronting speakers, with no respectable linguistic solution immediately in sight. (507)

If we want to spring to the defence of metaphor, we at least have to explore our attachment to it which involves some process of definition: this kind of response does, in fact, achieve the writers' objective in that it makes readers confront the ways by which they have come to classify and use terms such as 'metaphor'. As Bernstein points out, the best thing about the book is the way it makes one react: 'The important thing is not to be persuaded by their arguments but to respond to them' (xviii).

The business of definition is addressed more specifically in Part 4, using 'change' and 'alter' as examples of the difference between syn-

onyms and 'exact meaning'. Part 5 develops the demonstration of a new kind of lexicography through discussion about whether words operate as 'signs' with reference to 'man' 'woman' and 'sex'. Part 6, 'Studies in Meaning-Relation and Meaning-Distinction', outlines the new lexicographical possibilities of defining words through relation and distinction, although there is as much about the process of the new lexicography as the practice. It looks at word relationships and word-collections and is useful in helping readers of Riding's poetry understand why she rejected metaphor, symbol and rhythm as circumlocutions of poetry because they point away from the words rather than to an intrinsic meaning. Furthermore, Riding rejected poetry and other disciplines because she believed that 'where language is converted into the mere instrument of an art, it loses its virtue as the expressive instrument of humanity' (23-4). *Rational Meaning* aims to point the way to moral and spiritual development in the individual through extending their awareness of the inherent meaning of words as understood through the interrelations between words.

Although close to structuralist thought in defining words through their relatedness, the authors object to Saussurean notions of meaning as relative or differential. They also reject the theories of Chomsky, Derrida, Lacan, and Lévi-Strauss because, like Saussure, these do not acknowledge a spiritual or moral function of language:

The notions of Claude Lévi-Strauss, in which extensive application is made of linguistic structuralism, suggest just such an intellectually totalitarian vision of the future. . . . Here is the artistically fatuous, sociologically priggish, intellectually barbaric conception of "communication" as a comprehensive social process. (147)

The heart of the Jacksons' interest in raising standards of word use is consistently the moral and spiritual development of the individual:

What is here offered is not a philosophical, psychological, sociological, anthropological, or literary apparatus of linguistical analysis, but a finding that truth for human beings is what their own words can be made to speak for them and that to use their words for truth they must know them perfectly well. (22)

In this respect, *Rational Meaning* complements *The Telling* (1972) in exploring the importance of the 'soul' and 'spirit'. Laura (Riding) Jackson never resolved the question of whether some can 'tell' for all — i.e. assume the role of a representative or guide. Hence, she aimed for a universal speech: a language in which there would become no difference between the Teller and the individual tale he/she was rep-

resenting. In *The Telling*, she refers to *Rational Meaning* as a work-in-progress:

I have been engaged, with my husband, for many years, in preparing a work on language in which the relation between the spiritual basis of language and the rational principles informing it is traced, and the operation of those principles explored in the patterning of word-meaning; the work's object is the demonstration of the dependence of good (in all the senses) diction on the use of words with attentive regard for their individual rational nature, and the general function of language as the articulation of our humanness. (*Telling*, 69-70)

An early version of *The Telling* was initially printed in New York in 1967 in the magazine *Chelsea*. It could be argued that both *The Telling* and *Rational Meaning* are crucial to understanding Riding's poetry.

*Rational Meaning* is a statement contesting the relevance of historical contexts and social change to poetry, philosophy and dictionaries. Orthodox dictionaries were found to be unsatisfactory because they impoverished language though contextualising the meaning of words. Chapter 5 of Part 2 is useful in explaining the distinction which the authors make between bad and the best employment of words; the distinction rests between what usage prescribes and what language prescribes: 'the difference between usage and language as bases for determining right standards of word-use is a difference between *context* and *meaning* as the critical consideration in determining them' (103).

The three Prefaces (1973, 1976 and 1985), like much of Riding's explanations of her work, read as attempts at self-definition. They are interesting as autobiographical records of the later years, particularly following the death of her husband. Although she chose to live in solitude, she could not escape the continuing assaults of memoirists and biographers (35-6). It is interesting to learn about Schuyler Jackson's debt to *The Dawn in Britain* by Charles M. Doughty (Duckworth 1906), which is said to have rescued him from the slough of despair concerning modern American, British and Irish poetry; he ended up writing a glossary of this six-volume epic poem.

The arguments are typically abstract, but the actual chapters of *Rational Meaning* are more readable than the Prefaces might suggest. From the start, Riding was keen to point out that what follows is 'not a polemical treatise' (8), although the writing does shift between the discursive and the pedagogic:

There is need for readers of this book — and we have tried to proceed responsibly as to this need, recognized by us—of adjusting themselves in their reading of it to a position combining the status of “ordinary” speaker of the language, user of its words, and that of literate desirer of a fuller and surer knowledge of it, this being demonstrated to be possible. (438)

The polemical edge, however, invites the most reaction and therefore the aforementioned challenge of responding rather than being persuaded, as identified by Bernstein. The book is also worth getting hold of for the 130 pages of supplementary essays—oddly undated—which range from the unlikely ‘Mathematics as an Intellectual Master-Method’ and the amusing ‘Dr Gove and the Future of English Dictionaries’ to the outspoken and entertaining critique of Norman Mailer in ‘Contemporary Fashion-Plate (Intellectual Gab)’. Ultimately, the question, ‘Are words effectively definable—definition being understood as verbal rendering of word-meaning?’ (177)—rather than the definitions themselves, is what is likely to linger in the reader’s mind.