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Islands: Jewish Themes and Images in Selected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser

Wendy Susan Howard Gray
Longwood University

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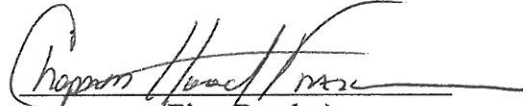
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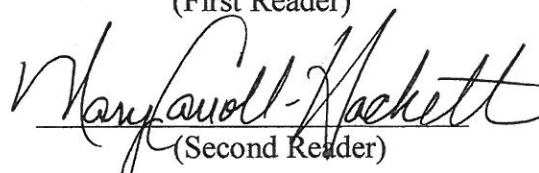
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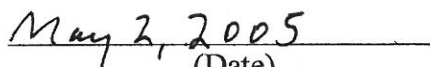
Islands:
Jewish Themes and Images
in Selected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser

By
Wendy Susan Howard Gray


(Director of Thesis)


(First Reader)


(Second Reader)


(Date)

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By
Wendy Susan Howard Gray

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English at Longwood University, Farmville, Virginia, May, 2005.

For Dad

I think you'd have liked this one

YOUNG & RUBICAM
1230 AVENUE OF THE STARS
SUITE 1000
CITY OF NEW YORK, NY 10020

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Biographical Overview.....	4
Chapter 2 Judaism Overview.....	14
Chapter 3 Jewish Influences in Selected Early Poems.....	26
Chapter 4 Jewish Influences in Selected Later Poems.....	47
Chapter 5 Conclusion.....	65
Works Cited.....	71

Introduction

Jewish themes and images in Muriel Rukeyser's poetry are like the islands she speaks of in her poem, "Islands": seemingly separate and isolated, but "connected underneath" within the larger body of her works. Defining Rukeyser's work on any one dimension is nearly impossible because her work is holistic, embracing interconnections. It encompasses multiple genres, including journalism, poetry, biography, translation, drama, and film, and many themes, ranging from history to politics to mathematics to science to technology to motherhood to music. Despite Rukeyser's large and diverse body of work, her work is less well known than that of many of her contemporaries. Much of it went out of print in the years following her death in 1980. Unlike some Jewish-American twentieth century writers such as Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, and Isaac Bashevis Singer who are often identified as explicitly Jewish writers, Rukeyser is more often identified for her independence of thought, breadth of work, feminism, and for her work as a woman at a time when women's voices were less often heard or taken seriously.

Although much of Rukeyser's work is not primarily Jewish on its surface, much of her poetry addresses themes of social justice, which can be seen as a Jewish—even if not uniquely Jewish—theme. In addition to their Jewish connection, the social justice themes would likely also have been influenced by Rukeyser's connection to the mid-twentieth century proletarian movements of socialism and communism. Secular religions themselves, in their heyday these

were thought to offer hope for salvation, not for the soul, but from economic and political oppression. Their promise was not fulfilled, but Rukeyser was one of many Jewish (and non-Jewish) artists and activists of 1930s who supported these movements' social justice objectives.

The full scope of Rukeyser's life and work cannot be explored in a study of this length, but in order to place the analysis of these selected early and later works in context, two background chapters are included in this study. Rukeyser was the daughter of second-generation Jewish immigrants and the unmarried mother of a son at a time when this violated middle class norms. These factors affect the thematic content of her work and are discussed in the biographical information in Chapter 1. In order to help readers understand more about the Judaism that Rukeyser knew, Chapter 2 summarizes relevant Jewish history and beliefs. Chapter 3 looks at Jewish themes and images from selections of Rukeyser's early work (1938 until 1959), while Chapter 4 examines selected works published from 1960 and later. Chapter 5 looks at Rukeyser's legacy.

An exploration of Rukeyser's work is a transformative experience. The reader need not come to see the world through the same lenses that Rukeyser saw it in order to be transformed. That is, one need not agree with Rukeyser that 1) the world is a place of Oneness that embraces all (even the ugliness and evil) that appears to divide it; 2) that observation is given voice by poetry; and 3) that the poet who sees suffering must, out of love, give poetry that speaks for those who cannot speak for themselves. One need only put on Rukeyser's lenses for a time, and to look at the world as she did, "as if" those things were true. Then, even after

the lenses are removed, the reader's world is changed. And this is the way Rukeyser would have it: "Reader, she will want to change your life. No, she wants you to change it," wrote her friend Jane Cooper in her foreword to the 1996 re-issue of Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry*. (xxviii). Although this thesis looks at a narrow range of Rukeyser's work, for me that work has indeed been life-changing. As more of Rukeyser's poetry and prose is brought back into print, hopefully others will have a similar opportunity to be transformed by her work

Chapter 1

Biographical Overview

Muriel Rukeyser was born December 15, 1913, a few months before the beginning of World War I. She died February 12, 1980, a few years after the end of the Vietnam War. War—and a search for the meaning of war—is a prominent theme in her poetry. Jane Cooper notes that “In a statement written for Oscar Williams’s 1945 anthology *The War Poets*, Muriel Rukeyser said, ‘For myself, war has been in my writing since I began. The first public day that I remember was the False Armistice of 1918’” (*Life of Poetry* xv).

She was born in New York City. She describes the location as being “in the house where a famous gangster lived, beside Grant’s Tomb, very near the grave of the Amiable Child, at that corner of the Hudson River” (*Rukeyser Reader* 277). Her parents, Lawrence and Myra Lyon Rukeyser, were Jewish; however, “Most of the younger Jewish writers in America are the children of immigrants, and I am not representative of them. [. . .] My parents did not migrate from Europe, but from America,” (“Under Forty” 4). Her father, who came from a large family in Wisconsin, was a cement salesman who later became a partner in a sand and gravel company. Rukeyser says that he “was helping to make New York. Even the sidewalk I played on [. . .] was partly made by him” (4). Her mother, a bookkeeper, “came from Yonkers, which was then a rather English town on the Hudson, and had not yet become an industrial offshoot of New York” (5). According to poet and scholar Kate Daniels, Rukeyser’s parents were

“staunchly Republican,” with whom Rukeyser “enjoyed a privileged and sheltered early life [. . .] Private education, chauffeurs, summer homes—all the accoutrements of great wealth marked her earliest years” (*Out of Silence* x).

Despite the financial advantages Rukeyser’s early life did not include, as she describes it, “the poetry of books. The poetry at home was only that of Shakespeare and the Bible. [. . .] Later, there were the sets that were laughed at as pieces of furniture bought neither with discrimination nor taste. [. . .] And so I was exposed to Dickens, Dumas, Victor Hugo, de Maupassant, Balzac” (*Rukeyser Reader* 277). Music, however, was part of her family life:

The *feeling* life of my parents seemed to me to be in the world of opera and music. They went to the opera on Thursday evenings, and on certain Friday mornings the libretto would be on the hall table. When I came home from school on Friday, I would read it, and it seemed strange, but not stranger than anything else. From the librettos, I first learned about translations, and about lurid poetry and melodrama. (280)

Her parents’ marriage was troubled, but the troubles were addressed with silence:

There were these things, and there were questions of love and hate. The terrible silences among my mother, my father, and my much-loved aunt, my mother’s older sister. They would have hot, passionate quarrels—forbidden times as far as I was concerned. Once I was prevailed upon to copy “Love’s Old Sweet Song” and

send it to my aunt so that she would talk to my mother again, and so that my father could see her again. This forbidden love was something that ran beneath the entire life of the family and went on until, just after my mother's death, my father married that aunt.

(278-219)

Coupled with the profound effect on Rukeyser of the images of World War I, the family situation also likely affected her outlook and subsequent work, says Kate Daniels:

The memories of emotional violence which she retained from her childhood must have colored her lifelong commitment to nonviolence, as surely as the graphic images from the battlefields of the Great War, culled from newspapers and early cinema, affected her imagination [. . .] (*Out of Silence* x).

All in all, Rukeyser says, "the preparation for poetry was strong. It was partly the silences of the house and the extreme excitement of the family. It was a building-business family, and the building was the building of New York" (*Rukeyser Reader* 278).

Like many second-generation Americans, Rukeyser's parents identified themselves as "American" as opposed to "Jewish," writes Janet Kaufman in *How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet*:

Ostensibly, the only "marks" of Judaism in her home were a "silver ceremonial goblet, handed down from a great-grandfather who had been a cantor, and a legend that [her] mother's family was

directly descended from [the second century scholar and poet in Palestine] Akiba” However, William L. Rukeyser, Muriel’s son, commented that her parents spoke Yiddish to each other; Judaism marked the language, the air, in their home. (*Poet* 49)

Adrienne Rich notes that Rukeyser’s parents expected that she would “‘grow up and become a golfer’ [. . .] a suburban matron. ‘There was no idea at that point of a girl growing up to write poems’” (*Rukeyser Reader* xii).

Nevertheless, she enrolled at Vassar College and Columbia University, although her father’s financial problems from the Depression caused her to withdraw in 1932. Her first book, *Theory of Flight*, published in 1935, won that year’s Yale Younger Poets award. She aligned herself with the Communist Party during the 1930s, and although she became less active and disenchanted with this (and most other) –isms, her early political orientation resulted in a forty-year surveillance by the FBI. (These files can now be viewed at the agency’s Freedom of Information Act website.)

As a journalist in 1933 Rukeyser covered the second trial of the Scottsboro Boys, nine young black men wrongfully convicted in Alabama of raping two white women. In 1936 she went to silica mines in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, to look into allegations “‘pertaining to a corporate cover-up of unsafe working conditions that was brought to the country’s attention by the Communist Party’” (*Out of Silence* xi). Her lengthy poem about this, “The Book of the Dead,” was published in 1938 in her second book, *U. S. I.* Subsequently she went to Barcelona to cover the Olympics, and while she was there, the Spanish Civil War

broke out, forcing her to evacuate. Her poem, "Letter to the Front," published in 1944 in her fourth book, *Beast in View*, incorporates this experience. Kate Daniels points out that by 1939, when Rukeyser published her third book, *A Turning Wind*, she "was firmly committed to an international nonpartisan pacifism" (xi).

In addition to *Beast in View*, Rukeyser published a number of other works of poetry, including *Wake Island* (1942), *The Green Wave* (1948), *The Elegies* (1949), and *Orpheus* (1949). She also published a biography of mathematician Willard Gibbs (1942); a book about the creation and meaning of poetry, *Life of Poetry* (1949); a play, *Middle of the Air* (1945); and a documentary film script, *A Place to Live* (1941), as well as many articles and reviews, all the while teaching and lecturing.

Rukeyser's working pace slowed down following the 1947 birth of her only son, William. Kate Daniels writes:

Although she later denied she had been forced to choose between motherhood and the poems, her optimistic, after-the-fact appraisal bears the whiff of the post-child rearing amnesia that many mothers contract. In fact, while she was living through them, she referred to those years between 1947 and 1958 as "the intercepted years," and the dramatic and immediate decrease testifies to the labor-, time-, and energy-intensive project of childbearing. From 1935 to 1948 she published five full-length books of poetry, a full-length biography, a three-act play and hundreds of articles, essays,

and reviews. From 1949 to 1964, when her son entered college, she published two volumes of previously published selected poems, a biography-in-verse, and one collection of new poems. (xii-xiii)

The necessity of making a choice was compounded for Rukeyser who was a single mother. Public silence surrounds the circumstances of her pregnancy. Some published accounts state that she was never married, others that she was married and divorced from her son's father, and still others that she was married briefly (that marriage was annulled) before her son was fathered by another man, who may—or may not—have been married to another woman at the time. The FBI FOIA files report that Rukeyser married a man named Glyn Collins, a New Zealander, in San Francisco on July 18, 1945 (FBI 107). The conflicting stories would not be resolved by the FBI, which stated in the same 1952 report that:

The birth records for the City and County of San Francisco were checked for the years 1944 through 1949 in an effort to identify the subject's child, but the records were negative.

The divorce files for the San Francisco County Recorder's Office for the years 1945 through 1952 were checked to determine if the subject and COLLINS were divorced. No record was found. (FBI 108)

Nor did William Rukeyser break the public silence when he wrote in 1999 that:

“it is difficult, even this much later, to say for sure whether she made the decision to have a child before she became pregnant or

only after. It is also impossible to say whether there was affection between her and her mate. Some indications are that she went searching for a father for her child the way some people go to The Gap: she was shopping for genes. [. . .]

But she did not resolve how to present her decision to have a child (either within her own family or to the rest of the world. While she hints at the situation and the challenges in her writing, she made up and stuck to a variety of contradictory stories that involved a marriage and widowhood prior to my birth. She also insisted on using a “Mrs.” in front of her maiden name, and on my birth certificate used a false name for the father, which was an anagram of his real name. As far as I could tell, she never truly resolved how to present her decision to become a single mother. (*Poet* 300)

Among Rukeyser’s works from 1950-1964 are the poetry volumes, *Body of Waking* (1958) and *Waterlily Fire* (1962). A volume of *Selected Poems* was published in 1951. She also wrote a play, *The Colors of the Day*, for the 1961 Vassar Centennial, and published a translation of two books of Octavio Paz’ poems.

She began teaching at Sarah Lawrence College in 1954 and taught there for many years during the ‘50s and ‘60s. Her perceived radicalism caused her to be the subject of a 1958 American Legion investigation that tried, unsuccessfully, to get her fired. Her literary reputation, “which could be considered major among

the poets of her generation until that point—declined markedly” after the war (xxi). Kate Daniels writes that this was attributable to two situations: “One was the anti-Communist atmosphere of the 1950s and the punitive spirit of the times exercised on many of those Americans who had been willing to consider socialist solutions to the problems of the 1930s” (xii). The other was motherhood, although as Daniels says, “She would not have given it up or traded it for anything” (xiii).

Teaching occupied Rukeyser during these years. A former student, Elaine Edelman, recalls the Muriel Rukeyser of 1959 as a “large, handsome woman in her mid-forties [. . .]. She would cruise down the campus’s curving paths [. . .] with the ease of a great ship” (*Poet* 76). She recalls Rukeyser exhorting her students to look again, both at what they read and the world around them: “There were no right or wrong answers, but she wouldn’t abide the careless ones, born of habit or laziness or routine. And when these, inevitably, came, she demanded that we look again” (79). Rukeyser confronted the idea of silences in her teaching, notes Daniels: “One of her favorite assignments for her poetry writing students was to begin a poem with the words *I could not say*” (*Out of Silence* xv). However, eventually she left her teaching job because, as William Rukeyser says, “In her professional life she refused to play the office politics that are often necessary to get ahead in the literary and academic worlds” (*Poet* 299).

Muriel Rukeyser began writing again in the mid-1960s and “inspired by the political similarities of the decade to the 1930s, she wrote prolifically for the final fifteen years of her life” (*Out of Silence* xiv). She wrote four books of poetry, *The Speed of Darkness* (1968), which included her feminist poem, “Kathe

Kollwitz,” *Breaking Open* (1973), and *The Gates* (1978), which included the eponymous poem about her 1975 visit to South Korea, while president of the PEN American Center, to protest the imprisonment of Kim Chi-Ha. A volume entitled *Collected Poems* also appeared in 1979. She published *The Orgy*, a novel, in 1966, and a biography of Thomas Hariot in 1971. In addition to the political focus of much of her later work, she also explored topics of female sexuality (a topic she had first explored in her 1947 poem sequence, “Nine Poems for the Unborn Child”) and was active in feminist and lesbian politics. Of Rukeyser’s personal sexuality, Jan Heller Levi writes that “this was the bisexual who never wrote in what we would deem explicit terms of her sexual relationships with women” (*Rukeyser Reader* xviii).

Edelman, who stayed in touch with Rukeyser, says that in the mid-1960s, “she was busy: her daily writing, her teaching and public readings, and as the 1960s and the Vietnam War ground on, the meetings, marches, and frightening acts of civil disobedience, while her draft-age son went into exile in Canada” (*Poet* 80). Rukeyser’s health began a decline after a paralyzing stroke in 1965. She wrote about her recovery and learning to speak again in her poem, “Resurrection of the Right Side.” Although she was working, her financial affairs appeared to be in decline. According to Edelman, “She seemed to change apartments every few years, and as the green couch and chairs were fit into ever smaller and less comfortable spaces, or in less convenient (i.e., cheaper) parts of town, I imagined poverty chasing her” (*Poet* 80).

Nevertheless, her powerful personal presence remained, says Adrienne Rich, who participated with Rukeyser in readings during the 1960s and 1970s. Rich says that

there was an undeniable sense of female power that came onto any platform along with Muriel Rukeyser. She carried her large body and strongly molded head with enormous pride, and stood with presence behind her words. [. . .] Even struggling back from a stroke, she appeared inexhaustible. (*Rukeyser Reader* xv)

Rukeyser suffered another stroke in 1977 and died on February 12, 1980. In recent years her work has attracted renewed attention from scholars and readers, including scholars who look at Rukeyser's work in a Jewish context. In order to help facilitate an understanding of that context, the next chapter incorporates a brief overview of Judaism.

Chapter 2

Judaism Overview

Muriel Rukeyser is a Jewish poet by definition of her parents' heritage. But what does it mean to be a "Jewish" writer? Jewishness is not a racial designation—there is no Jewish race. Nor is it a geographic designation—for millennia Jews have lived all over the known world. It is not a specific cultural designation—Ashkenazic (Western) and Sephardic (Eastern) Jews have many historical, linguistic, culinary, and musical differences. Perhaps Judaism can best be viewed as both a people (a "civilization" according to rabbi and theologian Mordechai Kaplan) and a religion. This chapter examines possible sources of Muriel Rukeyser's Jewish themes and images within the context of Judaism.

The child of two born-Jewish parents, Muriel Rukeyser can be classified as a Jew under the traditional definition, which holds that a Jew is someone who "inherits" Judaism by being born of Jewish parents (or by converting into it). However, Jewish identity based on parentage is subject to debate within the Jewish community. Adrienne Rich, also classified as a Jewish poet, is the daughter of a Jewish father and Christian mother. Traditional Jewish law accepts as hereditary Jews only those children born to Jewish mothers, however, so Rich would not be considered Jewish under that definition. Progressive Judaism, in contrast, accepts as Jews children whose mother *or* father was Jewish, so for Progressives, Rich is Jewish.

Among Jews, observance is another measure of identity. Here too there is a discrepancy between Rukeyser and Rich. Rukeyser, the “real” Jew under traditional law, led a relatively non-observant adult life. Rich, on the other hand, led a more traditionally Jewish adult life, with “her seventeen-year marriage to a Jewish husband from an observant family, and her experience as a mother raising three Jewish sons” (Chametsky et al 994). Importantly, however, both poets share a Jewish identity that was based on a “commitment to the ethics of the Jewish tradition as much as on genealogy” (994).

Rukeyser’s commitment to the Jewish ethical tradition can be seen in much of her work, some examples of which will be examined in chapters 3 and 4. Rukeyser achieved this despite having grown up in a religiously uninspiring and uninvolved household. Janet Kaufman writes that “in childhood, Rukeyser found her parents’ temple bereft of meaning and [. . .] she remained distant from organized Judaism” (*Poet* 47). Not only religious, but also ethnic cultural elements were lacking. Rukeyser writes that “The young man my father and the young woman my mother had no cultural resources to strengthen them. There was not a trace of Jewish culture that I could feel—no stories, no songs, no special food” (“Under Forty” 5). She describes attending religious school, but being unaware of “what a Christian was [. . .] [or] what a Jew was” at least until her mother “suddenly, out of a need or sadness of her own” began to attend weekly synagogue services (5, 6). Rukeyser and her mother attended together for about seven years, but the practice did not continue into her adulthood, and her son notes that she even “flirted with the Episcopalian Church” (*Poet* 300). Still,

Rukeyser acknowledges Judaism as one influence on her writing: “My themes and the use I have made of them have depended on my life as a poet, as a woman, as an American, and as a Jew. I do not know what part of that is Jewish” (“Under Forty” 8).

The Judaism in which Rukeyser grew up, like all modern forms of Judaism, differs greatly from ancient Judaism, but it still has strong ties to its origins. For example, it integrates its historical and religious past into its present liturgy and practices. Also, it integrates Biblical and rabbinic texts—frequently in their original languages—into its contemporary liturgy. And it incorporates ancient prayers and practices—often filtered through millennia of interpretation and commentary—into its current observances.

Briefly, the changes that led to modern Judaism began in the eighteenth century when the Emancipation of European Jews that followed the French Revolution gave Jews more civil rights and privileges and allowed them greater participation in the dominant Gentile community. According to Marc Lee Rafael:

It is a truism in the history of Judaism to point out that before circa 1800 there was (very generally speaking) just rabbinic Judaism, the religious system formulated by the rabbis of the first few centuries of the common era and developed during the following millennium and a half. Although this system faced attacks earlier, it was not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that central and western European Jews began to create alternatives and, following the creation of institutions,

ideologies. To do so they had to negotiate a complex set of interlocking ethnic, linguistic, national, regional, and religious identities. Out of these challenges would emerge a plethora of modern Judaisms, most notably Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and Reform Judaism [. . .] (46)

With the opportunity for social acculturation, the Emancipation diminished the ability of rabbis to control Jewish life and observance. This created a conflict within the Jewish community between the traditionalists, for whom ritual observances and study of sacred texts are central foci, and progressives (with whom Rukeyser was affiliated), for whom activist, ethical practices are key.

This emphasis on ethics over ritual has its roots in the Jewish Enlightenment, or *Haskalah*, which had begun in the early part of the eighteenth century and continued until about 1880. This movement involved “an intellectual movement to renew Judaism” (de Lange 204-205). A leading German Jewish Enlightenment thinker, Moses Mendelssohn, “was convinced that all the essentials of the Jewish religion—the existence of God, the immortality of the human soul, and the nature of divine providence—could be discovered by unaided human reason” (Cohn-Sherbok 142). He also supported modernization of education so that secular subjects as well as Jewish subjects could be taught in Jewish schools.

These were radical departures from traditional Orthodox beliefs that discouraged secular learning and continued to adhere to the belief that Written Law (Torah) and Oral Law (Talmud) were both given by God to Moses at Sinai,

and were therefore literally true and binding forever. The Enlightenment thinkers, and later the Reform movement (which had its start in Germany and was the major affiliation of western European Jewish émigrés to America), examined the meanings for ritual and ethical observances. They advocated modernization of the liturgy and a reduced emphasis on ritual observances, such as dietary laws, that tended to separate Jews from the larger community. Reform Jewish liturgy and practice emphasized “ethical monotheism” and the principle of social justice. “Justice” in this context is consistent with its OED definition as “Conformity (of an action or thing) to moral right, or to reason, truth, or fact; rightfulness; fairness; correctness; propriety” (*OED* 3), insofar as it relates to achieving equity for those who are impoverished or oppressed.

As will be discussed, while Rukeyser’s work reflects themes of social justice, this seems not to have come directly from childhood religious experiences. Her second-generation Jewish parents, like many affluent Jews, affiliated with the Reform movement. At that time the Reform movement was in its “classical” phase. In addition to discouraging ritual observances, classical Reform Judaism de-emphasized liturgical differences between Jewish and Christian practices. Instead it substituted religious behaviors that resembled those of the Protestant mainstream by whom immigrants from Jewish (and many other) backgrounds hoped to be accepted.

If the classical Reform practices had lost some of their “Jewish ness,” Orthodox practices may not have seemed much more spiritual. Reform was the dominant among German Jews, who viewed themselves as better educated and of

a socially higher class than their Eastern European counterparts. Within the Eastern European Jewish immigrant community, Orthodox Judaism prevailed. In contrast to the mixed seating in Reform services, Orthodox services segregated men from women. In contrast to the church-like orderliness of the Reform services, Orthodox services could be full of commotion, with people coming and going throughout the service, praying aloud at their own pace, and engaging in full-voice extraneous conversations. In contrast to approximately hour-long Reform services, which followed a Hebrew-English prayer book (that nevertheless resembled the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*), Orthodox services were long, including many repetitions of prayers that were read from a Hebrew prayer book. In contrast to Reform's use of organ music and four-part choirs (who often sang English language hymns), Orthodox services were chanted *a capella* in Hebrew by a prayer leader (who may have been a cantor and/or a rabbi). In contrast to the Reform rabbis' attire of black ministerial robes, Orthodox rabbis wore traditional prayer shawls, although robes could also be worn. In contrast to church-like arrangement of many classical Reform sanctuaries, with front-facing podia on raised altars, Orthodox sanctuaries oriented themselves to the Torah, so that the reader often faced away from the congregation (in much the same way that the pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic priest faced the altar, not the congregation). (This arrangement was typical of the Ashkenazic synagogue; Sephardic synagogues were often arranged "in the round" with the reader in the center of the room; both contrasted with the "church-y" Reform style.) The classical Reform movement often constructed temple

buildings that resembled churches, complete with classical Greek columns. The acculturation effort may have reached its peak when, for a time, the Reformers attempted to change the regular Sabbath services from Saturday to Sunday (Rafael 64).

In the end, however, it is not the service, rabbinical attire, or building design that communicates the message of Judaism. Jews are known as “the people of the book,” and despite their differences, all modern Jewish movements draw on the same sacred texts, the Bible and the Talmud. Referring to the latter, Jacob Neusner calls it “the single most important document in the history of Judaism” (1). This does not diminish the significance of the Bible, and both works influenced Rukeyser’s work, but the importance of the Talmud to Jewish thinking, culture, and practice cannot be overstated. As such, a brief overview is included here.

The Talmud is comprised of two sections: The Oral Law, or *Mishnah*, which was written down around 200 CE. It codified commentary and interpretation of Torah law made subsequent to the time the writing of the Hebrew Bible ended in about 100 BCE (*Jewish Literacy* 148-158). The other section, the *Gemara*, developed over the next four centuries. The *Gemara* records centuries of rabbinic and scholarly commentary on the *Mishnah* and on Mishnaic commentary. As such, the Talmud is a written record of a centuries-long debate. Talmud employs “rigorous, abstract argument about fundamentally practical, mostly trivial matters, an argument thoroughly articulated and tested against all possible objections” (Neusner xii). As important as its approach is its breadth of

subject matter. It encompasses virtually all the areas where law meets human behavior: religious, political, physical, civil, criminal, commercial, familial, and ethical.

Rukeyser may not have studied Talmud, but she was certainly aware of it. She claims the Talmudic martyr, Rabbi Akiba, as an ancestor (her poem, "Akiba," will be discussed in Chapter 4). Talmudic influence can be inferred from Rukeyser's similarly inclusive approach to human behavior, addressing for example, politics, sexuality, relationships, and commerce. It can also be seen in her ingenious integration of the trivial to illustrate the larger point, such as her use of a stock market quotation to illustrate corporate venality in "Book of the Dead," which will be discussed in Chapter 3.

The Reform Judaism in which Rukeyser grew up had rejected much of Talmudic ritual law, such as the kosher dietary laws and strict Sabbath observance. One reason that Reform rejected these ritual practices is that they seemed remote from their Biblical sources. Many of these practices developed after the diaspora that occurred after the destruction of the second Temple in Jerusalem 70 CE, and the destruction of Jerusalem a few decades later. The levitical priests could no longer fulfill their Biblically mandated duties or serve as a central judiciary for the Jewish people, so part of the Talmudic rabbis' (Rabbis) role was to create a written guide for Jewish observance in the diaspora. The Rabbis wanted to ensure that the Jewish people would not inadvertently violate Torah law, so they created a "fence" around the Torah, a more conservative set of practices that would guarantee that the underlying law would be observed. For

example, the Biblical injunction found in Exodus and Deuteronomy not to seethe a kid in its mother's milk developed into the kosher dietary practice to separate all meat—including poultry—from all dairy, even to the point of using separate dishes and cooking utensils for the food and requiring a certain amount of time for digestion between meat and dairy meals. Such scrupulous separation would ensure that one would not accidentally cook a baby goat or lamb in its own mother's milk. For Reform Jews the dietary laws became emblematic of the parochial legalisms that they wanted to modernize in favor of an ethical focus. (The early Reformers would also have recognized that observance of the dietary laws was also a barrier to social integration, which would have been an added inducement to not following them.)

Having dispensed with many of the ritual practices, the Reformers explicitly embraced the Bible's ethical laws, such as care of the poor, and right behavior (*derekh eretz*), such as showing respect to others (Steinsaltz 199-210). Rukeyser has acknowledged that she was influenced by the Bible with "its clash and poetry and nakedness, its fiery vision of conflict resolved only in God" ("Under Forty" 7).

Rukeyser read the Bible in English, but this nevertheless would have been the Hebrew Bible, or *Tanakh*, an acronym derived from the first letters for the Hebrew name of these sections: *Torah* (law), *Nevi'im* (prophets), and *Ketuvim* (writings). The *Tanakh* is comprised of most of the same books as the Christian Old Testament, although they are arranged in a different order. The *Torah* (the five books of Moses— Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy)

is read from beginning to end each Jewish year, and is a central part of each Sabbath service, along with designated readings from the prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah, and Micah. Readings from *Ketuvim*, such as Esther, Job, Lamentations, and Song of Songs, are read on certain holidays. Many sections of the prayer book are taken directly from these texts as well.

Two predominant themes from prophetic Jewish literature can be seen in much of Rukeyser's work: justice and peace. In the Jewish view, the principal role of the Biblical prophets was not, as is sometimes thought, to foretell the future. Instead, they were to call the people to make a return (*teshuvah*) to the path of holiness. They proclaimed the people's violations of Torah law (venality, adultery, idol worship, and so on), exhorted them to avoid (or end) Divine retribution by returning to the observance of Torah law.

One important prophetic theme was for the restoration of justice. Using as a basis the Torah verse, "Justice, justice you shall pursue" (Deut. 16:20), the prophet Micah says, "He has told you, O man, what is good, and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk modestly with your God" (6:8). Underlying the entire Jewish ethical system (and later adopted as the central tenet of Christianity) is the injunction from Leviticus to "love your neighbor as yourself" (19:8). A famous story is told of the important first century rabbi Hillel that when "a non-Jew approaches and asks him to define Judaism's essence while standing on one foot [he responds,] 'What is hateful unto you do not do unto your neighbor. [. . .] The rest is commentary—now go and study'" (*Jewish Literacy* 121).

The idea that the individual not only can but must take action to improve the world is another Talmudic teaching: “It is not your responsibility to finish the work (of perfecting the world), but you are not free to desist from it either” (qtd. in *Jewish Literacy* 479). Much of Rukeyser’s poetry, including “Book of the Dead” and “The Gates,” which will be discussed in chapters 3 and 4, respectively, take up the prophetic cause of justice.

Another important prophetic message was for peace, and this also was very much a part of Rukeyser’s political vision. The book of Isaiah envisions peace in “a future world in which human beings ‘beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they know war anymore’ (2:4)” (quoted in *Biblical Literacy* 286). However, “Isaiah’s hopes for a peaceful world do not reflect, as is commonly assumed, a pacifistic world view. [. . .] What the prophet hoped for was a world in which good itself triumphed so there would be no more Hitlers, Nazis, or other who wished to destroy good people” (286). This seems to be the view of peace that Rukeyser expressed in *The Life of Poetry*:

If we look for the definitions of peace, we will find, in history, that they are very few. The treaties never define the peace they bargain for: their premise is only lack of war. [. . .] In one long-standing language, there are two meanings for peace. [. . .] One meaning of peace is offered as “rest, security.” This is comparable to our “security, adjustment, peace of mind.” The other definition of peace is this: peace is completeness. (209)

Peace was the predominant theme in Rukeyser's 1944 poem, "Letter to the Front," and justice was the predominant theme in her 1938 poem, "Book of the Dead." These poems will be examined in more detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Jewish Influences in Selected Early Poems

Rukeyser's early work includes fewer examples of explicitly Jewish content than does her later work. Among her early work the Petrarchan sonnet, "To be a Jew in the Twentieth Century," is one of the few exemplars of an explicitly Jewish poem. It appears as section seven of the ten-part 1944 sequence "Letter to the Front," which focuses on the futility of war. Despite their overall lack of explicitly Jewish content, "Letter to the Front," from *Beast in View* (1944), and another long work, "The Book of the Dead," from *U.S. 1* (1944), can be seen to be implicitly Jewish in their themes of peace and social justice.

The full text of the sonnet reads:

To be a Jew in the twentieth century
 Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,
 Wishing to be invisible, you choose
 Death of the spirit, the stone insanity.
 Accepting, take full life. Full agonies:
 Your evening deep in labyrinthine blood
 Of those who resist, fail and resist; and God
 Reduced to a hostage among hostages.

The gift is torment. Not alone the still
 Torture, isolation; or torture of the flesh.

That may come also. But the accepting wish,
 The whole and fertile spirit as guarantee
 For every human freedom, suffering to be free,
 Daring to live for the impossible. (*Out of Silence* 65)

The poem may be addressed to the Americanized Jews Rukeyser knew as she grew up, especially those who wanted to remain invisible by fitting in with the white, mainstream middle class. Despite their affiliation with Reform Judaism which emphasized social justice and activism:

They were playing possum. [. . .] [T]hey felt that Hitler would be all right if he would only leave the Jews alone [. . .] [T]hey wanted a religion of reassurance [. . .] and refused to be involved in suffering that demanded resistance, and refused to acknowledge evil. ("Under Forty" 6)

These were people who were "starving for [. . .] poetry and politics" (6). The rabbis' sermons, she says, were "pale and mechanically balanced." These Jews listened to the "muted organ," symbolic of liturgical assimilation. (It is perhaps ironic, then that this sonnet was subsequently included in the 1970s-era prayer books of that same Reform movement.)

What inspired Rukeyser was the Jewish Bible with "its clash and poetry and nakedness, its fiery vision of conflict resolved only in God" (7). Also, in contrast with the "comfortable-pew" Jews, it was "the men and women in the Warsaw ghetto, standing as the Loyalists stood in Spain, weaponless against what

must have seemed like the whole world” who to her mind best represented the authentic spirit and obligation of prophetic Biblical Judaism. (8).

When the sonnet was written, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising had only recently occurred. As Joseph Telushkin recounts, on Passover, 1943, the Nazis planned to deport the remaining ten percent of the 500,000 Jews who had once been confined in the Ghetto. Despite their virtual lack of weapons, the Jews resisted, and for the next few weeks fought from underground bunkers they had dug. The outcome of the revolt could not have been in doubt. The Nazis were fully armed, while the partisans, who had already spent more than a year confined and starving, had no way to bring in food, water, or weapons. Nevertheless, the resistance lasted for almost a month (*Jewish Literacy* 369-370). Today the story is included in the Yom Kippur and Holocaust remembrance religious services.

As powerful a hold as this event still has on Jewish consciousness, Jewish resistance at a time when millions—unwilling or unable to resist—were being killed must have had immeasurable impact. It is likely then that Rukeyser would have been influenced by the uprising to write the sonnet. It exemplifies Rukeyser’s statement that “Once one’s responsibility as a Jew is really assumed, one is guaranteed, not only against fascism, but against many kinds of temptation to close the spirit. It is a strong force in oneself against many kinds of hardness which may arrive in war” (“Under Forty” 9).

As such, the sonnet expresses Rukeyser’s optimism and sense of possibility. As can be seen, Judaism contributed to her outlook. Nevertheless, of her life “as a poet, a woman, as an American, and as a Jew” Rukeyser says, “I

know that I have tried to integrate these four aspects, and to solve my work and my personality in terms of all four" (8). Rukeyser's ranking of these four elements might provide an insight into her self-image at the age of 30 when the statement was made. That she includes Judaism on the list adds weight to the argument for its influence, even at a time when little of her work was explicitly Jewish. Rukeyser sees social justice as intrinsic to Judaism, but she does "not think that is a particularly Jewish idea" or that "Jews are any more responsive to these ideas than Christians" (8); still, for the reasons discussed above, it can be seen as a Jewish theme.

Literary analysis cannot capture the totality of most poems, and given the dynamic interrelationship of influences on her work, it is particularly difficult with Rukeyser's work. Nevertheless, it is revealing to approach the sonnet from this perspective. A notable poetic feature of the sonnet is its use of contrasts. For example, the sonnet format, a short, fixed form, contrasts with the universal human themes of death, life, and freedom. The poem contrasts images of life and death: "gift," "full life," and "accepting spirit" are vital, affirming images, while "death of the spirit," "labyrinthine blood," "torment," and "torture" are bleak and negative. It also contrasts freedom with captivity: "offered," "accepting," and "free," imply reaching out and overcoming boundaries, while "stone insanity," "hostage," and "still torture" describe states of containment and imprisonment. It contrasts physical suffering as a "hostage" with freedom of the spirit, "The whole and fertile spirit as guarantee / for every human freedom." It contrasts the "death of the spirit" and "stone insanity" of those who refuse the gift by choosing instead

to “be invisible” with the spiritual liberation of those who accept the gift, “Daring to live for the impossible.”

The poem moves from the open-handed offer of the gift, through the choice to refuse the gift and thus remain bound and contained, to the acceptance of the gift and the resultant freedom. The first eight-line section introduces the gift of Judaism, and expresses the alternatives of accepting or refusing it. (Contrasts can be seen here as well, for acceptance gives “full life,” but also full agonies, and those who accept it “resist, fail, and resist.”) The concluding six lines focus on the gift itself, which is “torment,” but argues that if this is freely accepted as a spiritual gift, it in turn will guarantee “every human freedom.”

The poem does not shrink from the enormity of Jewish suffering, but embraces it. Still, each Jew must choose whether to accept the consequences of resistance. Jews in this poem are universal, symbolic of all people who refuse to allow their spirits to be destroyed, and whose efforts to resist result in freedom of spirit regardless of physical suffering or death. This universality can be seen in the larger context of “Letter to the Front” as well as in “The Book of the Dead.”

“Letter to the Front” is an extended work that argues for peace and the importance of the individual, especially the individuals who are often disregarded: women, poets, and (in the sonnet) the Jews. In *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser* Louise Kertesz writes that “‘Letter to the Front,’ like many poems in *Beast in View*, develops a theme which is rare in modern poetry, a theme which feminists of the sixties and seventies rediscovered and popularized. [. . .] The letter to the front, then, is the poet’s strong prophetic imagining of a new ground

of world peace and love: the androgynous spirit” (204). By fusing the male and female identity, Rukeyser recognizes their common humanity, and at the same time brings forward the importance of women’s consciousness.

This acknowledgement of women enters the poem in the first section which speaks of women and poets as prophets, who “believe and resist forever” (*Out of Silence* 62), and then connects them to the “strong agonized men” who “wear the hard clothes of war” (62). This section develops the tensions between resistance and surrender, war and peace, and intuited truth and external reality. These tensions continue through the poem, coming together at the end praising “the warm lips of the living / Who fought for the spirit’s grace among despair / Beginning with signs of belief, offered in time of war” (68).

The poem utilizes sections of short and long verses, short and long stanzas, fixed and non-fixed forms. For example, in addition to the sonnet, a sestina form is used in section four. It recalls Rukeyser’s experience in Spain in the early days of the civil war. It contrasts images of soldiers, fighting, and fear, with images of beauty (“silver country,” “flowery midnight”), and hope and “one wish for keeping” (63-64).

Section two also employs images of natural beauty, which are seen during “moments of delicate peace”; but fear is a central theme, both as the possibility of physical death and as the “death of our dear wish.” Physical death merges with timeless natural beauty, thereby eliminating fear from the equation: “And time that will be eating away our flesh / Gives us this moment when blue settles on rose / and evening suddenly seems limitless silver.” The wind on the hills carries

memory, and in an ascending motion, the “mountains lift into night” bringing the poet a memory of “the face of peace.” The upward, hopeful, dreamlike movement concludes the section, as a ship—possibly an image of war—rises “like a great bird, like a lifted promise.”

Section three utilizes envelope quatrains, rhymed a-b-b-a, concluding with a five-line stanza that delivers the heart of the message, the prophetic struggle for peace amid war: “Wars of the spirit in the world / Makes us continually know / We fight continually to grow.”

Section four is the sestina. This section tells the story of the psychological effect when the poetic “we” persona sees fighting in the nearby hills at the start of the Spanish Civil War. The persona recognizes that this will be the beginning of a wider conflict, and that some of the persona’s “mild companions” will be transformed from citizens into soldiers who will engage in “the war this age must win in love and fighting” (63-64).

The use of the plural persona indicates both a sense of connection to others, perhaps fellow non-Spaniards who are visiting the country. It also indicates a sense of separation between that group and the “companions,” possibly the Spaniards. It may also indicate the separation between those who would or would not become soldiers, for the Spanish Civil War attracted many outsiders, especially liberals, who supported the cause of the ruling liberal Popular Front government against the conservative Republican insurgency at a time when the ideological battle between Communism and Fascism was at its height.

The persona also recognizes that this conflict will become part of a larger conflict, for it “Meant to us the arrival of the fighting / At home ” (63). Perceived to symbolize the larger conflict between freedom (leftist) and oppression (right – wing). The fight must take place, because the choice was “fighting / This threat or falling under it” (63.)

The six repeated end words in the sestina, in their initial order are: *fighting—soldiers—keeping—fearing—changing—country*. As in the sonnet that addressed the horrors of the Holocaust in a fourteen-line fixed form, the fixed form of the sestina with its pattern of repeated end words places the upheaval of the Spanish Civil War and the World War that followed into an intricate orderly pattern, juxtaposing chaos and order. The end words, *fighting* and *soldiers* allude to the armed conflict itself, and *country* alludes to the idea that the war has a specific and limited territory. The instability implied by *changing* contrasts with the steadiness implied by *keeping*. Rumbling underneath is the omnipresent *fear*.

Not only do the end words change positions as prescribed by the sestina form, they also change in the way they are used. The *-ing* ending of *fighting*, *keeping*, *fearing*, and *changing* when used as verbs conveys ongoing movement, pointing to the transformation that is taking place, an effect augmented by enjambment. *Changing* used as an adjective (“fast-changing / Foothills”) conveys the same effect (63). *Fighting*, used as a noun (“The fighting / was clear to us all at last”) portrays the action within the observed scene (63).

The end words contribute to the paced motion of the poem. At the beginning of the sestina the poetic persona observes the turmoil outside; for the

subsequent five stanzas the persona wrestles with internal turmoil. Then, in the middle of the sixth stanza, a new psychological balance is reached, and the momentum slows. The new perspective recognizes that the world this “first day of war in a strange country” represents a permanent shift towards “our changing / Age’s hope and resistance” (64). The envoy of the sestina captures a new still picture, symmetrical with that seen from the train window in the opening lines:

The first day of fighting showed us all men as soldiers.
It offered one wish for keeping. Hope. Deep fearing.
Our changing spirits awake in the soul’s country. (64)

The transformation from citizens on a train to soldiers is complete, not physically, but spiritually, “in the soul’s country.” An understanding has been reached that the fight must be fought. The use of the six repeated words supports this. All the end words are nouns, settled, unmoving. The three middle words, are used as adjectives or nouns as well rather than as verbs. Yet the underlying instability of the changed world remains, contrasted in the tension between “hope” and “deep fearing.” The sestina presents Rukeyser’s ongoing theme that humanity is obligated to fight for what is just, here equating freedom with justice, not in an explicitly Jewish context, as in the sonnet, but in the larger context of social justice.

The rising ship re-enters the poem in section five. It is still symbolic of hope, but moves the time focus of the poem from the Spanish Civil War to World War II: “I saw a white ship rise as peace was made / In Spain, the first peace the

world would not keep.” The conclusion of this section also echoes the images of hope and belief linked to the rising bird.

In section six the poet thinks of the current “soldiers of distances” and remembers “what we were fighting for / in the beginning, in Spain.” For the poet and her soldier, “peace will in time arrive, but war defined our years.” While this section again speaks of faith in the future, it also humanizes the struggle of the soldiers, saying that what they want is “one / whose mouth is bread and wine, whose flesh is home.”

The three sections following the sonnet tend towards more length and lyricism than in earlier sections. Sections eight and nine include highly specific political and topical references to contemporary personages and events. Section eight mocks the war-makers, the businessmen and journalists who benefit from war and who would like to seem to be respectable leaders of the cause. The poet points out their hypocrisy, however, describing them as impotent, artificial and weak: “Consider this man in the clothes of a commander. / Remember that his field is bottled fizz” (65).

Section nine praises the resistance of women, whose “spirit lives against time’s disease.” However, it also uses the voice of an “old biddy” who sings of the unique anguish that war brings to women, who “have not had any rest / Sad dreams of the belly, of the lip, / Of the deep warm breast.”

The theme of women’s strength begins the last section of the sequence: “Surely it is time for the true grace of women / Emerging, in their lives’ colors, from the rooms, from the harvests, / From the delicate prisons, to speak their

promises.” A “new myth” will emerge that will change “traditional man” to incorporate the ethos of the woman and poet, and in this blurring of gender lines, to become more fully human. The poem concludes “Beginning with signs of belief, offered in time of war, / As I now send you, for a beginning, praise.” Louise Kertesz writes of this optimism that “The poet’s positive statements in these poems are indeed ‘willful assertions,’ but in Rukeyser’s poetic vision she finds the seeds of possibility” (203). The poem acknowledges and embraces the authentic suffering that comes with war—and in particular, wars of oppression, as opposed to wars of territorial conquest, all the while celebrating the power of resistance to lead to authentic freedom and peace. From the frequent use of memory as a lens to examine conflict, the poem concludes by looking with hope into the future.

In contrast to the theme of peace in “Letter to the Front,” “The Book of the Dead,” written six years earlier, focuses on the theme of social justice.

Jewish poet and scholar Gary Pacernick writes that Rukeyser:

is drawn to the struggles of oppressed people everywhere. For example, in the long documentary narrative, “The Book of the Dead” [. . .] she strongly identifies with the plight of West Virginia tunnel workers and becomes a passionate first-hand witness to their cause. Utilizing official transcripts and court records, dramatic monologues, photographic and visionary imagery, catalogues and narration, the poet weaves an imposing poetic

sequence, a long poem of enormous social and political significance. (213)

The poem examines what happened when, in the early 1930s, the Union Carbide company was digging an almost four-mile tunnel under the West Virginia mountains near Gauley Bridge to provide water power for a new hydroelectric dam. The digging revealed silicon in an almost pure form. Silicon could be used for metal refining, also a business interest for Union Carbide. Silicon is also toxic to the lungs, and those who are exposed to it can develop silicosis, a fatal condition that destroys the lungs. Apparently aware of this but nevertheless choosing to maximize its profits, the company forced the more than 2000 workers, many of whom were black, to forego using safety equipment or procedures in order to drill the tunnel as quickly as possible. Hundreds of the workers subsequently developed silicosis and died.

As a journalist for the left wing press, Rukeyser and photographer Nancy Laumberg traveled to the site to investigate the disaster. Scholar John Lowney in his article, "Truths of Outrage, Truths of Possibility: Muriel Rukeyser's 'The Book of the Dead,'" discusses some of the political, racial, gender and literary issues surrounding the event and Rukeyser's poem about it. According to Lowney, the mainstream press "either ignored or actively suppressed" information about Gauley Bridge; the information may never have become public had the left wing press not reported it (197). No local or national government stepped in to restrict the company's activities, and the company seemed to act with impunity. Stephanie Hartman writes that "Because silicosis usually takes

years or decades to develop, and because most of the miners were poor southern blacks, Union Carbide had assumed that they would not be held accountable for the resulting deaths” (211). Despite the scope of the disaster, Rukeyser’s poem about it was ignored or mocked. In part this had to do with 1930s-era Communist Party biases. Lowney quotes Paula Rabinowitz, who writes that women—especially bourgeois women—were viewed as incapable of truly understanding problems of workers, and that writing itself was not viewed at the essence of the movement: “Given the hostility of most 1930s American Marxists to ideas (as opposed to actions), their valuing of deed over word, the bourgeois woman represented the epitome of false consciousness” (qtd. in Lowney 199). A half century after the event, medical doctor Martin Cherniak published a comprehensive study of the event, yet does not mention Rukeyser’s poem, which Lowney finds disturbing:

The fact that Rukeyser’s poem does not exist in this, the most comprehensive account of the medical and social significance of Gauley Bridge, suggests not only how marginalized poetry has remained in American cultural history, but also how radically innovative Rukeyser’s documentary method still is: poetry and investigative reporting, poetry and social history, and for that matter poetry and science, persist as mutually exclusive discursive categories that Rukeyser spent a lifetime trying to bridge. (200)

Louise Kertesz also addresses Rukeyser’s poetic response to the dualities of the situation, writing that “To the young poet the Gauley tragedy was a striking

contradiction: men tapping a vast source of energy and being destroyed by it” (99). Her approach to the work used words in a way (also used by others) that blended poetry with other genres, including journalism, photography, and editorializing. The blended style resulted in mixed reviews from critics, some who thought the poem went too far, and others that it did not go far enough. Yet it was in keeping with other modernist approaches, according to Shoshana Wechsler:

As a documentary text that cross-examines documentary conventions, it invites close comparisons with James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; like John dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy, it utilizes modernist technique to compel attention to the world beyond representation. Because it also exhibits many of the earmarks of a long modernist poem “including history,” it arguably merits inclusion in the same canon occupied by Ezra Pound’s *Jefferson and Adams Cantos* (to which it offers a striking counter model), and William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* (which it anticipates by just a few years). Written as the Great Depression deepened in the United States and fascism raged across Europe, the poem signals decisive moments both in American documentary expression and in late modernism, as new and remaining adherents of avant-garde aesthetics revived and revised modernist methods in order to convey the complexities of escalating economic and political crises. (227)

The poet's support for the workers is made clear by the cumulative weight of her negative portrayal of the company and government, contrasted with her sympathetic portrayal of the suffering of workers and their families. For example, the section "Statement: Phillipa Allen," which provides a journalistic interview to give an overview of the project, describes the company's pursuit of its interest at the cost of the workers' health:

The contractors
 knowing pure silica
 30 years' experience
 must have known danger for every man
 neglected to provide the workmen with any safety device. . . .
 —As a matter of fact, they originally intended to dig that
 tunnel to a certain size?
 —Yes.
 —And then enlarged the size of the tunnel, due to the fact
 that they discovered silica and wanted to get it out?

(Out of Silence 12)

Subsequent sections of the poem show that the company did know about the dangers of the silica dust but continued the work without allowing workers to take safety precautions. The section "The Bill" presents, again in a journalistic fashion, the findings of an investigative subcommittee. Among these findings are

THAT silica is dangerous to lungs of human beings.

When submitted to contact. Silicosis

.....
THAT prevention is: wet drilling, ventilation,
respirators, vacuum drills.

Disregard: utter. Dust : collected. Visibility: low.
.....

The driving of the tunnel.

It was begun, continued, completed, with gravest
disregard

And the employees? Their health, lives, future?

Results and infection.

Many died. Many are not yet dead.

Of negligence. Wilful or inexcusable. (35-36)

Despite these findings, the poet finds the government's work inadequate: "The subcommittee subcommits. / Words on a monument. / Capitoline thunder. It cannot be enough" (37).

The poet's empathy for the people is portrayed in a number of vignettes presented in sections such as "The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones," Mearl Blankenship," "Absalom," "George Robinson: Blues," "Juanita Tinsley," and "Arthur Peyton." Using varying points of view and poetic structures and styles, the poet allows the reader intimate contact with the suffering of the workers. Laborers came (some from far away) to the remote Hawk's Nest project headquarters during the Great Depression. They found work, but many lost their lives:

[. . .] The Negro woman throws
 gay arches of water out from the front door.
 It runs down, wild as grass, falls and flows.

On the quarter he remembers how they enlarged
 the tunnel and the crews, finding the silica,
 how the men came riding freights, got jobs here
 and went into the tunnel-mouth to stay.

.....

hundreds breathed value, filled their lungs full of glass (14-15)

In the portrayal of the company's behavior from the individuals' experiences, the reader can identify with the workers' plight. For example, the "Mearl Blankenship" section opens with a two short stanzas written from the third-person view of the character as "He stood against the stove." It continues with a similarly constructed dialogic section that introduces the character's letter to the company. The next stanza contains the beginning of the letter, and is followed by a third person stanza in which Blankenship is seen standing "against the rock / facing the river / grey river grey face." The section concludes with more of the letter. Like the earlier "letter stanza," this one make the worker's life real to the reader by using the worker's own diction and the details of his health problems. It uses the company's lawyers to show the company's lack of caring, and contrasts that with the not entirely literate but nevertheless passionate expression of sincerity and hope:

J C Dunbar said that I was the very picture of health
when I went to Work at that tunnel.

I have lost eighteen lbs on that Rheinhart ground
and expecting to loose my life
& no settlement yet & I have sued the Co. twice

But when the lawyers got a settlement
they didn't want to talk to me

.....

I am a Married Man and have a family. God
knows if they can do anything for me
it will be appreciated
if you can do anything for me
let me know soon (18)

Employing another contrasting style to reveal more about the community, in the “George Robinson: Blues” section, the poet uses the traditionally black musical style to portray some of the stark horrors of the work on the construction project. For example this section’s persona asks, “Did you ever bury thirty-five men in a place in back of your house” (21). It then shows another example of the company’s self-interest: “When a man said I feel poorly, for any reason, any weakness or such, / letting up when he couldn’t keep going barely, / the Cap and company come and run him off the job surely” (22). This section also contains one of the most graphic visual images of the amount of dust (breathed in by the men) raised by the drilling: “As dark as I am, when I came out at morning after

the tunnel at night, / with a white man, nobody could have told which man was white. / The dust had covered us both, and the dust was white” (22).

The disparity between the power of workers and the company is only one of the portrayals of power in the poem, however. The power of the water, which is channeled via the tunnel and consolidated by the dam, is another theme. As Louise Kertesz writes, “The central fact in all this history is the power in nature” (100). The poem shows that “we can understand that we have harnessed power at the cost of human lives: the life giving river has become the river of death. But it is still a source of strength” (107).

“The Book of the Dead” begins with a story the poet’s discovery of the country between the East Coast and West Virginia, and then flashes back to early explorers of that area, who arrived there by following the path of the rivers and their strength to mold the land:

But it was always the water
 the power flying deep
 green rivers cut the rock
 rapids boiled down,
 as scene of power. (*Out of Silence* 11)

A later section, “Power,” describes as “midway between water and flame” the power house in the hydroelectric dam where the water diverted through the tunnel would produce electricity (29). The trip to the bottom of the plant shows the poet that “this is the river Death, diversion of power, / the root of the tower and the

tunnel's core, / this is the end" (31). This leads to a celebratory section about water and its power as it rushes through the dam:

All power is saved, having no end. Rises
 in the green season, in the sudden season
 the white to budded
 and the lost.

Water celebrates, yielding continually
 sheeted and fast in its overfall
 slips down the rock, evades the pillars
 building its colonnades, repairs
 in stream and standing wave
 retains its seaward green
 broken by obstacle rock; falling, the water sheet
 spouts, and the mind dances, excess of white,
 White brilliant function of the land's disease. (31)

The water can be seen as giving power, but also of taking it. It provided the power for the electricity, but to use it required digging the tunnel, which proved fatal to many workers. The self-healing in the shape of the water as it "repairs in stream" and foams in an "excess of white" is nevertheless a "function of the land's disease." The workers in their powerlessness were in some ways enslaved by the company, which used them on its enormous building project without regard to their well-being. For the tunnel-makers, the need to move the path of the water contributed to their oppression. One might contrast this image

with that of the ancient Hebrews for whom the waters of the Red (or “Reed”) Sea changed course in response to a Divine command, parting and allowing them to escape to freedom on dry land, and then changing course again to destroy their oppressors, the Egyptians.

Unlike the ancient Hebrews, for the Gauley Bridge workers, the water—for all its power as a natural force—was not a source of liberation from the corporation, that “body without a soul” (32). Yet in bringing the situation to our attention, Rukeyser gives us the opportunity to take up the fight against such evils. She concludes this poem, as she would so many of her later works, looking at possibility. In the last section of the poem from which the sequence takes its name, the poet travels back through the country. She expresses her own hope for the future and for the power of people to affect it as she asks: “What one word must never be said? / Dead [. . .] // What two things shall never be seen? / They [. . .] Enemy [. . .] // What three things can never be done? / Forget. Keep silent. Stand alone” (37). In their willingness to allow themselves to become part of the greater good are those who choose to meet “avoidable war” and “fight on all new frontiers” (40). “Defense is sight,” the poet says. By witnessing and telling of evils, the evils become known, and once known they can—and, in the poet’s view, will continue to be—fought by the many who “fight against madness, / find every war” (40). The poet recognizes the suffering and tragedy of the events at Gauley Bridge, yet, as she will continue to do in her later poems, she also sees in it the possibilities for change, that contains, “as epilogue, seeds of unending love” (40).

Chapter 4

Jewish Influences in Selected Later Poems

More instances of explicitly Jewish themes and images can be found in Rukeyser's poems from 1960 on, when her biographical poem, "Akiba," was published. Her shift of emphasis was not atypical of American Jewish writers at the time. In contrast with earlier American Jewish poets whose writings employed "the usual Greek-Western system of literary allusions, as best exemplified by T.S. Eliot," the later poets began changing their emphasis to "what Harold Bloom has termed 'diasporic myth-making,' says Harold Schwartz (382). Schwartz wrote of these changes in his 1980 compilation, *Voices of the Ark: The Modern Jewish Poets*. Citing American poets including Marcia Falk and Gary Pacernick, Schwartz says that they "hold the promise of an emerging generation of poets who regard themselves as Jewish American writers rather than the reversed emphasis of the older generations" (380). Janet Kaufman writes of the same phenomenon in her article, "But Not the Study: Writing as a Jew":

Sociologists and political scientists have documented the insecurity and strong assimilationist tendencies of American Jews between 1945—the end of World War II, their grief and shame from the Holocaust emerging—and 1968, when Jewish pride swelled, political activism increased, and identification with Israel intensified after the Six-Day War in 1967. [. . .] Concurrent in the decade of the Six-Day War was the rise, in the United States, of

the civil rights and women's movements, both dramatically contributing to increased awareness of the significance of and strength in racial, ethnic, and gender identity. (52)

Kaufman finds the timing of "Akiba" to be "significant—the 1956 Suez Crisis assured Jews that Israel had the military strength to defend itself against combined Arab armies and thus to become more than an eight-year experiment" (53). Kaufman also cites the capture and trial of Nazi Adolph Eichmann as "a pivotal event that gave Israeli, American, and European Jews confidence to begin directly facing the horrors of the Holocaust in legal contexts, literature, and scholarship" (53).

Within this context of American Jewish poets' greater identification with their Jewish heritage, Rukeyser produced the five-part sequence, "Akiba." The poem, which was "commissioned by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations [the Reform movement's umbrella organization], began appearing serially in *American Judaism*" (Kaufman 53).

Rukeyser provides information about Akiba in her note to the poem:

Akiba is the Jewish shepherd-scholar of the first and second century, identified with the Song of Songs and with the insurrection against Hadrian's Rome, led in AD 132 by Bar Cochba (Son of the Star). After this lightning war, Jerusalem captured, the Romans driven out of the south, Rome increased its military machine; by 135, the last defenses fell, Bar Cochba was killed. Akiba was tortured to death at the command of his friend,

the Roman Rufus, and a harrow was drawn over the ground where Jerusalem had stood, leaving only a corner of wall. The story in my mother's family is that we are descended from Akiba—
unverifiable, but a great gift to a child. — M. R. (*Ark* 620)

Thus, according to Gary Pacernick, "In 'Akiba,' the poet commemorates her ancestor's exemplary life, but also the heroic struggle of the Jewish people, of Israel, to create a great 'song of the way in,' a way not only to survive, but to find spiritual meaning in the world" (217).

The first section, "The Way Out," is arranged as a call and response: an alternating series of six nine-line stanzas followed by one-line stanzas, a style that emulates the structure of many prayers found in the *siddur* (Jewish prayer book). The poem opens with a reference to signs, and shifts to a series of references to speech as the poet recollects the momentous beginning of the Exodus: rock speaks to water, flame speaks to cloud, blood on the doorposts ("red splatter") speaks to angel and stars, sand speaks to moon, and the recollected "hammering," symbolic of the Israelite's slavery in Egypt, speaks to "the bones of our thighs," symbolic of the living who are leaving and the dead whose bones will stay behind, and the fleeing people "hear the hoofs over the seethe of the sea" (*Ark* 620).

The first single-line stanza changes the speech to music: "All night down the centuries, have heard, music of passage" (621). The music and speech themes continue in the second long stanza, which introduces Moses, "firstborn forbidden by law of the pyramid," the "water-drawn man" (621). Here the poet seems to be

referring to the accepted derivation of Moses' name. According to Gunther Plaut, the name "Moses" (*Mosheh*) is

associated with the word *mashah*, to draw out, which represents an assonance rather than correct etymology. The Rabbis overcame the linguistic problem ("drawn out" should be *mashuy*, while *mosheh* means "who draws out") suggesting that he was given the name prophetically, in that Moses would draw out Israel from Egypt, or that Moses drew himself out, so to speak, because of his merits.

(388)

This "water-drawn man" leads the people to the "smoke mountain" (Sinai). The rest of the stanza builds intensity with a series of gerunds: "the burning, the loving, the speaking, the opening" (*Ark* 621). In the voice from the mountain, the earlier "music of passage" becomes "Music of those who have walked out of slavery," who have traveled "Into that journey where all things speak to all things" (621), the place of "all creation being created in one image, creation" (621), an allusion to the central prayer of Judaism, the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (alt. "the Lord is One"). The subsequent lines recall others who have fled slavery and oppression, "the escaping Negroes," "those on the Long March." This reflects both the poet's well-established concern for social justice, and also echoes the admonition from the Passover prayer book that Jews should remember others who suffer oppression because "we were once slaves in Egypt." The Passover *seder* is a metaphorical re-enactment of the Exodus, and the wilderness journey the metaphorical choice to

move, body and soul, into the unknown. Here, according to the poet, “Where the wilderness enters, the world” is where all the signs and the speaking unite to become “the song of the world” (621).

The poem now introduces Akiba, whose body, dressed in “the clothes of death,” was smuggled out of Jerusalem by his students after his execution. Like his ancestor’s journey out of Egypt, Akiba’s is a journey “to find whatever he was loving with his life.” The poet seems to say that Akiba’s journey is symbolic of our “wilderness journey through which we move.” That is, when we take “the way out” from what restrains us, we, like the ancient Israelites, transform our lives into a journey in search of understanding. As we seek to discover “the signs of all things,” we create our “song of the way in” to awareness of the interconnections, the “one image,” of creation.

In the second section, “Song of Songs,” the lyrical verse incorporates images from that Biblical book together with its representation of physical, sexual love. Jewish history credits Akiba with having insisted that this book be included in the Biblical canon.

His argument for canonizing the poem prevailed over the rabbinic voices of his generation that found the poem’s silence about God in the face of the celebration of sexuality untenable and, therefore, determined that the relationship between the lovers must be an allegory for the relationship between God and Israel. Here, Rukeyser recognizes Akiba’s greatness for upholding the

sacredness of poetry on its own terms, for its own sensuality, for recognizing the poem as *The Song of Songs*. (Kaufman 56)

Rukeyser's poetry incorporates themes that draw from all aspects of life, including sexuality. This eleven-quatrain section celebrates the power and joy of human sexuality, "holy desire." The song of discovery from the earlier section here becomes creation itself:

This song
 Is the creation
 The day of this song
 The day of the birth of the world (*Ark* 623)

Physical love symbolizes all future possibilities, for "In these delights / Is the eternity of seed" (623).

In the next section, "The Bonds," the reader is brought back to the physical world where, "In the wine country, poverty, they drink no wine" (623). This section tells the story of the period in Akiba's life when he began to grow into role of teacher, which will eventually lead to his death. Like the first section, this one is written in the call-and-response style, with one-sentence stanzas interspersed with longer ones. This section incorporates another of Rukeyser's often-used themes: the power and importance of women. This theme, usually unacknowledged in Biblical and Talmudic literature, manifests here in the form of Akiba's wife: "She, Rachel, who is come to recognize / In the huge wordless shepherd she finds Akiba" (624). Having learned from the child she gave him, "his new son whose eyes are wine," Akiba, whose studies begin at the age of

forty, “can now come to his power and speak” (624). Akiba’s speaking becomes his teaching, allowing his understanding to be shared with his students, “The spark, from one to the other leaping, a bond / Of light” (624). Akiba will eventually be killed because he refuses not to teach (as the next section will describe), but here the poet says that Akiba could not *not* teach. Teaching had become central to his existence, and he nurtured the learning of his students in a way that transcends patriarchal gender lines: “[t]he need to give having found the need to become: // More than the calf wants to suck, the cow wants to give suck” (624).

The story of Akiba’s death is described in the fourth section, “Akiba Martyr.” In a series of varying length stanzas that frequently employ long, narrative verses, the poet recounts Akiba’s spiritual strength as he was being flayed to death. Akiba was sentenced to death because he had refused the Roman order to stop teaching. He had also supported the Jewish rebel leader, Simeon Bar Cochba, whom he and others had believed was the Messiah (*Jewish Literacy* 143-144). (It is worth noting here that in Judaism, the Messiah is not expected to be a divine figure, but rather a human being who will—among other things—reunite the Jewish people and bring peace to the world (*Jewish Literacy* 544-547). Not unlike the resistance of the partisans of the Warsaw Ghetto whose actions are reflected in Rukeyser’s “To Be a Jew” sonnet, the Bar Cochba rebellion pitted the Jews in futile resistance against the powerful Roman army.)

The rabbis of Akiba’s time were the ones who would write the *Mishnah*, the first written part of the Oral Law. Each of the leading rabbis had his own

group of devoted students and followers. The previous section describes the importance Akiba ascribed to the learning and teaching of Torah. Despite the edict against teaching, and despite his advanced age (the poem puts his age at ninety), Akiba refuses to abandon his work:

Does the old man during the uprising speak for compromise?

In all but the last things. Not in the study itself.

For this religion is a system of knowledge;

Points may be one by one abandoned, but not the study. (*Ark* 625)

For all of his devotion to learning and teaching, it is for his spiritual devotion that Akiba is most revered. This section of the poem alludes to the “commandment saying / Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul / and with all thy might” (625). These verses are part of the *Shema* prayer (Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One), which is to be recited at several, mandated times each day. One of these times is during the early morning prayer, and even as dawn breaks and Akiba is dying, he recites this prayer. Despite his agony, Akiba is said to have been joyful fulfilling the commandment to recite the *Shema*, realizing that “I knew that I loved him with all my heart and might. / Now I know that I love him with all my life” (625). Akiba embodies the unifying essence of the *Shema*:

To love God with all the heart, all passion,

Every desire called evil, turned toward unity,

All the opposites, all in the dialogue.

All the light and dark of the heart, of life made whole. (625)

This unification of “the light and dark of the heart” reflects the Jewish idea that people are not born evil (Judaism does not believe in original sin), but instead have both evil inclinations (*yetzer hara*) and good inclinations (*yetzer hatov*). To achieve holiness, people must work to develop the *yetzer hatov*, but they must also accept and channel the aggressive energy of the *yetzer hara*. As Joseph Telushkin recounts the Talmudic point:

“The *yetzer ha-ra* is very good,” one rabbi counseled his colleagues. “How so? Without it, a man wouldn’t build a house, marry a woman, have children and conduct a business. As Solomon taught (Eccl. 4:4): ‘I have also noted that all labor and skillful enterprise come from men’s envy of each other.’”

(*Jewish Literacy* 544-545)

If Akiba embodies the spirit of the *Shema*, and if in its representation of God’s unity the *Shema* represents universal unity, then, the poet seems to say, the objective of the individual’s journey into the wilderness must be to discover, in a “burst of consciousness” that transcends “the known life, day and ideas,” that everything is connected to everything else.

As he dies, Akiba’s journey of study has led him to the realization of complete unity with his God. The connection of the Jew to the journey began with Abraham, who according to Jewish tradition was the first monotheist, and who was also a nomad. Abraham’s One God is not the chief of a pantheon of gods; rather this God *is* One, containing and unifying everything. As Akiba, dying, proclaims his love and devotion to the One God, he has found “the way in” to that

transcendent one-ness. For the poet, wholeness is the end in itself, and Akiba has given it physical reality:

My hope, my life, my burst of consciousness:
To confirm my life in the time of confrontation.

The old man saying Shema.

The death of Akiba. (626)

If, for the poet, Akiba has reached the ultimate destination of the human spiritual journey, then the story of the Exodus can be seen to represent the universal human imperative for the freedom to explore. Walking out of slavery the Israelites can begin to see the “signs of all things” that they could not see while they were enslaved. “Escaping into faith” they discover that what seemed an impossible barrier (the sea) was not. Crossing it, despite their fear of being destroyed (by the water and the pursuing Egyptians), they reach the other shore where, in their joy, they dance and sing “the song of the way in,” celebrating the both their freedom and the infinite possibilities of discovery.

People must free themselves for the journey, resisting all that oppresses them or holds them back. Others who are already free must help by removing obstacles. This is an idea inherent in the concept of social justice, and it is one of the poet’s themes in much of her work. In the concluding section of this sequence, however, the focus is on another aspect of justice, that of serving as witness—a role that the poet herself will take on in her later poem, “The Gates.” The witness’s role in this section transcends time, from that of “the tall shepherd” and

“the false messiah to “tonight” (626). It also moves across day and night, and from memory into the present and into a “time not yet born.” The embodiment of the witness is new in each time, but, like the Jewish people, it will go on: “The witness is myself. / And you, / The signs, the journeys of the night, survive” (626)

The role of the poet as witness is at the heart of Rukeyser’s “The Gates.” Published in 1978 in a volume by the same name, the poem grew out of Rukeyser’s trip to South Korea on behalf of the imprisoned poet, Kim Chi Ha, whose writing “has got under the skin of the highest officials” (*Out of Silence* 155). Rukeyser, who by this time had health problems related to several strokes, was the president of the American PEN Center, a part of the noted international human rights and literary organization. Rukeyser describes the circumstances of the trip in her note to the poem:

An American woman is sent to make an appeal for the poet’s life.
 She speaks to Cabinet ministers, the Cardinal, university people,
 writers, the poet’s family and his infant son. She stands in the mud
 and rain at the prison gates—also the gates of perception, the gates
 of the body. She is before the house of the poet. He is in solitary.

(155)

The sequence is written in fifteen parts of varying length and structures. The order of the sections provides a rough chronology of the journey, interspersed with memory and profiles of some of the prisoner’s family members. The first section connects the poet-author with the poet-prisoner. Through Kim Chi Ha’s poetry, they link “across worlds,” so that the next section finds Rukeyser’s persona

“Walking the world to find the poet of these cries” (155). The repetition of the word “walking” creates an almost cinematic sense of physical transition, and in the third section “New Friends,” the poet has arrived in her hotel room. Political oppression and danger is conveyed through the actions of the poet’s “new friend,” presumably a sympathetic guide, who “walks around the room, touching / all the pictures hanging on the wall” where he finds one that “does not move” (156). Although the government may be using listening devices, he assures her “foreigners are safe.” Nevertheless, when she returns from her visit to the Cardinal, he is anxious: “I thought you were kidnapped.” (156).

Rukeyser’s experience as the subject of a decades-long F.B.I. investigation may have exacerbated her antagonism toward the Korean government. Her attitude emerges as the poet speaks to a Cabinet minister who tries to justify the government’s imprisoning Kim Chi Ha, saying that even the prisoner’s diaries condemn him: “He says, this poet, It is not wrong / to take from the rich and give to the poor” (156). Rukeyser’s persona, a supporter of the prisoner’s ideas, is not only unpersuaded by this reasoning, but sees the demonstration undermining its purpose, as “It also means that you broke into his house and stole his papers” (156).

Section five introduces the strong personal connection between the author and the imprisoned poet’s family—his young wife, her mother, and his son, “a strong infant” who is “beginning to run” (157). Later sections of the poem will develop the personal connections that are begun here, but the sequence continues with more of the author’s public endeavors. In the “Church of Galilee” section,

the author delineates opposing political sides present at a meeting held in a church. The police, representing the government, who would stifle free expression, are hovering menacingly outside. Inside, is a group of professors for whom “dismissed is now an honorary degree” who continue to “stand firm and sing / wanting a shared and honest lifetime” (157). The author’s experience with the resisters in the church meeting connects her with her own heritage, so that in “The Dream of the Galilee” section, the poet recalls visiting her ancestor Akiba’s grave at Kinneret in the Galilee in Israel. She imagines that Akiba advises her—and by implication, Kim Chi Ha—to continue to do what Akiba did:

[. . .] to love
 your belief with all your life,
 and resist the Romans, as I did,
 even to the torture and beyond. (158)

Section eight opens with a visual embodiment of passive resistance: a “woman at vigil in the prison yard, / [. . .] seen as the fine tines of a pitchfork” (158). This is the poet’s mother, who reputedly will kill herself if her son is killed. She is compared to a worn and rusted farm implement, yet in her commitment to stand, she is “transparent in bravery” (158). The image suggests a slender woman in traditional Korean dress whose legs appear to be the downward-pointed tines of a pitchfork that are dug into the earth, where the pitchfork would do its agricultural work. On the other hand, one could imagine the woman standing with arms reaching upward, toward the son’s cell as if trying to continue her mothering work with him.

The “grief woman” of the next section (perhaps the imprisoned poet’s mother from the previous section, or perhaps another female figure) has given the poet a “scarlet coverlet,” which the poet flings back as she recalls the juxtaposed images of the vigil women and the imprisoned poet in solitary (158). The nighttime, dreamlike images lead into the next section’s nightmare opening into a world filled with fear. In the thirty-eight verses of this section, the word fear appears (as a singular or plural) eighteen times. The sixth stanza uses the word “fear” almost percussively, creating increasing dramatic tension as sexual power becomes jailers’ power, and the drumbeat of “fear” becomes our acting out our fears with “ripping,” burning, and “the terrible scream,” that culminate in “tearing away every mouth that screams” (159). For victims of social injustice with their mouths torn away, “their screams are heard as silence” (159). The collective becomes the individual as the poet turns to the enforced silence of the prisoner in solitary. The imprisoned poet is without writing materials or anyone in a nearby cell to whom he could signal. Yet the prisoner nevertheless “is signaling” to others of conscience. The nightmare is ending because others do not allow themselves to be silence: “Many of us speak / we do teach each other, we do act through our fears”; by taking up the cause of social justice for this prisoner, “We run through the night. We are given his gifts” (159).

The sight of the prisoner’s infant son has caused the poet’s persona to recall her own son. She finds parallels between the enforced separation of the prisoner and his son and the separation of her son from his father, which had resulted from the father having had another child (unknown to her) three weeks

before her son was born. The poet says that that father isolated himself from her son because he was “jailed [. . .] / by his own fantasies” (161). Unable to “name the names” the poet sees common suffering in the children’s individual tragedies, and sees these as part of a universal imprisonment “in all our unfree lands” (160). She exhorts us to “name them all” by bearing witness for the prisoners. From her earlier inability to name (her child’s father), the poet in section fourteen sees her witnessing for Kim Chi Ha as having restored her own speech, and closes exhorting the reader to “Speak for sing for pray for / everyone in solitary / every living life” (161).

The concluding section of the sequence returns to chronological time in the prison yard and “Mud, silence, rain” (161). To the poet’s surprise, the prison gates open, but it turns out this is only so that a busload of new prisoners can enter. Now more families wait outside the gates, leaving the poet to ask,

How shall we tell each other of the poet?

How can we meet the judgment on the poet,

or his execution? How shall we free him?

How shall we speak to the infant beginning to run?

All those beginning to run? (162)

Witnessing, alone or with others, *is* doing something, according to the poet. Oppressive authorities must be confronted by those who can speak up: “Let them listen to the dispossessed / and to all women and men who stand firm and sing / wanting a shared and honest lifetime,” Rukeyser writes (157). Although “The gate that never opens / opens at last” only to receive new prisoners, the poet

does not allow the reader to abandon the effort to free the prisoners. She does not ask *if* we should tell each other of the poet or speak to the infant, she asks *how* we shall do it. Witnessing provides a possibility for change, an idea that the Talmud supports as it also invokes the image of (heavenly) gates:

Rav Anan said: The gates of prayer are never barred, as it is written (Deut. 4:7): “For what great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon Him?” And what is calling upon Him, if not prayer, as it is said (Isa. 65:24): Before they call, I will reply; while they are yet speaking, I will have heard.” (Deut. Rabbah 2:12, qtd. in *Gates of Prayer* i)

Despite its thematic connection to this Talmudic idea and despite its reference to Akiba, “The Gates,” like “The Book of the Dead” and most of Rukeyser’s other social justice poems, is not explicitly Jewish, nor is “Islands,” the final poem to be examined here. However, in its concept, “Islands,” published in The Gates may be Rukeyser’s most “Jewish” poem, in that it restates the essence of the central Jewish prayer, the *Shema* (“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One”):

O for God’s sake
they are connected
underneath

They look at each other
 across the glittering sea
 some keep a low profile

Some are cliffs

The bathers think

islands are separate like them (*Out of Silence* 151-152)

The apparent separateness of the islands is an illusion, and it is mirrored by the structure of the poem. The connection carries over at the end of the verse so that the islands are “connected / underneath.” (151). The difference in their appearance is even more misleading, and it carries across the break between stanzas: “some keep a low profile // Some are cliffs” (152). The bathers cannot see—or do not think about—what they see being connected to what they do not see, but the connection is there nonetheless. The islands themselves seem alive in that they “look at each other,” much as the bathers would look at one another, and this creates a unifying connection between nature and humanity. The bathers are in the water, and so become part of it, while still retaining their separate identity. The water, then, connects all the elements: people, islands, and what is underneath, so that all are parts of one whole.

Years earlier in *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser had written about the theme of One-ness, but in the context the Depression years, of modernism, and of the subjects which were considered appropriate for literature. Speaking of herself and her contemporaries she wrote:

Our drive was not for the old unity. We had entered the age of the long war and the circular traps: unemployment which branded these children with a sense of waste that dragged back each drop of blood; silence among all the shouting and the floods of print that renewed a distrust of all beliefs and all poetry; and beyond all of this, a sense of human possibility that would not let us rest in defeat ever, or admit the notion of defeat. [. . .]

The work was what we wanted and the process. We did not want a sense of Oneness with the One so much as a sense of many-ness with the many. Multiplicity no longer stood against unity.

(207)

In “Islands,” published about thirty years after *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser continues to assert Unity, albeit with a more sardonic tone (“For God’s sake”) than in her earlier work. (This can also be seen in her comment in “The Gates”: It also means that you broke into his house and stole his papers.”) Perhaps the tone is a result of her having aged and matured, or perhaps it is the result of changes in outlook prompted by her ongoing health problems; but in general her later poems are more accessible than the earlier ones—even if the later ones do encompass more references to Judaism, and this has led some critics to advise new readers to begin reading with the later poems. Unity—interconnectedness—is a theme throughout all Rukeyser’s work, and in this way it might be said that by reflecting the One-ness expressed in the Shema, *all* of Rukeyser’s poetry is Jewish poetry.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Muriel Rukeyser's poetry is often political, advocating for a peace that is not just the absence of war. Her poetry argues that good and evil are but part of a greater whole. It argues for freedom, especially the freedom to be heard, and it argues that it is incumbent on humanity ensure a voice for the powerless and oppressed, the poor, the imprisoned, and, minorities, including women. The latter points are consistent with the Jewish prophetic tradition of social justice for all human beings, whether Jewish or not.

Biblical commentators and Talmudic scholars would point out that even early Judaism provided a relatively enlightened view of civic rights for women, including the right to own property and divorce their husbands. While this was far from full being granted full rights, it was significant in the context of that place and time. Rukeyser's own feminist themes, while not explicitly connected to this tradition, nevertheless echoes the past, even as she anticipates the feminism of the 1970s and later. Her own life can be seen as a feminist example, writing about subjects, such as mathematics and politics, in an era when public discussion of these topics was dominated by men. She chose to have a child out of wedlock, and to raise the child herself in an era when middle class society rejected such decisions.

Rukeyser's political views were much influenced by American and European political events, especially the wars—hot and cold—of the 1930s-1970s. It was also influenced by social events, including the Depression, the

growth and entanglement of big business with big government, and by the feminist movement. Her work was also influenced by the poets she read, including Melville, Emerson, Dickenson, Whitman, Pound, and Eliot. It was also influenced by her personal and professional standing (and her sometimes invisibility) in pre-feminist America as an Eastern, urban, educated female writer and single mother. And it was also influenced by her Judaism. She manifested her Judaism rather indirectly, according to Janet Kaufman:

In some respects Rukeyser is like the “non-Jewish Jew” Isaac Deutscher describes when reflection on the lives of great Jewish modern revolutionaries such as Heine, Marx, Luxemburg, and Trotsky. Deutscher sees these figures as Jewish precisely in the way they transcended the boundaries of Judaism, living their Judaism in a universal arena: all believed in human solidarity, and all saw solidarity as extending beyond Jewish borders. Jewry was too narrow, too archaic, and too constricting for them; however, as the contemporary feminist theologian Judith Plaskow observes, these revolutionaries “betrayed a passion for justice and action that is rooted in the tradition they wanted to leave behind.” Reflecting on nineteenth-century Jewish radicals, Plaskow asserts that they reworked, albeit unintentionally, Isaac Luria’s sixteenth century, Kabbalistic notion of *tikkun olam*—the repair of evil released in the world by God’s withdrawal from it—such that the task of repairing the broken world was entirely in human hands. As

Plaskow asserts, action for them came to mean social action; evil was injustice; and revolution was the solution to repairing the material world, the only world. (*Poet* 51)

Her idea of poetry may be informed by the Jewish idea that this world is God's world, not a lost world that can be reclaimed only in an afterlife. Perhaps poetry was meant instead "To stand against the idea of the fallen world, a powerful and destructive idea overshadowing Western poetry. In that sense there is no lost Eden, and God is the future. The child walled-up in our life can be given his growth. In that growth is our security" (*Life of Poetry* 206)

Much of her poetry evoked images of "the child," and much of that evokes images of the fatherless child. At the time she chose to raise her son as a single mother and to remain publicly silent about his paternity—a choice that today might be impossible, given our intrusive and resourceful press and our tell-all culture. Because they are not easily connected to biography, these images can become iconic in a way that experiences of some of the female confessional poets could not: this son can represent all sons separated from their fathers, this lonely mother can represent all women abandoned by their lovers, and all women whose own strength gave them their own way out—without the man.

For Rukeyser, the individual often represents a larger value. The individuals in "The Book of the Dead" presented images of individual suffering, but they also represented the suffering of the hundreds who died, and by extension, those unnumbered individuals who had been hurt or killed by corporate and governmental callousness and greed. The mother of the poet—the "pitchfork

woman” in “The Gates”—is all grieving mothers who are powerless to save their children but who are also powerless to stop trying to save them. Similarly, the “strong child beginning to run” is every child, full of life, unaware of the dangers ahead, too young to feel the pain of separation, and beginning to run into his own future, which is the future of humanity.

Rukeyser’s universality was not always well received by the critics who frequently bristled that they were unable to put her in a category. Speaking of the modernists, Rukeyser said that “Those of us whose imaginations had been reached would not sell out: we would not stop at the images, or at ‘sincerity,’ at security, or at any one field. There are relationships, we said, to be explored; and in our weakness and limitation, in ignorance and several poverties and doubt and disgust, we thought of possibility” (*Life of Poetry* 208). More recently, critics and scholars have begun to appreciate the complexities of her work. Scholars accept the stylistic distinctions between her early and later work, as Jan Heller-Levi writes, but the important thing about approaching Rukeyser is to do so holistically:

Often there’s a great honoring of Rukeyser’s later books of poetry [. . .] for their accessibility. Such accessibility is one of her gifts, but so is the troubling, troubled difficulty of many important poems that come before. For every one of her late, great poems, there is precedent in her earlier books. [. . .] More than any other poet I can think of, Rukeyser lived on paper (that she was willing to do so was clear from the start—‘Breathe in life, breathe out

poetry') continually exploring and elaborating her themes of connection and growth. (*Poet* 284-285)

Of the difficulty reading Rukeyser's work, Adrienne Rich says that "this may be partly due to resistances stored in us by our own social and emotional training" (*Rukeyser Reader* xiv). Yet because Rukeyser's message often emerges from accumulation, Rich asserts, "of all twentieth century writers, her work repays full reading" (xv).

Anne Sexton is said to have referred to Muriel Rukeyser as "the mother of us all." (Some sources credit this to other poets, but in the end it is the message of the comment that matters.) In her universality, complexity, passion, and caring Muriel Rukeyser is like a mother, a source of nurturing that comes to us from the written page. She did write, as she said, as an American, a woman, a poet and a Jew, and one could follow any one of these influences looking for its themes and images in her body of work. Except in her explicitly Jewish poems, such as, for example, the sonnet from "Letter to the Front" and "Akiba," references to Judaism—and her personal connection to it—are infrequent. However, the prophetic theme of social justice, while not uniquely Jewish, dominates much of her work. While Jewishness per se may not be the hallmark of her work, its influence arguably can be inferred.

It is a Jewish custom (albeit too little observed) for parents to write an "ethical will" in addition to the typical legal will. The ethical will is a statement of the parent's beliefs about what really matters, and is an expression of what the parents hope will have been their personal legacy—their moral effect—on the life

of their children. Whether or not she intended it as such, Muriel Rukeyser wrote something of an ethical will in one of her late poems. Despite its brevity, the poem "Then" seems to capture everything the poet hoped would be her legacy to us, her family of readers:

When I am dead, even then,

I will still love you, I will wait in these poems,

When I am dead, even then,

I am still listening to you. (*Out of Silence* 154)

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