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*Montclair State University*

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MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

A FEMINIST REVOLUTION ON THE POPULAR FRONT:

MURIEL RUKEYSER'S 1930s POETRY

by

JANIS HUBSCHMAN

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

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College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

[Redacted Signature]

Dr. Claire Taub  
(Dean)

*INTERIM DEAN*

4/20/09  
(date)

Thesis Committee:

[Redacted Name]

Dr. Art Simon  
(Thesis Sponsor)

[Redacted Name]

Dr. Tom Benediktsson  
(Committee Member)

[Redacted Name]

Dr. Sharon Lewis  
(Committee Member)

[Redacted Name]

Dr. Daniel Bronson  
(Department Chair)

## ABSTRACT

### A FEMINIST REVOLUTION ON THE POPULAR FRONT:

#### MURIEL RUKEYSER'S 1930s POETRY

Modern American poet, Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980) launched her half-century career in the thirties, a decade marked by an economic crisis in the United States, the rising threat of fascism abroad, and, consequently, by a politically-charged literary culture. Although Rukeyser's deep engagement with social issues identified her from the start as a poet of the left, she maintained her political and artistic autonomy throughout the decade to shape a highly individualistic radical feminist aesthetic. My analysis of Rukeyser's three collections from the 1930s: *Theory of Flight* (1935), *U.S. 1* (1938), and *A Turning Wind* (1939) considers how the poet embraces, transforms, and disrupts the leftist literary conventions and social ideas of the period to merge her leftist and feminist impulses. These texts, I argue, are concerned with joining issues of politics and social change with issues of identity and feminism for a broader understanding of what activist poetry can accomplish. I read the three works within the context of Depression-era feminism to consider how they advance the poet's idiosyncratic feminist social vision where politics is deeply connected to the personal and female agency is a key component in social reform.

A FEMINIST REVOLUTION ON THE POPULAR FRONT:  
MURIEL RUKEYSER'S 1930s POETRY

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

by

JANIS HUBSCHMAN

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2009

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## Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: <i>Theory of Flight</i> (1935)	14
Chapter Three: "The Book of the Dead" from <i>U.S. 1</i> (1938)	33
Chapter Four: <i>A Turning Wind</i> (1939)	55
Works Cited	76

## A Feminist Revolution on the Popular Front: Muriel Rukeyser's 1930s Poetry

### Chapter One: Introduction

Modern American poet, Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980) launched her half-century career in the thirties, a decade marked by an economic crisis in the United States, the rising threat of fascism abroad, and, consequently, by a politically charged literary culture. Rukeyser's deep engagement with social issues identified her from the start as a poet of the left. An eyewitness to the decade's despair, she was swept up in the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War while covering the antifascist Olympics in Barcelona, she reported on the Scottsboro trial in Alabama, and she investigated Union Carbide's abuses at Gauley Bridge, West Virginia where thousands of workers were dying of silicosis. Although her poetry appeared with frequency in such explicitly political journals as *New Masses*, *Partisan Review*, and *The Daily Worker*, Rukeyser—to the consternation of critics on the left *and* the right—did not conform to the dictates of any aesthetic or political agenda. More significantly, the left literary culture, with its dismissal of the “personal” as worthy subject matter and its inconsistent attention to gender, could not accommodate Rukeyser's expansive, Whitmanesque poetic vision.

While male radicals continued to privilege class over gender, Rukeyser fused issues of politics and social change to issues of identity and feminism for a broader understanding of what poetry can accomplish. Her politically-inflected poetry of this period reveals not only a sharp awareness of society's hierarchal power arrangement, but also of a woman's subordinated position within it. In challenging the masculine narratives of heroism, power, and war in her work, Rukeyser exposes the patriarchal



assumptions and motives behind the creation of 1930s political poetry, and thereby opens a space for the female radical's perspective. As Walter Kalaidjian claims, "[...] perhaps Rukeyser's most stunning advance beyond proletcult and bourgeois aesthetics alike is her distinctively feminist rendering of social empowerment" (*American Culture* 173).

This thesis considers Rukeyser's three collections from the 1930s: *Theory of Flight* (1935), *U.S. 1* (1938), and *A Turning Wind* (1939) to show how the poet negotiates the period's leftist literary conventions and social ideas to merge her leftist and feminist impulses. In this work, I argue, Rukeyser moves beyond the left's often simple, universalizing, masculinist poetics to shape a boundary-breaking radical feminist aesthetic. For even as Rukeyser engages with the social and political questions of her day, she is never constrained in her poetry by the left's interpretation of socially committed literature – an interpretation that often duplicates, in its rhetoric and iconography, a traditional binary construction of gender. Rather, she extends the revolutionary discourse to include a feminist viewpoint, and thereby extends the ongoing conversation within radical poetry beyond issues of class struggle.

Rukeyser, like other leftist women poets of the thirties, unavoidably wrote against a paradigm of a masculinized aesthetic. Although the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) never dictated aesthetic criteria in its policies, the party did have ideological influence on Depression-era poets taking a critical stance against capitalism. Barbara Foley explains that "the official arbiters" of Marxist theory were the critics associated with *New Masses* and *Partisan Review*, a homogenous group of middle-class white males—including Mike Gold, Joseph Freeman, Phillip Rahv, and

Isidor Schneider—that in no way represented the diverse group of writers at that time (47).

The women radical poets no doubt felt alienated when Mike Gold, CPUSA member, writer, and founder of *New Masses*, linked literary and political potency with rugged masculinity in 1929:

A new writer has been appearing: a wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines, steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America. He is sensitive and impatient. He writes in jets of exasperated feeling and has no time to polish his work. He is violent and sentimental by turns. He lacks self confidence but writes because he must. (qtd. in Rabinowitz “Women” 3)

The literary left consistently used gendered language to describe working-class subjects. Moreover, the workers were assumed to be anti-capitalists. Foley notes that “[t]he egalitarian impulse to value the articulations of authentic proletarian subjects could converge with patronizing and sexist assumptions about who those subjects in fact were” (97). Mike Gold’s prescription for the proletarian writer effectively diminishes the experience of both men and women.

In addition to establishing an iconic macho image of the proletarian writer, Gold reveals, in this account, another aesthetic development of the period: many writers, in the interest of reaching a worker-class audience, abandoned complex modern forms for simpler, more accessible styles (Nelson *Repression* 158). *New Masses* poetry critic Isidor Schneider advises writers to reject the “snobbery” and

“mysticism” of modern experimental poetry (Kertesz 83). In resisting this edict, Rukeyser, a fellow-traveler, often ran afoul of left-wing critics who variously dismissed her work as “obscure,” “erratic,” or “complicated” (Kaufman xxxviii). The charge of obscurity, according to Rukeyser says more “about the audience and nothing about the poem” (*LP* 54). Indeed, while the leftist critics and cultural leaders called for more accessible styles, they still tended to subordinate gender to class when addressing the social problems of the day.

Despite the large numbers of women exploited in the Depression-era labor market, the rhetoric and iconography of the CPUSA’s Third Period regularly constructed the category of “worker” as male. Gold and other leftist male writers, responding perhaps to the popular notion that Depression-era suffering was a singularly male experience, fashioned proletarian aesthetics and culture into a male dominion. Leftist male poetry from this period—such as Edwin Rolfe’s “These Men Are Revolution” (1934) and Kenneth Patchen’s “Joe Hill Listens to the Praying” (1934)—includes images of men striking, marching, and dying for democracy. The opening lines of Sol Funaroff’s poem, “American Worker,” exemplify the left’s idealization of the 1930s revolutionary male worker:

He stands solid,--  
 unbudging newengland rock;  
 and his mighty head rears firm, mighty  
 a high mountain in the Rockies,  
 into the field houses of sunrise.

*His heart's dynamo that runs this country ...* (qtd. in Nelson  
*Repression* 141)

This model of a simple, idealized male worker who constitutes the bedrock of America not only discounts women's experience and contribution, it also naturalizes socially-constructed, polarized gender differences. It is precisely this kind of masculinized, patriotic image that Rukeyser destabilizes in "Mearle Blankenship," included in her long poem, "The Book of the Dead," from *U.S. I* (1938):

He stood against the rock  
facing the river  
grey river grey face  
the rock, mottled behind him  
like X-ray plate enlarged/diffuse and stony  
his face against the stone. (30-36)

Here, Rukeyser merges the image of the dying tunnel worker, Blankenship, with the landscape that has provided him with both a living and a death sentence. Unlike Funaroff's idealized, universal American worker, Rukeyser's Blankenship represents a more specific critique, and thereby particularizes suffering under capitalism. Similarly, the portrayal of Mrs. Jones in "Absalom," another poem from the sequence, challenges the era's stereotypical portrait of the "working-class woman as sacrificing mother" by granting this female speaker the agency and authority to address a congressional committee (Rabinowitz *Labor* 55).

The radical left's inconsistent attention to gender issues can be explained in part by the Marxist doctrine of "productive forces determinism," which maintains that

cultural change can only be achieved through political and economic revolution (Foley 245). The left's record on women's issues, though spotty, is nonetheless a progressive one. As Deborah Rosenfelt points out, even as it broadcast a decidedly masculinized image, culture, and literature, the left "simultaneously gave serious attention to women's issues, valued women's contributions to public as well as private life, and generated an important body of theory on the Woman Question" (qtd. in Foley 216). And, while the men's club atmosphere would seem to preclude the acceptance, or even possibility, of a female revolutionary poet, a number of women, including Rukeyser, did in fact write and publish highly-regarded radical verse in the 1930s. Among them, Rukeyser is most successful, however, at writing what Louise Kertesz calls "a new feminine lyricism," a modernist verse that merges themes of social awareness with deep personal experience (71). In fact, Rukeyser's work would become a seedbed for future feminists.

Preceding Rukeyser in the radical tradition is avowed Communist, Lola Ridge (1873-1941). American editor of *Broom* and a contributing editor at *New Masses*, Ridge wrote poetry that combined social critique, feminist vision, and mysticism. William Drake argues that "[f]ew poets of Ridge's generation shared her intuitive grasp of the distinction between power as oppressive in men and liberating in women, with radical political implications" (qtd. in Nelson *Repression* 285). Although both Ridge and Rukeyser make use of urban and scientific imagery in their social-minded poems, they differ in one important respect. Ridge does not combine "personal exploration with social awareness," according to Kertesz (79).

Like Rukeyser, Lucia Trent (1897-1977) addresses the politics of gender in her work. She boldly tackles such unconventional subjects as pregnancy and the pain of childbirth. In "Breed, Women, Breed," for example, Trent lashes out in angry satiric verse at the men who control motherhood within capitalism and at the women who cooperate with them. Cary Nelson notes that Trent's poems "attack conventional gender roles and power inequities," and are also "implicitly written against conventions for representing male and female interests and identities" (Nelson "On Breed"). Along with her husband Ralph Cheyney, Trent edited a number of political poetry anthologies to promote cooperation among poets and to counter what they called "the star system" (Kalaidjian *American Culture* 52). In this way, Trent also challenged the dominant relations of literary production.

Another progressive poetic forerunner of Rukeyser's is Genevieve Taggard (1894-1948). During the thirties, Taggard's lyrical poetry on social themes appeared regularly in *New Masses* and other leftist journals. Her specific critique of Depression-era misfortune resists the thirties leftist trend to idealize the working class. As Nelson observes, her poetry "registered the human costs of the Great Depression with special eloquence" (Nelson *Anthology* 335). Like Rukeyser, Taggard fuses radical and feminist themes in her work. In making the shift to proletarian poetry, however, Taggard abandoned her earlier themes of "self-revelation within the erotic relationship" (Kertesz 84).

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892-1950) was best known for her witty and ironic sonnets. As Nelson notes, "Their rhetorical dexterity and confidence reflect an adaptation of Elizabethan sonnet style, while the gender instability and reversal of

conventional gendered roles embody both her feminism and the rethinking of sexual identity that preoccupied modernist writers and the general public" (*Anthology* 320). When she began to write poetry that reflected her commitment to political activism, however, Millay, like Rukeyser, was maligned by critics who believed she did not write the kind of poetry women should be writing.

Although Rukeyser established her independence from any political or aesthetic programs, critics on both the left and on the right would, in the interest of categorizing her work, predictably zero in on the aspects of her poems that fit their particular visions of what poetry should look like. Critics on the left applauded her social-minded themes but deplored her "bourgeois prosody" and her "Modernist obscurity" (Schoerke 24). The conservative New Critics—who viewed poetry as a purely aesthetic object, and therefore preferred an ahistorical textual analysis—thought Rukeyser's "deviant" politics muddled her poetry (Schoerke 24).

Among the reviewers critical of Rukeyser's work was the poet and *The New Yorker* editor, Louise Bogan (1897-1970). According to Kenneth Rexroth, Bogan was a "militant feminist" and "much of her poetry is either a celebration of her womanhood or intensely, but cryptically erotic" (qtd. in Kertesz xiv). Bogan remained critical of Rukeyser's poetry throughout her career. In her reviews, Bogan "could not mention Rukeyser without bristling sarcasm," claims Kertesz (3). A 1951 review from *The New Yorker*, which faults Rukeyser for not measuring up to the best female lyricism, reveals Bogan's restricted view of women's verse. She writes:

The chief virtue of women's poetry is its power to pin down, with uncanny accuracy, moments of actual experience. From the beginning

of the record, female lyricism has concerned itself with minute particulars, and at its best seems less a work of art than a miracle of nature—a flawless distillation, a pure crystallization of thought, circumstance, and emotion. (qtd. in Kertesz 43)

The sweeping scale of Rukeyser's work does not fit within Bogan's miniaturist vision of lyricism. As Lorrie Goldensohn observes, "If ever women poets were to imprison themselves within a tiny domesticity or a narrow range of intellect, here was the urging for it, and from as sharp and brilliant a woman poet as the era would produce" (124). When Bogan labels Rukeyser's style "a deflated Whitmanian rhetoric," she reveals a possible distaste for Rukeyser's unfeminine ambition (qtd. in Kertesz 43). As *The New Yorker's* poetry gatekeeper, Bogan appears to be cooperating in maintaining the status quo of a gendered poetry tradition.

Traditional gender roles would also be endorsed by the CPUSA during its Popular Front era. In 1935, the party shifted its focus from the Third Period's emphasis on working-class revolution to the fight against fascism. As Paula Rabinowitz notes, literary radicals continued to represent class through gender in this period with "revolutionary girls" becoming "partisan mothers" (*Labor* 59). Radical writers turned toward such popular American icons as "the mother" and "the family" to appeal to a broader population in their opposition to fascism and other anti-democratic threats. Whether the party promoted a masculinized worker or an idealized portrait of motherhood, the effect for women was the same, claims Rabinowitz: "gender was fixed through biology; male sexuality or maternity determined one's political and literary efficacy" (Rabinowitz "Women" 12). Despite



the changes in party line, however, many radical female poets continued to employ a feminist critique in their work. To a large extent, they enjoyed what Rabinowitz calls a “liberated zone” in literary radicalism (“Women” 13). The frequent exclusion and criticism of women’s work by radical left men was itself “liberating,” freeing the women to “experiment” and “to outline a revolutionary literature that would speak with a feminine voice,” suggests Rabinowitz (“Women” 13). Rukeyser, for one, foregrounds female speakers, merges personal and political elements, and critiques patriarchal institutions of power in her earliest poems from this decade.

Rukeyser, and other female radical writers, also occupied what Rachel Blau Du Plessis calls an “insider-outsider social status,” a position which makes her become “irreconcilable things” (278). Rukeyser, for example, is an outsider by her gender position and by her relation to the dominant culture; she is an insider by her social position and class. This subject position, Du Plessis explains, produces a “double consciousness” that allows Rukeyser to produce a “female aesthetic,” one that incorporates “contradiction and nonlinear movement into the heart of the text” (278). Indeed, throughout the thirties, the poet succeeded in shaping a left feminist cultural practice from within the era’s masculinist model of radical poetry.

Additionally, the genre of poetry itself enabled Rukeyser to fully express her individualistic aesthetic and political visions. Due in part to its long association with song and the spoken voice, poetry is considered an open and available resource for those who want to express or to identify with a social or political point of view, according to Nelson (*Repression* 124). He contends:

One might argue elsewhere over tactics, policy and leadership, but in the cultural space of poetry, the left might temporarily speak with a collaborative tolerance, even if never in one voice. Moreover, because of its historical links with individual voice, poetry could also offer more idiosyncratic political vision without triggering programmatic implications and disputes. (*Repression* 125-6)

Indeed, Rukeyser's poetic voice and vision were for the most part well-received by the 1930s critics. As Kate Daniels notes, "Rukeyser [...] was regularly proclaimed the best woman writer of her generation, the best of recent Yale Younger Poets, the best of the young "revolutionist" poets by critics such as Malcolm Cowley and Louis Untermeyer" ("Muriel" 248). For poets interested in writing about political issues, the 1930s were, in fact, a more open and receptive time than the two decades that immediately followed. Rukeyser's early critics—perhaps, too, because they were still trying to get a sense of her work—were more accepting of her complex, idiosyncratic style than the later critics.

The three chapters that follow consider Rukeyser's work from the 1930s: *Theory of Flight* (1935), *U.S. 1* (1938), and *A Turning Wind* (1939) to show how the poet embraces, transforms, and disrupts the leftist literary conventions and social views of the period to merge her radical and feminist impulses. A close critical analysis of Rukeyser's work shows how the poet deploys a number of formal and rhetorical strategies—from modernist collage and juxtaposition to feminist language, imagery, and themes—to infuse her revolutionary politics with a feminist social vision. Chapter Two addresses Rukeyser's first volume, *Theory of Flight* (1935), to

demonstrate the poet's early interest in the Communism movement, including her pursuit of such left-wing social themes as racism, labor struggles, and suffering under capitalism. However, the analysis of this early work also reveals how Rukeyser surmounts the biases and restrictions of the dominant leftist literary practice to employ high modernist technique, merge personal and political elements, and privilege female experience in her socially-committed poetry. Chapter Three focuses on "The Book of the Dead," the modernist long poem from Rukeyser's second collection, *U.S. I* (1938). A close analysis of this poem sequence illustrates how Rukeyser shapes a left feminist cultural practice from within the masculinist models of modernism and proletarian poetry. Specifically, this chapter shows how the poet fuses techniques associated with social realism and proletarian poetry with modernism and a female mythology to achieve a radical feminist perspective on power. Chapter Four examines poetry from *A Turning Wind* (1939), Rukeyser's most complex work from this decade. Close critical analysis of this verse confirms Rukeyser's autonomous development as an activist poet throughout this period as she experiments with new forms and complex language, expresses female consciousness, and communicates a strong ethical vision. With this collection, Rukeyser not only strengthens her leftist and feminist commitments, she also broadens her aesthetic range.

In the turbulent thirties, Muriel Rukeyser's strong political commitment liberated, rather than restricted, her aesthetic and ethical sensibilities. In her poetry and in her politics, she remained open to new ideas, new forms. As she writes in *The Life of Poetry*:

Always we need the audacity to speak for more freedom, more imagination, more poetry with all its meanings. As we go deeper into conflict, we shall find ourselves more constrained, the repressive codes will turn to iron. More and more we shall need to be free in our beliefs, as we come to our forms. (*LP* 30)

The poet's three collections from the 1930s resisted easy categorization by the critics on the left and on the right. Rukeyser draws from the leftist and modernist practices of the era to craft her idiosyncratic radical feminist poetry. By remaining poetically flexible and politically open, she is able to fulfill her own objective of locating "the universe of emotional truth" in her socially-committed poetry (*LP* 23).

Chapter Two: *Theory of Flight* (1935)

Muriel Rukeyser won the Yale Younger Poets Prize with her first collection, *Theory of Flight* (1935), published when she was twenty-one. This eclectic volume establishes Rukeyser's individuality, her lifelong commitment to formal experiment and to social and feminist themes. Though the poems reveal an early interest in Marxism—with Karl Marx invoked as one of the “makers of victory” (19) in “Passage to Godhead”—they are not hamstrung by ideological commitment. Rather, the path of Rukeyser's artistic activism was largely self-directed, informed by an individualistic literary preference and social vision. This chapter will show how Rukeyser shapes a poetic stance in *Theory of Flight* that, while socially-conscious, transcends the period's leftist literary biases and restrictions for a more expansive, feminist vision. A close critical analysis of the poems will demonstrate how the poet negotiates between her left commitment and her feminist sensibility by employing a number of discursive and formal strategies, including: the fusion of personal with political elements; formal revision and experimentation; the evocation of powerful female figures; and the introduction of women-centered experience and themes.

*Theory of Flight*—published in an era when the term “feminist” was still associated with the bourgeois suffragette struggle for an individual's rights under capitalism, and when issues of gender were virtually invisible within revolutionary poetry—opens the door for future generations of feminists seeking a politically-engaged poetics.

From the beginning, critics recognized that Rukeyser's poetic approach veered from the period's dominant leftist discourse. In his foreword to the collection's Yale

Series of Younger Poets edition, Stephen Vincent Benét identifies Rukeyser as a “Left Winger and a revolutionary,” but offers the following qualification:

I do not intend to add [...] to the dreary and unreal discussion about unconscious fascists, conscious proletarians, and other figures of straw which has afflicted recent criticism [...]. But I will remark that when Miss Rukeyser speaks her politics—and she speaks with sincerity and fire—she does so like a poet, not like a slightly worn phonograph record, and she does so in poetic form. (qtd. in Kaufman 598)

While this assertion reflects Benét’s own discomfort, as an early social poet, towards the left’s inflexible, dogmatic literary pronouncements during this period, it also reveals Rukeyser’s unfaltering ethical and artistic independence in the face of the ideological maelstroms on both the left and the right.

Rukeyser’s early interest in social inequities was undoubtedly cultivated through her involvement in party-supported causes. Alan Filreis explains that “as political crises heated up [...] poets were confronted with the seemingly reasonable option of joining or closely affiliating with the Communist Party of the United States [...]” (174). Rukeyser’s first-hand reporter’s accounts of the Scottsboro trial and the Spanish Civil War, for example, appeared in the *Student Review*—the Communist-sponsored National Student’s League journal. Her poems inspired by those events (“The Trial” and “Mediterranean”) were published soon after in the *Student Review* and *New Masses* respectively.

“The Trial” is included in Rukeyser’s first volume as the third section of “The Lynchings of Jesus” in the long poem, “Theory of Flight.” At first glance, the poem’s

opening lines read like a reporter's atmospheric lead-in to the central narrative about nine young black men falsely accused of raping two white women:

The South is green with coming spring ; revival  
flourishes in the fields of Alabama. Spongy with rain,  
plantations breathe April : carwheels suck mud in the roads,  
the town expands warm in the afternoons. (1-4)

However, partially obscured within the lush spring landscape are the freighted symbol of the "plantation" and the image of "mud," impeding progress. As the scene shifts subtly from day to night, the poem's focus swerves to:

the black boy  
teeters no-handed on a bicycle, whistling The St. Louis Blues,  
blood beating, and hot South. A red brick courthouse  
is vicious with men inviting death. (4-7)

As though wielding a camera, the poet pans from the deceptively benign scenery to a representative black child ("the black boy") balanced precariously ("no-handed") on a bicycle and whistling The St. Louis Blues, a song about betrayal. The tension builds in the next line as the one- and two- syllable words throb like a heartbeat with "b" and "d" sounds ("blood beating," "red brick"). The stanza's final line reaches a climax with "men inviting death," a phrase that destabilizes the authority of the "courthouse" in the preceding line.

The poem's panoramic movement from landscape to courtroom calls to mind the era's popular social documentary, in which, William Stott contends, "[...] emotion counted more than fact" (9). Rukeyser will make more extensive use of

documentary technique in her long poem, "The Book of The Dead," in *U.S. 1*. Here, in the first stanza of "The Trial," she seems to employ the technique to gain some distance from her emotionally-charged subject: she substitutes the image of the free (albeit imperiled) child for the incarcerated youths. However, by juxtaposing the images of nature's regeneration with the image of the death-dealing courthouse men, Rukeyser establishes an ironic poetic stance in the first lines that reveals her own political partisanship.

From the start, Rukeyser's poetic consciousness reflected a larger vision of humanity. While she pursues many of the left's social themes like racism, labor struggles, and suffering under capitalism, Rukeyser merges them with personal elements for a more complex representation of social radicalism. As Nelson asserts, Rukeyser's work reflects the understanding that "[p]olitics is not only the large-scale public life of nations. It is also the advantages and inequities and illusions that make daily life very different for different groups" (*Anthology* 655). The single, realized image of the black boy in "The Trial," for example, holds the reader's thoughts and feelings more effectively than any slogan or propaganda ever could. Indeed, it is Rukeyser's specific, emotional response to suffering and injustice that saves her work from becoming debased by a doctrinaire point of view even when a poem is clearly influenced by Marxist left-wing politics, as it is in the volume's opening poem, the autobiographical "Poem Out of Childhood." Here, the poet employs Hegelian analysis in her depiction of an adolescent's awakening to the painful realities of an unjust world: "Dialectically our youth unfolds : / the pale child walking to the river, passionate / in ignorance in loneliness" (84-86). The poem's final lines reveal



the adolescent speaker's decision to "organize" (79) her childhood memories of war and suffering in order to find unity, or a synthesis, in an opposite state of being:

Listening at dead doors,  
 our youth assumes a thousand differing flesh  
 summoning fact from abandoned machines of trade,  
 knocking on the wall of the nailed-up power-plant,  
 telephoning hello, the deserted factory, ready  
 for the affirmative clap of truth  
 ricocheting from thought to thought among  
 the childhood, the gestures, the rigid travellers. (93-100)

The accumulation of terminal imagery ("abandoned machines," "nailed-up power-plant," "deserted factory") coupled with the forward march of participles ("summoning," "knocking," "telephoning," and "ricocheting") creates a tension that echoes the tension inherent in Hegelian theory about unity emerging from contradictory forces. Thus, a generation of "grim children," (70) marching in lockstep to the drumbeat of war, eventually rebels. They give up "listening at dead doors" and break with the status quo in order to search for the "affirmative clap of truth" behind the history-book propaganda, or behind what Louis Althusser would label, nearly four decades later, the ideological state apparatuses.

Although the poem may be read as a Marxist critique of American politics and history, Kertesz argues that it also stands as a "rich evocation of the psychological progress of childhood and adolescence in the modern world" (7). Indeed, the breadth of Rukeyser's response includes not only the political, but also

the personal, the individual's private anxiety and desire in the face of a nightmarish modern world:

Disturbed by war we pedaled bicycles  
breakneck down the decline, until the treads  
conquered our speed and pulled our feet behind them,  
and pulled our heads. (60-63)

Here, as in "The Trial," the poet uses a bicycle image to symbolize the delicate balancing act that is childhood. Violence and injustice disturb our equilibrium, our psychological development ("pulled our heads") without our awareness. Kertesz suggests that

[p]erhaps the use of "dialectically" in a poem written in 1935  
inevitably calls up the figure of Marx to some readers. Today,  
however, one can appreciate the poem's meanings in fundamental  
rather than purely ideological terms, the way Rukeyser herself  
intended. (7)

While we may be able to only guess at Rukeyser's intention, Kertesz's reading demonstrates that Marxist ideology is not central to the poem's meaning.

In the end, it is the poet's specific critique of a young girl's psychic pain that adds emotional power to the work's objective particulars. And, for this reason, a Marxist lens may be useful for examining the poem's politically-centered representation of women. As Monique Wittig notes, "It remains [...] for us to define our oppression in materialist terms, to say that women are a class, which is to say that the category 'woman,' as well as 'man,' is a political and economic category, not an

eternal one [...]” (qtd. in Jones 370). “Poem Out of Childhood” privileges female experience in the material world at a time when radical poetry reified the male experience, placing him on the front lines of social revolution. As Alan M. Wald observes, “Even when an author is a woman, her major focus might be on a male work experience [...], and the voice in a poem by a woman frequently might be gender neutral or even have masculine characteristics” (260). Rukeyser reverses the masculinist trend by giving voice and agency to her female speaker.

Rukeyser, like many other 1930s writers who were inspired and energized by the political and cultural ideas of the Communist Party, did not slavishly follow its every doctrine. Her political commitment liberates, rather than stifles, her aesthetic and ethical sensibilities. Daniels notes that Rukeyser was “[d]eeply affected by what she regarded as the humane vision of communism,” and “she felt free as a young poet to embrace selected aspects of the doctrine and reject others” (“In Order” xi). Thus, in her first collection, Rukeyser repeatedly flouts the literary left’s call for “reading clarity” (Wald 307) by employing both high-modernist and social realism techniques, most notably in the volume’s title poem. “Theory of Flight,” a long poem in six sections, uses modernistic techniques: uneven free-verse lines, allusive imagery, unconventional punctuation, and a loose, disruptive syntax – to celebrate the triumph of human spirit and desire in a modern technological age. Although the poet employs the experimental techniques of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, she does not adopt their disillusioned mood, their artistic indifference to contemporary political and economic issues. In an obvious quarrel with the desolation and disengagement of Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” Rukeyser’s “Preamble” declares:

Fortuitously have we gained loneliness,  
 fallen in waste places liberated,  
 relieved ourselves from weakness' loveliness :  
 remain unpitied now, never descend  
 to that soft howling of the prostrate mind. (14-18)

The poet pushes for engagement and advocates for hope; she shuns the lovely poetic expression of weakness and indecision.

Indeed, "Theory of Flight" is an elegant rejoinder to Eliot's charge that leftist writers "substitute political and social theory for thought" (Aaron 249). The long poem reveals Rukeyser's nuanced understanding of social realities. In "The Committee-Room," for example, where she investigates the moral bankruptcy of the "voting men" (1) who decide the fates of artists and revolutionaries, Rukeyser concludes with a vision of ascendant hope: "and the feet all falling in those places / going up the hill with sheaves and tools / and all the weapons of ascent together" (89-91). Then, in "The Strike," she exposes the contingency of hope when she considers the particular case of a strikebreaker whose hungry child "chewed its shoe to strips" (19) and whose murder convinces the company to accede to the strikers' demands. The ironies and contradictions in Rukeyser's long poem leave room for diverse interpretations and conclusions. Her method contrasts with the contemporary male modernists' "whose experimental forms often masked conservative—even reactionary—attitudes toward women, society, and politics" (Dickie 235). Margaret Dickie asserts that Rukeyser, like other female modernists (i.e., Gertrude Stein, H.D.,

and Marianne Moore) resists the androcentric modernist models established by such literary luminaries as Eliot and Pound:

In contrast to what they regarded as negative and destructive attitudes these women poets were anxious to establish a poetics based on generativity, revision, and a curiosity that confirmed otherness. In their work the lyric “I” dissolves in an interactive process that allows a participatory celebration [...]. (258)

Rukeyser did not share the male modernists’ nostalgia for the past. In “Theory of Flight,” she repeatedly exhorts readers to transcend fear and history, to overcome the “intolerable contradiction” (8) that is flight.

Rukeyser’s choice of the airplane as her long poem’s symbol of human achievement and possibility reflects her own independent, imaginative power. In navigating an individualistic poetic course, she follows her own counsel in “Preamble”: “Cut with your certain wings; engrave space now / to your ambition : stake off sky’s dimensions” (19-20). However, as Kertesz points out, Rukeyser’s ambitious poetic technique, at times, allows “unresolved conflicts into her poems, often through [...] blurred allusive lines [...]” (97). Consequently, critics often labeled her work “obscure” or “too flowingly allusive” (Kertesz 97). As the poems in her first volume reveal, Rukeyser refuses to be limited by what John Malcolm Brinnin calls the “social poet’s problem,” namely:

whether to insist upon first premises, even though that means a static repetition of familiar ideology, or to exercise full imagination and the resources of language in an endeavor to contribute a new dimension to

poetry, though that attempt, in its inevitable intellectual concentration, must deny a social audience. (qtd. in Wald 309)

Rukeyser, Wald contends, never makes a choice between the two: she addresses the social issues of her day, while making full use of her poetic imagination (309).

Women's marginal position liberates them to resist conventional culture and language, claims Julia Kristeva. She writes that "[i]f women have a role to play [...] it is only in assuming a negative function: reject everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society. Such an attitude places women on the side of the explosion of social codes: with revolutionary movements" (qtd. in Jones 363). Indeed, Rukeyser's outsider status in the radical literary community gives her the freedom to experiment with new forms and complex language in order to express her feminist social vision.

At the same time that Rukeyser refuses to modify her style for reading clarity, she also refuses to be restricted within the lyric/romantic conventions of women's poetry. She wrote "Theory of Flight" in an era when few women felt "empowered to write the long poem, associated as it was with epic's traditionally male spheres of historically significant action" (Keller 557). The male impulse to "conserve and memorialize" within their history-laden long poems was at odds with the radical modernist women's need to "create and disrupt" (Dickie 258). For Rukeyser, no poetic tradition was off-limits for the expression of her feminist social vision. In "For Memory," for example, Rukeyser rewrites the masculine tradition of the elegy when she dedicates the poem to her Vassar classmate, Ruth Lehman. An elegy written by a woman about a young woman friend breaks with tradition since, as Kertesz explains,

“[t]he famous elegies in English (Milton’s, Shelley’s, Arnold’s, Tennyson’s) are by young men about young men” (91). The subject of Rukeyser’s poem is a young radical who was born into a wealthy family, but dedicated herself to helping the poor – “her life was a job of freedom” (62)—until her premature death in 1934 (Kaufman 603). While “The *Times* prints a name” (63) in a fleeting obituary, Rukeyser creates an elegy that burns for eternity: “The words lean on the written line, the page / is a signal fire all the letters shine” (52-53). In rewriting the traditional masculine elegy, Rukeyser gives voice and agency to the female radical whose experience often gets buried in the hegemonic leftist rhetoric and policies.

At a time when social commitment and activism were mainly represented through a masculinized discourse, Rukeyser’s poems articulate revolutionary politics from a distinctly female point of view, one that is not essentialized or subordinated within patriarchy. As Wald contends “[...] while some women creative writers aspired to adapt to patriarchal models, others found a range of ways of talking back to the masculinist paradigms” (253). In “This House, This Country,” for example, Rukeyser insists on the social context of personal experience when she documents a young woman’s departure from her parents’ house and, one may deduce, from their bourgeois worldview:

I crossed frontier  
 the questions asked the proofs shown the name  
 signed smiling I reached knowledge of my home.  
 .....  
 I have left forever

house and maternal river  
 given up sitting in that private tomb  
 quitted that land that house that velvet room.

Frontiers admitted me  
 to a growing country  
 I carried proofs of my birth and my mind's reasons  
 but reckon with their struggle and their seasons. (6-8, 29-36)

The poet's use of the frontier image invokes Gold's 1929 essay, "Go Left, Young Writers!". In his *New Masses* essay, Gold connects the left with the Wild West, and suggests that the new proletarian writer should be a young, strapping male laborer (Rabinowitz "Women" 3). Rukeyser subverts Gold's masculinized leftist discourse when she employs the frontier image to represent a young radical woman's journey toward independence. The "proof" required for this leftward journey, the poet proposes, is self-knowledge: "proofs of my birth and my mind's reasons".

The poem's formal arrangement: the simple diction and the regularly rhymed AABB quatrains – belie the work's unstable, emotionally-charged subject matter. Short terse lines convey the speaker's urgency, her need to move forward into the larger world. But the sparse punctuation allows for a more fluid, associative reading, one that reflects the poem's theme: the complex, nonlinear development of social consciousness. The title also reflects this fluid developmental process by dividing "This House" and "This Country" with a serial comma, indicating a slight pause instead of a complete stop or definite separation between the personal and social



spheres. With its rejection of male-centered hierarchies and binary logic, this poem stands as a distinctly feminist rendering of an individual's ethical development.

In "Poem Out of Childhood," Rukeyser continues to explore and develop the female radical's coming-of-age narrative. While the poem does not address women's issues, per se, it depicts the female's evolving perception of world events, and explores deep personal issues against a larger socio-historical backdrop. The young female speaker divulges to her father that she would like to be "Maybe : something : like : Joan : of : Arc ..." (51) at the precise moment in history (the summer of 1918) when the "Allies Advance, [...] / Six Miles South to Soissons" (52-53). Thus, Rukeyser rewrites the gendered convention of proletarian poetry through her representation of a powerful female on the front lines of social revolution. As Daniels emphasizes, "[Rukeyser's] task was never to be 'as good as a man' or 'equal' to a man; from the beginning she had a strong and innate sense of the power and worth of women" ("The Demise" 225). Indeed, the poem seems to propose, with its evocation of France's national heroine, that political and social change is possible with feminist intervention, specifically with the help of a female figure possessing divine vision and the ability to overcome the dominant culture's status quo.

Elsewhere in *Theory of Flight*, Rukeyser invokes powerful female characters, living and dead, real and mythical, to advance her socialist-feminist vision. According to Daniels, "[...] from her very first book [Rukeyser] set herself the task of restoring to literature the women's voices that had been left out" ("The Demise" 227-8). In "Tradition of This Acre," for example, the poet takes up the theme of America's relationship with its ancestors and traditions. In the first of the two poems,

“Place-Rituals,” Rukeyser evokes Semiramis, the early Assyrian Queen, founder of Babylon, associated with the beginning of goddess worship (Kaufman 601), placing her alongside America’s forefathers and heavenly father: “And if there were radium in Plymouth Rock, they would not strike it / (bruising the fair stone), nor gawk at Semiramis on Main Street / nor measure the gentle Christ in terms of horse-power” (5-6). By juxtaposing Semiramis, a queen noted for her wisdom and sexual adventures, with the synecdochic “Plymouth Rock,” “Main Street,” and “Christ,” Rukeyser positions women at the center of American discourse and thereby gives authenticity to female history and experience. Alicia Ostriker observes that the feminist attempt to construct a redefined goddess is an “attempt by women to retrieve from the myth of the abstract father-god who creates the universe *ab nihilo*, the figure on which he was originally based, the female creatrix” (320). In a sense, the appearance of this unexpected female ancestor destabilizes patriarchal tradition by breaking the “ritual of [...] habit” that “fall before the repetitions in the lips of doom” (10-11).

In “Cats and a Cock”—a complex modernist poem dedicated to Eleanor Clark, another radical Vassar classmate—Rukeyser joins issues of women’s liberation with issues of artistic freedom. However, the poem’s subtle allusion to the politics of gender appears as a postscript to her main theme of the politics of leftist aesthetics. Halfway through this poem about the aesthetic rift between protesters and poets, Rukeyser quotes a powerful radical female figure, the martyred, Polish-born Marxist revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg: “‘Still elegiac! : between two battles, when one is happy to be / alive !’ -- Rosa Luxemburg” (88-89). The “two battles”

may arguably refer to the twin struggles for female liberation and for a general social revolution. In a 1912 speech, agitating for women's suffrage in Berlin, Luxemburg quoted Charles Fourier, (and, unknowingly, Karl Marx in the third of the Economics and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844): "In any society, the degree of female emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation" (Luxemburg 5). In America, however, the left-wing leaders did not use Fourier's measuring standards. As Alice Kessler-Harris and Paul Lauter note:

Though leftist ideology in 1930s recognized the 'special oppression' of women and formally espoused sexual equality, in practice, the left tended to subordinate problems of gender to the overwhelming tasks of organizing the working class and fighting fascism. (qtd. in Foley 217)

Rukeyser's more inclusive vision of social revolution in "Cats and a Cock" encompasses both male and female concerns: "I wish you to be saved...you wish...he wishes...she.../ In conjugation of a destiny" (47-48), but tellingly she trails off after the feminine pronoun. The female "wish" for emancipation cannot be voiced within the proletarian poem is Rukeyser's implication here. Charlotte Nekola observes that "[r]adical thinkers generally thought the problems of women would be resolved by class struggle. Gender, itself, was a relatively quiet issue" (132). But Rukeyser resists the dominant culture's tendency to place issues of class over issues of gender when she exhorts her friend to "Witness the unfailing war, season with season, / license and principle, sex with tortured sex, class versus class" (64-66). The poet includes gender with class in her representation of social struggle. In women's poetry of this period, Wald contends, "[...] the perspective of viewing women as

trapped between the two coordinated systems of oppression (capitalism and patriarchy) is more frequently implicit than directly represented” (261). Revealingly, Rukeyser includes a second quote in this poem: “Forehead to forehead I meet thee, this third time, Moby Dick! — /Herman Melville” (152-153). Ahab’s antagonistic, but absolutely necessary, relationship with Moby Dick is an apt metaphor for the problematic relationship women formed with the leftist movement, as well as the one poets forged with partisans.

“Cats and a Cock” more explicitly addresses the tension between artists and activists, specifically “how much individual personality the artist must suppress in order to write such poetry” (Kertesz 95). To support her thesis, Rukeyser employs mimesis to represent the proletarian’s preference for simplicity and readability:

Moon rides over us  
 town streams below :  
 Strike and support us  
 the strike-songs go. (21-24)

In the next lines, the poet provides a stark contrast to the literal and sing-song language of the proletarian jingle:

Ceilings of stars  
 disturb our faces,  
 tantrums of light  
 summon our eyes; (25-28)

Although the lines are visually similar to the ones preceding, they provide language that is deeply imagined, and so, more memorable. Additionally, the powerful

allegorical overtones in this poem – the poet/cock and the partisan/cats—appeal to the imagination rather than to reason. And, the imagery is dreamlike, surreal, a clear departure from the reading clarity the literary left demanded:

The latchpieces of consciousness unfasten.

We are stroked out of dream and night and myth,

and turning slowly to awareness, listen

to the soft bronchial whisperings of death.

Never forget in legendary darkness

the ways of the hands' turning and the mouth's ways,

wander in the fields of change and not remember

a voice and many voices and the evenings' burning. (117-124)

The multiple hands suggest a community of poets and protesters, working collectively toward the same social outcome. However, the singular mouth emphasizes the poet's individuality, her distinctive contribution to social change. "Here, as elsewhere," Kertesz argues, "Rukeyser comes out strongly in favor of the artist's individuality, of the great variety of ways people can take 'in the fields of change,' of the great difference in voices" (95). Ultimately, the poet envisions a reconciliation between poets and partisans who disagree about the aesthetics of proletarian poetry: "Mayday is moment of proof, when recognition / binds us in protest, binds us under a sun / of love and subtle thought and the ductile wish" (169-171). The repeated phrase "moment of proof" is the title of a later poem from *A Turning Wind* (1939) where it defines an individual's response to intense emotion:

“That moment when the brain acknowledges the world” (10). Here, the phrase signals an aesthetic and political agreement between poets and partisans who are struggling to achieve the same social goals.

But even as Rukeyser envisioned a reconciliation between poets and partisans, critics on the left faulted her first volume for falling short of proletarian poetry standards. Poet Ruth Lechlitner, for one, praised the collection, but said Rukeyser was not a “true revolutionary poet,” adding that Rukeyser “still drew on the romantic-lyric tradition and has not effected the transition from the ‘I’-sympathizer type to the ‘we’ collectively working, emotionally unconfused poet” (qtd. in Kertesz 96). John Wheelwright, reviewing *Theory of Flight* in *Partisan Review*, wrote: “Revolutionary writing in the snob style does not reach a proper audience” (qtd. in Kertesz 97). An original, experimental writer on her own terms, Rukeyser, it seems, never set out to write emotionally tidy, self-effacing political poetry. Nor was she interested in reaching a “proper audience.” As the poems in *Theory of Flight* make clear, Rukeyser transcends the left’s political and literary biases and restrictions to craft a highly individualistic left feminist aesthetic.

The title and themes of Rukeyser’s first collection were inspired by time spent in flight school, an experience that began with an adolescent act of defiance. As Rukeyser relays in a 1978 letter to translator Jan Berg:

I could not get my parents’ permission to study or fly, and I was a minor, so I worked in the school’s office...in exchange for my tuition at ground school. The first part of the mechanic’s course was called Theory of Flight, the title of my first book [...] (qtd. in Kaufman 599)

In *Theory of Flight*, Rukeyser's youthful independence and imagination are evident in her formal experimentation, her exploration of social themes, and her fearless attention to personal issues. "To me," Rukeyser writes, "the image of flight and return to ground was extremely important, particularly in relation to freedom and heresy and to what I felt to be their ancestors and their rhythms" (qtd. in Kaufman 599). In her first volume, Rukeyser flies under the ideological radar to fashion a social-minded feminist poetics that she will deepen and develop throughout the decade.

Chapter Three: "The Book of the Dead" from *U.S. 1* (1938)

In her second collection, *U.S. 1* (1938), Muriel Rukeyser continues to develop and explore her socially-conscious, feminist aesthetic. In both traditional and modernist verse, Rukeyser takes on a number of 1930s left-wing causes, including Union Carbide's abusive labor practices ("The Book of the Dead"); Depression-era unemployment ("Boy With His Hair Cut Short"); social inequities ("More of a Corpse than a Woman"); racial injustice ("Three Black Women"); and Spain's struggle against fascism ("Mediterranean"). As she does in *Theory of Flight*, Rukeyser fuses these political and social issues with issues of identity and feminism for a complex representation of social radicalism.

Rukeyser's distinctive literary approach and feminist social vision are perhaps nowhere more evident than in this collection's opening work, the modernist long poem, "The Book of the Dead." To write her radically innovative response to the Gauley Bridge industrial disaster, the poet deploys modernist collage and juxtaposition to merge lyric and narrative verse with such documentary elements as Congressional testimony, interview statements, Union Carbide stock reports, and medical evidence. Moreover, Rukeyser incorporates feminist language, themes, and imagery into "The Book of the Dead," and thereby helps to shape a left feminist cultural practice from within the era's masculinist models of modernism and proletarian poetry. Like many other 1930s leftist poets, Rukeyser looked for innovative forms to express her radical ideas about social change. However, as Daniels observes, "There was not, when [Rukeyser] began writing, anything that encouraged women writers to invent a new kind of poetry, to search out new modes



of expression, new formal strategies” (“In Order” xiv). “The Book of the Dead” changes that, and so stands as a signal work for the socially-conscious feminist poets that followed her. This chapter will focus on “The Book of the Dead” to show how Rukeyser infuses her Popular Front revolutionary politics with a feminist social vision. In addition to her use of modernist practices and documentary conventions, the poet foregrounds female speakers; merges personal and political elements; critiques patriarchal institutions of power; and invokes a mythic female deity, Isis, to function as the poem’s medium for social and political change.

“The Book of the Dead” originated from Rukeyser’s investigation into the events surrounding miners’ deaths from silicosis in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia. In 1936, she traveled to West Virginia with documentary filmmaker, Nancy Naumberg, to research Union Carbide’s indifferent treatment of migrant workers—most of whom were African Americans—hired in 1929 to dig a three-and-a-quarter mile tunnel to divert water to a hydroelectric power plant. In the course of construction, it was discovered that the Hawk’s Nest tunnel contained deposits of pure silica, a valuable mineral used in the electroprocessing of steel. Evidence shows that the mine owners, cognizant of the health dangers posed by inhalation of silica rock dust, failed to provide adequate protection for the workers, and even expanded the project for greater profit.

Although Naumberg abandoned her own documentary project, she advises Rukeyser on hers. In a 1937 letter, Naumberg urges the poet to relay the tragedy through the narratives of the individual laborers:

Stress, through the stories of Blankenship, Milleretc. [sic] the necessity of a thorough investigation in order to indict the Co., its lawyers and doctors and undertaker, how the company cheated these menout [sic] of their lives, and the miserable conditions under which they now live; stress the relief situation, the inadequacy of it, how far they have to go to get it [...]. (Nelson "Overviews" 1-2)

Naumberg's approach is similar to the one used by the period's photojournalists who captured Depression-era suffering in books that combine images and words. Stott contends that "[t]he point of all these books was the same: to make the reader feel he was firsthand witness to a social condition" (214). But many of these works also manipulated readers' emotions. Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White's *Have You Seen Their Faces* (1937), for example, arranged its impoverished sharecropper subjects in contrived, sentimentalized poses (Stott 213). Other 1930s photojournalists used "tricky montage and ironic juxtaposition of image and text" to promote their own ideas about social justice (Stott 213). As this chapter will show, Rukeyser uses more restraint in directing her reader's emotions; the ironies and contradictions in her work, as well as her commitment to a more collaborative poet-reader process, leave room for diverse interpretations and conclusions.

In "The Book of the Dead," Rukeyser also employs a camera lens, albeit a metaphorical one, to provide readers with a "firsthand witness" experience. The process is revealed in the initial poem, "The Road": "Now the photographer unpacks camera and case, /surveying the deep country, follows discovery / viewing on groundglass an inverted image" (28-30). The "inverted image," Walter Kalaidjian

argues, refers to Marx's metaphor for "false consciousness": the camera obscura— included in *The German Ideology* (1845-47). Kalaidjian asserts that:

Similarly, camera work, as a key metaphor for ideological representation in Rukeyser's verse, at once projects a visual image of middle class American prosperity and exposes it as the inverted "other" to Gauley Bridge's particular historicity of class conflict and ruthless labor relations. (*American Culture* 167)

Kalaidjian's reading is compatible with the camera's-eye view of the West Virginia landscape as it unfolds in the first three poems, beginning with the affluent imagery of the "The Road" ("wealthy valley, resorts, the chalk hotel")(18); and moving on to the region's violent history in "West Virginia" ("The battle at Point Pleasant, Cornstalk's tribes, / last stand, / Fort Henry, a revolution won")(22-23); and, finally, arriving at the "inverted image" of this prosperous setting in "Statement: Philippa Allen":

The contractors  
                   knowing pure silica  
                   30 years experience  
                   must have known danger for every man  
 neglected to provide the workmen with any safety device... (21-25)

Throughout "The Book of the Dead," Rukeyser will continue to represent this "normalized setting" as a "deceptively" inverted image (Kalaidjian *American Culture* 168). However, as Robert Shulman contends, Rukeyser does not "spell things out" for the reader; rather she lets "meaning accumulate [ ]" (184). He adds that "[i]n

Rukeyser's modernist and politically radical version of the documentary, the reader is an active participant, not a passive observer [...]” (184). The metaphor of the camera lens contributes to the poem's illusion that the photographs, not the poet, are telling the story.

Rukeyser's choice of the camera as metaphor appears to be part of a strategy to place distance between the poet and her politically-charged, widely-publicized subject. By employing a photographer—of unspecified gender, race, or class—as the poem's persona narrator, Rukeyser can illuminate the scene without seeming to be a manipulating presence in the manner of 1930s photojournalists like Caldwell and Bourke-White or the modernist poets Hart Crane, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound. Additionally, Rukeyser had another interest in appearing neutral: as a female intellectual from the bourgeois class, she was often targeted by literary radicals who questioned her political commitment. Rabinowitz observes that “[g]iven the hostility of 1930s American Marxists to ideas (as opposed to action), their valuing of deed over word, the bourgeois woman represented the epitome of false consciousness” (*Labor* 54). Rukeyser's neutral photographer, her persona narrator, can observe the scene with apparent detachment. “Gauley Bridge” opens with a cool, distant tone:

Camera at the crossing sees the city  
 a street of wooden walls and empty windows,  
 the doors shut handleless in the empty street,  
 and the deserted Negro standing at the corner.

The little boy runs with his dog

up the street to the bridge over the river where  
 nine men are mending road for the government.

He blurs the camera-glass fixed on the street. (1-8)

Against this backdrop of restrained language and a distant tone, the poem's sorrowful mood stands out in greater relief. The lines convey a sense of loss and sadness without becoming overly sentimental. Thirties writers generally repudiated sentimentalism. As Jane Tompkins points out, "sentimentality" was often the criticism aimed at women who attempted cultural critique (qtd. in Thurston "Documentary" 66).

The poem, of course, is a constructed literary work, and as such it controls what the reader sees, even if it does not directly control what we feel. For example, the enjambment in these stanzas adds to the impression of a camera at work as the reader's eye is forced to the next line, to the next fragment of landscape. After the "empty street" and the "deserted Negro," the reader is compelled to consider the "little boy" running "with his dog". Tellingly, the gender of the "deserted Negro" is not specified. Unlike the "little boy" who "runs with his dog," the African American citizen remains undifferentiated. In the dominant culture's view, the migrant "Negro" worker is an anonymous transient figure in the landscape. Like the bicycling boy in "The Trial" (*Theory of Flight*), the Gauley Bridge boy represents virtue in a corrupted landscape. His appearance in the otherwise deserted setting signals a shift in perspective: "The man on the street and the camera eye" (20). Now the "eyes" begin to multiply in "Gauley Bridge": "The naked eye", "Eyes of the tourist house," "the eyes of the Negro, looking down the track," and "one's harsh night eyes over the

beerglass" (23, 29, 30, 33)—as Rukeyser prepares the reader for the community of perspectives that will follow. But first Rukeyser reinforces her leftist alliance by ending "Gauley Bridge" with a rebuke to those who seek a purely aesthetic experience, a Romantic representation of small-town America: "What do you want—a cliff over a city? / A foreland, sloped to sea and overgrown with roses? / These people live here" (38-40). "These people" will come to life in Rukeyser's deployment of the conventions of social documentary.

The social documentary genre supplies Rukeyser with a number of discursive and representational strategies for performing a socialist-feminist investigation of power and its abuses. The case history, a convention of the social documentary, for example, allows Rukeyser to reveal the human side of the industrial disaster. Presented through narrative, description, and testimony, the case history exposes the local differences of race, class, and gender that the official documents frequently erase (Thurston "Documentary" 72). Rukeyser draws her subjects from an inclusive sampling of citizens, ranging from Congressmen, doctors, and corporate executives to the marginalized African-American workers and their wives. In this, the poet appears to have been influenced by mid-thirties Popular Front politics and aesthetics, as well by the period's social documentary. Kalaidjian explains that Rukeyser gives "a specific human face to the capital's industrial oppression of labor" and thereby "rearticulates the ideological signs of class revolution in a more popular and feminist mode" ("Muriel Rukeyser" 69).

In the case histories that take the form of monologue, Rukeyser's subjects are permitted to speak in their own voices. For example, "George Robinson: Blues"

transposes the Congressional testimony of George Robison (called Robinson here), the African-American tunnel laborer, into blues-inflected poetic monologue:

The hill makes breathing slow, slow breathing after you  
   row the river,  
 and the graveyard's on the hill, cold in the springtime blow,  
 and the graveyard's up on high, and the town is down below. (5-8)

In keeping with blues tradition, the tone is despairing. As John Lowney asserts: “[T]he pain expressed by so many blues singers corresponds with the treatment they receive by a social system quick to capitalize on their talent—on their labor—but slow to provide necessary support in time of need” (204). Indeed, the speaker reveals a sharp awareness of the complexities and incongruities of his experience:

Gauley Bridge is a good town for Negroes, they let us stand  
 around, let us stand  
 around on the sidewalks if we're black or brown  
 Vanetta's over the trestle and that's our town. (1-4)

The speaker possesses what W.E.B. Du Bois calls a “double-consciousness.” The African-American activist and author defines this state of being as “this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (2). An affliction and a “gift,” this “two-ness” also gives the speaker “second-sight in this American world [...]”, according to Du Bois (2). This “second-sight” is evident in Robinson's ironic observations about the “good town,” which, in fact, enforces segregation: “Vanetta's over the trestle and that's our town.” Robinson's insight into society's hierarchal

power structures allows him to talk back to the hegemonic forces, to testify before the Congressional Committee; he becomes an active agent for political and social change. Elsewhere, in "Praise of the Committee," Robinson is called "leader and voice" (31). In "The Disease," Robinson appears to allude to the origin of his activist impulse when he says: "If I remained / flat on my back I believe I would die" (28-29).

Some critics view Rukeyser's representation of race in "The Book of the Dead" as flawed: David Kadlec calls her an "essentializing poet;" and Tim Dayton believes Rukeyser's editing of testimony "removes the racial focus" (36, 73). In this period, many poems by white writers dealing with black American life or race relations, though often well intended, perpetuated racist ideas about blacks. These poems employed dialect or adopted a condescending tone (i.e., Covington Hall's "The Congo," Carl Sandberg's "Jazz Fantasia," and Sol Funaroff's "Negro songs"). According to Cary Nelson, "[...] relatively few whites understood how deeply constitutive race prejudice was for American culture, and thus few really confronted racial issues in sufficient depth" (*Repression* 117). However, Rukeyser's "George Robinson: Blues" may be considered an exception to this criticism. Rukeyser's specific emotional response to suffering and injustice under capitalism allows for a more nuanced critique. In "George Robinson" and in her earlier poem on race relations, "The Trial" (*Theory of Flight*), Rukeyser exposes the incongruity between America's discourses of democracy and its practice of capitalistic exploitation and racial discrimination. As Nelson observes, "Overall, it was the poets writing explicit poems of political critique who were most likely to gain enough distance from a racist culture to write poems that could do useful work on racial issues" (*Repression* 119).



In “George Robinson: Blues,” Rukeyser strategically edits George Robison’s Congressional testimony to simultaneously reveal the socially-constructed nature of race and the possibility for protest and change:

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. (40-44)

By presenting the workers as a homogeneous “white” group, sharing a common fate, Rukeyser does not appear to be promoting a color-blind approach to race. Rather, she exposes the way race is culturally constructed for the social and economic benefits of the dominant group. As Thurston observes, Rukeyser stresses:

[ . . . ] a community united against such lines of demarcation as race and gender, a community united by the fact of death (generally but also, more important, the fact of the deaths of *these* workers in *this* industrial disaster) and by the possibility of resurrection and revolution through a politicized memory. (*Making Something* 182)

Rukeyser’s poem reveals the possibility for social change through communal action. Lowney argues that “[...] the commonality compelled by shared adversity also suggests a potential for interracial alliances to contest the white supremacist thinking that Robinson so bitterly mocks” (204). Indeed, “George Robinson: Blues” complicates the simple and reductive paradigm of “otherness” promoted by the dominant group.

Another example of the case history is provided by Rukeyser's portrayal of Vivian Jones—the railroad engineer hired to transport silica from the mines. In “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones,” Rukeyser tracks Jones's movement and thoughts as he leaves town and heads for the Hawk's Nest Tunnel. He describes, in third person narrative, the imposing panorama (“the river at his knee,” the mountain's “great wall-face,” the dam's “slope of water”), as well as the interior landscape of memory: the explosions, the crews arriving on freight trains, the tunnel-mouth that “opened wider” and where men went to “stay” (4, 22, 24, 16). The poet merges personal details with large-scale political concerns to deliver a specific critique of human suffering under capitalism. As Lowney observes, “[...] by dynamically relating individual acts of remembering to the formation of collective memory [...] Rukeyser transforms a site of geographical and social marginality into a site of memory that contests official interests in forgetting the past” (196). In this way, Rukeyser dramatizes the particularity of human experience and offers a vision of wholeness.

In addition to borrowing from the era's social documentary conventions, Rukeyser also employs the formal innovations and discursive practices of modern poetry to achieve her feminist social critique. In the style of modernists like Pound (*Cantos*) and Eliot (*Waste Land*), Rukeyser dramatically edits and juxtaposes actual source documents (the hearings of the House Committee on Labor's investigating subcommittee, letters, a stock market quote) to fulfill her poetic objectives for the work. Her methods diverge from the modernists', Thurston contends (in particular Pound's), in that she does not exert “editorial control” over her sources “in an all-encompassing remaking of the world,” but rather “focuses on the specific institutions

at fault for human suffering” (“Documentary” 74). Like other 1930s revolutionary women poets, Rukeyser challenges the elitist male tradition of modernism, which typically emphasizes a central consciousness. She adapts the form to address class and gender issues, and to join individual voices to a collective consciousness. For example, “Mearle Blankenship” links an individual’s experience to a wide-ranging political issue. The poet juxtaposes lyrical verse with a genuine letter, transcribed with all the original misspellings and incorrect punctuation:

Dear Sir, my name is Mearl Blankenship  
 I have Worked for the rhinehart & Dennis Co  
 Many days & many nights  
 & it was so dusty you couldn’t hardly see the lights.  
 I helped nip steel for the drills  
 & helped lay the track in the tunnel  
 & done lots of drilling near the mouth of the tunnell  
 & when the shots went off the boss said  
 If you are going to work Venture back  
 & the boss was Mr. Andrews  
 & now he is dead and gone  
 But I am still here  
 a lingering along. (19-29)

The epistolary form, with its first-person, present-tense narrative, allows Rukeyser to convey the urgency of the speaker’s distress. Blankenship’s respectful, self-effacing tone in this stanza reveals the asymmetrical power structures that he must negotiate in

order to receive compensation. By making the addressee a nameless entity, Rukeyser emphasizes the impersonal nature of the employee-employer relationship. In light of this alienated association, the speaker's heartfelt narrative about his "many days & many nights" of service to the company gains a particular poignancy. In the end, however, Rukeyser represents Blankenship as a victim and a hero as she ends the stanza with his fleeting victory: "But I am still here / a lingering along."

The letter strengthens Rukeyser's theme of class oppression. Even though the correspondence has been obviously reworked to fit the poem, it allows Rukeyser to circumvent criticism often leveled at middle-class writers, namely that she presents an idealized version of a working-class subject. It is a risk that she runs with the following lyrical lines:

He stood against the rock  
 facing the river  
 gray river grey face  
 the rock mottled behind him  
 like X-ray plate enlarged  
 diffuse and stony  
 his face against the stone. (30-36)

The metaphorical language elevates the working-class subject above his material circumstances, and merges him with nature. Significantly, "mottled" is also used in "The Book of the Dead" to describe the workers' silicotic lungs. As Wald observes, "[...]Rukeyser was nearer to romanticism in perceiving a oneness of humanity and nature, something of a contrast to the recurrent modernist perspective of a fecund

mind travailing in isolation in the face of a passive nature” (321). Indeed, Rukeyser draws from the modernist practice even as she questions its ideas about how poems should express meaning and what work they should do.

Rukeyser, like other 1930s leftist poets, deployed modernist practice to respond to oppressive social conditions. To perform her radical social critique, Rukeyser employs collage, a technique that originated in the visual arts where it is associated with fragmentation and strategic juxtaposition. Collage is also found in the 1930s poetry of Eliot and Pound and in fiction by James Joyce and John Dos Passos. For Rukeyser, and other leftist writers, modernist collage represents a means of creating an image that would become its own “exceptional configuration of reality” (Wald 321). Wald contends that collage, as employed by the leftists, becomes a way for the writers to establish an “ethos with the capacity to ameliorate society” (321).

Wald adds:

However, for the pro-Communists, this strategy led beyond, not in the direction of, modernism; in fact, to them, modernism’s demand for cultivated compact intelligence appears more suitable for curbing the catalytic potential of poetic reasoning than for making verse the bridge to mass action. Leftists like Rukeyser and Funaroff, in contrast, wished to affiliate the collage effect with the struggles of the working class and collective resistance to fascism. (321)

Indeed, “The Book of the Dead” reflects Rukeyser’s belief in the poet as activist. In her hands, collage is a strategic weapon aimed at the powerful patriarchal institutions that tend to venerate the document as hard and fast truth. Rukeyser’s work with

historical documents, Thurston maintains, “[d]irectly challenges the world from which they are drawn” (“Documentary” 74). Through the strategic juxtaposition of diverse narratives, Rukeyser produces an ironic deflation in the discourses and documents ordinarily associated with power. In “Praise of the Committee,” for example, the workers’ insurmountable struggle for justice is subtly and poignantly depicted in the following juxtaposed lines:

Active members may be cut off relief,

16-mile walk to Fayetteville for a cheque—

TO JOE HENIGAN, GAULEY BRIDGE, ONE AND 50/100,

WINONA NATIONAL BANK. PAID FROM STATE FUNDS.

(50-54)

The simple, unembellished fact of the 16-mile walk flattens the strenuous officialese of the check made out for the sum of one dollar and fifty cents. Rukeyser resists the official version of the industrial tragedy through the strategic deployment of contradictory evidence.

In “The Dam,” Rukeyser employs collage to emphasize the contradictions of power, both natural and constructed. The previous poem, “Power,” concludes: “this is the end,” but “The Dam” begins “All power is saved, having no end.” Through the tactical use of documents, the lyrical description of the power of flowing water is sporadically interrupted with fragments drawn from mythology, physics, law, and finance. For example, an actual Union Carbide stock report follows the lines: “The dam is safe. A scene of power. / The dam is the father of the tunnel. / This is the valley’s work, the white, the shining” (87-89). These straightforward declarations

about power, safety, and work must be reconsidered in the context of capitalism's abuses. Thurston argues that:

Through her polysemous juxtaposing of fragments, Rukeyser releases surpluses of meaning the poem cannot contain; she overcomes the spatial limitations of the poem and the containment implicit in its title by yoking the thematic anarchy of water to the rhetorical anarchy of language. ("Documentary" 76)

The infinitely renewable power of nature is only temporarily obstructed by science (the physics equation for the conversion of falling water's energy into electricity), government (the transcript of congressional testimony), and commerce (the stock market quote). Similarly, revolutionary language exposes the truths about power, safety, and work that are often obscured by science, politics, and capitalism.

In the end, the man-made dam may be "the father of the tunnel" (88), a scene of patriarchal power, but it is no match for the transforming life force of Mother Nature. The poem concludes:

Nothing is lost, even among the wars,  
imperfect flow, confusion of force.  
It will rise. These are the phases of its face.  
It knows its seasons, the waiting, the sudden.  
It changes. It does not die. (106-110)

The water is converted into electrical power, but continues to flow, symbolizing the potential power of the people.

Power is the overarching theme of this poem, and Rukeyser empowers her women speakers. The poet challenges the hegemonic status quo from within the official public discourses. In "Absalom," for example, she combines testimony from three separate witnesses (Mrs. Jones, Philippa Allen, and Mrs. Jones's husband, Charles) for the voice of Mrs. Jones, the mother who has lost three sons to silicosis. Beginning with the opening lines, Rukeyser establishes the female speaker's agency and authority through her use of an active voice and the first person point of view: "I first discovered what was killing these men. / I had three sons who worked with their father in the tunnel:" (1-2). At the request of her dying son, Mrs. Jones set out to determine the source of the miners' deaths. When she was unable to convince the doctor to X-ray her sons for free, she "went on the road and begged the X-ray money" (36). In the end, her sons' X-rays launch the lawsuits brought against Union Carbide. However, the woman's suffering continues. In plain language, Mrs. Jones tells her story:

I hitchhiked eighteen miles, they make checks out.  
 They asked me how me how I keep the cow on \$2.  
 I said one week, feed for the cow, one week, the children's  
 flour. (63-67)

Rukeyser's portrayal of Mrs. Jones invites a class and gender analysis of economic oppression. As is typical for left-wing women poets of the period, Rukeyser expresses her feminism implicitly, through her specific emotional response to oppressive and exploitative practices, rather than through an explicit critique of gender (Keller and Miller 82). Kalaidjian observes that "[i]n the mother's grim



testimony of industrial disease and poverty, Rukeyser uncovers capital's hidden oppression of depression-era families that, obscured in the domestic sphere, were not as visibly exploited as male workers" (*American Culture* 173).

The powerful female images in this poem contest the era's stereotypical portrayals of women. Mrs. Jones transcends the Popular Front's representation of the "working-class woman as sacrificing mother" (Rabinowitz *Labor* 55) in two important ways: she is portrayed as an active agent for change, and she seeks reform in the public sphere. Mrs. Jones's depiction also diverges from the typical 1930s documentary case study which, Stott contends "[...] went into piteous and lurid detail about the lives of the poor, trying to influence the reader's politics through his feelings" (176). In contrast, Rukeyser not only grants her female speaker the power to testify, but she also gives her the power to name, traditionally a male privilege. In the hearings, Charles Jones listed the dead men, but Rukeyser gives Mrs. Jones the honor. As Thurston remarks, "[b]y reading the dead into the record, Mrs. Jones acquires the power to preserve their memory and to give them new life" ("Documentary" 79).

Indeed, Mrs. Jones is a revitalizing force in this poem. The mother's strength transcends the material world as she seeks to immortalize her dead son: "He shall not be diminished, never; / I shall give a mouth to my son" (79-80). Rukeyser elevates and strengthens the mother's plainspoken pledge with transcendent lyrical verse:

*I open out a way, they have covered my sky with crystal,  
I come forth by day, I am born a second time,  
I force a way through, and I know the gate,*

*I shall journey over the earth among the living. (75-78)*

According to Kalaidjian, the mother's words voice a "feminist rebirth" ("Muriel Rukeyser" 80). He explains that, "[t]he mother forces 'a way through' to a revolutionary, transpersonal resolve through her fusion with the invoked figure of the female messiah, here patterned after Isis, the Egyptian goddess of transmigration" (80). Rukeyser invokes this "mythic feminism" as a way to "rearticulate traditional gender roles" (Kalaidjian "Muriel Rukeyser" 80). The mother's intonation announces her authority:

*I have gained mastery over my heart*

*I have gained mastery over my two hands*

*I have gained mastery over the waters*

*I have gained mastery over the river. (48-51)*

The word "mastery" has been paired with the image of "hands" in relation to the masculine manipulation of nature – in the "Praise of the Committee" and in "The Dam." Now the poet shifts the mastery to a woman's hands, connecting her strength to the "universal power of regeneration" (Kertesz 102). As M.L. Rosenthal observes:

The mother's determination to make her youngest child's death count for something, to have him live again in her own work of struggle for a better life, is linked with the rebirth motif of the great religions, and specifically the Egyptian religion whose scripture is *The Book of the Dead*. (qtd. in Kertesz 102)

Rosenthal (like Kalaidjian) identifies the persona in Rukeyser's poem as Isis. A divinity of ancient Egypt, Isis has magical capabilities, can heal the sick, and

promises resurrection to her followers after death. Isis possesses power usually associated with male divinity: she separated earth from heaven, assigned languages to nations, and invented alphabets and astronomy (Pomeroy 218). Rukeyser's choice of a female deity who can heal the sick and invent language is particularly apt for this feminist rendering of social empowerment. The cult of Isis elevated the status of women in classical antiquity, and her presence in this poem signals the revolutionary power of the feminine. Rukeyser's "feminist theology," Kalaidjian argues, "functions in the poem as a catalyst for personal and political change" ("Muriel Rukeyser" 81).

Change, or opportunity, in this poem emerges from struggle and death. Indeed, Rukeyser's motif of regeneration is reflected in the basic structure of her long poem. The final section, "The Book of the Dead," repeats the long poem's opening refrain: "These roads will take you into your own country" (1). The non-linear format forces readers to reconsider the journey in light of new evidence about oppression across the lines of race, gender, and class. In the same way that Rukeyser does not break with poetic tradition (in merging lyric and modernist verse), she maintains an open dialogue with America's past. History, for Rukeyser, is a site of continuing interpretation and resistance. In the final section, "The Book of the Dead," she writes, "What three things can never be done? / Forget. Keep silent. Stand alone" (13-14). The Gauley Bridge industrial tragedy becomes a part of America's historical narrative of discovery, power, and death. In Rukeyser's account, however, the individual's experience is foregrounded, not forgotten. The poet insists upon a revision of dominant ideas about power, social justice, and female agency; she

evokes the mythic image of Isis to serve as a guide toward a unified awareness and activism:

But planted in our flesh these valleys stand,  
 everywhere we begin to know the illness,  
 are forced up, and our times confirm us all.

In the museum life, centuries of ambition  
 yielded at last a fertilizing image:  
 the Carthaginian stone meaning a tall woman

carries in her two hands the book and cradled dove,  
 on her two thighs, wings folded from the waist  
 cross to her feet, a pointed human crown. (67-76)

As an antidote to Union Carbide's industrial tragedy, Rukeyser offers a vision of peace ("dove") and community ("our flesh," "our times"). "The Book of the Dead" is a reflection of Rukeyser's own political activism; it is also a rallying call for other writers to give voice to the oppressed and powerless:

Carry abroad the urgent need, the scene,  
 to photograph and to extend the voice,  
 to speak this meaning.

Voices to speak to us directly. As we move.  
 As we enrich, growing in larger motion,

this word, this power.

---

Name and road,  
communication to these many men,  
as epilogue, seeds of unending love. (122-127, 134-136)

The word gathers strength and power from the assembly of multiple voices.

Rukeyser's inclusive poetry brings together multiple perspectives to challenge the hegemonic laws and to bring about social change. Unifying all in this poem is the archetypal figure of Isis, the "fertilizing image" sowing "seeds of unending love."

With the publication of *U.S. 1*, Rukeyser broadens the scope of her literary and political vision. Even as she borrows freely from modernist practices and leftist material, Rukeyser transcends the ideological limitations of both. With "The Book of the Dead" Rukeyser crafts a left feminist aesthetic that fulfills her own poetic objective of locating "the universe of emotional truth" (LP 23). In her next volume, *A Turning Wind* (1939), Rukeyser continues to experiment with form and language to express her idiosyncratic radical feminist ideas about social change.

Chapter Four: *A Turning Wind* (1939)

Muriel Rukeyser's third collection, *A Turning Wind* (1939), unlike her two previous volumes, was not reviewed in *New Masses* (Wald 309). It is an odd omission since the work addresses a number of social and political issues embraced by the Popular Front movement, including the Loyalist's fight against fascism in Spain, the dangers of aestheticism, social injustice, and the American tradition of rebellion. Moreover, as the acknowledgements reveal, poems from *A Turning Wind* were originally published in the radical journal's pages. One explanation for the *New Masses'* oversight lies in Rukeyser's distinctive development as an activist poet during the thirties. While her political compass pointed steadily left throughout the decade, her literary choices frequently diverged from the practices endorsed by revolutionist critics, in particular from their demand for straightforward, accessible verse dealing with contemporary social issues supported by the Communist Party. From the beginning, the poet refused to modify her complex, expansive style or alter her subject matter to satisfy doctrinaire critics. Rather, she maintained her literary autonomy to craft a complex modernist poetry that joins issues of identity and feminism to issues of politics and social change for a new understanding of what poetry can accomplish. "Of all the Left poets of the interwar generation," observes Wald, "Rukeyser was perhaps the most creative in carrying out her belief that a new age demanded new styles and subject matter if art were to be an effective agent for change" (305). In *A Turning Wind*, Rukeyser continues to explore new modes of poetic expression that will successfully communicate a feminist social vision where

politics is deeply connected to the personal, and female agency is a key component in social reform.

This chapter will show how Rukeyser uses a number of formal and rhetorical strategies to merge her feminist and radical impulses in *A Turning Wind*. By employing poetic forms that are conducive to the expression of an individual consciousness—including elegies, lyrics, and biographical narratives—Rukeyser insists on a more complex representation of women than the essentialized maternal role emphasized in Popular Front rhetoric. According to Rabinowitz, as the Communist Party sought to make itself more appealing to a broader range of Americans in the Popular Front era, “it promoted images of stable family values anchored by the working-class woman as sacrificing mother” (*Labor* 55). Rukeyser’s expression of female consciousness in her poetry destabilizes this oppressive view of gender. Additionally, as this chapter will show, Rukeyser’s use of “power” as a thematic framework for this volume enables a critique of the masculine narratives of heroism, war, and politics and thereby opens a space in the Popular Front’s discourse for the often excluded female radical’s perspective.

*A Turning Wind* was completed on September 1, 1939, on the eve of Hitler’s invasion of Poland, and England and France’s subsequent declaration of war on Germany (Kertesz 127). As Rukeyser composed these poems in the stressful lead-up to war, she mined a collective American past as well as her personal past for sources of human strength and purpose. In the volume’s introductory note, she writes:

Now in our time, many of the sources of power are obscured again, or vulgarized and locked out. They are our inheritance, part of our

common property, I believe, among the techniques of our living [...] I have hoped to indicate some of the valid sources of power that have come down to us. (*ATW*).

The poet explores these “valid sources of power” through “studies in symbolism,” “studies in individual lives,” and most significantly, her own experience (*ATW* “Note”). She organizes the volume into three sections: “Elegies,” “Moment of Proof,” and “Lives” – which progress from the private individual consciousness expressed in the shorter lyrical verse to the public expression of creativity represented in the longer biographical poems.

The five elegies that open the collection explore deep personal experience against a socio-historical backdrop of war and economic depression. Thus, the elegies challenge the literary left’s conception of a universalized male experience and open a space for the female radical perspective. The autobiographical “First Elegy. Rotten Lake” represents both a public act of witness and a personal struggle toward wholeness. The poem’s speaker seeks to regain her former idealism after witnessing the outbreak of Spain’s Civil War. She meditates on the way that the foreign political crisis has shaped her interior life. The poem opens in *medias res*, reflecting a continuing search for wholeness in a violent world:

As I went down to Rotten Lake I remembered  
the wrecked season, haunted by plans of salvage,  
snow, the closed door, footsteps and resurrections,  
machinery of sorrow. (1-4)



The stanza proceeds on a swift current of vivid images that have an associative relationship, one that encourages a collaborative poet-reader process. The hopelessness of the “wrecked season” nevertheless holds the promise of “salvage,” which is further suggested by the coupling of “footsteps and resurrections,” a combination of the earthly and the spiritual. Underlying the note of hope, however, is a mournful tone communicated, like an ululation, through the repetition of the long “o” sound in “snow,” “the closed door,” and “sorrow.” In keeping with the conventions of elegy, the speaker mourns a loss: her former idealistic self. With the absolute metaphor, “machinery of sorrow,” the poet compels the reader to connect the speaker’s private despair with powerful societal forces.

“First Elegy” represents what Kertesz calls a new “female lyricism,” a style of poetry that merges deep personal experience with themes of social awareness (71). The style breaks with the nineteenth century romantic/lyric tradition of women’s verse, which is characterized by a “[p]assionate expression of emotion, revelation of personal sensibility, apparent delicacy overlaying sensuality and self assertion, musicality created by diction and cadence, [and] a vigorous grace of form” (Larsen 203). Beginning in the thirties, the female lyric tradition would be vilified by critics “in terms suggesting shallow girlishness” (Larsen 205). Rukeyser’s new female lyricism, despite its social themes, troubled a number of leftist critics, including Ruth Lechlitner who argued that she was not a true revolutionary because her early work did not break with the “romantic-personal individual consciousness” (Kertesz 151). Radical poetry’s focus was on class struggle, not private despair, according to the

leftist critics. In obvious disagreement with the critics' criteria for revolutionary poetry, Rukeyser insists on the link between the personal and the political:

When you have left the river you proceed alone;  
 all love is likely to be illicit; and few  
 friends to command the soul; they are too feeble.  
 Rejecting the subtle and contemplative minds  
 as being too thin in the bone; and the gross thighs  
 and unevocative hands fail also. But the poet  
 and his wife, those who say Survive, remain:  
 and those two who were with me on the ship  
 leading me to the sum of the years in Spain. (20-28)

With the repetition of the direct address phrase that begins this stanza, as well as the next two stanzas, – “When you have left the river” – the poet continues to insist on the reader's engagement in considering the personal significance of Spain's Civil War. The language is formal, but the tone is intimate, due in part to the personal subject matter (the disappointing friends and lovers, and the physical shortcomings). Moreover, the stanza reads like a journal entry: the private shorthand of “those two,” the long sentences composed of closely related ideas expressed in mainly literal language. For this reason, it seems possible that the speaker addresses not only the reader, but also a younger idealistic self, a self gripped by “untamable need” (12).

Significantly, the poet depicts the speaker's “untamable need” as something monstrous, as “the black-haired beast with my eyes / walking beside me” (7-8).

According to Rabinowitz, radical women writers who are restricted by the traditional

boundaries assigned to genres and gender must “de-form” the literary text in order to establish their own female “genre within a genre” (*Labor* 73). Rabinowitz argues that:

[...] the estranged position occupied by women writers has resulted in textual de-formation—sometimes quite literally, as in the image of woman confronting herself within the text as *monster*, but more often symbolically through narrative or generic reconstruction. For a woman to produce a literary text, to enter the (masculine) terrain of genre, she must step out of her gender and therefore, ironically out of bounds. (*Labor* emphasis added 68)

In addition to identifying with the “black-haired beast,” the poet also “de-forms” the androcentric conventions of radical poetry when she experiments with form, and when she introduces an individual consciousness into her verse. For example, in “First Elegy,” Rukeyser portrays victims of economic depression: the hungry man driven to steal a loaf of bread and the people in the “lines at the unemployment bureau” – but their struggle is connected with a “failure of the imagination” and not with a failure of capitalism (41). In Rukeyser’s highly personalized aesthetic, the remedy is, therefore, not a collective social revolution, but rather a private journey toward wholeness. The poet’s perspective is rooted in Marxist beliefs and principles that stress the individual as an agent of social change. The individual achieves self-knowledge by discovering his or her relationship to the larger social struggle. This self-transformation is a necessary component of social integration, and indeed, revolution. The speaker in Rukeyser’s poem claims the power of her own

imagination to foresee fulfillment: "I prophesy the meeting by the water / of these desires" (59-60). The poem ends on a transcendent note with the speaker positing that the "wish" for wholeness offers sustenance for the future: "and cry I want! I want! rising among the world / to gain my converted wish, the amazing desire / that keeps me alive [...]" (93-95). The speaker's imagination allows her to create art with the power to effect change in the world. With "First Elegy," Rukeyser demonstrates Meridel LeSueur's contention that

[b]elief is an action for the writer. The writer's action is full belief, from which follows a complete birth, not a fascistic abortion, but a creation of a new nucleus of communal society in which at last the writer can act fully and not react equivocally. In a new and mature integrity. (303)

Rukeyser, positioned as the poet/prophet, breaks with leftist literary restrictions to give voice to the female radical's individual experience. In "First Elegy," she portrays individual identity as a dynamic force essential for social change.

Self-identified as the prophet, Rukeyser clearly aligns herself with the prophetic tradition in American poetry. Her 1930s work carries out the prophet's "ancient mission," which Aaron Kramer describes as "alarming the dormant, vexing the complacent, unmasking the iniquitous, challenging the powerful, and comparing the real with the ideal—no matter at what personal cost" (331). Indeed, throughout the turbulent decade, Rukeyser maintained her commitment to a radical feminist social vision even in the face of critical censure. In "Second Elegy. Age of the

Magicians,” Rukeyser explores the difficulties that the poet/prophet confronts in an age of darkness and deceit, an age characterized by the magician:

The aim of magicians is inward pleasure.  
 The prophet lives by faith and not by sight,  
 Being a visionary, he is divided,  
 or Cain, forever shaken by his crime.  
 Magnetic ecstasy, a trance of doom  
 mean the magician, worshipping a darkness  
 with gongs and lurid guns, the colors of force.  
 He is against the unity of light. (8 -15)

The poem alludes to “the Bible’s distinction between the two antagonistic mysticisms of miracle and magic” (Kertesz 130-31). Miracle, the power for good, is associated with the prophet (Kertesz 131). Since magic distorts reality, it is associated with darkness and all that is false. The poet/prophet must respond to the meaningless cacophony of “gongs” and the abusive power of “lurid guns” with clarity of vision: “The index of prophecy is light / and steeped therein / the world with all its signatures visible” (36-38). In “Second Elegy,” the poet illuminates the role that politics plays in private life, by deploying parataxis, the rapid juxtaposition of dissimilar images: “the table of diplomats, / the newsreel of ministers, the paycut slip, / the crushed child’s head, clean steel, factories” (51-53). In this way, Rukeyser transforms radical ideas about power and its abuses into symbolic language that has the potential to move readers to political action. Power, the poet implies in “Second Elegy,” does not

lie in force or domination over others, but in the ability to bear witness in a hostile world.

“Second Elegy,” with its non-universal symbolism (“your tree half green and half burning”) and its surreal imagery (“death as a skier curves along the snow”), reflects Rukeyser’s autonomous development as a political poet throughout the thirties. Like many left-wing female writers, Rukeyser remained an outsider to the literary left’s bitter debates about radical literature’s appropriate audience, form, and cultural work. This marginalized position allowed Rukeyser to exercise greater aesthetic freedom in crafting a poetry that reflects her own feminist social vision. Brinnin, commenting on the poems in Rukeyser’s third volume, notes that “[t]he problems of a generation [...] are no longer centered exclusively in the terms of the striker or the organizer, but in the larger concept of Death, who appears in many disguises” (qtd. in Wald 309). While the poet’s complex and inventive use of language may not readily identify her as a “people’s poet,” her work continues to speak for the condition of all humanity. As Brinnin stresses, Rukeyser is among the 1930s poets who “have undergone the disappointments and tortured doubts of the last decade and yet succeeded in enlarging both their strength of purpose and the scope of their poetry” (qtd. in Wald 308). She maintains her literary integrity and radical feminist vision, it seems, by remaining only tangentially connected to leftist literary culture. Like many 1930s left-wing poets, she has a “hybrid style,” which employs a variety of strategies to meet her literary goals (Wald 319).

At least two of Rukeyser’s literary goals remained constant throughout her fifty-year career: to communicate her commitment to leftist ideals, and, as she

asserts, to “write from a female body” (qtd. in Daniels “In Order” xv). From the beginning, Rukeyser’s poetry is particularly concerned with the representation of a female consciousness. However, the Popular Front literary culture promoted a regressive concept of gender roles. By the mid thirties, the “virile proletariat had given way to an antifascist struggle of mothers,” according to Rabinowitz, and motherhood became the only way for women to “find expression as historical subjects” (*Labor* 58). In “Fourth Elegy. The Refugees,” Rukeyser writes against the left’s traditional binary representation of gender:

And the child sitting alone planning her hope:  
 I want to write for my race. But what race will you speak,  
 being American? I want to write for the living.  
 But the young grow more around us every day.  
 They show new faces, they come from far, they live  
 occupied with escape, freeze in the passes, sail  
 early in the morning. A few arrive to help.

Mother, those were not angels, they were knights. (1-8)

The leading term—*and*—links the individual consciousness with a world that extends beyond the solipsistic concept of “my race”. As the poem implies, the young writer’s point of view will develop to embrace a larger vision of humanity. The image of a young girl “planning her hope”, while ironic, nevertheless conveys an active struggle for female authority and agency. To “write for the living”, the girl must craft a poetry that is itself alive, and not stifled by ideology.

Since Rukeyser's political consciousness is expressed through her art and not—as Popular Front ideology would have it—her maternity, the images of children in this poem reflect a concern with the individual poet's artistic development and not with the promotion of American family values. When Rukeyser writes, "It is the children's voyage must be done / before the refugees come home again," she refers to the artist's journey toward unity. "Artists must become as little children," explains Kertesz, "and learn again what children know in themselves, the undeniable urge to form in the growth of their bodies and spirits" (134). The mature poet recognizes her responsibility to make the "wild" world "intelligible," to "record miracle," even when the undertaking is difficult and "many are cast out, become artists at rejection" (10, 11, 9). Concealment and self-deception turn artists into the refugees of the poem's title. As the poet emphasizes, in "[T]he age of the masked and alone" (13), all that remains are "ventriloquists and children" (22). The ventriloquists may represent the marginalized females who, in conforming to a masculinized literary tradition, stifle their own voices. In fact, Rukeyser addresses the theme of "ventriloquist" poets again, three decades later, in "The Poem as Mask" (1968), a poem widely celebrated by Second Wave feminists. In this work, the poet chides herself for speaking with another's voice, the voice of an institutionalized patriarchy.

The aesthetics of 1930s literary radicalism made it difficult for female writers to speak with their own voices. Since the left-wing critics valued work that was informed by "external societal forces," radical women writers needed to distance themselves from a female literary tradition characterized by private discourse practices like letter writing and journal keeping (Rabinowitz *Labor* 178).



Nevertheless, Rukeyser, and other radical female poets who existed on the margins of the dominant literary culture, continued to assert the female voice in poetry, linking the personal with the political in their work. Rukeyser explores the aesthetic and ideological differences within the left literary community in the middle section of *A Turning Wind*, "Moment of Proof."

The first poem in this section, "Reading Time : 1 Minute 26 Seconds," illustrates people's fear of feeling, the "hand up palm out / fending off moment of proof" (22). The poem's title as Kertesz explains, "[...] is an ironic echo of the magazine *Liberty*, which printed for readers an estimate of how long it would take to read particular pieces" (141). While the verse is clearly directed at the resistant reader, it may also represent Rukeyser's sardonic response to the leftist critics who dismissed individualism and formal experimentation as bourgeois:

The fear of poetry is the  
fear : mystery and fury of a midnight street  
of windows whose low voluptuous voice  
issues, and after that there is no peace. (1-4)

The poet employs figurative language to explain a fear of figurative language. This bold strategy pulls the reader into the imaginative process and makes disengagement difficult. At stake for both the poet and the reader is the ability to use poems as "sources of power" and "techniques of our living" (*ATW* "Note"). However, when people are controlled by a fear of emotion, they wear masks or retreat into silence; they fail to achieve "[t]hat climax when the brain acknowledges the world, / all values extended into the blood awake. / Moment of Proof" (10-12).

In “Paper Anniversary,” Rukeyser deploys the theme of emotional detachment to challenge foundational assumptions about patriarchal institutions of power. The poem’s setting is a crowded concert hall on the night of the 1929 stock market crash. The audience, “lost with their fortunes,” is unable to respond to Mozart’s “water-leap, season of coolness, / talisman of relief” (12, 7, 8):

“I was cleaned out at Forty—” “No golf tomorrow” “Father!”

but fathers there were none, only a rout of men

stampeded in a flaming circle; and they return

from the telephones and run down the velvet lane

as the lights go down and the Stravinsky explodes

spasms of rockets to levels near delight,

and lawyer thinks of his ostrich feather wife

lying alone, and knows it is getting late. (25-32)

Controlled and corrupted by a destructive capitalist system, the fathers are emotionally estranged from the music, which symbolizes “life” in this poem. The crash turns the group of fathers into a “rout of men,” which may be read as a “noisy mob” or as a “disorderly flight or retreat, as of defeated troops” (*Webster’s*). The sharp contrast between the poem’s orderly form – four-line stanzas with a loose ABCB rhyme scheme—and its frenetic subject matter helps to escalate the tension. The fathers are in motion, but going nowhere: they are “pushing up the aisles,” “fainting in telephone booth;” they “stampeded in a flaming circle,” and they “run down the velvet lane” and “swim up and about” (18, 27, 28, 34). The loss of an

empowering, defining wealth sends the men into a tailspin as they lose their class standing, their patriarchal status (“But fathers there were none”), and, it appears, their generative powers. Stravinsky’s inventive music, described here in sexualized language (“explodes,” “spasms of rockets”) does not register with the emasculated men (29, 30). By drawing an analogy between an oppressive capitalist system and the cultural role of father as patriarch, Rukeyser performs a radical feminist critique of power hierarchies in this poem.

Rukeyser continues to complicate patriarchal notions about power with her representation of a strong female ancestor in “Judith.” According to Kertesz, the repeated image of “a dark-faced woman at the telephone” in this poem is a “modern reincarnation of the powerful, noble, and dedicated biblical figure who penetrates the enemy camp and murders Holofernes” (152). With this portrayal of a radical female avenger, Rukeyser subverts traditional masculine narratives of heroism and warfare:

This is a woman recalling waters of Babylon,  
 seeing all charted life as a homicide map  
 flooded up to the X which marks her life’s  
 threatened last waterline. (11-14)

The poem’s subject reflects the Popular Front era’s concern with the role of history in American identity. However, Rukeyser appropriates the narrative of war, the fall of the neo-Babylonian empire, to depict a female radical’s imperiled position. Through the trope of war, the dark woman is represented as selfless and brave, characteristics traditionally reserved for male warriors. The “charted” life prescribed for her by others threatens her independence and her agency.

By depicting a strong female character that is capable of achieving social and political change on the world stage, “Judith” challenges the conventional narratives of motherhood and domesticity championed by Popular Front ideology. The “dark woman” in this poem may correspond to the 1930s era female radical poets who addressed political conflicts far removed from the domestic sphere:

This is a woman putting away close pain,  
 child of a stolid mother whose family runs wild,  
 abandons fear, abandons legend; while the insane  
 French peasant is caught stalking and barking Heil,  
 fire, anemia, famine, the long smoky madness  
 a broken century cannot reconcile.

Agons of blood, brown blood, and a dark woman  
 leaves the blond country with a backward look,  
 adventures into the royal furious dark  
 already spread from Kishinev to York. (21-30)

The irregular rhyme scheme and the enjambment employed in these lines contribute to the poem’s urgent and agitated mood as the dark woman “adventures” far from the domestic sphere, into “dark” territories scarred by anti-Semitic pogroms. In a “broken century” infested with “insane” Hitler supporters, the dark woman “abandons fear” to avenge the wrongs of her people.

The “dark woman” confronting “agons of blood, brown blood” may also represent the period’s black American female activist poets, writers like Margaret Walker who “used their work to champion marginal groups” and “challenge[ ] a

socio-economic hierarchy by advocating a more equitable system for disadvantaged people” (Allego “Margaret Walker”). Indeed, Walker’s poem, “Dark Blood,” confronts a diasporic legacy that has resulted in the disenfranchisement and marginalization of African Americans. With “Judith,” Rukeyser recognizes the agency of female activist writers, like Walker, who “go like a woman sweated from a stone / out from these boundaries [...]” (56-7) to craft literary works that give full expression to female consciousness across race and class.

Rukeyser’s desire to represent the female consciousness in her verse leads her to cross many of the boundaries historically imposed on women by an oppressive patriarchal social structure. In particular, she constructs a powerful female history and identity within her work. In “Ann Burlak,” a biographical poem about a boundary-breaking 1930s Communist labor organizer, for example, Rukeyser asserts the strong political influence of women’s voices:

Let her be seen, a voice on a platform, heard  
 as a city is heard in its prophetic sleep when  
 one shadow hangs over one side of a total wall  
 of houses, factories, stacks, and on the faces  
 around her tallies shadow from one form. (1-5)

The opening phrase is an echo of Genesis: “And God said, Let there be light: and there was light” (*King James Version* 1:3). The poet asserts Burlak’s authority and agency with these lines. Indeed, radical woman’s wide-ranging political power is compared to a massive shadow, which results from the obstruction of light. Her

influence reaches the private spheres (“houses”) as well as the public ones (“factories,” “stacks”).

“Ann Burlak” represents one of the five “studies in individual lives” included in the “Lives” section of *A Turning Wind* (ATW “Note”). As Rukeyser states in her introductory note: “The five people [...] are Americans—New Englanders—whose value to our generation is very great and partly unacknowledged” (ATW). In writing these biographical poems about a scientist (“Gibbs”), a painter (“Ryder”), an essayist (“Chapman”), a composer (“Ives”) and a labor organizer (“Ann Burlak”), Rukeyser takes a critical stance toward the recorded past. As she posits in *The Life of Poetry*, “If we are free people, we are also in a sense free to choose our past, at every moment to choose the tradition we will bring to the future. We invoke a rigorous positive, that will enable us to imagine our choices, and to make them” (21). By including a contemporary female labor organizer among the male artists (all born in the nineteenth century), Rukeyser asserts the need for strong female role models. In “Ann Burlak,” the poet also celebrates the anonymous women who are often neglected by masculine narratives of heroism and civic life:

She speaks to the ten greatest American women:

The anonymous farmer’s wife, the anonymous clubbed picket,  
the anonymous Negro woman who held off the guns,  
the anonymous prisoner, anonymous cotton picker  
trailing her robe of sack in a proud train,  
anonymous writer of these and mill-hand, anonymous city walker,  
anonymous organizer, anonymous binder of the illegally wounded,

anonymous feeder and speaker to anonymous squares. (73-80)

Rukeyser represents working-class women across the categories of race and class, and thereby complicates the radical left's simple notion of a homogenized masculine workplace. Significantly, each woman is represented here as an active agent in the public sphere, and except for the farmer's wife, none are defined by traditional, essentialized roles. Rukeyser's use of parallel construction in these lines, a common rhetorical device in the tradition of oral poetry, intensifies the emotional impact of the female images. As Kertesz notes, the poem has been adapted to the cadence and phrasing of a "masterful orator" (193). Like the agitator's speech, the poem has been composed for oral recitation.

"Ann Burlak" not only represents the female's role in social change, it also particularizes the female's experience in 1930s America. Throughout the Depression era, leftist rhetoric tended to emphasize the male's experience through images of the male worker, men on the breadlines, and the male revolutionary. In radical literature, women's struggles were often marginalized or hidden within the domestic sphere. Rukeyser resists the dominant culture's representation of gender by linking women's personal lives with political realities:

She knows their faces, their impatient songs  
of passionate grief risen, the desperate music  
poverty makes, she knows women cut down  
by poverty, by stupid obscure days,  
their moments over the dishes, speaks them now,  
wrecks with the whole necessity of the past

behind the debris, behind the ordinary  
 smell of coffee, the raveling clean wash,  
 the turning to bed, undone among savage night  
 planning and unplanning seasons of happiness  
 broken in dreams or in the jaundiced morning  
 over a tub or over a loom or over  
 the tired face of death. (81-93)

Rukeyser particularizes the hardships of impoverished women's lives. With the trope of housework, the poet challenges the Popular Front era's uncritical promotion of traditional family roles. Like other 1930s leftist women writers, Rukeyser recognizes the distinctive hardships of women's labor, labor that is further complicated by childbirth and gender expectations. The poet joins issues of identity with issues of politics for a complex representation of women's lives throughout the decade. As Nancy Berke observes:

While female progressive intellectuals no doubt joined their male counterparts in a shared belief in the failings of the capitalist system, many women began to link Depression-era social problems, such as joblessness and homelessness, with the kinds of domestic failures that were pertinent to American women at this time of struggle. (11)

Indeed, "Ann Burlak" merges Rukeyser's leftist ethos and feminist impulses. The poem performs the radical cultural work of critiquing the traditional power hierarchies that contribute to the hidden oppressions of women and families in 1930s America.



The publication of *A Turning Wind* marked the end of a productive and inventive decade for Muriel Rukeyser. Her work during this period was distinguished by its political rigor, feminist themes, and formal innovation. That she remained true to her artistic vision throughout the rancorous literary battles of the 1930s may be attributed to her reluctance to identify with any one political or literary movement. As Wald reports: "In a political biography she later imparted to her son, she said that she had come close to joining [the Communist Party] in the mid-1930s—to the point of taking out an application—but had pulled back at the last minute from a desire to protect her creative autonomy" (302). In the end, Muriel Rukeyser was first and foremost a poet, albeit one with radical sympathies and strong feminist sensibilities. No doctrine or theory would restrict her enormously inventive poetic imagination. While her artistic independence often prompted critical scorn, it also kept her work relevant and fresh. As Michael Heller remarks, "[...] as one examines the departures and the failures among American writers of the period, one is reminded of the remark of the [...] Nobel laureate Elias Canetti that what marks the writer's duty to one's time is that in some profound way he or she is willing to stand against those times" (99). Indeed, Muriel Rukeyser survived the vicissitudes of the decade by resisting the pressures of doctrinaire critics and political groups in order to craft her highly individualistic work. By remaining poetically flexible and politically open, she was able to meet the literary challenges she set for herself in each of her three volumes. As she writes in *The Life of Poetry*:

In time of crisis, we summon up our strength. Then, if we are lucky, we are able to call every resource, every forgotten image that can leap

to our quickening, every memory that can make us know our power.

And this luck is more than it seems to be: it depends on the long preparation of the self to be used. (1)

Beginning with her first volume, *Theory of Flight*, and continuing with *U.S. I* and *A Turning Wind*, Muriel Rukeyser extended her poetic vision throughout the thirties to embrace new forms, to convey female consciousness, and to express a deeply-felt ethical vision.

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