

UNIVERSITY OF READING

MURIEL RUKEYSER: POETRY AND THE BODY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English Literature

in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in English Literature

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July 2015

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DECLARATION

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

Signature:

DEDICATION

To my family, who have encouraged me at every stage of my work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my supervisor for his unstinting and valuable support and guidance throughout my work on the thesis.

ABSTRACT

The human body occupies a central place in Rukeyser's poetry. Her characters' physical experiences inspire their search for an artistic form and a holistic vision that reconciles the corporeal and conceptual aspects of their life. My thesis deals with Rukeyser's reconciliation of disparate aspects of existence through the image of the human body and the practical experiences she underwent in her personal life and incorporated in her poetry. I discuss her poetry of the 1940s, where a tension is observed between the artist's personal life and her art, which she attempts to resolve by adopting an artistic form that accommodates her quotidian experiences. I study, mainly through her poetry of the 1950s, Rukeyser's poetic technique in the light of her organicist poetics and the combination of tendencies to coercion and suggestiveness distinguishing her style. I examine her portrayal of the suffering body in her poetry of the 1960s and 1970s. By means of their physical experiences, the ill, her despised and the imprisoned protagonists undergo a process of development whereby they perceive the different aspects of their identity and attempt to broaden perspectives on their situation by reconciling them.

I argue that Rukeyser's engagement with physical encounters and with the poem as an inclusive, organic body enables her to reconcile disparate elements in her poetry, such as her personal life and her art, her individual existence and the public world, as well as the distinct aspects of her characters' identity. Her vatic outlook, which integrates distinct aspects of experience, is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's idea of human perception as characterised by the two interdependent positions of immanence and transcendence. Rukeyser's poetry depicts her physical engagement with quotidian events of her life as a factor of artistic inspiration. These situations constitute shared human experiences that enable her to imagine the links binding her to other people and the world at large. The poet's personal experiences inspire her search for an artistic form that accommodates them. Her perception of the concrete aspect

of her individual existence gains significance when it is linked to social and political issues. Both the private and public are thus seen as interconnected, and they affect the existence of each other while retaining their distinctness.

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PREFACE

Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980) was an American poet whom many literary scholars have found difficult to categorise. Her work accommodates topics in disparate fields such as science, psychology and politics, and she experimented with different types of styles during her career. Rukeyser started her career in the mid-1930s with the publication of *Theory of Flight* (1935). There was a mixed critical response. Kenneth Burke, in a 1936 review for *New Masses*, a journal affiliated with proletarian writers, welcomed enthusiastically the collection of poetry, congratulating ‘the Communists on having gained Rukeyser as an ally’.¹ Burke’s perspective may have been based on the social themes included in Rukeyser’s early poetry. Stephen Vincent Benét, on the other hand, chose to have a broader view of her poetry. Focusing on the aesthetic merits of her work, he refused to compartmentalise her in one of the convenient categories of the time, such as those of ‘unconscious fascists, conscious proletarians, and other figures of straw which has afflicted recent criticism’.² Rukeyser’s capacious vision makes it difficult to situate her in any of the literary groups of the twentieth century. While her poetry deals explicitly with questions that belong to proletarian literature, her complex style reflects her interest in modernist forms. Thus, the leftist poet Ruth Lechlitner did not consider Rukeyser a ‘true revolutionary poet’, since she ‘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’.³ Perhaps Rukeyser sensed a coercive element in poetry that deals with Marxist ideals in an exclusive manner and thought it better to include innovative elements that invite a spectrum of readers’ interaction and

¹ Kate Daniels, ‘Muriel Rukeyser and Her Literary Critics’, in *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers*, ed. Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1996), 250.

² Ibid.

³ Louise Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 96.

feedback. Thus, two tendencies, belonging to seemingly incompatible outlooks coexist in Rukeyser's poetry, tendencies which have frustrated attempts to situate her properly in any literary movement or group.⁴

Comparing Rukeyser to some of her women predecessors, such as Lola Ridge, Marya Zaturenska and Genevieve Taggard, Louise Kertesz notes that although these other poets incorporated social themes in their poetry, they did not blend successfully these themes with personal ones in the way Rukeyser could.⁵ Although there are common features between Rukeyser's poetry and that of these poets, the latter emerged in the heyday of modernism and their writing had more to do with that movement than with any other. By contrast, when Rukeyser started writing, in the mid-1930s, various movements, such as modernism and proletarian literature, were competing for dominance in the literary scene and she had to contend with their conflict, either choosing one, or, as she did, endeavouring to reconcile them.

There have been attempts to place Rukeyser with Walt Whitman and Hart Crane. Her vatic, transcendental outlook is similar to that of these two poets. However, while they held to the romantic tradition, through which they expressed their bardic voice, she combined a romantic sensibility with a realist one. This can be seen, for example, in her portrayal of technology from disparate perspectives in 'The Book of the Dead'. It can also be observed in her delineation of the concrete aspects of her personal, quotidian experiences in poems such as 'Nine Poems for the Unborn Child' where she depicts private sensations of pregnancy in a quasi-religious language and links that event to social and political issues.

⁴ These two stylistic tendencies are explored, in the context of Rukeyser's poetry, in the second chapter of this thesis.

⁵ Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision*, 84.

Rukeyser was interested in reconciling perspectives. In a memoir that she wrote about her trip to Spain at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, first published in *Esquire* in 1974, she speculates on the way in which issues in our modern world have come to be so interwoven that an effort to isolate them would be impractical and unrealistic:⁶ ‘the acts of this century, events which said in tragic clarity that our lives would not be shredded, not as athletes nor women nor as poets, not as travellers, tourists, refugees’.⁷ She maintains the perception that the different aspects in our life need to be realised in terms of the relevance of each to others, affirming her desire ‘Not to let our lives be shredded, sports away from politics, poetry away from anything. Anything away from anything’.⁸ When asked in an interview about her fusion of ‘seemingly unrelated elements—autobiographical, political, philosophical, religious’, she bluntly responded: ‘I think they are related. [. . .] I don’t work with unrelated elements’.⁹ Rukeyser’s embracing of relationship between distinct aspects and fields in her poetry has led Clive Bush to conclude that ‘the academic need to construct a specific genealogy around her has to be treated with caution. A too-exclusive focus, whether socialist, feminist, lesbian or Jewish (and she acknowledged and positively celebrated all of these), will do less than justice to her achievement’.¹⁰ Bush suggests that a discussion of Rukeyser, even if it scrutinises a specific feature of her poetry, has to take into account her combination of aspects and her

⁶ Rukeyser theorises on the interrelations among distinct aspects of life. Speaking of the latter, she defines her outlook: ‘It isn’t a question of making them come together. They are together. It is a fighting that they not be torn apart and killed that way’. So her relational vision is driven by the need to keep in mind the interdependence of disparate elements, instead of separating them and robbing them of their broader significance. See Muriel Rukeyser, ‘Craft Interview with Muriel Rukeyser’, in *The Craft of Poetry: Interviews from the New York Quarterly*, ed. William Packard (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1974), 171.

⁷ Muriel Rukeyser, ‘We Came for Games’, in Muriel Rukeyser, *Savage Coast*, ed. Rowena Kennedy-Epstein (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), 297-8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁹ Rukeyser, ‘Craft Interview’, 173.

¹⁰ Clive Bush, *The Century’s Midnight: Dissenting European and American Writers in the Era of the Second World War* (Witney: Peter Lang, 2010), 380.

association of elements usually isolated in critical studies, since this inclusive outlook dominates her work.

The central topic of my thesis is Rukeyser's reconciliation of supposedly incompatible elements, in her poetry, through the motif of the body (and the term refers to the human bodies that appear or are evoked in her poetry, and, to a lesser degree, to the idea of a poem as an organic entity, where it is relevant), an inclusive, holistic facet that drives the artist's creative impulse and inspires her relational vision. Addressing novelist Cynthia Ozick in a panel discussion on the woman writer in 1976, she declared: 'You, Cynthia, write from the mind, but I write from the body, a female body'.¹¹ In many of Rukeyser's poems we can perceive her interest in physical human experience that engages with the concrete aspects of existence. Her female identity enables her to include in her poetry, which signifies a maternal body, 'patriarchal' forms, and produce, or give birth to, innovative forms that combine supposedly incompatible stylistic elements.

A distinctive feature of Rukeyser's poetics is her reconciliation of both an awareness of being part of the tangible world around her, and the sense of individuality enabling her to recreate this world in her distinctive vision. The relation between these two aspects can be explained through Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological notion of perception. He deduces two apparently paradoxical qualities of perception: 'immanence', through which 'the perceived object would not be able to be foreign to the one who perceives'; 'transcendence', since 'it always involves a beyond of what is actually given'.¹² This theory implies that if immanence refers to an individual's own perspective of herself and the things she observes, then transcendence denotes the things beyond her reach in her environment. According to this

¹¹ Muriel Rukeyser, cited by Kate Daniels, 'Preface: "In Order to Feel"', in Muriel Rukeyser, *Out of Silence: Selected Poems*, ed. Kate Daniels (Evanston: TriQuarterly Books/Northwestern University Press, 1992), xv.

¹² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, ed. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 93.

hypothesis, an individual can make sense of the world around her by including other things within her perspective and by acknowledging the distance separating her from them.

Within the context of Rukeyser's poetry, I explore the way in which the two elements of Merleau-Ponty's idea of human perception supplement each other despite the tension between them. Immanence and transcendence are reconciled through Rukeyser's treatment of the personal body and its practical, quotidian experiences as a source of inspiration and a factor that enables the poet to imagine an artistic form that reflects her individuality and brings together the disparate elements of her identity. At the same time, these experiences stimulate the author to think of her experiences as interconnected to those of other people and the world in its various realms, such as the social and political. In her poetry, she is both aware of herself as an individual being with a distinct, transcendent vision, and a social person who shares, and is affected by, many of the situations and perceptions that other people may experience.

My thesis is divided into an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. In the first of these I analyse sections of Rukeyser's 'The Book of the Dead' in the light of immanence and transcendence as expressed in Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception. The poem brings together individual voices of witnesses to and victims in a tragic industrial incident, using a documentary style that exposes the limitations of their depiction of the event. This style is combined with a lyrical mode through which the author seeks to deal with the flaws of the individual characters' perspectives. This strategy illuminates the tension between these forms and the manner in which they may complement each other in the same way that immanence and transcendence both constitute the act of human perception. In the first chapter, I shed light on Rukeyser's imagery of the body in her poetry of the 1940s, where her protagonists undergo a tension between a preoccupation with the concrete aspect of their physical experiences and an attempt to extend its significance by linking it to other aspects of identity,

such as its creative potential and its connection to the public world. The protagonists recognise the wider implications of their individual encounters and seek to extend their vision by embracing them, despite the conflict that this effort involves.

In the second chapter, I concentrate on Rukeyser's technique, which combines the two tendencies of inviting readers' contemplative response by presenting the images in a thought-provoking manner, and overwhelming readers by forcefully laying out individual views that they may not agree with. The first tendency can be linked to the author's awareness of herself as part of a community of readers (immanence), with whom she seeks to connect and interact. The second stems from her consciousness of her vatic function (transcendence) as a poet who has a unique vision of life and aims to instigate change with her poetry. In the third chapter, I concentrate on the suffering body undergoing the conditions of illness, abjection and imprisonment in Rukeyser's late poetry. Here, the protagonists gain an acute sense of their corporeality, through which they attempt to reconcile the various aspects of their identity and existence. As a result of their physical suffering the characters gain insight into their identity, the sources of their creativity, and the ties binding them to other lives.

I approach the issues included in my thesis by analysing Rukeyser's poetry from the volumes she published during her life, all included in *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*. In addition, I use her prose book, *The Life of Poetry*, her biography of Willard Gibbs, her memoir *The Orgy*, and her 1974 interview, conducted by William Packard and published in *The Craft of Poetry*. I cite from a number of her essays, such as 'We Came for Games', included in her novel *Savage Coast*, 'The Education of a Poet', in *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader*, 'Under Forty', originally published by the *Contemporary Jewish Record*, and her review of Charlotte Marletto's *Jewel of Our Longing*, entitled 'A Simple Theme'. My secondary resources include Louise Kertesz's *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser*, the collection of essays 'How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?': *The Life and Writing of*

Muriel Rukeyser, Tim Dayton's *Muriel Rukeyser's 'The Book of the Dead'*, and Catherine Gander's *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary: The Poetics of Connection*. Besides these, I have utilised a number of reviews, essays and books written about Rukeyser's poetry, as well as resources related to the topics I discuss in my thesis.

Despite the central place that the artist's body occupies in her work, and in spite of the increasing number of essays and monographs, after a period of neglect, written about her poetry since the 1990s, there has been no study devoted to the significance of the body in her poetry. Criticism usually centres on her style in relation to her feminist themes, an example of which is Susan Ayres's 'Outlaw Against the Thinking Fathers', or political ideas, as in Michael Thurston's 'Documentary Modernism as Popular Front Poetics'. Catherine Gander's *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary* focuses on Rukeyser's documentary style in a number of her works. However, these scholarly efforts do not address in ample detail the manner in which these issues are connected to the body in her poetry. My thesis puts these topics in the context of what Rukeyser regarded as the source of her creativity, and a factor that has a prominent presence in her poetry. So, I hope that my dissertation will encourage further efforts at concentrating on the way that Rukeyser's body and her personal, physical experiences shape her vision and the themes and style of her poetry.

Now we turn to a detailed description of each part of the thesis. In the introduction, I discuss Rukeyser's conciliatory style in 'The Book of the Dead'. I study her way of presenting the main topic of the poem, the Hawk's Nest incident, through the diverse outlooks of characters connected to the event, both to expose their flaws, and suggest, by putting them together, their complementariness. I examine her juxtaposition of the documentary and lyrical forms. These two styles supplement each other as aspects of the poet's view of the problem. I study Rukeyser's multifaceted view of the issues surrounding the main topic in the light of Merleau-Ponty's idea of perception as characterised by the two

aspects of immanence and transcendence. In 'The Book of the Dead', the documentary content is provided through the perspectives of the various characters, who maintain an immanent relation to the incident, since most of whom are directly or indirectly involved in it. The facts indicate the intricacies of the situation, showing it within its specific historical context and both its starkly negative and elusive aspects. The author's lyrical voice transcends and complements this set of perspectives by affording a visionary view of the problem beyond the limits of its facts, addressing the question of its reception by future readers of the poem. The author draws inspiration for that vision from the concepts of nature, science, and technology, which are implicated in the incident. On the one hand, these forces are seen as victims to industry's exploitative practices; on the other, they are viewed as renewable resources which will find a way of extending their existence just as the tragedy's victims will be memorialised long after the event in question.

In the first chapter of the thesis, I explore the tension, in a number of Rukeyser's poems of the 1940s, between the concrete aspect of the poet's personal life on the one hand, and her aesthetic ideals, on the other. The first part of the chapter deals with her pragmatic vision in 'Ajanta', a poem inspired by William James's idea of practical experience as a source of knowledge. In this work, the protagonist attempts to flee her war reality, and seeks refuge in a cave where she finds artistic imagery depicting what appears to be an ideal, isolated world. The cave is a miniature cosmos where creatures engage sensually with their surroundings in consummate poses and connections. So, the place represents an alternative to the war raging outside it. The speaker embarks on a journey where she compares the cave's utopian, peaceful realm to conflicts in her psyche, her society and her culture, which she discovers to be integral to her life. Therefore she temporarily discards her dream of realising a wholly ideal existence where art transcends and supplants quotidian concerns. Instead, she adopts a

view that reconciles, as part of an evolutionary process, the traumatic aspects of her life and her search for a perfect universe in art.

In the next section, entitled 'The Artist's Body and the Search for an Inclusive Form', Rukeyser progresses from the depiction of the concrete aspect of a personal experience to the search for a form that accommodates and reflects its disparate elements. In her long poem *Orpheus*, she employs a mythic framework to illustrate the intricate relation binding an artist to her artistic work. After he is mutilated at the hands of the Maenads, the main character of the poem goes through different stages of existence. Initially, he is presented as a fragmented entity without an integrated body giving him a defined identity. His 'wounds', symbolising his psychic tension, beseech him continuously to acknowledge and establish contact with them. He finally responds to them and to the memory of his love and his art, retained in the severed parts of his body, by making an attempt at creating a song, which involves the process of his regeneration. This song is a holistic form which incorporates elements that are even inimical to him, his women murderers and the weapons they have used to kill him. This signifies Rukeyser's appropriation of traditionally masculine forms of art, such as the epic, in her poetry.

The conciliatory effort is taken to another level when she rejects, in 'The Poem as Mask' (1968), the mythic framework and concedes the autobiographical character of the experience in *Orpheus*, thereby removing the boundary or 'mask' separating her art from her personal life and reconciling both in her poetry. In all the poems analysed in this chapter, Rukeyser's personas contend with the question of understanding and expressing their personal, physical experiences through the medium of art, recognising both the tension between both elements and the way they are closely linked in the artist's identity. The events portrayed in these poems involve a repudiation of total devotion to abstract ideals and the embracing of rediscovered concrete aspects of the artist's existence, which inspire a distinct type of

dynamic, transcendent creativity rooted in corporeality. At this moment of her career, during the mid-1940s, Rukeyser was beginning to reconsider her commitment to leftist ideals, which she staunchly held during the 1930s, and take more interest in her personal life, searching for an inclusive form that accommodates it.

In the third section of this chapter I analyse parts of Rukeyser's 'Nine Poems for the Unborn Child', another poem where she attempts to reconcile an event from her practical, quotidian life and her art. The protagonist undergoes pregnancy, and through this she gains a sharpened sense of her body, which becomes a source of inspiration for her. She portrays her condition using concrete images from nature, which indicate the sense of dynamism she experiences. Pregnancy involves for her a temporary loss of agency and fragmentation; this state is embraced by the protagonist as a means of insight into her body and the processes sustaining it. Past and present come together as she, at a crucial stage of her condition, confronts the threat of death and considers her situation in terms of a past event in her life. Furthermore, she contemplates the future life of her child and the prejudice he may suffer, since he would be fatherless. The boundaries separating her from another entity crumble in the case of pregnancy since two beings share the same body and are sustained by their interrelation. The experience brings together the physical and creative aspects of the mother's identity. For the author, it instigates a reconciliation of the personal aspect of her life and her art, in a form, autobiographical writing, that combines both.

In the third chapter of the thesis, I study Rukeyser's technique, and the way it reconciles disparate stylistic aspects and tendencies, in accordance with her organicist poetics. The manner in which imagery and stylistic elements function together in her poetry reflects her idea of the poem as a system of interrelated elements interacting constantly and suggesting different ways in which readers can understand her works. The first part of the chapter deals with Rukeyser's deployment of various forms of rhythm in two of her poems, 'The Birth of

Venus' and 'A Birth', both of which are included in her collection *Body of Waking* (1958). She makes extensive use of consonance, which creates an impression of resonant sounds that correspond to the concrete imagery that dominates the poems. One of the sources of rhythm for Rukeyser is repetition, which is incorporated on the level of sounds, words and phrases. The latter may create music with the way they succeed each other, in addition to their function as revealing various aspects of the images they depict. The rhythms in Rukeyser's poems reflect different stages of the experience that a protagonist undergoes. Thus, the music shifts according to differentiated attitudes presented in the poem, which gives the appearance of her technique as erratic and carelessly constructed. Rukeyser's style is consistent with her idea of rhythm as an organic element of a poem, where thematic and formal aspects are integrated in a body-like system of interrelations and interactive processes.

In the second section of this chapter I discuss aspects of the diction in Rukeyser's poems, including her utilisation of personification, the present tense and hyphenated compounds. Through these means she creates images that carry different levels of meaning and combine distinct elements of existence, such as corporeality, creativity and the phases of history. Personification enables her to portray abstract concepts as tangible elements that gain dynamism from their relationship with the human body and the living world. The present tense offers a flexible tool through which Rukeyser presents distinct eras of history as interrelated. Hyphenated compounds are utilised as figures of speech where Rukeyser reconciles incompatible images, especially those related to the human body and its relationship with nature. From an analysis of the diction in a number of her poems, we can observe that her style is characterised by two tendencies: a suggestive one and an overwhelming one. Her creative juxtaposition of images and the ambiguous way in which they are framed evoke different levels of meaning that readers may contemplate. However, a

coercive aspect of her style emerges when the associations Rukeyser makes are not logically supported or justified in the poems, which may not be accepted by readers.

In the third section of the chapter I continue with a discussion of Rukeyser's style in terms of the aforementioned tendencies. Here, I study the physical features of her work, including punctuation, lineation and her employment of montage techniques. These supplement the poem's meaning, in accordance with Rukeyser's organicist poetics. The punctuation marks of the colon and the extra spaces enrich the reading experience by suggesting different types of relationships among images, allowing readers to ponder the parts of a poem and the correlations that the author creates therein. Using innovative forms of lineation, the poet incorporates various levels of experience or consciousness in connection with the poem's meaning. Rukeyser applies the montage to bring together private and public aspects of the speaker's life. Through this device, she reconsiders the boundaries separating her life from the lives of other people. We observe the coexistence of both the coercive element and the suggestive one in Rukeyser's style. Her inclusion of these contrary tendencies brings dynamism to the experience of reading her poems, which involves a tension between interacting with her evocative juxtaposition of images and acquiescing to her assured manner of affirming them.

In the third, and final, chapter of the thesis I discuss Rukeyser's treatment of the suffering body in her poetry. The poems I analyse here come from the volumes she published late in her career, between the 1960s and the 1970s. The protagonists of these poems undergo experiences of physical suffering where their relationship with their bodies is intensified and through which disparate aspects of their identity and life are reconciled. In the course of these experiences the characters also consider issues beyond their bodily conditions; this makes suffering a conciliatory factor that extends their vision and transforms their lives. The first section of the chapter deals with Rukeyser's depiction of the ill body. The relationship

between illness and the normative body is reconsidered and both are viewed as interdependent. Illness is seen to be an integral part of life and a factor in the development of a person's identity. In a number of her autobiographical poems, illness prompts the writer to search for a form to express it and thereby transform her art. Through her poetry, Rukeyser investigates the question of the loss of agency during illness. In one of her poems, disability is regarded as a source of inspiration, since it brings the protagonist into contact with the unconscious aspect of her character.

In the second section of the chapter, I examine Rukeyser's view of the despised body in a number of her poems. I start by looking into the different ways she views and renders the relationship between types of dichotomies, such as female-male, private-public, and body-mind, whose distinctions are seen as an essential, organising factor in life. She recognises their separateness, their equality and their interdependence in a series of images in 'The Speed of Darkness' (1968). In this way she challenges the cultural attitude of privileging one element of a binary over another. Next, I focus on one binary, which is the self-other one. Rukeyser addresses this issue in a number of poems that deal with prejudice and abjection. She considers the question of racism, which is based on essentialist notions of the body, and contends that it is connected to an individual's prejudiced view of the parts or functions of her body. In one of her poems, the speaker embraces materiality in all its forms, which constitutes transcendence of both racial and gender labels. In another poem, 'Desdichada' (1973), the speaker identifies with the despised other in all its types, including those perceived as war enemies. She goes as far as accepting the universally dreaded end of life, death, as a condition with which she can engage sensually. This would enable her to confront the afterlife and survive it.

The third and final section of this chapter is devoted to the topic of imprisonment in a number of Rukeyser's poems. The poet considers the situation of prisoners confronting

problems related to various aspects of their identity. I scrutinise the impact of this experience in terms of intensifying the protagonists' awareness of their bodies, which leads to the reconciliation of the physical and spiritual in the case of Akiba in the poem of the same name. In another poem, the protagonist faces up to the threat that incarceration poses for her sense of individuality. Her dilemma involves the two alternatives of introspection or a reconciliation of her individuality with the fact of her being part of a community of prisoners. In 'The Gates' (1976), which is the title poem of Rukeyser's last volume of poetry, the speaker makes a journey to protest the imprisonment of a poet by a despotic regime. The poet's condition evokes memories of trauma that she herself suffered and overcame during her life. The speaker speculates about the imprisoned protagonist's attempts to break the boundaries of his prison cell by communicating to readers through his writing, for which he lacks the resources save for his body, an essential source of his creativity. The speaker extends the poet's existence by taking her memory of her experience back to her own country and by contemplating the relevance of his political stance and his work to her life and her people. Through this poem, Rukeyser reconsiders the boundaries separating a poet's personal life from her work and the latter from readers, advancing the physical experience of imprisonment, specifically that for political activism, as one which transcends the prison boundaries to affect the people outside it and elicit their response.

INTRODUCTION

Immanence and Transcendence in ‘The Book of the Dead’

‘The Book of the Dead’, included in *U.S. I* (1938), is one of Rukeyser’s long poems. The central concern of the poem, the Hawk’s Nest incident, is tackled mainly through the different perspectives of its various characters. These speakers recreate the incident through their distinctive but flawed ways of viewing it. The documentary is combined with a lyrical style that complicates and extends its significance. The variety of voices and styles frustrates the formation of a coherent picture of the event and triggers questions such as the following: What role does the human element play in hiding, exposing or memorialising the event? Who or what is being criticised through the Hawk’s Nest tragedy? Is it large corporations, corrupt industrialists, or the misuse of science and technology? What view does the disaster give of industrial technology? How do we judge or indict something whose products, such as glass and electricity, have invaded all aspects of modern human life? The section below deals with the limitations of individual perspectives in revealing the full extent of the event. I discuss Rukeyser’s strategy of juxtaposing the documentary and lyrical mode as a way of dealing with this problem, at the risk of creating tensions in the poem.

1) The Immanent Body and the Relativity of Human Vision

‘The Book of the Dead’ was inspired by the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel incident in Gauley Bridge, WV, which came to be regarded as one of the worst industrial disasters in American history. The story started in 1929, when a subsidiary of the Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation, based in West Virginia, contracted another company to dig a three-mile-long tunnel to divert water from the New River to a hydroelectric plant at Gauley Bridge, in order that the power produced could be sold to another of Union Carbide’s subsidiaries. In the process of digging the tunnel, a huge deposit of extremely pure silica was discovered on site, so the project’s aim

changed to the mining of that material, which could be processed for the production of both glass and steel. The operation was conducted without safety precautions for the workers.

Though wet drilling and the use of protective masks were recommended, the company, in its enthusiasm to finish the project in a swift, cost-effective manner, did not follow these safety requirements. This resulted in the direct exposure of a number of the mainly black migrant miners to silica, which causes silicosis when it enters the lungs. According to one estimate, 764 workers died from this illness, which they developed in the process of digging the tunnel.¹³

Thus, one of the motifs that play a central role in ‘The Book of the Dead’ is that of glass. It appears in its basic chemical form, silica, in the third part of the sequence, ‘Statement: Philippa Allen’. Here, the substance is dealt with from the perspective of its industrial value to the corporations extracting it. The character mentioned in the title, Philippa Allen, is a social worker providing her testimony to a subcommittee of the House of Representatives, who are investigating the incident in question. Rukeyser presents the hearing in the form of an exchange between Allen and the subcommittee. The section starts and concludes with personal questions directed at the social worker. When asked whether she likes the State of West Virginia, she responds that she likes it in the summer, which suggests a tourist attitude to the place. Towards the end, when she is asked whether the people there are hospitable enough to transport her in their cars, she replies in the positive, praising the fact that they are ‘obliging’, which seems more a self-interested impression than an objective view of the state. Between these two answers, she gives, with the stimulation of her interrogators, a detached account of Union Carbide’s initial scheme, its sudden change of plan, and its negligence of

¹³ Tim Dayton, *Muriel Rukeyser’s ‘The Book of the Dead’* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 17.

the workers' safety, leading to the tragedy. Rukeyser adapts the hearing to create a conversational, intermittent rhythm, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

—As a matter of fact, they originally intended to dig that

tunnel a certain size?

—Yes.

—And then enlarged the size of the tunnel, due to the fact

that they discovered silica and wanted to get it out?

—That is true for tunnel No. 1.

The tunnel is part of a huge water-power project

begun, latter part of 1929

direction: New Kanawha Power Co.

subsidiary of Union Carbide & Carbon Co.

That company—licensed:

to develop power for public sale.

Ostensibly it was to do that; but

(in reality) it was formed to sell all the power to

the Electro-Metallurgical Co.

subsidiary of Union Carbide & Carbon Co.

(*CP* 76)¹⁴

¹⁴ Unless otherwise stated, all quotations of Rukeyser's poetry, indicated throughout the thesis by the abbreviation *CP*, come from Muriel Rukeyser's *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Janet E. Kaufman, Anne F. Herzog and Jan Heller Levi (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005).

The focus here is on the facts rather than the companies' greed and their exploitation of, and injustice to, the workers. The statement gives the impression that Union Carbide's conduct is typical of any company arranging deals and producing goods to earn and maximise profits. Even silica, which was responsible for the illness of many miners, is merely seen in a neutral light, as a chemical compound, with a basic formula (SiO_2) and industrial applications, specifically the 'electro-processing of steel'.

Allen's statement is presented in the form of short answers consistently interrupted by interrogators, which, according to Tim Dayton, was not the original format of the hearing. During the latter, Allen was given the chance to speak without interruption for longer periods of time.¹⁵ The interrogators' questions at the beginning and end of the section elicit answers that reveal Allen's relationship to her subject. They provide more details and prompt her to confirm or shed light on critical points, in a manner that stimulates the investigation process. The social worker's statement is presented in an objective manner but she herself appears personally nonchalant about a tragedy of this magnitude. When asked if she 'met' the workers in person, she tentatively responds: 'I have talked to people; yes' (CP 75). There is a discrepancy between the pathos of the situation and the degree of Allen's personal and emotional involvement with it.¹⁶

Despite the predominantly objective character of Allen's statement, Rukeyser incorporates stylistic elements that interfere with it, complicating and extending its message. For instance, she uses brackets in an ambiguous way, creating uncertainty as to whether they are her or the

¹⁵ Dayton, *Muriel Rukeyser's 'The Book of the Dead'*, 39.

¹⁶ The personal details in Allen's statement, as well as Rukeyser's reformulation of the hearing, are emblematic of the notion that the documentary form is essentially a subjective performance, although it involves the utilisation of hard facts and objective utterances. William Stott alludes to this issue, thinking of the documentary as an artefact necessarily influenced by the techniques and position of its author: 'A document, when human, is the opposite of the official kind; it is not objective but thoroughly personal'. See William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 7.

protagonist's contribution to the text. These may contain guiding, specific details as do these lines: 'To divert water (from New River) / to a hydroelectric plant (at Gauley Junction)' (*CP* 76). Although they are part of Allen's statement, the brackets may not have been present in the actual speech, unless they reflect the details' status as marginal. However, they could also be Rukeyser's supplementary additions to the hearing. The specific geographical information emphasises that the Hawk's Nest incident is not just an insignificant event happening at an unidentified location in the state of West Virginia. The details provide the setting with defined contours as a real place where an important incident has happened. The parentheses also appear towards the end of the passage above, around the expression 'in reality', to supplement the meaning of the adverb 'ostensibly' in the previous line. Allen defines the motive for the formation of New Kanawha Power Co., but the parentheses complicate that detail by suggesting that this fact is not acknowledged by the parent corporation. There is tension within the detached statement since hidden truths struggle to find a place in the main text.¹⁷

The parentheses' obtrusive character becomes more obvious near the end of the statement. When Allen is asked about the people in West Virginia, whether they are 'happy to pick you up on the highway', she simply responds, sticking with the limits that the question sets up: 'Yes, they are delightfully obliging' (*CP* 77). Underneath this response there is a statement enclosed in brackets: '(All were bewildered. Again at Vanetta they are asking, / "What can be

¹⁷ The incorporation of subjective elements in Allen's predominantly objective statement corresponds to an essential element of the documentary form for John Grierson, who first coined the term, in 1926, to describe Robert Flaherty's film *Moana*. In one of his essays, Grierson recommends the integration of a 'dramatic method with clashing forces', together with other elements, such as the 'musical' or 'symphonic' and the 'poetic' one, in documentary films. See John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1979), 45.

done about this?")¹⁸ The message of these lines contrasts with the positive, bland note of Allen's answer. The author seems fed up with the speaker's avoidance of any direct reference to the tragic aspect of the Hawk's Nest incident and she intercedes to pinpoint it through the town's residents' interest in it.

Another aspect of the documentary style in 'Statement' is the intrusive deployment of ellipsis in a suggestive manner in the text, beyond which the author seeks to go, possibly in order to fill its gaps. This stylistic device is appended to the end of the lines that deal with Union Carbide's negligence, and they represent Allen's only indictment of those responsible for what would be a tragic event. She affirms that the contractors 'must have known danger for every man / neglected to provide the workmen with any safety device' (CP 76). Ellipsis draws attention to the specific results of the company's indifference, unmentioned here. Further, after hearing Allen's statement, one of the Representatives declares:

There are many points that I should like to develop later,

but I shall try to give you a general history of this

condition first (CP 77)

Ellipsis here gives the impression that Allen's account is not detailed enough since it cannot be regarded as a 'general history of this condition'. The speaker does not define the 'condition' she indicates. Describing the complex situation as a single 'condition' both simplifies it and causes ambiguity as to the specific aspect of the case at which the speaker is hinting.

¹⁸ Vanetta was a coal mining town in West Virginia. The editors' notes in Rukeyser's *Collected Poems* mention that 'The migrant black workers recruited for the Gauley Bridge project lived predominantly in Vanetta'. See Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 606.

‘Gauley Bridge’ zooms in to the daily life of people in the industrial city, where glass figures prominently in its consumable form, as a finished product. The first appearance of the material here can be detected with the ‘camera’ deployed at the beginning of the section. So the appliance registering the scene of the tragedy is implicated in it, being made of the same material whose basic form causes the death of the miners. Initially the city’s life is hidden from view and shrouded in mystery because places are seen only from the outside, ‘a street of wooden walls and empty windows, / the doors shut handless in the empty street’. Nevertheless, when an image of movement on the street is noticed through the camera, the latter suddenly becomes ‘blurred’:

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. (*CP* 77)

The image of the boy running with his dog strikes the speaker as out of place. By virtue of its unpredictability, it disrupts her journalistic task of capturing static, picturesque images.¹⁹ The boy is heading for an occurrence that promises to be exciting to him, workers ‘mending road for the government’. This image implies an attempt at restoring a sense of normality to a

¹⁹ Rukeyser is probably alluding to a style of travel reportage, common during the 1930s, where images were recorded without much interference on the part of the reporter. Alfred Kazin deplors such an uninvolved aesthetic attitude as inspired by the objective outlook that the camera seems to offer. He comments that ‘the camera *as an idea* affected documentary and travel reporters and served them as a prime symbol of a certain enforced simplicity and passivity of mind’. Catherine Gander points to an implication of this style, observing that ‘the camera as instrument and metaphor reproduced a fractured reality without advancing a method by which such experiential fragments might be integrated’. This manner of presentation can be discerned throughout ‘Gauley Bridge’, where the images bear no relation to each other, except for the prevalent existence of glass, which reveals nothing but salient aspects of the town’s public life. See Catherine Gander, *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary: The Poetics of Connection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 169.

place where a tragedy has happened. The images hide another reality, that of miners suffering harmful and fatal working conditions. The speaker is interested in a more panoramic view, so she is compelled to leave this specific street and head for a wider setting, where she would be able to survey various aspects of life in the town.

The camera advances towards scenes of the business world in Gauley Bridge. It records the image of a 'commercial' hotel, where 'the owner is keeping his books behind the public glass', as well as that of a 'post office window', beyond which there is 'a hive of private boxes'. Through this window, interaction with the office employees is limited; only hands ('the hand of the man who withdraws, the woman who reaches / her hand') exchange items or documents to be sent by post. Glass takes on an attractive character in the restaurant, whose window lends a glittering, 'April-glass-tinted' appearance to the 'yellow-aproned waitress'. Later, after the arrival of a train, probably with tourists visiting the town, readers are taken into a 'beerplace' where 'one's harsh night eyes' are looking at the waitress and her apron 'over the beerglass'. The latter and the drink contained in it are part of a secluded realm that protects the patron from the reality outside the bar.

These images of business, and of glass as a finished product, provide the impression of a surface glossing over the process of production, presenting a spectacle of reality that marginalises or suppresses the tragedy in the Gauley Bridge tunnel. This recalls Karl Marx's idea of the alienation taking place between workers and the product of their labour. In one of his early writings, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, first published in 1932, Marx, advancing the concept of 'estrangement', which he views as an essential feature of the worker-product relationship in the capitalist system, speculates that '*Political economy conceals the estrangement inherent in the nature of labour by not considering the **direct***

*relationship between the **worker** (labour) and production'* (emphasis in source).²⁰ Elsewhere, he defines this idea in these terms: 'The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him' (emphasis in source).²¹ We witness this situation in Rukeyser's depiction of a city where life continues as usual regardless of the fate of the people who produce the material sustaining its daily activities. Workers are estranged from the fruit of their toil since consumers ignore the efforts and sacrifices expended in its process of production. Moreover, an aspect of the alienation involved in this case is the industrialists' ignorance, stemming from greed, of the miners' exposure to the hazardous substance of silica, which is a cause of their illness.

As we have seen in this section, the camera reveals a feature of the town's public life, the ubiquitous existence of glass in its buildings, where the material gives access to imagery but constitutes a barrier against the photographer's full interaction with her subject. The town appears devoid of distinctive qualities, prompting the speaker to conclude that 'any town looks like this one-street town' (*CP* 78). To confirm this fact, the speaker changes her descriptive style at the end of 'Gauley Bridge' to address readers directly:

What do you want—a cliff over a city?

A foreland, sloped to sea and overgrown with roses?

These people live here. (*CP* 78)

These lines seem a reaction against the journalistic perspective that characterises the section in general. The speaker is dissatisfied with her own attempt at burnishing the town's image and presenting it as a possible tourist destination. She repudiates an attitude that puts the

²⁰ Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: A Reader*, ed. Jon Elster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 38-9.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

economic value of a place before the lives occupying it, affirming the human element of the Hawk's Nest incident.²²

In 'Mearl Blankenship' the main character is more involved in the tragic situation. The section commences with these lines: 'He stood against the stove / facing the fire' (CP 82). By virtue of his job, he is in direct contact with the production facilities and, as a result, with the hazardous substance therein. Despite being opposite the fire, he derives 'little warmth' from it. No human communication takes place, 'no words', and the only sound to be heard is that of 'loud machines' suppressing and muting any speech.

In a message to the carrier of a letter included in this section, Blankenship describes the symptoms of his condition of silicosis, which disturb him and operate on his body even in his sleep: 'I wake up choking, and my wife / rolls me over on my left side'. His illness has developed to the degree that it shares the victim's body, which copes with it by being 'rolled over' to a more comfortable position. Yet, when he is moved to that posture and while still sleeping, Blankenship dreams of 'the tunnel choked / the dark wall coughing dust'. The tunnel gains a human attribute in his dreams; it mirrors the condition of the people working in it, its victims. He carries his condition as a stigma wherever he goes, even in the world of nature, where he retreats. That realm reflects and bears witness to his ailment, as the following imagery suggests:

He stood against the rock

²² Rukeyser's reference to people in this passage points to the human aspect distinguishing the documentary mode when it became popular during the 1930s. Stott notes that, at the time, the term 'human', 'like documentary itself, had a class bias'. He cites Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins, who travelled to monitor the application of the New Deal's NRA programme in Duquesne's steel mills: 'Again I asked my questions of these managers. But I had come down to get the human side of the situation and I wanted to see some of the men alone'. Having started with the standard procedure of questioning managers, Perkins affirms that the basis of her trip is discovering the 'human' aspect, which implies the workers of the company. See Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 49.

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. (*CP* 83)

Blankenship's problem is revealed to be not merely an individual condition. It spills over to his surroundings. This stanza starts in a similar manner to the first but the protagonist is here placed in a different setting. In the first image ('no words / loud machines') there is a wide gulf separating the worker from the production facilities, while in the second one ('grey river grey face') he is part of, and even identified with, the phenomena around him. His condition is projected onto the rock, which becomes both a victim of silicosis, since being 'mottled' is one of its symptoms, and evidence of it, displaying and 'enlarging' it as X-rays may in a different context. Rukeyser is perhaps alluding to the pollution emanating from industrialised production when its waste is dumped into the natural world, which becomes a victim as the miners do. In the image above, the rock as a revelatory feature has its own strengths as well as limitations; it is exposed to the elements, so the image it reflects is unstable and it may become 'diffuse' in time. Still, traces of the evidence may be tenaciously retained because of the 'stony' character of the rock. The latter is similar not only to X-ray but also to glass in its hard, smooth surface and in its ability both to reflect and deflect the light that comes in contact with it.

Rukeyser varies modes in 'Mearl Blankenship' to demonstrate the different perspectives from which the protagonist's plight can be viewed. We have an omniscient speaker, who

views Blankenship in relation to his surroundings, which he may not have been able to discern or express from a limited, personal perspective. As we have seen, there is also a message that the main character writes for the carrier of a letter that he has written. This casual note complements the ecological viewpoint with intimate details of his daily life as a silicosis victim, perhaps to draw sympathy from the person posting the letter. Realising that public officials would not be interested in his private life, his letter concentrates on his work duties, the risks they involve, and his failed attempts to sue his company, which he imputes to the corruption of his lawyers, who were bribed to abandon his case. Blankenship mentions, in error-ridden sentences reflecting his poor level of education, that his job involves ‘drilling near the mouth of the tunnell’. He relates how his boss told him to ‘Venture back’ when the ‘shots went off’. He informs his reader that his foreman has died and is ‘gone’, while he is, against the odds, still alive, ‘a lingering along’. Though he is ‘expecting to loose’ his life he seeks, being practical, compensation, possibly for the sake of his family, whom he mentions in the letter. The final words of entreaty seem, with the sense of desperation they imply, to be directed even at the poem’s readers: ‘if you can do anything for me / let me know soon’ (*CP* 83). Despite the exhortative note at the end, the predominantly unsentimental quality of the letter obscures the degree of his suffering and reduces the impact of the fact that he is dying; the verb in the expression ‘loose my life’ is even misspelt, inadvertently, from his point of view, giving the sense of something being liberated rather than terminated.

The different perspectives from which Blankenship’s story is told reveal aspects of it while ‘diffusing’ it. It is difficult to find a focal point in the different renditions of his case; the latter’s truth or reality is characterised by relativism, since it is perceived through human eyes. All the same, the implied appeal at the end of the letter impels readers to bring the threads together to perpetuate the memory of the protagonist.

Another section where Rukeyser combines perspectives to expose the flaws of a speaker's outlook is 'Absalom'. The latter is based on a testimony by a woman named Emma Jones, whose husband and three sons were victims of the Hawk's Nest incident. Rukeyser blends different statements, that of Mrs Jones as well as those of her husband, Charles Jones, and Philippa Allen, to construct that of the mother.²³ Moreover, a more conspicuous form of intertextuality can be observed in Rukeyser's juxtaposition of passages, directly or in an adapted form, from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. The texts vie with and complement each other to create a picture that is held together by the tensions among its parts.

Through the framework of a monologue, the mother in 'Absalom' tells the story of her family since the time they started work at the tunnel until the time their illness was discovered and lawsuits were initiated to obtain compensation. The woman's husband and sons were lured into leaving their previous jobs and joining the New Kanawha Power Company by a 'power Co. foreman', who frequently visited them to partake of their 'home brew', for which the family was known. The foreman's offer may have sounded particularly timely at a moment when workers were looking for better-paying jobs during the Depression. The mother emphasises the case of her youngest son, Shirley, who 'went into the tunnel', as if especially regretting the fact that she allowed him, despite his young age, being eighteen years old, to be exposed to what turns out to be a grave danger in the power company. After her reference to her youngest son, we are presented with two lines from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, as spoken by Shirley, who now seems to be living another existence after his death: 'My heart my mother my heart my mother / My heart my coming into being' (CP 84). These lines affirm both the son's body and emotions as the factors reflecting his identity, beyond narrow economic considerations and in defiance of them.

²³ Dayton, *Muriel Rukeyser's 'The Book of the Dead'*, 47.

The mother continues with a record of the concrete details of the illness of her husband and children. She identifies her youngest son's case when he arrives home one day with a 'shortness of breath'. The boy is incapacitated by illness, so his mother has to take care of him, treating him like a helpless baby: 'I would carry him from his bed to the table, / from his bed to the porch, in my arms'. This is intercepted by a quotation from the *Book of the Dead*, asserting his individuality, again in terms of his 'heart', where the mind and the body meet: '*My heart is mine in the place of hearts, / They gave me back my heart, it lies in me*'. It is only after death that the boy gains the sense of himself as a distinct human being, after losing control of his fate in a capitalist world that evaluates people in terms of their materially productive potential without regard to their emotions or individuality.

The mother's monologue proceeds to the circumstances of her struggle to get a medical diagnosis of her husband's and sons' condition. She is faced with the reluctance of the only doctor she trusts to cooperate with her directly even in return for money, perhaps sensing a threat to his job if he does so. Nonetheless, he later agrees to help her after she presents him with X-ray results, which she has received from a hospital and paid for by begging. The son, who is not able to go with her to see the doctor, implores his mother to arrange for his autopsy to confirm that silicosis is the cause of his death. In this way she will get compensation, which would support her and make up for the loss of all her providers.

From another realm, the afterlife, the son proclaims that he has 'gained mastery over' his 'heart', his 'two hands', 'the waters' and 'the river'. Mastery, which is supposed to be his ability to conduct his job with dexterity, is realised after death. He attains full command of his body and even the natural world with its diverse forces. This is echoed by another development in the world of the living: the mother's efforts pay off and a series of lawsuits against the company, as well as its lawyers and doctors, are initiated. Although Shirley will

not live to see that victory, he has achieved something by being one of the first cases drawing attention to the problem:

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. (CP 85)

Despite his death, Shirley's contribution will extend his life, ensuring him a rebirth and a form of eternal life in the living memory of his people. This is realised by his dedicated mother, who vows at the end of her testimony: 'He shall not be diminished, never; / I shall give a mouth to my son'. In spite of the passionate note of the mother's words, she takes his death for granted and believes that the only thing which will stop his 'diminishment' is her act of memorialising him, so all he needs is a 'mouth' that can speak on his behalf. Yet, the boy's statement from the other world confirms his resumed new life despite the barrier separating death from life on earth. He even knows the 'gate' to the latter and is liberated to roam 'over the earth', specifically 'among the living'.

As we have seen, Rukeyser draws a picture of the tragic incident by bringing together distinct, individual voices, therefore achieving one of the principal aims of the documentary, as can be discerned in Charles Reznikoff's record of the process of writing *Testimony* (1934). Through this work, he sought to outline the history of his nation 'not from the standpoint of an individual, as in diaries, nor merely from the angle of the unusual, as in newspapers, but from every standpoint—as many standpoints as were provided by the witnesses

themselves'.²⁴ However, Rukeyser goes beyond cataloguing or depicting the voices she presents. She also points to the limited outlook of each one by hinting at and exposing their flaws. We will see next how she complements these perspectives with a vatic one, foregrounded in the sections discussed below, which complicates and extends them.

2) *The Transcendent Body and Complementary Perspectives in Tension*

'Power' starts with an idyllic image of two landscapers enjoying the sunshine. The viewers engage sensually with the sun's warmth 'until the entire body watches the scene with love'. The body's perspective is extended; the landscapers are able to 'see' nature as a place which defies expectations and comprehension. In this world, 'perfect cliffs' appear as unassailable, stable protrusions, 'until the river / cuts sheer, mapped far below in delicate track' (CP 96). The view of the river 'cutting' through the solid cliffs with its subtle but steady movement strikes the speaker as a 'surprise of grace'. For the speaker, the sunny, 'brilliant day' is a time 'when love sees the sun behind its man / and the disguised marvel under familiar skin' (CP 96).

The images above affirm the human body's ability, with the aid of the sun's light, to discover the various aspects of nature, thereby expanding the 'familiar' world by being able to identify its intricacies. This idea, as understood from the imagery, calls to mind Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory, whereby a person's ability to perceive the things around her enables her to transcend the limits of her material body and therefore extend the dimensions of her world. Merleau-Ponty writes of the way that our world is composed of the objects we can actively sense or imagine:

²⁴ Charles Reznikoff, cited in Monique Claire Vescia, *Depression Glass: Documentary Photography and the Medium of the Camera Eye in Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, and William Carlos Williams* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 33 and 36.

The perceived thing exists only insofar as someone can perceive it. I cannot even for an instant imagine an object in itself. [. . .] I thus cannot conceive a perceptible place in which I am not myself present. But the very places in which I find myself are never completely given to me; the things which I see are things for me only under the condition that they always recede beyond their immediately given aspects.²⁵

The author hypothesizes that perceived objects exist by virtue of a person's awareness of them; perception brings things together as part of her existence, but, because of their materiality, there are limits to her contact with these objects. The human body creates its surroundings through its act of perception; because of its involvement in the perceived realm, it is not merely an outsider viewing or sensing the world from a distance but is also part of what it senses. This makes individuals implicated in what they witness, since they are part of it; their perception of it gives it shape, bearing in mind the distance separating the viewers from material reality. So, the basis of Merleau-Ponty's idea is a person's experience of sensing her surroundings and including them in this way, rather than an objective notion of materiality and consciousness as mutually exclusive concepts. In the poem's imagery above, the landscapers' physical engagement with their surroundings makes them comprehend the relations among the natural phenomena they observe, part of which is their own existence, which adds a greater significance to their experience and the things they see.

The scene in 'Power' shifts from nature towards the power plant where electric power is produced. The building's towers are described in impressive terms ('steel-bright, light-pointed, the narrow-waisted towers'), emphasising their symmetrical design, their 'accurate flex of distinction' and 'economy of gift'. From the inside, the view is equally awe-inspiring. The 'tall immense chamber of cylinders' is painted in a colour that accentuates its magical quality when sunlight reaches it:

²⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*, 92-3.

Green,

the rich paint catches light from three-story windows,

arches of light vibrate erratic panels on / sides of curved steel'. (*CP 97*)

The image implies that the machinery assumes a vivid appearance when light enters the place and becomes reflected on it, contributing to its majesty. Elsewhere the penetrating light is shown as reflecting an incongruent, 'mottled' quality, similar to a symptom of silicosis, in the majestic atmosphere of the place: 'Light laughing on steel, the gay, the tall sun / given away; mottled; snow comes in clouds' (*CP 97*). Clouds, which hold the promise of life-sustaining rain, may also carry snow, which halts and freezes life. On the other hand, Jones, the engineer who has designed the power plant, maintains a positive view of it, feigning it and regarding it as a paradise that he does not want to leave. Boasting of it, he declares: 'This is the place. Away from this my life / I am indeed Adam unparadiz'd' (*CP 98*). The Miltonic expression 'Adam unparadiz'd' points to Jones's attachment to his realm. It also intimates that the place represents a cover for him; his departure from it and towards the outside world signals a form of exposure just as the biblical Adam became aware of his nudity after sinning, leading to his expulsion from Paradise. The engineer is sheltered and caged in by his perception of his workplace as a one-dimensional, wholly productive world and does not want to compare it to any other reality or explore its other aspects, which may distort the image of the factory for him.

Next, readers have a glimpse of a lower level of the power plant. The speaker descends a 'drunken ladder' whose 'rungs give, pliant, beneath the leaping heart'. The precarious ladder's swaying rungs mirror the speaker's feelings of excitement and apprehension. In this place, a 'naked bulb' emits intermittent light ('makes glare, turns paler, burns to dark again'), which is probably ironical in a plant where electricity is produced. The light is personalised;

it starts to ‘speak’ and then falters: ‘Brilliance begins, stutters’. Through this effort, it ‘comes upon / after the tall abstract, the ill, the unmasked men’ (*CP* 98). The ‘tall abstract’ possibly refers to the romanticised description of the factory and its machinery, which, by virtue of its grand proportions and perfection, looks unreal or extraordinary compared to the ill workers. For Stephanie Hartman, this is a ‘reminder of how the material can complicate the abstract beauty of the towers, and even Jones’s idealism’.²⁶ Still, materiality does not alone account for the complexity that the ‘unmasked men’ add to the situation. The body’s dynamism as opposed to the machinery’s mechanical quality is what makes the former’s illness difficult to contain or suppress, thereby distorting the benign appearance of technology, whose dark aspect is betrayed by the workers’ exposure to silica.

A character that plays a role in revealing an aspect of the factory to create a multifaceted picture of its reality is that of the ‘independent figure of the welder’. This person does not belong to either the victim miners or the culpable managers, so he may be qualified to comment on both. Unlike the miners, the welder is ‘masked for his work’. He is given qualities that hint at another type of profession: ‘His face is a cage of steel, the hands are covered, / points dazzle hot, fly from his writing torch’ (*CP* 98). The description applies indirectly and self-referentially to the poem’s author, whose pen is likened to a light- and heat-dispensing ‘torch’. The welder’s face is compared to a mask of steel, which indicates the form through which he beholds his material and uses it to create his work. The mask is part of his professional identity as a welder; it affords him a barrier against the risks involved in his job. Similarly, writing requires the poet’s dedication to her art and lack of sentimentality in approaching her subject. Towards the end of ‘Power’, the speaker faces up to the reality to

²⁶ Stephanie Hartman, ‘All Systems Go: Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead” and the Reinvention of Modernist Poetics’, in *How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?: The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 219.

which the situation she witnesses leads, ‘the river Death’ and ‘diversion of power’, so there is dissolution on the one side, and hope for change and regeneration on the other.

‘The Dam’ takes readers to the source of energy for the power plant, water, in an attempt to deal with the irretrievable loss of lives in the Hawk’s Nest tragedy. The section opens with an image of the movement of water in a dam, resonating with the first law of thermodynamics:

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

Water celebrates, yielding continually
 sheeted and fast in its overfull
 slips down the rock, evades the pillars
 building its colonnades, repairs
 in stream and standing wave
 retains its seaward green
 broken by obstacle rock; falling, the water sheet
 spouts, and the mind dances, excess of white. (*CP* 99)

Water is portrayed as a dynamic material that is able to move in all seasons, even reaching the ‘lost’. Because of its flexibility and despite being bounded or ‘sheeted’, it manages to find its way through the dam by ‘evading’ or going around its pillars, which increase the speed of its movement by obstructing it. It preserves its colour whether it is stationary, ‘broken by obstacle rock’, or flowing. With its excessive dynamism, it even seems to surround and dominate the dam, which is supposed to control it. The style of this passage simulates the movement of water. It is distinguished by enjambment, which impedes momentarily and, at

the same time, stimulates the forward progression of the lines, thereby maintaining their continuity. The lineation gives the impression of words falling over the edge of the line to go on flowing in the next one, imitating the outpour of water over the boundaries of a dam.

After asking some purely speculative questions, ‘How many feet of whirlpools? What is a year in terms of falling water?’, Rukeyser inserts the formula for the velocity of falling water ($\sum Q = 0$), which is depicted as ‘The balance-sheet of energy that flows / passing along its infinite barrier’ (*CP* 100). This suggests that even a scientific fact or formula, despite its important function of defining a physical phenomenon, is merely a representation that may be transcended by nature and its power to transform the limitations of its reality.²⁷ This is symbolised by the image of the legendary phoenix, which renews its life by undergoing and overcoming the process of annihilation. Towards the end of ‘The Dam’, this process of rebirth becomes a source of power for people who seek the truth of the matter even when it is obscured at one time or another:

Effects of friction : to fight and pass again,
 learning its power, conquering boundaries,
 able to rise blind in revolts of tide,
 broken and sacrificed to flow resumed. (*CP* 102)

The lines combine quasi-scientific diction with politically-inflected expressions to extend their corresponding realities in a vision of history where human entities gain ascendancy. The imagery advances a cyclical notion of history in which the memory of oppressed people

²⁷ Rukeyser rejects the modern, specifically Victorian, conception of science as an objective reflection of reality, where ‘nature became some colony of imperial and scientific man, and Fact and Logic his throne and sceptre’. She declares that ‘Fact is a symbol, Logic is a symbol: they are symbols of the real’. See Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (1949; Ashfield: Paris Press, 1996), 177.

cannot be submerged by any attempts to hide or efface it.²⁸ On the contrary, these attempts create ‘friction’ and incite resistance, which revives that memory, extending the lives of its human victims.

The section’s images of the water’s movement and the dam are interrupted by documentary pieces that deal with concrete aspects of the Hawk’s Nest incident and the company responsible for it. Here is a fragment of a Congressional hearing dealing with the problem:

Mr. Griswold. ‘A corporation is a body without a soul.’

Mr. Dunn. When they were caught at it they resorted to the

methods employed by gunmen, ordinary machine-gun

racketeers. They cowardly tried to buy out the people who had

the information on them.

Miss Allen. Mr. Jesse J. Ricks, the president of the Union Carbide

& Carbon Corporation, suggested that the stock-holder had better

take this question up in a private conference.

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

Stock and

Dividend in

Net

Closing

²⁸ The management of Union Carbide & Carbon resorted to underhand procedures to conceal the facts of the Hawk’s Nest incident. They paid off doctors to misdiagnose silicosis sufferers, bribed lawyers to prevent them from defending victims, and when the latter died, overpaid a mortician to bury them surreptitiously in makeshift graves. See Michael Thurston, ‘Documentary Modernism as Popular Front Poetics: Muriel Rukeyser’s “Book of the Dead”’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 60: 1 (1999), 59-83.

High	Low	Dollars	Open	High	Low	Last	Chge.	Bid	Ask	Sales
111	61¼	Union Carbide (3.20)	67¼	69½	67¼	69½	+3	69¼	69½	3,400

(CP 101)

The documentary statements interrupt the progression of descriptive imagery before and after them. The language of the Congressional hearings is sensationalised and inflated, in line with the politicians' aim of swaying listeners to their case. They contrast with the images of nature, which consider the problem from a broader, generalised perspective. The documentary fragments act as a dam where the problem is processed by characters who seek to take control of it for their own purposes. The reference to the human element, specifically Mr. Griswold's allusion to the body in his cited aphorism, suggests that although a corporation is sustained by the labour of its workforce, the latter's humanity is ignored and priority is given to material profits. This is supported by the stock statement above, portraying the corporation as embodied by figures and statistics. The short text demonstrates the improvement in the value of Union Carbide's stocks over time, justifying its business but omitting the cost in human lives at which these profits have been made. Mr Dunn's exposure of the company's cover-up practices points to the notion that efforts to obstruct justice will ultimately be discovered and revealed, further supporting the victims' case.

The documentary passages are complicated and supplemented by the lyrical part of the 'The Dam'. The concrete facts give shape to the problem, defining its intricacies. Yet, the factual details limit the dimensions of the situation by presenting it from specific angles. Thus, to extend their significance, the facts are compared with forces that the speaker considers everlasting. Interpolated among the documentary pieces is the cynical message that the dam, as an unassailable emblem of the irreversible course of technological development, is beyond the wrangling of politicians and industrialists. Similarly, 'The Dam' affirms that humans and nature never lose their identities through industrial processes: 'The men and the

water are never idle, / have definitions' (CP 101). These factors are not governed by exigencies of the present time as indicated by the specific documentary facts; they find ways of preserving their existence and renewing themselves throughout history. Rukeyser's juxtaposition of the documentary with the lyrical mode once again recalls Merleau-Ponty's idea of immanence and transcendence as two paradoxical yet complementary aspects of human perception. The documentary excerpts in 'The Dam' provide a view of the concrete aspects of the incident while the poet's vision affords a wider historical dimension to the problem, taking account of the way it will be received and treated by future generations of readers.

One of the lessons that Rukeyser acquired through her work designing war posters at the U. S. A.'s Office of War Information's Graphics Workshop during WWII is the supplementary link that an artist's perception adds to the elements of a 'photo-text', enriching and contributing to its impression by widening its scope. She reminisces about that time:

among the things we learnt was the impact that a combined form may have when picture and text approach the meaning from different starting-places. In this combination of an image and a few words, there are separables: the meaning of the image, the meaning of the words, and a third, the meaning of the two in combination.

The words are not used to describe the picture, but to extend its meaning.²⁹

According to this quotation, when the separate elements of the visual image and the caption in a poster are brought together in an original manner there emerges a third aspect stemming

²⁹ Following the example of photojournalists such as Margaret Bourke-White, who collaborated with Erskine Caldwell to publish *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), and before working at the Graphics Workshop, Rukeyser had already experimented with documentary art, publishing in 1939 two sets of captioned photographs, entitled 'Adventures of Children' and 'Worlds Alongside'. In each of the 'photo-texts', the author presents two contrasting images with an artistically rendered comment that seems to stand on its own, but can be creatively linked to both photos. See Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 137, and Gander, *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary*, 32.

from the way they are combined. It broadens their sense by letting readers see the possibilities that result from the juxtaposition of image and text.

A related notion is that of perceived reality being a dimension distinct from both art and the things it delineates. Talking about the way that poetry offers a vision of relational reality, Rukeyser speculates that ‘Art and nature are imitations, not of each other, but of the same third thing—both images of the real, the spectral and vivid reality that employs all means’.³⁰ Reality is measured by what can be sensed concretely and synthesised by the poet before it is transcribed in a work of art. The adjectives ‘spectral’ and ‘vivid’ evoke an image of light entering a prism and forming a spectrum of colours that ‘employs all means’ by unveiling the otherwise invisible colour possibilities that light contains, so the latter appears as a combination of integrated parts to its viewer.

Rukeyser’s extensive deployment of documentary material in ‘The Book of the Dead’ drew censure from a number of critics. Willard Maas remarked that it led her into ‘fields that have been more adequately explored and more tersely recorded by journalists’. He characterised the poem as ‘modeled after leaflets’. Comparing leaflet writing to poetry, he surmised that the former ‘would appear to be an immediate and transitory art as opposed to one which aims for permanence’.³¹ Maas’s comment points to a problem in Rukeyser’s utilisation of documentary material, which is that it reduces the poem’s value since it relies on facts that are usually used in journalism. However, the reviewer does not take into account Rukeyser’s juxtaposition of factual content and lyrical descriptions and the way they function together. Taken separately, the two styles reveal flaws in their depiction of the event in question, but the way they are combined in the poem provides journalistic items with a

³⁰ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 26.

³¹ Willard Maas, ‘Lost between Wars’, Review of *U. S. I*, by Muriel Rukeyser, *Poetry* 52 (1938), 102.

historical dimension, achieving, to some extent, Rukeyser's aim to 'extend the document', as she declares in her note to 'The Book of the Dead'.³²

On the other hand, William Carlos Williams commended Rukeyser's skill in deploying documentary material and compared her poem to Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. He observed that she 'knows [. . .] how to select and exhibit her material. She understands what words are for and how important it is not to twist them in order to make "poetry" of them'.³³ Although Rukeyser's method may have been inspired by Pound's technique in his documentary poems, they diverge in at least one aspect. The Poundian documentary, especially in the earlier *Cantos*, mainly functions as a stylistic framework for stable notions, so 'productive thought depends upon the rigorous definition of the concepts over which the mind ranges',³⁴ an idea that David Ten Eyck deduces from an image in one of Pound's poems.³⁵ Conversely, Rukeyser's style is marked by the stimulation of different relationships around concepts, such as technology and nature, which reflect a state of flux, though they are connected to an actual incident.³⁶ Rukeyser's juxtaposition of different voices raises the question of how the Congressional testimony is supposed to work in relation to the images of technology and the scientific ideas invoked in the present and previous section. These concepts are presented as eternal forces that transcend industrial attempts to control or deplete them. However, they are placed within the context of the disparate perspectives of characters who view the Hawk's Nest incident according to a narrow subjective outlook. This makes readers wonder if the

³² Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 604.

³³ William Carlos Williams, 'Muriel Rukeyser's *US I*', *The New Republic* 94 (1938), 141-42.

³⁴ David Ten Eyck, *Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 41.

³⁵ Pound's view of poetic style was adopted by the New Critics and attacked by Rukeyser in *The Life of Poetry*: 'In poetry, the relations are not formed like crystals on a lattice of words, although the old criticism (which at the moment is being called, of course, the New Criticism) would have us believe it so'. See Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 166.

³⁶ Catherine Gander considers the structure of 'The Book of the Dead' in terms of Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the 'rhizome', constituting "'plateaus", or "multiplicities", and "lines of flight", which pass between the plateaus, constantly fostering new connections'. See Gander, *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary*, 182.

concepts are eternal or neutral ones, and whether they are not, at least partially, responsible for the tragedy.

Rukeyser may have been inspired to adopt this complex style by Willard Gibbs's idea of truth as 'not a stream that flows from a source, but an agreement of components'.³⁷ This counters a view of truth, and the reality it reflects, as an objective entity that is independent of people's individual perspectives of it. Truth for Rukeyser constitutes the way elements come together at a specific situation to make up a multifaceted view of reality. If applied to a work of art, this idea gives importance to readers' interaction with the text they read and the facts it may underlie. They can contemplate a poem and offer their own perspectives on it, complementing the reality it indicates.

In her discussion of paintings by such artists as Ben Shahn, Albert Pinkham Ryder and Xavier Guerrero, Rukeyser asserts that a work of art leaves the greatest impression on readers, in her words 'becomes most memorable', if they can relate it to their private experiences and engage with it through their different outlooks on the work. She declares that 'the sharpness of sight dissolves, evokes experience and memory and dream, journeys through storms of association to become sharp on another level, clear and sharp as sight perfected and capable of many focuses and many perspectives'.³⁸ Another artist she mentions in this discussion is David Alfaro Siqueiros, who 'made the shapes of women changing as you move through, in "walking perspective"'.³⁹ Rukeyser was interested in the distinctive ways of interaction that paintings, especially murals, with their wide scope, offer their viewers. Her witnessing the burning of a Claude Monet painting at the Museum of Modern Art in April 1958 inspired her to write 'Waterlily Fire' (1962), where she links the various stages of the development of her city, New York, with those of her life. She uses the image of

³⁷ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 167.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

‘the long body’—‘an idea from India of one’s lifetime body as a ribbon of images, all our changes seen in process’.⁴⁰

Going as we go in the changes of the body,
 As it is changes, in the long strip of our many
 Shapes, as we range shifting through time.

The long body : a procession of images. (*CP* 409)

Rukeyser’s city, together with her life, changes in the same way that a living body grows gradually in time. The body retains, throughout this process, all the ‘images’ or stages of its development, which embody a painting-like work of different, evolving perspectives and tendencies. Similarly, ‘The Book of the Dead’, with its various angles and the complex treatment of its subject material, is structured in the form of a body reflecting distinctive stages or manifestations of the characters’ and the speaker’s perceptions, to be complemented by future readers’ interactive views of the text.

⁴⁰ Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 620.

CHAPTER ONE

Imagery of the Body in Rukeyser's Poetry:

Tension between Transcendence and Immanence (1940s)

Part I: The Engaged Body in Rukeyser's Pragmatic Vision

In this section I will study Rukeyser's shifting perspective in her poem 'Ajanta'. Here, we may witness her practical engagement with different settings, starting with the war reality in which she finds herself at the beginning of the poem. She seeks refuge from that in a cave whose paintings and sculptures reflect an idyllic realm where living things act in a perfectly harmonious manner, which contrasts with the impression she has of the world at war. She probes her inner self and her culture for a reality similar to that of the cave, but she is disappointed by the conflict and repression she discovers in these two spheres. The speaker yearns to transcend the fragmented character of her life, but she realises that conflict is part of her own psyche, so she suffers from the same condition afflicting the political sphere. She discovers at the end of her experience that it is difficult to separate herself from the discordant aspects of her reality and chooses instead to accommodate them; the speaker finally adopts a pragmatic view to combine conflicting elements by testing them practically and experiencing them in her daily life.

1) Transcendence of the War Reality

'Ajanta', from *Beast in View* (1944), was written after the vitriolic criticism that her long war poem *Wake Island* (1942) drew from critics, especially some of those affiliated with the *Partisan Review*. 'Ajanta' is distinguished by a pacifist attitude that contrasts with the patriotic stance in *Wake Island*. Although she avoids falling into chauvinism when she links the Wake Island battle to the wider struggle against fascism, *Wake Island* is still characterised

by Rukeyser's partisan stance. On the other hand, the speaker's more balanced position in 'Ajanta' develops in a process of discovery through physical contact and engagement with the world. Thus, the body plays a central role in the speaker's inclusive vision, where corporality is regarded as a factor of change and a source of belief.

Wake Island was based on a battle of the same name that began simultaneously with the Pearl Harbour attack on 8 December 1941. The battle lasted for only 16 days before the American Marines on Wake Island surrendered to the Japanese forces. Nevertheless, the daring defensive action of the American troops won the admiration of those in the mainland and supported the case for American involvement in WWII.⁴¹ Even Hollywood started work on a film, named *Wake Island*, depicting the battle soon after it was fought. The film was released by Paramount on 12 August 1942, several months after the American forces there were defeated. *Wake Island*, as a propaganda film, employs the strategy of demonising Japanese forces to fan the viewers' patriotic emotions. It also alludes, in its prologue, to other older battles: Valley Forge, Custer's Last Stand and the Lost Battalion of World War I, all of which were defeats that led ultimately to victory.⁴² By associating the battle to past ones, the film controls the types of associations American audiences were likely to make, directing the way they make sense of their present struggle in a manner that serves the war effort at the time.

⁴¹ General Thomas Holcomb, Commander of the United States Marine Corps at the time, puts into words the reaction that the battle produced among Americans and the way that it gave impetus to his country's active participation in WWII:

Wake Island began this war magnificently for the Marine Corps, and America found that the old soldierly virtues are still embodied in its fighting men. True, the enemy now mans the guns on that small atoll. But under the water off shore lie the rusting hulks of the price he paid for the horse-shoe islet and its tiny garrison.

The event is here seen in a positive light and exploited as an instance of valour rather than of defeat. See Gregory J. W. Urwin, *Facing Fearful Odds: The Siege of Wake Island* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 9.

⁴² Robert L. McLaughlin and Sally E. Parry, *We'll Always Have the Movies: American Cinema during World War II* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 82.

Rukeyser's *Wake Island* also makes connections of its own to other conflicts. In this poem, she describes the American troops as 'fighting as if they were the fist of the world / and they had a world to save' (CP 201). The speaker considers this small conflict to be part of the global one already raging outside American borders. The troops' defensive action took place before the United States' official involvement in WWII. Yet the battle is associated with the struggle against fascism, one of whose critical events was the Spanish Civil War, which Rukeyser witnessed at its outbreak.⁴³ The speaker declares that 'In the cloud country, among the breathless calm / Wake was built for a link' (CP 201). The 'link' here indicates the island's strategic importance as a connection to America's interests in Asia. It also hints at the wider significance that the place was destined to hold during a time of war.

Rukeyser was attacked by some critics who looked sceptically on the associations she made in her poem. The editors of *Partisan Review*, for example, thought that 'there is still a world of difference between the anti-fascist struggle of the Spanish people and war now being waged in the Pacific'.⁴⁴ The left-leaning critics at the journal could not link the ideologically motivated war in Spain to WWII, which they regarded as nothing but an imperialistic conflict, especially after Stalin betrayed the expectations of many American

⁴³ Rukeyser travelled to Spain in the summer of 1936 to cover the People's Olympiad for the literary magazine *Life and Letters Today*. The event was intended to be an alternative to the Olympic Games held in August of the same year in Nazi Germany's capital Berlin. However, two nights before the People's Olympiad was to begin, the Spanish Civil War broke out, and, after spending only five days in Spain, Rukeyser had to leave the scene of action and return to America. Yet the event lingered in her mind and appeared in many of her poems for the rest of her career. See Dayton, *Muriel Rukeyser's 'The Book of the Dead'* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 8, and Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, 'Introduction', in Muriel Rukeyser, *Savage Coast*, ed. Rowena Kennedy-Epstein (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), viii-ix.

⁴⁴ James Brock, 'The Perils of a "Poster Girl": Muriel Rukeyser, *Partisan Review*, and *Wake Island*', in *How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?: The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 259.

Communists by signing a Nonaggression Pact with Hitler in 1939.⁴⁵ Yet, Rukeyser, with her Popular Front politics, adamantly opposed fascism and supported any effort to fight it. Thus, she saw America's joining of the Allied forces along with the Soviet Union as an important stage, together with the Spanish Civil War, in the struggle against fascism, ignoring the historical circumstances that might have been thought to distinguish the former event from the latter. The broad implication Rukeyser suggests here constitutes an overwhelming thematic aspect, since it obliges readers to accept the relationship between separate historical events based on her belief in that relationship.

Despite Rukeyser's generalised perspective of the Wake Island battle, her poem, by virtue of her partisan stance, is not as stylistically complex as her other poems. The specificity of Rukeyser's position dictates formal simplicity, which limits the way her readers may interact with the poem. Here, the 'enemy' is reduced to a mechanical tool of destruction, a 'plane's gaze' directed at soldiers who are preoccupied with saving the lives of other people. Unlike their cowardly foes, who attack them from the air, these fighters 'wish, in that moment of proof, more life for the world / and stand their ground' (*CP* 201). William Rose Benét described *Wake Island*, in the *Saturday Review*, as 'Not too elliptical . . . for the average reader—who, after all, should allow his or her mind to do a *little* work on what it reads'.⁴⁶ Benét points to Rukeyser's biased treatment of her subject, which shapes her unsophisticated

⁴⁵ The *Partisan Review*'s editors were possibly comparing the contemporary war in the Pacific to a previous imperialist one, the 1898 Spanish-American War, which led to American control of Spanish colonies at the turn of the century. Although it was popularized by yellow journalism at the time, the war was criticised by historians such as Henry Adams and Foster Rhea Dulles. The latter, commenting on the American occupation of the Philippines and flouting idealistic notions of colonization, remarked that 'the Filipinos were not interested in his [McKinley's] conception of duty, humanity, civilization. They were interested in the independence of their country and . . . they could expect no aid from the American President' (editorial insertions in source). See Thomas Schoonover, *Uncle Sam's War of 1898 and the Origins of Globalization* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 90.

⁴⁶ William Rose Benét, cited in Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision*, 177.

style of rhetorical generalisations in the poem and elicits a limited, simplistic response from its readers. The latter would be constrained either to agree or disagree with the author's position instead of appreciating what would have been the poem's multifaceted perspective.

Wake Island marks a shift from Rukeyser's quasi-proletarian poetics of the 1930s to what some critics regarded as 'Americanism', helping to trigger what came to be known as the 'Rukeyser imbroglio'. The imbroglio was a series of editorials and vehement letters published by the *Partisan Review* in 1943, following Rukeyser's publishing of *Wake Island* and her employment as a designer of war posters at the War Information Office between 1942 and 1943. The critics at the *Partisan Review* saw both efforts as instances of Rukeyser's 'bandwagon riding'.⁴⁷ The 'patriotic' aims of both projects indicated to them a radical shift from her affiliation with leftism to what they viewed as 'literary careerism'.⁴⁸ The least serious charge against Rukeyser was Weldon Kees's very brief review of *Wake Island* stating that 'There's one thing you can say about Muriel: she's not lazy',⁴⁹ which was regarded as misjudged and ineffectual by Delmore Schwartz, who complained in a letter to the *Review*: 'Muriel's bad poem [*Wake Island*] and her bandwagon writing [*sic*] from the proletariat to the Marines should have been exposed. . . . Instead of that you print a jealous wisecrack from Kees'.⁵⁰ Schwartz projects his own jealousy of Rukeyser onto Kees, whom he might have considered an easy target for his double attack, as the one-line review's author was just starting his writing career at the time of the imbroglio. Aside from the possible personal motives behind Schwartz's or Kees's attacks, they imply the notion that Rukeyser was 'too

⁴⁷ Delmore Schwartz, cited by Brock, 'The Perils of a "Poster Girl"', 258.

⁴⁸ David Bergman, 'Ajanta and the Rukeyser Imbroglio', *American Literary History*, 22 (2010), 556.

⁴⁹ Weldon Kees, *Reviews and Essays, 1936-55*, ed. James Reidel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 62.

⁵⁰ Delmore Schwartz, cited by Brock, 'The Perils of a "Poster Girl"', 258.

hardworking to be a reliable leftist'.⁵¹ Since the beginning of her career, Rukeyser had defied critical attempts to categorise her securely within a specific political or literary milieu, and this is one of the reasons for the censure she received from critics of various affiliations and points of view.

'Ajanta' presents a different perspective of the war reality. In the first section of the poem, entitled 'The Journey', the speaker expresses her desire for a consummated mode of life to supplant the crippling effect that war exerts on her:

Wanting my fulness and not a field of war,

For the world considered annihilation, a star

Called Wormwood rose and flickered, shattering

Bent light over the dead boiling up in the ground (*CP* 207)

Rukeyser's depiction of war as a 'star / Called Wormwood' is an allusion to the star or angel which, according to the Book of Revelation, falls to the earth, poisoning the water and killing people:

And the third angel sounded, and there fell from heaven a great star, burning as a torch, and it fell upon the third part of the rivers, and upon the fountains of the waters; and the name of the star is called Wormwood: and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters, because they were made bitter.⁵²

Rukeyser resorts to a metaphor from the Bible to indicate the indomitable, destructive impact of war, shown as purely evil. War, with its 'tainted weather', creates the impression of a fevered condition; military planes are described as 'Hallucination and the metal laugh / In

⁵¹ Bergman, 'Ajanta and the Rukeyser Imbrolio', 556.

⁵² Revelation 8:10–11, *The New Testament* (1611; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1881), 570.

clouds, and the mountain-spectre riding storm' (*CP* 207). Rather than bringing her to terms with concrete reality, the aircrafts' noise bears a hysterical quality that distorts her view of life. She flees this situation, where 'the teeming forms of death, / And death, the price of the body, cheap as air', and seeks refuge in a cave, which seems to promise her survival, tranquillity and a sense of integrity.

The second section of the poem, 'The Cave', offers an artistic, sensual experience that counters war and its destruction.⁵³ Here, the speaker contemplates the significance of imagery in an Ajanta cave, where she finds protection from the social world with its fluctuations of unpredictable occurrences: 'This is not a womb, nothing but good emerges' (*CP* 208). She eschews a comparison between this isolated world and the one outside it in terms of what is real or not: 'This is a stage, neither unreal nor real'. It is delineated in utopian terms at variance with the absurdity of war:

There is no background. The figures hold their peace

In a web of movement. There is no frustration,

Every gesture is taken, everything yields connections. (*CP* 208)

⁵³ The title refers to one of a group of caves in Ajanta, India, which contain paintings and sculptures representing Buddhist religious art. The notes to 'Ajanta' include the following by Cary Nelson and Janet Kaufman:

The Ajanta caves in India are a series of twenty-nine Buddhist cave-temples and monasteries cut into cliffs in the north, near Ajanta, Maharashtra. Built over several centuries beginning in the second century BC, they were abandoned in the seventh century and rediscovered in 1819. Most of the cave walls have large-scale tempera murals depicting the lives of the Buddha, while the ceilings are decorated with flowers and animals. The compositions are rhythmic, naturalistic, and generally drawn with soft, curving lines. Rukeyser had not seen the caves themselves, basing her descriptions, as in 'Les Tendresses Bestiales,' on a large portfolio of reproductions.

See Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 611.

The cave's universe constitutes as an autonomous work of art. It does not have a 'background' which positions it in a particular temporal or spatial context. The artistic 'figures' there act in coordinated 'gestures' unhindered by any unforeseen factors or interruptions. The cave is a self-contained realm which suffers no disruption from the external world. It maintains its integrity through a system of internal relations. The poem alludes to the New Critical idea of the literary work as a 'well-wrought urn', an artefact whose aesthetic value is independent from readers' possible interaction with it or the historical circumstances in which it was produced.⁵⁴

The Ajanta cave reflects the body and its dynamic relations: 'The space of these walls is the body's living space' (*CP* 208). The speaker's escape from the war reality leads her from the cave to the microcosm of the body. Her interest in the latter recalls the ancient theory of the body as a miniature cosmos, which was maintained in the Renaissance by artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, who found artistic inspiration in this idea. The speaker enjoins her reader to engage sensually with the cave's relics:

Tear open your ribs and breathe the color of time

Where nothing leads away, the world comes forward

In flaming sequences. Pillars and prisms. (*CP* 208)

⁵⁴ 'The Cave' may be an allegory of the New Criticism's idea of a literary work as an autonomous body. Cleanth Brooks, one of its proponents, argued that a poem is 'a pattern of resolutions and balances and harmonizations, developed through a temporal scheme'. The New Criticism was dominant in American literary and academic circles at the time 'Ajanta' was written. Rukeyser criticised the movement's poetics in *The Life of Poetry*, where she described their critical practice as 'dissecting poetry into ideas and things, and letting the life escape'. Though she concurred with some of the New Critical precepts, such as that of the internal relations in a poem, she sought to develop and extend them so that they included other factors as well, such as the concrete experience of a poem's author and readers. In 'Ajanta', she improves on the New Critical idea of the artistic work by involving the speaker's subjectivity in her attempt to explore the relevance of the cave imagery in her daily life. See Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in The Structure of Poetry* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1968), 166, and Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 166.

The cave's realm is instituted through the viewer's effort to perceive the images it depicts. Reality in the cave is comprised of what meets her eyes through 'pillars and prisms', which generate visual effects but also extend the imagery, offering different ways of looking at the artefacts. Despite the variety of perspectives through which the cave figures are seen, there are only two physical entities involved in the appreciation process: the cave's sculptures and the person's body sensing them. In this situation, 'nothing leads away' so the artefacts are not distorted by being exposed and compared to the political world and its exploitative forces.⁵⁵ The cave is protected from the variegated factors of social reality and only the individual onlooker is able to engage with its imagery.

'The Cave' presents a view which is antithetical to that offered by Plato's allegorical cave. The speaker avoids describing the tangible place as either real or unreal. She similarly asserts that the cave does not have a background, which points to a sense of reality drastically different from Plato's dualistic one. According to the latter, the material world is comprised of mere 'shadows' or traces of reality, itself to be fulfilled in abstract principles, perfect 'Forms' of the objects in our world. Anne Sheppard notes that 'Plato presents a contrast between two worlds, the world of absolute qualities ('Forms' or 'Ideas') on the one hand and

⁵⁵ Most of the images in 'The Cave' echo Stella Kramrisch's description of the Ajanta caves in an essay entitled 'Ajanta' (1937). The author contrasts Ajanta-style art with Western art. While the latter points to a vast space beyond it (its background), the former, which is projected forwards towards the viewer, does not indicate an aspect beyond it; it embodies its surroundings instead of being separate from them; it appears thereby to be making an immediate bond with the onlooker's perceptive faculties. Kramrisch observes that in the Ajanta cave:

We are stage and spectator of the world as we see and live it. There is nothing to lead us away into a distance outside ourselves, and there is no room for nostalgia or perspective. [. . .] Memory transmutes time with a rhythm of simultaneous sequences on the stage which we ourselves make up and behold.

By virtue of the cave's isolation and the impression it gives the speaker of its being a self-contained realm, it combines for her different levels of experience. See Stella Kramrisch, *Exploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 274.

on the other the everyday world of particular things accessible to sense-perception'.⁵⁶ The Greek philosopher held that 'Forms are the only true objects of knowledge and only they are truly real. Although the particulars lack the perfection of the Form they are nevertheless regarded as "imitating" the Form; they are like it even though they fall short of it'.⁵⁷ For the speaker in 'Ajanta', the cave's enclosed material reality is not an imitation of a world beyond it. The place stands by itself, independent from its surroundings: 'the walls are the world, the rocks and palaces / Stand on a borderland of blossoming ground' (CP 208).

In the final part of the poem, entitled 'The Broken World', the cave is even raised to a status higher than the daily reality outside it. It is characterised as 'The real world where everything is complete, / There are no shadows, the forms of incompleteness' (CP 210). In 'The Cave', the painted images capture expressive movements of living things, which are kept in their perfected state through the medium of art:

Flung into movement in carnal purity,

These bodies are sealed—warm lip and crystal hand

In a jungle of light. Color-sheeted, seductive

Foreboding eyelid lowered on the long eye,

Fluid and vulnerable. (CP 208)

The state of completeness here lies in the cave's material world, where figures are preserved forever in their consummated state, which opposes Plato's idea of perfection as existing solely in the abstract forms that tangible things 'imitate'. Plato's elevation of static 'Forms' is transposed to artefacts that gain their dynamism through the 'sealed' images of movement

⁵⁶ Anne Sheppard, 'Plato and the Neoplatonists', in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

they embody, which gives them the impression of being ‘fluid’, though they are ‘vulnerable’ to the artist’s brush painting them.

The speaker’s sensual experience serves as a revelatory rather than an illusionary experience, as Raphael Allison observes: ‘The Ajanta caves are Plato’s cave in reverse: the innermost shell of rock and crust of paint, Plato’s dreaded materiality and representation, here provide the purity and abstract *a priori* of the Idea itself’.⁵⁸ This is further complicated when Rukeyser conceives of ‘our world’ as full of shadows, images that are incompatible with the things they are supposed to reflect:

In our world, a tree casts the shadow of a woman,
 A man the shadow of a phallus, a hand raised
 The shadow of the whip.
 Here everything is itself,
 Here all may stand
 On summer earth. (*CP* 210)

The speaker’s idea of ‘our world’ is consistent with Plato’s Cave, which is an allegory of earthly existence rather than a real cave separate from our world. She rejects the equivocal character, the fallacies, of ‘our world’, where things evoke images of other entities, and seeks an immediate system of reference in the cave. The ‘shadows’ in this passage refer to ideas that do not reflect, and even hide, the speaker’s concrete reality.

Louise Kertesz points to the ‘androgynous vision’ implied in the quotation above, since sexual symbols are rejected and all entities are perceived as equal; they ‘stand on summer

⁵⁸ Raphael C. Allison, ‘Muriel Rukeyser Goes to War: Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Politics of Ekphrasis’, *College Literature*, 33 (2006), 17-18.

earth', so they are regarded simply in terms of their materiality.⁵⁹ The cave imagery suggests an elision as well as a conflation of sex labels, attitudes that the speaker adopts to ward off the possibility of conflict resulting from sexual difference. Although the poem affirms, both at the beginning and towards the end, that all entities, 'gods', 'animals' and 'men', are 'interlaced' in the cave, the terms applied here are merely generic and do not reflect distinctions within types; the expression 'men', for example, includes men and women, but it also obscures the difference between them. Furthermore, the body-related imagery depicted in 'The Cave' does not specify the figures' gender, although the latter must have been defined in the actual cave. For the speaker, 'The spaces of the body / Are suddenly limitless, and riding flesh / Shapes constellations over the golden breast' (*CP* 208). Here, sensuality transcends culturally-constructed or stereotypical gender definitions to include different forms of sexuality.

2) *Pragmatic Accommodation of Conflict*

In the section entitled 'Les Tendresses Bestiales', we have a set of images undergoing a series of transformations. The speaker seems to move out of the cave into the external world, where things begin to assume different forms. The whore who appears with 'the dying red hair' in the first section reappears but she becomes 'faceless' here. Other similar instances of change are: 'The face I know becomes the night-black rose' and 'The sharp face is now an electric fan' (*CP* 209). Apparently, these people were initially familiar to the speaker, yet they have come to adopt aspects completely at odds with their human appearance. It is as if after her transformative experience in the cave she starts to see into the people she meets and to discover their essence, an outlook which she may have developed by comparing the flawed wider world with the state of perfection manifested in the cave. The speaker uses the same phrase she employs in 'The Cave' to define the omniscient view of things she has gained:

⁵⁹ Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision*, 208.

‘Now the scene comes forward, very clear’. The state of transcendence experienced in the cave is now being practiced and applied to the world outside it.

This causes the speaker to move to a higher plane, since she has the ability of viewing things in their various aspects and dimensions, which presently have the tendency to offer themselves to her in a spontaneous manner:

Dream-singing, airborne, surrenders the recalled,

The gesture arrives riding over the breast,

Singing, singing, tender atrocity,

The silver derelict wearing fur and claws. (*CP* 209)

In her quest for the essence of things in her life, the speaker reaches out to the world of dreams and subconscious inspirations. This deeper aspect of being is received through her body, ‘riding over the breast’. The ‘gesture’ or revelation of rediscovered reality comes in the form of ‘tender atrocity’ carrying both the harshness of impact and the possibility of positive catharsis. The contradiction finds its echo in the speaker’s realisation of herself as a ‘silver derelict wearing fur and claws’, so she combines, in her psyche, contrasting human (the privileged ‘silver’) and animal (‘fur and claws’) qualities.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ This view of reality corresponds to that suggested by the title of this section, ‘Les Tendresses Bestiales’, which may be an allusion to one of Arthur Rimbaud’s expressions in ‘Parade’ or ‘Outside Show’, as translated by Stanley Appelbaum. In a place that the poet describes as ‘the most violent Paradise of enthusiastic grimacing’, different types of people ‘combine maternal, traditional stunts with animal-like poses and tenderness (“les tendresses bestiales”)’. The Rukeyser speaker’s perception of herself as composed of both animal and human qualities is possibly connected to the impression she has in the Paradise-like Ajanta cave, of ‘interlaced gods, animals, and men’. This idea of the psyche coming to terms with its instinctual aspect recalls Mircea Eliade’s notion of shamanism, which ‘harks back to mythic times, when man enjoyed total integration with reality; that the mythic origin, however, is never encountered, is always absent’. He speculates that the shaman’s ‘assumption of animal qualities, his submission to animality, is therefore a preparation for the ecstatic, a

The speaker reacts against this process of self-probing, which, although it involves transcendence of the outside world and her exploration of her inner self, it uncovers the fragmented character of her psyche as opposed to the state of innocence that the cave represents. Towards the end of ‘Les Tendresses Bestiales’, she complains:

I am haunted by interrupted acts,

Introspective as a leper, enchanted

By a repulsive clew,

A gross and fugitive movement of the limbs. (*CP* 209-10)

The speaker is troubled by the way that her contact with other people as well as her psyche interferes with her appreciation of the perfect system of existence in the cave. Here the poem advances a set of paradoxical expressions reflecting the speaker’s indeterminate position with regards to the cave realm or the external one. She seeks to reach the utopian space, but keeps being occupied by problems in her daily life. The speaker is engrossed in what she acknowledges to be only transitory (‘fugitive’) acts, which have a force of their own, being ‘gross’. Although she is aware of herself as similar to a ‘leper’, with her act of self-analysis, she is still ‘enchanted’ by the ‘repulsive clew’ that leads her to confront her inner self.⁶¹ She

transcendence of the merely human, a means of recreating the primordial unity of animal, human, and divine’. See Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell and Other Works: A Dual Language Book*, trans. Stanley Appelbaum (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2003), 55, and Edward J. Ahearn, *Rimbaud: Visions and Habitations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 156.

⁶¹ Elisabeth Däumer indicates that the ‘repulsive clew’ is an allusion to the Greek myth where Ariadne gives Theseus a ball of thread to find his way out of the labyrinth after killing the Minotaur, who resides there. The ‘Ajanta’ speaker may have initially expected to find in her inner self an ideal world similar to that in the cave. However, she is disappointed by finding conflict there. So, she feels betrayed by the ‘clew’ that should have been a means of guiding and saving her. See Elisabeth Däumer, “‘Ajanta’—An Introduction”, in *Muriel Rukeyser: A Living Archive*, (2012) <<http://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org/essay/elisabeth-daumer-ajanta-introduction/>> [accessed 11 April 2015].

is stranded between two types of conflict: the outside one of war (the ‘Torn streets, the savage parks’) and the internal one of her psyche, where she is ‘plunged deep’. Thus, at the end of this part, she decides to find her way out of this situation by seeking the Ajanta cave.

At the outset of ‘Black Blood’, the scene of a ‘habit leading to murder, smoky laughter’, an allusion to war, is initially viewed as a necessary evil, before its motives are gradually altered through unpredictable circumstances. In this atmosphere, the speaker comes across instances of perversion in society, such as that of a woman restricted in a specific social role, that of entertainer, ‘the woman laced into a harp’. She presents an image of a ‘Floating Man’, who cynically asks, ‘Do not say, Which loved? / Which was beloved? Only, Who most enjoyed?’ (CP 210). The man, who apparently holds an objective view of the matter, laments the fact that what is supposed to be a selfless, mutual love has degenerated into self-gratification. Finally, we have an image of a woman invoking her male counterpart to inflict pain on her, from which she seems to derive masochistic pleasure:

A girl runs down the street

Singing Take me, yelling Take me Take

Hang me from the clapper of a bell

And you as hangman ring it sweet tonight (CP 210)

These situations represent an inverse of the reality in the cave. While ‘The Cave’ deals with a place where images are preserved in their ideal, artistic gestures, ‘Black Blood’ presents a view of people trapped by their failure to engage with their society in a fulfilling manner.

In the concluding section of the poem, ‘The Broken World’, an anomalous entity creeps into the cave to which the speaker has escaped:

Crawls from the door,

Black at my two feet

The shadow of the world. (CP 211)

She is now confronted by the world she has tried to escape by seeking the cave. Both realms now meet, hence the naming of this section as 'The Broken World'. She acknowledges the dystopian quality of her life with its imperfections and contradictions. She decides to accommodate reality with its conflicting elements, including the 'black' or grim ones. She is constrained to include tangible as well as emotional aspects of her daily life: 'The naked world, and the old noise of tears, / The fear, the expiation and the love' (CP 211). She joins 'the shadowed and alone', where she would settle for solitude in a world of deceptive reality.⁶² The end of the poem signals an on-going effort to reach the concrete cave, 'The journey, and the struggles of the moon'. The moon possibly stands for the speaker; despite the distance separating her from the concrete aspect of her life, she is intimately connected to it and would attempt to get closer to it, just as the moon and earth are closely linked together,

⁶² The speaker's condition of being 'alone' or, in a previous section, 'derelict', is a result of her involuntary separation from a deceased lover, whom she mentions at one point in the poem. Her struggle to reach the cave is probably an attempt at reuniting with her beloved and the idyllic realm that love represents. In 'Les Tendresses Bestiales', she revisits her past to revive this memory and rediscover the sexual aspect of her love relationship:

My life reaches the skin, moves under your smile,
And your throat and your shoulders and your face and your thighs
Flash. (CP 209)

The opening poem of *Beast in View*, entitled 'One Soldier', starts with a memory of her lover, which takes her to a 'midnight' atmosphere similar to that of the cave in 'Ajanta':

*When I think of him, midnight
Opens about me, and I am more alone;
But then the poems flower from the bone.* (CP 207)

So her remembrance of her lover gives her an acute sense of being alone but it also inspires her to write poetry. Similarly, in the final section of 'Ajanta', 'The Broken World', the speaker fails to protect herself from the memory of loss, 'the old noise of tears', ultimately incorporating it as a necessary factor in her 'journey' towards the cave.

as can be seen in the phenomenon of the sea's ebb and flow, caused by the 'struggles', or pull, of the moon.

In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser outlines her artistic agenda in 'Ajanta' and her view of art in general:

Art is not in the world to deny any reality. You stand in the cave, the walls are on every side. The walls are real. But in the space between you and the walls, the images of everything you know, full of fire and possibility, life appearing as personal grace, says Kramrisch. Dancing: creating, destroying, taking possession.

There is here a reciprocal reality. It is the clue to art; and it needs its poetry.⁶³

Rukeyser places emphasis on the readers' ability to read between the lines of an artistic artefact, to link it to their personal lives, rather than keep the world of art and the reality outside the text as two separate spheres. In this process, the private 'life' of the text as well as that of the involved reader can be linked to the public world, and the conflict between them can be responsibly embraced and reconciled. Rukeyser takes up a set of images that belong to another culture, the oriental, and fully engages and identifies with them in a wholehearted, egalitarian manner. She does not treat the Ajanta cave as a curious but inferior form of art; instead, she regards it as an essential source of wisdom that she desperately needs at a time of war. She also recreates the images according to her perspective of art, 'possessing' them by linking them to her concrete existence. Pramod Nayar argues that Rukeyser's elevation of oriental culture is combined with a colonialist conception of the cave as a realm of 'barbarism': 'The promise of another land is heaven clouded by a fear of an unknown world. The darkness of the caves symbolizes the fear of the "darkness" of "primitive" lands like

⁶³ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 155.

India. The savagery of the “heathen” lands runs alongside a promise of peace’.⁶⁴

Ambivalence exists in the poem (the cave is described as ‘the midnight cave’, ‘the painted cave of dream’ before it finally becomes ‘the painted space of the breast’), but it is part of a process where the cave assumes different forms according to each stage of the speaker’s journey. The exaggerated, romanticising perspective, stemming from a strong reaction against war at the beginning of the poem is combined with fear of its mysterious powers. The full realisation of the cave’s significance as the journey proceeds, especially in the poem’s concluding section, enables the speaker to reconcile it realistically with her daily life in her own, Western world.

At the end of ‘Black Blood’, after delineating different types of neurotic behaviour, the speaker cites an injunction that throws light on one of the principles maintained by Rukeyser for much of her career. The speaker hears a ‘black voice beating among all that blood: / “Try to live as if there were a God”’ (*CP* 210). This exhortation can be associated with Rukeyser’s belief in American pragmatism.⁶⁵ Allison observes that ‘It is the maxim of a philosophical pragmatist who wills belief in the face of metaphysical failure. To live “as if” there were a God suggests that ethical behaviors must continue despite the loss of absolute value’.⁶⁶ In ‘Ajanta’, Rukeyser presents images of conflicting perspectives, which have to coexist in a

⁶⁴ Pramod K. Nayar, ‘Trans-formations: Muriel Rukeyser’s “Ajanta”’, *Indian Journal of American Studies*, 24 (1994), 56-7.

⁶⁵ Rukeyser’s acceptance of spirituality as a potential factor of a pragmatic vision recalls William James’s conception of religious belief, which she cites in her biography of Willard Gibbs. James contends that

God’s existence is the guarantee of an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. This world may indeed, as science assures us, some day burn up or freeze; but if it is part of his order, the old ideals are sure to be brought elsewhere to fruition, so that where God is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution are not the absolutely final things.

The speaker’s reference to God in ‘Ajanta’ can be regarded as an attempt to resolve the conflict in her embattled world, in order to make it approach the state of harmony reflected by the cave imagery. See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902; Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008), 375.

⁶⁶ Allison, ‘Muriel Rukeyser Goes to War’, 21.

fragmented, or ‘broken’, world. She looks on the world from three angles: the purely corporeal world where beings are brought together by physical contact, which is represented by the cave; the psyche, which is sustained by the tension between its elements; and the political world where war leads to social crises. The speaker’s religious belief empowers her to keep hold of disparate realms in the same way that God is supposed to, by being part of the world (immanent) and maintaining a distance from it (transcendent). By virtue of her in-between position vis-à-vis both the cave and the war reality, both realms manage to find a place in her life.

In the mid-1940s, Rukeyser was engaged in a search for a dynamic philosophy to replace the leftist ideals she held at an earlier stage of her career, during the 1930s.⁶⁷ Her interest in Willard Gibbs, whose biography she published in 1942, led her to adopt his scientific model of the Phase Rule, where contrary physical states of a chemical substance may coexist in particular conditions. The theory provided a framework for her ideas of pluralism and pragmatism at a time, during WWII, when Rukeyser and her culture were experiencing an identity crisis. She sought to extend the meaning of democracy beyond the stereotypical notions associated with it in American culture. Her quest was characterised, as James Brock observes, by a ‘desire to endorse the liberating promises of American democracy while rejecting the underlying oppression wedded to Americanism’.⁶⁸ For Rukeyser, the notion of democracy is not to be defined rigidly by American culture or politics; rather, she thinks of it

⁶⁷ John Brinnin provides an estimate of Rukeyser’s position at this moment of her career, when ‘events abroad had split the partisans of the left into many contentious camps of opinion’. He points to the ‘inevitable disillusion of one who has seen the [Marxist] revolutionary temper of her contemporaries become dissipated and insignificant, and who, herself, has been forced to reconcile grave doubts concerning the efficacy of certain policies’. Brinnin is referring principally to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact but the ‘policies’ may include Stalin’s repressive measures in his own country, of which Rukeyser may have heard by the late 1930s. See John Malcolm Brinnin, ‘Muriel Rukeyser: The Social Poet and the Problem of Communication’, *Poetry*, 61 (1943), 572-3.

⁶⁸ Brock, ‘The Perils of a “Poster Girl”’, 262.

as a ‘moving goal’ and an ‘organic structure which we can in conscience claim and use’.⁶⁹ So the concept of democracy becomes a framework that accommodates different perspectives: ‘Then the multiplicities sing, each in his own voice. Then we understand that there is not meaning, but meanings; not liberty, but liberties’.⁷⁰ Rukeyser’s promotion of pluralism is possibly a response to the ‘melting pot’ doctrine, where differences are homogenised in favour of a common Western-style culture. This recognition of multiplicity may have seemed most pertinent at a time, the 1940s (the time of writing both *The Life of Poetry* and ‘Ajanta’), when cultural ideals were manipulated to justify WWII and pursue unconditional surrender.

Pragmatism represented for Rukeyser a way of reconciling contrary perspectives, ones which created polarisation resulting in violence and war. She advocated practical experience as a test for the validity of ideas, including metaphysical or religious ones. She was interested in James’s idea of truth as rooted in practical, individual experience. She declares at the beginning of ‘Ajanta’, ‘Came in my full youth to the midnight cave / Nerves ringing; and this thing I did alone’ (*CP* 207). The speaker dedicates all her force to her personal mission of truth-finding by actively testing her ideals in the practical world through her journey to the Ajanta cave. This idea of individual experience leading to relativist wisdom echoes James’s sense that ‘The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one’.⁷¹ The author further explains the process whereby individuals are able to discover truths in their life: ‘*ideas (which themselves are but parts of our experience) become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience*’ (emphasis in source).⁷² In ‘Ajanta’, the speaker is engaged in a practical

⁶⁹ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 211.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking, A Series of Lectures* (Rockville: Arc Manor, 2008), 29.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 32.

experience in which she tests different realities, that of her society and culture as well as her inner self, against the utopian one in the cave. Through this experience she reaches the tentative conclusion that it is difficult to separate the different realities from each other but she resolves to continue her endeavour of truth-finding and her quest for the cave with the ideal mode of existence it signifies.

In a review of *Beast in View*, a critic comments on Rukeyser's nonlinear presentation of different types of images in her poetry: 'She most conscientiously convolutes her imagery. . . Miss Rukeyser remains curiously anonymous and her coils entangle and trip us up. They do not unwind to lead us anywhere'.⁷³ The complex style in 'Ajanta' creates an impression of aimlessness, and this is one of the risks of the journey-like framework she adopts in the poem. On her way to the cave, the speaker adopts an escapist, utopian perspective, which is questioned before a relativist, pragmatic vision is finally accommodated. The poem's readers may be confused by this shift in the speaker's experience. Moreover, Rukeyser's stylistic application of pragmatism is not always a careful or thorough one, since she does not seem to provide a firm basis for the speaker's changing outlook, which may exert an overwhelming pressure to accept it upon readers. Still, the contrary perspectives in 'Ajanta' stimulate readers to interact with the poem, adding their own views to it. Rebecca Pitts, in a critical response to the Rukeyser 'imbroglio', affirms that 'No matter what her faults are, as a writer . . . they spring from an intuition of the relationships between orders of intellectual, emotional, and social experience which have been kept separate too long. And this is what people are looking for—this effort to link—this concern, precisely, with "meanings"'.⁷⁴ Rukeyser creates associations that readers may not agree with, but may be tempted to imagine and contemplate. 'Ajanta' places emphasis on physical engagement and practical experience rather than specific principles or values. Thus, the speaker's quest leads her to a

⁷³ F. C. Flint, cited in Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision*, 216.

⁷⁴ Rebecca Pitts, cited in *ibid.*, 181.

relative instead of a clearly-defined vision. This outcome stimulates readers to explore the poem's relevance to their own lives and their conception of the world around them.

Part II: The Artist's Body and the Search for an Inclusive Form

As we have seen in the previous section, the protagonist in 'Ajanta' contemplates the relationship between her art and the social world through a personal, practical experience, her journey towards a cave of paintings. Rukeyser further delineates the radical change that a private experience brings to an artist's life, through the Orpheus myth, in poems such as 'Clouds, Airs, Carried Me Away' (1948) and *Orpheus* (1949). In the latter, the main character's death prompts the search for a form that brings together the severed parts of his body. By acknowledging and embracing the physical sensations of his experience, his wounds, Orpheus manages to bring forth a multifaceted form that includes contrary elements, as symbolised by his murderers, the maenads, whom he endeavours to accommodate in his art. He extends the corporeal aspect of his identity by creating a form that revives his dead body and perpetuates his existence in another realm, that of his song. The poem involves a tension between the limitations of the body, in terms of its physical sensations and its gendered character, and a form of art that freely embraces both trauma and the protagonist's conflicting psychic elements. In one of her late poems, 'The Poem as Mask', Rukeyser rejects the mythic framework to reveal the autobiographical character of the experience of death and rebirth in *Orpheus*, thereby effecting a reconciliation of her art in its mythic form and her personal life.

1) The Body as a Factor of Cohesion

Rukeyser engaged with the Orpheus myth at different stages of her career. An early rendition of the myth appears in her poem 'In Hades, Orpheus', included in *U.S. I* (1938). Here, a modern-day Orpheus strives to convince Eurydice to leave the hospital, where she is staying,

in order to join the daily life of movement and conventional social roles, where ‘A boy skating upstreet / shouted; the gardener climbed at the doorway, pruning’ (CP 118).⁷⁵

Although he offers her the opportunity to fulfil her life in the outside world, she refuses to do so in his male terms and prefers to retain her independence, ending up being caged in by her interior self and her sense of an ideally female identity, which seems to be her final choice since the poem ends on a fatalistic note: ‘He faced her full for the first time, speaking, / turned with his hand her face to meet his mouth, / “but that death’s over”’ (CP 118).

‘In Hades, Orpheus’ is one of a series of poems where the relationship between the characters’ private world and an exterior reality is negotiated. An early poem that deals with this theme is ‘In a Dark House’ (1935), where two lovers ascend stairs that take them away gradually from the social world towards a domestic sphere where they can isolate themselves in their love relationship and their family life. However, external elements keep intruding into their romantic realm with its artificial boundaries:

But the nights are restless with receding faces

in massed battalions through the solemn air,

vivid with brightness, clangorous with sounds:

struck copper, chiming cylinders of silver, horns :

⁷⁵ The author provides autobiographical details about the experience that inspired this poem: ‘In a poem written when I was nineteen, after a long hospitalization for typhoid fever contracted in an Alabama station house during the second Scottsboro trial—a poem called “In Hades, Orpheus,” I focussed on Eurydice, the ill woman who yearns backward from the burning green of the world to the paleness and rest—and death—of the hospital’. In this excerpt, Rukeyser treats the experience as a private, individual one. However, the fact that she is dealing with a male character, standing for Orpheus, makes it gendered, too. Although the poem was composed in time to be published in her first volume of poetry, *Theory of Flight* (1935), it was not included in the latter, probably because it contradicts the message of another poem in that volume, ‘In a Dark House’, discussed in the body of the thesis. See Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 182.

presences in the outer air. But here

only the empty shaft and the painful stairs. (*CP* 7)

The contrast between the characters' secluded life and the public world with its things, people and memories implies the disparity between lofty ideals and concrete reality. The 'outer air' 'vivid with brightness' and 'clangorous with sounds' is set against 'the empty shaft and the painful stairs'. The characters' isolated existence needs to be complemented with tangible aspects of a collective world, which includes other people and other things. Thus, the climb upstairs becomes a 'painful' severance of two realities that are supposed to be interdependent despite the contrast between them.

In 'Clouds, Airs, Carried Me Away', Rukeyser uses the Orpheus myth to reflect on a physical experience that transforms the speaker's attitude to a past event in her life as well as her perspective of the political world. The poem starts with a comparison between two types of reality experienced by the speaker: a previous one, characterised by lofty ideas, where she was 'carried away' by 'clouds' and 'airs', and a recent one, in which she becomes more realistic, as suggested by the following image: 'here we stand / and newborn we begin' (*CP* 255). She elaborates on her previous situation by introducing another image, that of a play with the theatre props, 'the lights', simulating reality, for which she has kept a map to follow directions. However, as that stage came to a close, the speaker and a group of people, perhaps her generation, began to see a different type of reality. She now views wars with fatalistic nonchalance: 'we know there will be wars / all acted out, and know not who may win' (*CP* 255). Supposing that this reflects the poet's personal attitude at the time, it contrasts with Rukeyser's view of war in *Wake Island* (1942), where she espouses a patriotic stance, promoting America's involvement in WWII at the time of the Wake Island battle in 1941. In

‘Clouds, Airs’, she adopts a stoical attitude and regards war as an inevitable act or game with unpredictable consequences. Thus, its audience ‘know not who may win’.

In the second stanza of ‘Clouds, Airs’, a transformation takes place, whereby the speaker’s creativity is fulfilled through her identification with the corporeal aspect of her life. She addresses another person with the following words:

Deep now in your great eyes, and in my gross
flesh—heavy as ever, woman of mud—
shine sunset, sunrise and the advancing stars.

But past all loss

and all forbidding a thing is understood. (*CP* 255)

The speaker perceives in the eyes of her beloved and in her body the monumental phenomena of sunset, sunrise and ‘the advancing stars’, which indicate stages of development that she has undergone. Her acknowledgement of the physical aspect of her life compensates for the ‘loss’ she has suffered.⁷⁶ Despite the latter and the ‘forbidding’ she received, her love has provided her with insight. The speaker turns away from the realm of ‘clouds’, or abstract ideals, to her quotidian life and the concrete world. At a previous stage, she relied on her faith since she was not able to derive inspiration from the practical aspect of her life: ‘I believed because I saw not’. At the present time, a personal relationship makes her see her memory in a new light. She is now ‘so haunted by a living face / that all the dead rise up and stare’ (*CP*

⁷⁶ Rukeyser is probably alluding to both her experience of childbirth and her love relationship with the German athlete Otto Boch, whom she met in Spain when she travelled there, in the summer of 1936, to cover the People’s Olympiad, which was organised in protest of the Olympics being held, at the time, in Nazi Germany. Boch fought with the Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War, and was killed in battle in 1938. See Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 608.

256). Out of this transformed perspective ‘form and forgiveness shine’, offering her a vision that reconciles her present to her past.

The speaker’s transformed outlook evokes the image of Orpheus, who endeavours to sing through the ‘pieces’ of his dismembered body. The poem presents the image of these pieces ‘singing’ to each other by ‘remembering’ their previous state of cohesion. The mutilation Orpheus suffers reveals gendered conflict that the speaker deplores through his fragmented body: ‘One piece in tatters sang among its blood: / man is a weapon, woman’s a trap’ (*CP* 256). This symbolises discord among contrary elements in the protagonist’s psyche as well as essentialist notions of gendered artistic forms. Orpheus resolves this conflict by viewing his wounds in a positive light; in time, these wounds, which are seen to be integral to his character, evolve into mouths through which he expresses his art. Orpheus finds inspiration in the physical aspect of his character; even while he is dying, he maintains a tenacious relation to his body as the source of his creativity.

Rukeyser returns to the Orpheus myth and the motifs connected to it in an extended work, *Orpheus* (1949). This poem went through different stages of an intermittent effort, over a long period of time, before it assumed its final form. According to the author herself, the idea behind this work had its roots in her childhood, which endows the poem with a special significance: ‘The beginnings go far back, to childhood and a wish for identity, as rebirth, as coordination, as form’.⁷⁷ She elaborates on her artistic motives, declaring her aims for the writing of *Orpheus*: ‘My interests here are double: a desire for form, and perhaps a stronger desire to understand the wish for form’.⁷⁸ Her absorption in the Orpheus myth reached a crucial stage when she witnessed a ‘performance of Gluck’s Orpheus which Tchelitchew

⁷⁷ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 182.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

designed for the Metropolitan Opera'.⁷⁹ She was excited by the scenes of 'loss and the dragging loves and the music and thorny volcanic Hell'.⁸⁰ She confides that she was 'so moved and disturbed that, years later, I wished to go on from there, not to revisit those scenes of Hell'.⁸¹ Rukeyser was reacting here against the emotionally-charged romantic aspect of the Orpheus myth, which cost the prophetic figure his beloved, Eurydice, and may have constricted his creativity. In the third part of *Orpheus*, the speaker asserts that the protagonist's relinquishment of sentimentality has finally liberated him, providing him with an objective outlook that enables him to view his 'wounds' as resources for self-development and self-expression: 'And now the wounds losing self-pity change, / they are mouths, they are the many mouths of music' (*CP* 293).

Another inspirational moment in the process of the poem's composition, eight years before it was completed, comes about when Rukeyser observes people walking at night, past 'movie houses, the Marine Bar, the Flea Circus', and has the impression, in the dark, of fragments of people, parts of their bodies, moving on their own.⁸² This image inspired notes for a poem which would not be written, but the scene found its way later into *Orpheus* as well as a poem written before it, 'The Antagonists', the ninth of a series of poems entitled *Elegies* (1949).⁸³ The poem contains an image that would be fully developed in *Orpheus*: that of the speaker as composed psychically of conflicting elements, which need to be reconciled as a difficult but necessary step for the development of her identity. 'The Antagonists' starts with the following lines:

⁷⁹ Ibid. Rukeyser is possibly referring to the opera 'Orfeo ed Euridice', composed by Christoph Gluck, designed by Pavel Tchelitchew and performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, in 1936.

⁸⁰ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 182.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ *Elegies* is comprised of ten poems, the first five of which were originally published in *A Turning Wind* (1939), while the sixth through the ninth appeared in *Beast in View* (1944). The elegies were later published together by *New Directions* in 1949.

Pieces of animals, pieces of all my friends

prepare assassinations while I sleep.

They shape my being, a gallery of lives

fighting within me, and all unreconciled. (*CP* 325)

The speaker portrays the conflicting aspects of her psyche as primitive ('animals') and familiar ('friends'), aspects that are in constant strife verging on violence, 'assassinations', which are, however, integral to her identity. She associates these contrary elements with tendencies that mark American history and society, represented by such disparate figures as John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, John Brown and Abraham Lincoln. The poem suggests that, if allowed to interact and balance each other, the opposite forces can sustain the progress of history as well as the speaker's psyche.

Orpheus starts with a detailed description of the scene of Orpheus's murder at the hands of the maenads. There is a sense of foreboding as the natural world witnesses and measures the extent of the tragedy that has befallen Orpheus. The moon adjusts its position so as to register fully the details of the crime:

The scene is the mountain, just after the murder,

with a dry concentrated moon

rocking back and forth between the crowns of trees,

back and forth, until over this black crown,

attacking the sharp black and the secrecy, moon comes to rest. (*CP* 287)

The zigzag shape of the lines simulates the moon's swinging motion. The 'dry concentrated' quality symbolises the speaker's detached position towards her subject; if she stands for the author, she is far removed in time from the mythical event in question, which may qualify her to observe its various aspects. The moon is trying to find a way of dealing with the murder and the anarchy emanating from it. When the trees and clouds gain 'voices', they grieve the loss. The moon rejects these frustrated laments, looking to the future, when something else may happen:

But the moon says No : in finished night the great moon overrides,

promising new moons only, saying I know no harvests—

My harvest, declares in whiteness, are the tides to come. (*CP* 288)

In spite of the 'finished night' of the perpetrated atrocity, the moon asserts its dominion. It denies the existence of harvests, which stand for irreversible events, but it affirms belief in a special type of harvest, 'the tides to come', indicating a process of change. The moon looks on the murder stoically as an event that may give way to a transformation, hinting at the promise of a future revelation of the murder or presaging Orpheus's forthcoming attempt at resurrection.

The second part of the poem starts with a depiction of Orpheus's chaotic state after he loses contact with the 'mother' of his self, his body as a holistic entity:

Scattered. The fool of things. For here is Orpheus,

without his origin : the body, mother of self,

the earliest self, the mother of permanence.

He is sensation and matter, all forms and no form.

He is the pieces of Orpheus and he is chaos. (*CP* 288)

Despite his state of fragmentation, the speaker still points to the protagonist as Orpheus. His body turns into ‘pieces’ and ‘chaos’, but a personal pronoun is still employed for him. He retains traces of his former identity, although he has lost his body, his ‘origin’ and ‘earliest self’. The imagery offers a view of Orpheus’s total disintegration, yet underlying it is the sense that his body holds the potential to be whole again.

Orpheus is marked by stages of development which the protagonist undergoes throughout the poem. Just after he is mutilated ‘in darklit death’, the disjointed parts of his body retain the consciousness and dynamism they had when Orpheus was alive. His heart ‘knows something of the source, the maze of blood’ (*CP* 289). The tentative style conveys the protagonist’s sense of loss and his endeavour to restore an essential aspect of his character:

Something was founded at the base of the heart,

it cannot find it now, but the blood’s pilgrimage

carries its relics and the sacred banners

far from this mountaintop to the beating valves of the sea. (*CP* 289)

Orpheus is struggling to find an unidentified thing, probably the source of his creativity, which lies in the core of his being, his heart. The blood flows like a river towards another source, the sea with its own heart, ‘beating valves’. This image echoes Carl Jung’s idea of the collective unconscious, a resource, in the human mind, of universal instincts and motifs, as suggested by the ‘relics’ and ‘sacred banners’ in Orpheus’s blood. The protagonist’s murder sets in motion a search for this ‘sea’ as a source of inspiration for his art, which would ultimately make him whole by bringing together the disparate pieces of his identity, rooted in his body.

The body's parts preserve their memory of the singer's artistry: 'The arm that living held the lyre / understands touch me, the thrill of string on hand' (*CP* 290).⁸⁴ Orpheus's arm is personalised; it recognises his desire to create art and his sensual enjoyment of this act. His wounds issue repeated incantations, in several parts of the poem, to elicit physical contact, communication and tenderness from the mutilated musician: 'The wounds : Touch me! Speak to me! Love me!' (*CP* 289). The entreaties are addressed to Orpheus, but they seem also directed at the writer, and even the readers of the poem. At these junctures, the author appears to be grappling with the situation of the protagonist's death in order to make sense of it and create a work that transcends the stasis that the poem seems to undergo here. The imagery in the poem develops from the view of the murdered body as fragments disconnected from each other to an integrated body able to include even its murderers. Readers join Orpheus in his struggle to resuscitate himself. They witness his attempt to deal with his state of disintegration and create a whole that stands for his identity.

The speaker's insistence on form and the need for it is an attempt to pinpoint the cause of Orpheus's chaotic state, the absence of a framework which brings together his severed pieces. The fragments of his body strive to retrieve their memory of their previous unity. However, because of their disorganised form, they lack the ability to create an identity for Orpheus:

The bones and the skein of flowing, the many-chaining

blood and the chain of dreams and chain of silver nerves

⁸⁴ At one stage in the writing of *Orpheus*, while reading John Arthur Thomson and Sir Patrick Geddes's *Life: Outlines of General Biology*, Rukeyser became interested in morphology and 'specifically in the fact that no part of the body lives or dies to itself'. In this book, she read about 'the memory and lack of memory of fragments, of amputees, and of dislocated nerve centers'. In the poem, some of the parts of Orpheus's body retain their individual memory of sensuality and the ability to produce art out of physical engagement. Thus, memory constitutes an important factor in the protagonist's rebirth, which enables him to create music again. See Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 183.

cannot remember. They cannot imagine. (*CP* 292)

The separate parts of the body still function since the blood flows through them, yet they require a structure that turns them into a whole. The network of nerves exists but cannot be energised to seek its memory of love for Eurydice. The body cannot make sense of the murder or deal with its perpetrators. The pieces of Orpheus cannot even perceive the imperative for cohesion and a holistic form: ‘They do not even know they need be whole’ (*CP* 292).

The poem reaches a critical moment when Orpheus’s hand takes the initiative of rising and touching the lyre. He remembers his art by sensing its symbol, his instrument for producing it. It is merely an object but it bears significance as an emblem of his singing, the means whereby he would be able to express himself and overcome his stasis:

The hand is risen. It braces itself, it flattens,

and the third finger touches the lyre. Wounds of hand. (*CP* 292)

The image of the ‘risen’ hand recalls that of the resurrected Christ. The dismembered artist reaches a higher level of existence through his memory and his firm belief in his art.⁸⁵ Thus, Orpheus’s vocation holds importance as his means of regeneration. His wounds, which clamour for his response, stimulate him to remember his beloved, Eurydice, and seek a form to express his love for her.

In the third section of the poem, Orpheus’s body regains its dynamism as a consequence of discovering a unifying principle: ‘A mist of blood and fire shines over the body, / shining

⁸⁵ Bernstock indicates the modern poet and artist’s ‘quest for self-renewal’ through remembrance, attaching that to one of the perceptions in classical culture: ‘In ancient Greece, forgetting was equivalent to ignorance and death’. See Judith E. Bernstock, *Under the Spell of Orpheus: The Persistence of a Myth in Twentieth-Century Art* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 131.

upon the mountain, a rose of form' (*CP* 293). The image of the 'rose of form' is inspired by Willard Gibbs, and it points to a number of components combined in a holistic structure.⁸⁶ The image evokes his theory of the Phase Rule, which offers an organising principle for the interactive reactions that take place in chemical mixtures, leading to a state of equilibrium among them. Another rephrasing of Gibbs's words appears next in *Orpheus*: 'His life is simpler than the sum of its parts. / The arrangement is the life. It is the song' (*CP* 294). These lines are consistent with the scientist's maxim that 'The whole is simpler than its parts'.⁸⁷ This concept emphasises the general relationship binding the parts of a whole, which is seen as 'simpler' than the total sum of the parts put together. Orpheus discovers a form that brings together the severed parts of his body, standing for the distinct aspects of his psyche, whose tension, symbolised by 'wounds', needs to be accommodated for the protagonist to reach the state of wholeness. The poem suggests that the protagonist discovers this form through his song; so, just as equilibrium among contrary elements organises processes in nature, it may also sustain cohesion in a work of art. The song, with which the poem ends, perpetuates the process of evolution upon which *Orpheus* is based, celebrating 'creation not yet come' (*CP* 296).⁸⁸

In her insistence on an organising form, Rukeyser concurs with the aesthetic ideas of such modernists as Ezra Pound, for whom 'discrete structures are the meaning; the form of the poem is its reality', as Nadel observes.⁸⁹ In Canto XXV, Pound depicts the notes of music as

⁸⁶ Kertesz associates Rukeyser's image of the 'rose of form' with Gibbs's 'rose of direction', which he came up with as he 'drove about the city and pondered his systems'. See Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision*, 240.

⁸⁷ Muriel Rukeyser, *Willard Gibbs* (1942; Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow Press, 1988), 420.

⁸⁸ Rukeyser delegates the challenge of 'creation' to her readers. In her record of the process of writing *Orpheus*, she asserts her purpose of deploying symbols in an open-ended manner: 'These symbols must not be finished; the witness himself wants to finish'. See Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 185.

⁸⁹ Ira B. Nadel, 'Introduction Understanding Pound', in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 8.

stable points regulating the ‘movement’ of the mind in its attempt to make sense of an artistic piece:

. . . the waves taking form as crystal,
 notes as facets of air,
 and the mind there, before them, moving,
 so that notes needed not move.⁹⁰

For Pound, the work of art can be appreciated when its structure is stable, so that it maintains its integrity despite the reader’s efforts at engaging with it. However, Rukeyser associates her idea of order with the living body. It is only when Orpheus is resurrected that he finds his form. As a static, dead body, he is nothing but chaos. Moreover, *Orpheus* itself is characterised, thematically and stylistically, by the principle of process. The effort at synthesis is not merely implied in the poem; it is conducted in an overt manner since Orpheus himself enjoins the parts and ‘wounds’ of his body to come together and revive his life.

The evolutionary process characterising *Orpheus* as well as a number of Rukeyser’s long poems was regarded as a failing by M. L. Rosenthal, who projects the style onto the author herself, indicating ‘the painful view we are sometimes afforded of the poet desperately trying, under our very eyes, to piece a poem together without quite finding the key (usually, a proper middle part)’.⁹¹ In *Orpheus*, the protagonist’s body goes through different stages of sensation that readers are constrained to follow and understand. They have to link conceptually the poem’s parts together just as Orpheus is attempting to do that for his body. Thus, the poem gives the impression of inconsistency, since it reflects vacillating efforts at regeneration

⁹⁰ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 124.

⁹¹ M. L. Rosenthal, ‘Muriel Rukeyser: The Longer Poems’, *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*, 14 (1953), 202-29.

rather than a defined message or line of argument. Rosenthal points to an overwhelming aspect of Rukeyser's poetic form: 'The structure [. . .] bears no inner necessity within it, or conviction of heroic challenge. For here [. . .] we have the demand for synthesis existing independently of any real link with the reader except his awareness of the poet's desire for it'.⁹² Although Orpheus's body is a concrete entity and so is his song, the event of resurrection that leads from one to the other is hypothetical; the speaker concedes that this act requires a 'miracle'. Rukeyser defines the relationship between Orpheus and his transformation as one of 'Cyclic dependence the god and the miracle / needing each other' (CP 295).⁹³ Orpheus's rebirth does not constitute an outlet or 'exit' out of his death, to be supplanted by his art. There is a relation of interdependence between the 'god' and his resurrection resulting in the creation of his song. However, that relation is not explained in the poem. The unjustified combination of body imagery and theoretical concepts in Rukeyser's poetry is noted by Virginia Terris, who criticises the 'unwarranted alternations between concrete image and intellectualized and abstract summary'.⁹⁴ Thus, it is difficult to deal with the work as anything but a stimulus that begs for readers' participation and interaction in reviving Orpheus and re-creating the myth as well as its 'song'.

Bearing in mind the flaws of Rukeyser's form, Rosenthal, in the conservative literary atmosphere of the mid-twentieth century, during the heyday of the New Criticism, was still unprepared for her poetics of process.⁹⁵ Underlying Rukeyser's style in *Orpheus* is the idea of change and development even past death and disintegration. This was probably a response to

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ The 'miracle' of revival that the 'god' undergoes signifies, in general, the perpetuation of the artist's life through the work she produces. She transcends her earthly existence when her readers appreciate and interact with her artistic production.

⁹⁴ Virginia R. Terris, 'Muriel Rukeyser: A Retrospective', *The American Poetry Review* 3 (1974), 15.

⁹⁵ The New Criticism promoted the idea of the poem as an artistic artefact which holds its own intrinsic value, so its structure is neither affected by factors related to an author's life, the process of writing, nor the readers' attempts to appreciate and make sense of the work.

the pessimistic and ironical strands distinguishing much of post-WWII poetry. In a book that she published in the same year that *Orpheus* was published, she attacks the poetry that became popular at the time, describing it as ‘poetry of the sense of annihilation, of the smallness of things, of aversion, guilt, and the compulsion toward forgiveness’.⁹⁶ She counters that trend by affirming the role of art in instigating change. As can be seen in *Orpheus*’s process-like style, which reflects her interest in Gibbs’s Phase Rule, Rukeyser was in search of a transformative artistic form around the time her poem was published, shortly after WWII, when people lost faith in poetry’s power to change their lives.

Rukeyser had nurtured the idea of poetry as a tool of change as early as 1936. She reminisces about a significant moment of her life when she boarded a ship, with a group of refugees, to flee the Spanish Civil War, which broke out at the time the anti-fascist Olympiad was supposed to take place in Barcelona. Amid the conversations of the ship’s passengers about the events happening around them, a voice caught her attention: ‘Suddenly, throwing his question into talk not at all leading up to it—not seeming to—a man—a printer, several times a refugee—asked, “And poetry—among all this—where is there a place for poetry?” Then I began to say what I believe’.⁹⁷ Rukeyser asserts the importance of poetry as a vehicle of change even, and especially, in time of war. Templeton indicates the types of war poems that Rukeyser recommends: ‘creations of life-giving energy, not just protests against death’.⁹⁸ *Orpheus* serves as an exhortation for transformation in the face of destruction and disintegration. It follows the line of H.D.’s *Trilogy*, which seeks an alternative to war in mythical and historical personalities, especially female ones.⁹⁹ However, while *Trilogy* seems

⁹⁶ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 176.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹⁸ Alice Templeton, ‘What’s the Use? Writing Poetry in Wartime’, *College Literature* 34 (2007), 51.

⁹⁹ H. D.’s poem, written during WWII, starts with the image of destruction being sparked around the world:

a series of mainly separate images of myth and mythic figures from different eras of history, Rukeyser actually energizes her imagery by enacting the effort of active integration throughout the sections of her poem.

2) *Rukeyser's Idea of an Androgynous Form*

The first allusion to androgyny in *Orpheus* appears in its first part, where the hybrid moon is able to look on Orpheus's murder from a wide perspective: 'the moon cleared range and rose, female and male, / shining on treetops and water and on the pieces of a man' (CP 288). The combination of qualities in the moon allows it view the event not in a narrow, biased perspective but one that includes and takes into account both genders. Similarly, the male protagonist, Orpheus, is portrayed as an effeminate character; he is not able to defend himself from the aggressive murderers, and he is fixated on his art instead of bearing the classical male qualities of courage and the desire for revenge. These two androgynous characters are contrasted to the maenads, who cannot tolerate Orpheus's homosexual relations, according to one version of the myth. The latter suggests that he was killed because of his homosexuality, which either made the Thracian women jealous of his male lovers, or robbed the former of their husbands, who were attracted to Orpheus. Rukeyser's choice of a character that combines male and female qualities is significant; it points to her idea of an artistic form that accommodates contrary elements.

A reference to Orpheus's double nature can be found in the second part of the poem, where he tries to understand the intricacies of his consciousness. After outlining images of

An incident here and there,
And rails gone (for guns)
From your (and my) old town square

After presenting a view of mayhem and confusion resulting from war, the poem offers glimpses of history where the poet finds a source of faith in mythical figures such as Hermes, Osiris, Astarte and Mary of Magdala. See H. D., *Collected Poems 1912-1944*, ed. Louise L. Martz (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1984), 509.

things where contrasting physical states coexist, ‘a sun half sky half water wholly flame, / the burning ship half wood half water all fire’, we are offered a view of the artist going deep into himself to discover an androgynous self:

Father of song, in the seed and vaults of the sea,

the wall of light and pillars of desire,

the dark. The dark. But I will know again,

I will know more and again,

woman and man. (*CP* 291)

In Orpheus’s world death (‘vaults’) and birth (‘seed’) exist together as do light and dark. Rukeyser presents the question of androgyny in Orpheus not as a final definition of his character, but as part of the process of his self-discovery, consistent with his desire for knowledge of himself and his relation to his art. So, since his nature is inclusive of incompatible elements that need to be combined into a whole, his art, if it is to be reflective of his nature, needs to reconcile its various contrary elements as well.

Orpheus’s rebirth necessitates a further step, his accommodation of the perpetrators of his murder and the tools they have used for that purpose: ‘And all the weapons meld into his song. / The weapons, the wounds, the women his murderers’ (*CP* 294).¹⁰⁰ Orpheus, as an artist, is not only able to take a stoic, unsentimental view of a traumatic event in his life; he is even willing to make it part of his art, an inspiration for his creativity. Orpheus’s reconciliation of his wounds with the weapons of his murder stands for his acknowledgement of the conflicting elements in his psyche. However, to stretch the point further, especially

¹⁰⁰ The idea of Orpheus’s incorporation of the maenads in his song was suggested to Rukeyser by one of her friends, who believed that the ‘god must include his murderers if murder is part of his life’. See Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 185.

with Rukeyser's reference to the murderers' gender in conjunction with Orpheus, the image signifies her idea of hybrid art. In her poetry, she appropriates 'patriarchal' literary styles, which can be regarded as responsible for marginalising women's voices, as she does in the long poem *Orpheus*.¹⁰¹ She was also attacked by some critics for the affinities between her own and Whitman's bardic voice. Louise Bogan thought that 'Muriel Rukeyser is the one woman poet of her generation to put on sibyl's robes, nowadays truly threadbare'.¹⁰² The remark points to the conservative culture within which Rukeyser was writing, and shows how premature her effort at the reconciliation of different gendered forms was for her time.

From the beginning of her career Rukeyser worked against sexual separatism in the field of writing.¹⁰³ She experimented with the epic form, rarely used by women poets then, producing such poems as 'Theory of Flight' (1935) and 'The Book of the Dead' (1938). She added her own touches to the typically masculine form, such as her focus on the body as the locus of creativity, her reconciliation of disparate elements, and her theory of the poem as a process of development where readers participate through their aesthetic experience. In

¹⁰¹ Goldensohn links Rukeyser's conciliatory view of artistic forms to personal events in her life. Her experience of childbirth and the hysterectomy she underwent without her consent made her turn into herself to forge an identity that both opposes and embraces the male in her life, including the Other no matter how inimical it seems to her existence: 'The new myth is this female body whose wounds produce the Orphic song, its emblem the poet-mother and child. Against the surgical knife of male cancellation, body and family become female: first mother, then tentatively, then more and more strongly, bisexual or lesbian'. See Lorrie Goldensohn, 'Our Mother Muriel' in *How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?': The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 127.

¹⁰² Louise Bogan, cited in Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision*, 43.

¹⁰³ Rukeyser shares, to some extent, Elizabeth Bishop's view of art as transcending gender labels. Bishop refused to define herself in terms of gendered poetics, as she confides in a letter to Joan Keefe: 'Undoubtedly gender does play an important part in the making of any art, but art is art and to separate writings, paintings, musical compositions, etc., into two sexes is to emphasize values in them that are *not* art'. Rukeyser put this idea into practice by appropriating forms traditionally considered to be masculine. So her perspective of art is not that it is simply neutral but actually inclusive of gendered forms that can be regarded as complementary despite their perceived contrariness. See Jonathan Ellis, *Art and Memory in the Work of Elizabeth Bishop* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 169.

‘Theory of Flight’ she sets out to define the medium of flight, which implies the act of writing:

Sky being meeting of sky and no-sky

including our sources the earth water air

fire to weld them : unity in knowing

all space in one unpunctuated flowing. (*CP* 23)

The speaker affirms her belief in the interdependence of contrary elements through the image of ‘sky’ and ‘no-sky’ or earth, which overlap despite their distinctiveness. They both make up the space in which we exist and whose resources we can draw from. Rukeyser creates a sense of process by ending her lines with the rhyming participles ‘knowing’ and ‘flowing’. Human perception is given a pivotal role here; it constitutes a factor of unity binding the images and concepts together, organising and giving purpose to their ‘flowing’ movement.

In the poem ‘Ballad of Orange and Grape’, from her volume *Breaking Open* (1973), Rukeyser questions the practice of a street vendor who ignores labels on drink containers, putting each drink in the other’s container. The confused speaker contemplates the significance and tenacity of binaries, such as women and men, white and black, and war and peace:

I ask him : How can we go on reading

and make sense out of what we read?—

How can they write and believe what they’re writing,

the young ones across the street,

while you go on pouring grape into ORANGE

and orange into the one marked GRAPE—? (*CP* 493)

The message in these lines is a mixed one that demands a change of attitude towards the things people read or write. The poetic persona points to both the difficulty of separating concepts from each other as binaries and to the nature of the late twentieth-century American culture where the conventionally-established line between many binaries has blurred.

In *Orpheus*, the protagonist's reconciliation of the maenads, who may stand for the feminine side of his psyche, enables him to give birth to his song, an act that simulates the female one of childbirth. A poem where Rukeyser considers the gender binary as a factor of inspiration is 'Käthe Kollwitz' (1968). Here, the artist celebrates the androgynous quality of her identity. The speaker cites Kollwitz:

She said : 'As a matter of fact,

I believe

That bisexuality

is almost a necessary factor

in artistic production; at any rate,

the tinge of masculinity within me

helped me

in my work.' (*CP* 462)

The artist acknowledges the multifaceted character of her inner self. She specifies 'bisexuality' as a psychological state which finds its way into her work. She regards its

masculine aspect as an inspiration, or a stimulus, for her ‘artistic production’. Yet, she is not sure of the degree or the manner in which ‘masculinity’ contributes to her creativity. She intimates that the elements of her identity are intricately linked together, in spite of the possible tension stemming from their contrariety, that it is difficult to isolate and define one from another.

This issue of an inclusive literary form raises a question: Does not the juxtaposition of gendered artistic forms hide the difference between them, which is essential to both, especially the long-victimised feminine one? The mythic framework in *Orpheus* obscures the role corresponding to the female author in the poem as well as the distinction between the gendered elements in Orpheus’s integrated form. Priority is given to the blending of disparate factors to create a song. Although she does not answer the above-mentioned question explicitly here, she does so in one of her late poems. When old Oedipus wonders to the Sphinx, in ‘Myth’ (1973), about why he was not able to recognise his mother, it replies that he provided the ‘wrong answer’:

‘When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning,

two at noon, and three in the evening, you answered,

Man. You didn’t say anything about woman.’

‘When you say Man,’ said Oedipus, ‘you include women

too. Everyone knows that.’ She said, ‘That’s what

you think.’ (CP 480)

As far as the English language is concerned, the word ‘man’, in its archaic use and if regarded in a general manner, includes men and women. However, this is done at the expense

of the feminine gender, since the word is typically employed for members of the male sex. The Sphinx criticises the language usage that privileges a masculine noun as a generalised term, which involves marginalisation of its feminine counterpart. This rendition of the Oedipus myth hints that the inclusion of male and female forms is not supposed to eliminate or obfuscate the distinction between them.

Nearly twenty years after *Orpheus* was published, Rukeyser wrote 'The Poem as Mask' (1968) to reveal that the previously published long poem was connected to her experience of caesarean childbirth. In 'The Poem as Mask' she scrutinises her technique of employing a mythic framework to depict events in her personal life. The later poem is composed in a confessional mode, taking advantage of the cultural atmosphere that began to accept this form of poetry. Rukeyser gives a series of revelations about the significance of the motifs she previously used in *Orpheus*:

When I wrote of the women in their dances and wildness,

it was a mask,

on their mountain, god-hunting, singing, in orgy,

it was a mask; when I wrote of the god,

fragmented, exiled from himself, his life, the love gone

down with song,

it was myself, split open, unable to speak, in exile from

myself. (CP 413)

Rukeyser deconstructs the mythic structure of the previous poem, reiterating that it was just a mask for an experience that actually happened in her life. The vehemence of her confession

makes it something she wanted to say for a long time but was unable to do so. In this poem she re-gains a voice, the autobiographical one, which was obscured by her framework of myth in *Orpheus*. In the latter her female self is dispersed in different characters, and the only factor that brings them together is art. According to Melissa Zeiger, the various mythic characters provide a common space, thus admitting a way out of Eurydice's 'desocialised' state: 'These other personae can allow her to imagine a way out of Eurydice's personal and cultural singleness; perhaps even more importantly, they are discovered to be already incorporated within her'.¹⁰⁴ 'The Poem as Mask' suggests that the speaker is not confessing a fact that she has discovered only later in her life. She acknowledges her deployment of myth for facts that have been autobiographical all along, but which she chose to transform in the previous poem.

In 'The Poem as Mask' Rukeyser conducts a revisionist act whereby she includes, in an explicit manner, traumatic personal events in her writing, just as Orpheus, in the previous poem, enacts the process of acknowledging his corporeal experience of death, by sensing and responding to his wounds, thereby including his private, physical pain in a holistic form of art. The latter combines contrary gendered elements by embracing the male protagonist's female murderers. Therefore, in both *Orpheus* and 'The Poem as Mask', concrete, physical experiences inspire the artist to create a form that incorporates both the personal and artistic aspects of life.

Part III: Autobiography and the Reproductive Body

In this section I discuss the way Rukeyser treats the personal experience of pregnancy as an inspiration for a process of self-discovery, an accommodation of the Other, and as a form for her art. It is an experience she underwent when giving birth to her son, William L., on 25

¹⁰⁴ Melissa F. Zeiger, *Beyond Consolation: Death, Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 67-8.

September, 1947, in Berkeley, California. It was daring of her to proceed with the pregnancy, since she was unmarried at the time, and the child's father refused to acknowledge his son. She endorsed that life-giving process and wrote about it in 'Nine Poems for the Unborn Child', included in *The Green Wave* (1948). The poem is a sequence of sonnets corresponding to the protagonist's period of pregnancy. During this time, she considers the developments that take place in her life as a result of her experience. The latter affords her an intensified sense of her body and the material world around her. She submits temporarily to the loss of self-control and the fragmentation she undergoes as a result of her condition, deriving inspiration from the way that her body accommodates these changes. She reconsiders the boundary separating herself from her foetus and the latter from the outside world. Then she links her condition to her memory of political action in her past. Her inclusion of her child stimulates her meditation on her relationship with her body as well as with her child. The pregnancy involves a reconciliation of two aspects in her life: her physicality and her creativity. Here, once again, as she does in 'Ajanta', Rukeyser attempts to bring together, through her autobiographical poem, her art and the practical aspect of her life.

1) *Pregnancy and an Acute Sense of Corporeality*

Childbirth is one of the topics that Rukeyser addressed in her poetry to break the silence surrounding it in the history of literature up to her time. In a review of Charlotte Marletto's book of poems entitled *Jewel of Our Longing*, she affirms the scarcity of writings that discuss this experience: 'There is no poetry of birth in the literature that reaches us. In our own time, we can count the poems on our fingers; there is a great blank behind us, in our classic and religious literature'.¹⁰⁵ Rukeyser maintains that the subject of childbirth had even been a taboo in Western literature. For her, it is one of the experiences whose meaning and reality

¹⁰⁵ Muriel Rukeyser, 'A Simple Theme', review of *Jewel of Our Longing* by Charlotte Marletto, *Poetry*, 74 (1949), 236.

are consistently repressed in the imagination of writers and poets: ‘the young men in poetry seem, for the great part, to suffer so from the fear of birth that we have a tabu deep enough in our culture to keep us even from speaking of it as a tabu’.¹⁰⁶ Two forms of taboo are involved here: fear of the experience of pregnancy and an aversion to speaking or writing about it.

Childbirth especially represented a challenge to writers. Susan MacCallum-Whitcomb points to the social pressures and difficult choices American women writers faced as they contemplated undergoing the experience of pregnancy: ‘They [American women] could forgo childbearing to dedicate themselves to their art, and, in doing so, risk being dismissed as aberrations; or they could have children, settle into a domestic routine, and give up their poetic aspirations’.¹⁰⁷ Rukeyser encountered this situation during her pregnancy. Giving birth to a child was expected to affect her literary career at a time when she was already an established writer.¹⁰⁸ However, at the time of her pregnancy, she held faith in her ability to maintain a balance between the demands of her personal life and those of her artistic career. The childbirth experience represented to her an affirmation of her choice and the breaking of barriers or ‘masks’ separating her art from her personal life:

I was told by friends [. . .] when it was a matter of deciding to go ahead and have a child, that I would have to choose between the child and poetry, and I said no. I was not going to make that choice; I would choose both. [. . .] It’s very much a question of

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 237-8.

¹⁰⁷ Susan MacCallum-Whitcomb, ‘Claiming Our Birth-Write: The Poetry of American Mothers’, in *This Giving Birth: Pregnancy and Childbirth in American Women’s Writing*, ed. Julie Tharp and Susan MacCallum-Whitcomb (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 2000), 45.

¹⁰⁸ In fact, this personal event and the responsibilities it entailed would cause a substantial reduction of her literary output during the next decade. She only published two new books in this period, *One Life* (1957) and *Body of Waking* (1958), after being a prolific writer during the early part of her career, between 1935 and the late 1940s. In addition to the obligations of motherhood, Daniels cites another reason for Rukeyser’s diminished productivity and waning literary reputation during the 1950s, which is ‘her desire to avoid any publicity that might bring her to the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee’. See Daniels, ‘Muriel Rukeyser and Her Literary Critics’, 256.

reinforcing choices as one makes them, of leaving one's life open to them, of going further in and confirming them, and also of clearing away, stripping away the masks.¹⁰⁹

In the first sonnet of 'Nine Poems for the Unborn Child', the speaker ponders a memory in her life, 'the dark screen of loss', which may stand for the death of a person she loved. She makes an appeal to that beloved or possibly to her art: "Give me myself," or "Take me". Before undergoing childbirth neither her art nor her personal life is consummated since they are not attached together: 'There was little to give, and always less to take' (CP 280). What she receives from her art is a 'promise' of a 'miracle to come'. Yet she is unsure about the form in which her life or her art may be changed.

Though there were previous instances of women writers depicting the experience of childbirth, such as Kate Chopin in *The Awakening* (1899), it was not until the twentieth century that women writers began to deal explicitly with this matter. One of the early attempts in the century was Mina Loy's poem 'Parturition', published in 1923. The poem views childbirth from the perspective of its intense, boundary-breaking pain:

I am the centre
 Of a circle of pain
 Exceeding its boundaries in every direction¹¹⁰

Although she is the 'centre' of the pain, the speaker is helpless against a condition that keeps extending beyond its own limits. She finds herself amid forces and connections that transcend the limits of history:

¹⁰⁹ Muriel Rukeyser, 'The Education of a Poet', in *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader*, ed. Jan Heller Levi (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 280-1.

¹¹⁰ Mina Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. Roger L. Conover (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1997), 4.

I am absorbed
 Into
 The was—is—ever—shall—be
 Of cosmic reproductivity¹¹¹

Her experience puts her on a par with reproductive entities throughout the universe and she becomes indistinguishable from them. She participates in a natural process that has taken place since time immemorial and would continue past her time.

The speaker associates pregnancy with reproduction in the animal kingdom. To her it inspires the following image:

Rises from the sub-conscious
 Impression of a cat
 With blind kittens
 Among her legs¹¹²

At a deep level of her consciousness, she thinks of herself as an animal acting spontaneously on its instinct. The subconscious holds the speaker's fear of childbirth as a primitive condition.¹¹³ Pregnancy distorts her view of herself as a distinct human being who is

¹¹¹ Ibid., 7.

¹¹² Ibid., 7.

¹¹³ In one of her letters to her friend Mabel Dodge, Loy criticises what she perceives as a limitation of Freud's idea of the subconscious: 'Freud who seems to have been a sort of wet nurse to sub-c[onscious] would not leave much room in it for evolving creative inspiration' (editorial insertions in source). To her the subconscious appears to be 'a dumping ground for cast off impressions', and she suggests an improvement of it that accommodates human creativity: 'if you accept the superc[onscious]—there is no limit to possibility' (editorial insertions in source). See Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 144.

conscious of her individuality. She reacts against the experience, since it threatens her sense of independence.

The clash between artistic and social demands underlies a problem in what can be termed autobiographical poetry. It pertains to the difficulty, in a personal poem, of imagining and portraying a quotidian event, which is shared by the speaker as well as people at large, as a distinctive, individual, creative experience. The universal character of childbirth in ‘Parturition’ impels the speaker to subsume it under ‘cosmic reproductivity’, thereby contextualising her artistic experience away from its specific temporal and personal aspects, since her individual, artistic self reacts against it. Childbirth robs her of her individuality since she becomes like any other female undergoing it. Although Loy depicts this personal experience in an artistic form, it does not hold a creative, transformative potential for her as an artist. Thus, the poem concludes with a note of resignation echoing religion’s essentialist view of humanity:

I once heard in a church

—Man and woman God made them—

Thank God.¹¹⁴

In 1980, Sharon Olds published ‘The Language of the Brag’. In a later culture that appreciates physical strength and gender equality, the speaker has sought to achieve a sense of power through an endeavour that tests her endurance:

I have wanted some epic use for my excellent body,

some heroism, some American achievement

beyond the ordinary for my extraordinary self¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, 8.

To distinguish herself, she embarks on the demanding experience of pregnancy, whose painful aspects do not discourage her from undertaking it. She depicts childbirth in what would be regarded as its unsavoury details: ‘my stool black with iron pills, / my huge breasts oozing mucus’. Here are some more images: ‘I have lain down and sweated and shaken / and passed blood and feces and water’.¹¹⁶ The speaker regards her experience, with all its private aspects, no matter how disagreeable, as worthy of literary expression. At a time when confessional poetry has become part of the literary canon, Olds does not see any conflict between her autobiographical material and an artistic representation of it.

Parturition becomes a source of power that places the speaker on an equal footing with such assertive poets as Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg, who celebrated possibility, without having engaged in a physical experience of the magnitude and impact of childbirth. By placing herself alongside these male poets, she turns the notion of a contradiction between a woman’s writing career and her family life on its head. She proves that a woman does not have to resist conventional notions of the family to be a successful or ‘heroic’ writer. She can do so even as she engages in childbirth and the chance it offers her for self-discovery.

In ‘Nine Poems for the Unborn Child’, pregnancy stimulates concrete images in the speaker’s mind. In the second sonnet, when she receives news of being pregnant she starts contemplating its implications, one of which is the creative potential of her physical experience:

They came to me and said, ‘There is a child.’
 Fountains of images broke through my land.
 My swords, my fountains spouted past my eyes
 And in my flesh at last I saw. (*CP* 280)

¹¹⁵ Sharon Olds, *Penguin Modern Poets*, Vol. IV (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1995), 107.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

While this is typically an emotionally-charged moment, when different sentiments vie for dominance, it inspires, in the speaker, a series of images that manifest themselves on her ‘land’, which symbolises her mind. The latter is imagined to be a field where tangible things emerge, which signifies the speaker’s attachment with the material aspect of her existence. She thinks of her creativity and her art as ‘fountains’ and ‘swords’, which actually appear or ‘spout’ before her eyes. The images of concrete things culminate in the one where the speaker declares ‘And in my flesh at last I saw’. This statement echoes a biblical text, where the speaker affirms: ‘And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God’.¹¹⁷ The speaker in ‘Nine Poems’ vests her physical endeavour with a spiritual aspect. She does not define the object of her act of seeing, which is possibly a form of art that she would derive from her physical experience.

In the third sonnet of ‘Nine Poems’, instead of deploying specialised terms connected to the development of the embryo and the movement of amniotic fluids happening inside her body, the speaker uses images from nature, such as the ‘live wave individual’, which ‘is struck by wind, / Ribbed, steepened, until the slope and ridge begin’ (*CP* 281). Even her visible symptom of nausea at this stage of pregnancy is expressed in an indirect, metaphorical manner: ‘Me, the scroll, froth, foam of the overfall’ (*CP* 281). Rukeyser avoids utilising any technical terms connected to pregnancy, though she frequently incorporates scientific terms and ideas in many of her other poems.¹¹⁸ She even attacks Marletto’s poems for the quasi-

¹¹⁷ Job 19: 26, *The Holy Bible, King James Version, Cambridge University Press*, (1611) <http://search.credoreference.com.idpproxy.reading.ac.uk/content/entry/cupkjvbible/the_book_of_job_chapter_19/0> [Accessed 27 June 2015].

¹¹⁸ Rukeyser employed scientific terminology as early as her first volume of poetry, *Theory of Flight* (1935), named after a ‘mechanics’ course’ for flying that she actually attended at The Roosevelt School of Air from 1933 to 1934. ‘Gyroscope’, a section in the title poem of that volume, starts with the following lines:

But this is our desire, and of its worth. . . .
Power electric-clean, gravitating outward at all points,

scientific expressions she employs, referring to their effect as ‘anatomical fallacy’. Examples of these expressions that Rukeyser cites in her review are ‘cervix hall’, ‘cerebral hall’, ‘orgastic waves’, ‘cephalic shores’, and ‘shocking his schizospheres together’.¹¹⁹ For Rukeyser, scientific language, with its direct reference, fails to reflect the complexity of the experience of pregnancy. By avoiding medical terms and relying on her poetic language, Rukeyser illuminates a creative way in which pregnancy can be viewed by the person actually going through it.

In the fourth sonnet, the speaker acknowledges her temporary loss of agency amid the transformations of pregnancy, which she embraces as a source of inspiration:

Now the ideas all change to animals
 Loping and gay, now all the images
 Transform to leaves, now all these screens of leaves
 Are flowing into rivers, I am in love
 With rivers, these changing waters carry voices (*CP* 281)

Childbirth inspires in the speaker concrete images of nature. Her ideas become alive, moving by themselves. The words ‘loping’ and ‘gay’ suggest freedom and independence. The images she visualises turn into tangible objects, ‘leaves’, which come together and follow a subsequent process of transformation as they coexist in ‘rivers’ that ‘carry voices’ to the

moving in savage fire, fusing all durable stuff
 but never itself being fused with any force (*CP* 24)

Rukeyser continued to incorporate scientific ideas and terms until her later volumes. One of the poems in *Breaking Open* (1973) is entitled ‘A Simple Experiment’ and it deals with the physical phenomenon of magnetism and its significance for the speaker. However, Rukeyser refrains from deploying scientific language for a topic, pregnancy, that may justify it, and this is probably to emphasise the intimate, personal character of her experience, instead of participating in medical discourse, which typically marginalises a woman’s private sensations of childbirth. See Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 599, and Alan M. Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 301.

¹¹⁹ Rukeyser, ‘A Simple Theme’, 239.

speaker.¹²⁰ The ‘rivers’ may stand for the fluids through which her foetus moves in her womb, during the stage known as quickening.

Although this stage causes a state of change where the speaker is fragmented, becoming part of various elements of nature, she is ultimately able to gain insight into her body and her identity:

The waves are changing, they tremble from waves of waters
 To other essentials—they become waves of light
 And wander through my sleep and through my waking,
 And through my hands and over my lips and over
 Me (*CP* 281)

Instead of being estranged from her body, which acts independently from her will, the speaker, with her perceptive mind and accommodating self, not only accepts the exigencies of her condition but also learns to appreciate their power and the ‘light’ they shed on her character as a dynamic, receptive entity.

In the fifth sonnet, the protagonist reaches a state of sharpened sensual awareness and perceptiveness. She partakes of sleep and sunlight in the same way she does her food: ‘Eating sleep, eating sunlight, eating meat’ (*CP* 281). We witness a situation where the mother experiences heightened receptivity in relation to her body and the physical world around her. Elsewhere, Rukeyser describes the pregnant body as ‘almost unspecialized, as one thinks one’s body in infancy might have been, seeing with the whole body, tasting with the whole

¹²⁰ The ‘river’ image recurs in Rukeyser’s works. It signifies creativity and pragmatism since rivers ultimately join together, flowing into the sea. In addition, the image stands for the ability to accommodate change and persevere despite difficulties. According to Rukeyser, she came up with this image when she was working on her biographical poems, among which was a poem about Willard Gibbs, in *A Turning Wind* (1939). In an interview, she announces her motives for writing these poems: ‘I needed a language of a changing phase for the poem. And I needed a language that was not static, that did not see life as a series of points, but more as a language of water [. . .] Moving past one phase of one’s own life—transformation, and moving past impossibilities’. See Rukeyser, ‘Craft Interview’, 170.

body'.¹²¹ This corresponds to Julia Kristeva's notion of the *chora*, which is the pre-verbal stage in childhood that 'precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality'.¹²² During this period, the child does not yet view the world in terms of logical, linguistic or signification laws. Here, behaviour is characterised by spontaneity and an immediate relation with the material world. Similarly, through pregnancy, the boundaries separating the mother's body and the outside world become porous and invite different types of creative connections.

The condition of 'unspecializaion' is combined with the feeling that the speaker is watching, from a distance, a process which is, nevertheless, taking place in her body. She continues with her impressions:

Lying in the sun to stare
 At deliverance, the rapid cloud,
 Gull-wing opposing sun-bright wind (*CP* 281)

The speaker is here resting, so she is not participating actively in the scene she is describing. She refers to the latter as 'deliverance' to distinguish what seems like but is distinct from the act of delivery, which she would encounter later. She looks on her foetus's movement in her womb as she may witness a bird's attempt to oppose the wind bearing it. Pregnancy transforms the speaker's sense of herself; she retains her consciousness of herself as a distinct person yet she develops the feeling of being blended with another entity and experiencing its physical sensations. Cristina Mazzoni points to the implications of this situation to the subject's identity:

Pregnancy and childbirth bring both language and the body to their limits, where they paradoxically encounter one another at the same time as they face their ultimate incompatibility: for the unity of the speaking subject, essential to its ability to

¹²¹ Rukeyser, 'A Simple Theme', 238.

¹²² Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 26.

formulate a univocal ‘I,’ gets fractured in the mother-child merging and parting, the process expressively described as parturition.¹²³

The speaker in ‘Nine Poems’ acquires a sharpened sense of her body and is, at the same moment, estranged from it. She does not attribute the actions she lists to a specific subject until the fifth line in the sonnet, when she looks forward to her newborn embarking on a mysterious, daring journey of discovery, ‘From nowhere to nowhere’. The child would have to contend with and negotiate life’s difficulties in order to forge his identity. Moreover, the experience is itself a factor of change for the speaker, who declares, ‘And in my body feel the seasons grow’, which also corresponds to the child’s development during the period of pregnancy.

Rukeyser achieves the feat of eschewing sentimentality by presenting an event, pregnancy, through images of tangible things rather than intense emotions on the part of the speaker. Eberhart, in his review of *The Green Wave*, commends the detached style in this volume and in ‘Nine Poems’, remarking that it represents a shift from the author’s previous ‘doctrinal’ poetry:

One approaches *Nine Poems for an Unborn Child* with scepticism that this subject could be confronted with satisfying results. It is a pleasure to report that these poems are beautiful, that they escape sentimentality, that one can remark their honesty and dispassion. They approach an existence as things in themselves.¹²⁴

Eberhart points to a critical preconception regarding poems about childbirth, which is that the latter can rarely be depicted without falling into sentimentality. This stems from a stereotypical notion of poetry dealing with personal themes as lacking in originality.

According to Jo Gill and Melanie Waters, ‘to label a poem as “autobiographical” or identify

¹²³ Cristina Mazzoni, *Maternal Impressions: Pregnancy and Childhood in Literature and Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 174.

¹²⁴ Richard Eberhart, ‘Art and Zeitgeist’, review of *The Green Wave* by Muriel Rukeyser, *Poetry*, 73 (1948), 175.

autobiographical sources or voices is tantamount to denying its creative or aesthetic value'.¹²⁵

Eberhart suggests that for an autobiographical poem to be satisfactory a balance has to be maintained between honesty to personal details and an unemotional rendition of them.

In her review of *Jewel of Longing*, Rukeyser complains about Marletto's sentimental depiction of autobiographical details in her poems: 'It is so easy, and fatal, in coming to a subject which frightens so many people, to fall into autobiographical sentimentality and "expression," without having given the emotion to the reader'.¹²⁶ She criticises the poet's tendency to transmit spontaneously her emotions instead of portraying her experience in an objective manner that enables readers to interact with the poem in their own way and with their own emotions. Nonetheless, her own dispassionate approach to the topic of pregnancy in 'Nine Poems' obscures the purely physical and traumatic aspects of her experience, which would not have been well received by critics at the time; the poem was written before confessional poetry would attempt to express the most private and mundane experiences and sensations in a poet's life.

2) *Pregnancy and the Breaking of Boundaries*

In the sixth sonnet of 'Nine Poems', the speaker faces the possibility of death when she is informed of the complications of her pregnancy:

Death's threat! Today I have known laughter
 As if for the first time; have seen into your eyes,
 Death, past the still gaze, and found two I love.
 One chose you gladly with a laugh advancing,
 His hands full of guns, on the enemy in Spain.
 The other living with the choice of life

¹²⁵ Jo Gill and Melanie Waters, *Poetry and Autobiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 3.

¹²⁶ Rukeyser, 'A Simple Theme', 239.

Turning each day of living to the living day. (*CP* 282)

Because of the risk to her life that the childbirth involves, the speaker is asked, probably by doctors, before giving birth to her son: ‘If you must choose, / Is it yourself or the child?’ (*CP* 282) At this moment of her life she makes a decision that defies medical concerns for her health and asserts her free choice in a life-or-death matter. Her response was that she would sacrifice her life to her child. It represents a regaining of her individual choice, as a pregnant woman, back from the predominantly male medical institution, which has sought historically to take control of childbirth through its practices and discourse.¹²⁷

Rukeyser links this situation to her activist athlete friend Otto Boch’s decision to die for his principles in the struggle against fascism, during the Spanish Civil War. The speaker senses the irony of that link between what is intimately personal and what is public and historical, and she expresses it in her ‘laughter’ at the crucial moment of choice.¹²⁸ She

¹²⁷ Much has been written about the history of the male-dominated ‘medicalisation’ of childbirth and its detrimental effect on women’s self-image, from a feminist perspective. One of the books that tackle this question is *Of Woman Born*, by Adrienne Rich, who describes the pregnant woman as being ‘in the hands of male medical technology’. She indicates the ‘hierarchal atmosphere of the hospital, the definition of childbirth as a medical emergency, the fragmentation of body from mind’. Paula Treichler locates the problem in the way medical institutions have monopolised the experience of childbirth: ‘The problem of traditional childbirth for women is rooted not in “medicalization” *per se* but in monopoly: monopoly of professional authority, of material resources, and of what may be called linguistic capital—the power to establish and enforce a particular definition of childbirth’. In ‘Nine Poems’, although Rukeyser does not explicitly refer to this act of ‘monopoly’, she suggests its pervasive, authoritarian quality when she associates it with death. She defies the authority of medical opinion by opting to go ahead with a life-threatening operation that will nevertheless preserve the life of her child. She even assumes God-like power as she wills that life with her ‘hands’: ‘I saw an immense ship trembling on the water / Lift by a gesture of hands. I saw a child’ (*CP* 282). See Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1986), 176, and Paula A. Treichler, ‘Feminism, Medicine, and the Meaning of Childbirth’, in *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, ed. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth (New York: Routledge, 1990), 116.

¹²⁸ In this act of laughter, Rukeyser alludes to the biblical story of Sarah’s laughter when she learns that she would be pregnant. That news was coupled with an announcement, by the angels who visit Abraham, of God’s intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. So, in this story, as in Rukeyser’s poem, death is connected with birth as a passing era gives way to an

laughs as she remembers the old event and witnesses the breaking down of boundaries where past and present meet in her life. To her, both acts bear a great importance for the sense of responsibility they entail. In this way, she reveals her childbirth to be both a personal event and a rebellious action against a conservative culture which stigmatises both single women and fatherless children.

Another of the associations the speaker makes in 'Nine Poems' is that between her child and the social world he would meet. In the seventh sonnet, as she approaches childbirth, addressing her future child, she contemplates the results of exposing another soul to reality outside the womb. She thinks of her child as a potential link in a world where people, places and events influence each other continuously, although people repress that fact by walling themselves in their private lives:

You will enter the world where death by fear and explosion

Is waited; longed for by many; by all dreamed.

You will enter the world where various poverty

Makes thin the imagination and the bone.

You will enter the world where birth is walled about,

Where years are walled journeys, death a walled-in act. (*CP* 282)

The speaker demonstrates her ability to consider the conditions of the outside world and reach out to it, even while she is living a private experience. In the seventh month of her pregnancy, she begins to think of her foetus as a separate being and starts planning for its uncertain future as the child-to-be of a single mother. She realistically anticipates social prejudice and economic difficulty. Yet she derives consolation by comparing his situation with other instances of suffering, which may be even more serious than his, around the world.

emergent, future one. This may also be an allusion to the new stage America witnessed as a new generation of 'baby boomers' may have seemed to redress partially the human losses suffered in WWII.

Although her interest in world affairs dates back at least to her journey to cover the People's Olympiad in Spain in 1936, Rukeyser's indication of international conditions also reflects a growing interest among Americans in world affairs subsequent to America's involvement in WWII. Her mention of poverty may not be as relevant to the improving standard of living in America's war and post-war economy as it is to the world at large at the time. It may also point to the so-called Depression-era mentality, since concerns mounted among Americans in the late 1940s, the time 'Nine Poems' was published, that their relative wealth might not be sustainable as the war economy gave way to the civilian one.¹²⁹ Also, Rukeyser's reference to birth as 'walled-in' seems out of place when America was experiencing at the time what came to be known as the Baby Boom. However, since her child would be born out of wedlock, he would be treated differently from other children in a conservative culture characterised by stereotyping.¹³⁰

The speaker realises the risk to which she exposes her child as early as the second month of her pregnancy: 'I have known fatherless children, the searching, walk / The world, look at

¹²⁹ As WWII drew to a close and American soldiers began returning to their native land, there were fears that employment levels, which rose during the war because of intensified military production, would regress to pre-war ones, when America was just beginning to recover from the Depression. However, different factors, among which was the dismantling of government controls on the economy, contributed to the subsequent post-war period of economic growth and prosperity, which extended from the late 1940s to the late 1960s. See Robert Higgs, *Depression, War, and Cold War: Studies in Political Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 118.

¹³⁰ Rukeyser campaigned against prejudice towards fatherless children perceived as 'bastards'. In a later poem, 'The Speed of Darkness' (1968), the speaker affirms:

I assure you
there are many ways to have a child.
I bastard mother
promise you
there are many ways to be born. (CP 466)

In 1976, Rukeyser made an effort to establish an activist group opposing 'the word and concept of bastardy'. She sent a letter to a number of American and international figures, inviting them to sign a petition. In that letter, she wrote: 'It is beginning to be clear that we can end the concept of illegitimacy as applied to children [. . .] The word 'bastard' can stay as a pejorative, if people want it, but, like 'villain,' a class-word from the same stock, it can let go of its group meaning'. See Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 625-6.

all faces for their father's life' (*CP* 280). However, she takes solace in the idea that the child would grow up to depend on himself, exploiting the loss or lack of a father as an incentive to experience the world first-hand and learn directly from it. Thus, fatherless children have the opportunity to 'Earn their brave set of bone, the seeking marvellous look / Of those who lose and use and know their lives' (*CP* 280). The child's encounter with prejudice would contribute ultimately to the development of his personality. He would gain insight as he grapples with the difficulties in his life.

The speaker describes, in the seventh sonnet of 'Nine Poems', her child's emergence into the world as a departure from a 'house that time makes'. He is going to 'Enter the present, where all the deaths and all / The old betrayals have come home again' (*CP* 282). She takes a pessimistic view of her child's future in the external world, where she believes violence and opportunism reign. She refers to him as 'Judas', alluding to the way he would be persecuted in a similar manner to the historical figure of the same name. If the poem is autobiographical, then the speaker's, who is also Rukeyser's, child would grow up to be Jewish, since his mother was of Jewish descent. Anti-Semitic sentiments were still prevalent in America in the aftermath of WWII, even after Americans heard of the extent of the Holocaust.¹³¹ So, the birth of her child would be 'walled-in' or surrounded by social prejudice that he would have to contend with later in his life.

Iris Marion Young describes a situation in which the limits defining a woman's identity in relation to her body and surroundings are disrupted: 'Pregnancy challenges the integration of my body experience by rendering fluid the boundary between what is within, myself, and what is outside, separate. I experience my insides as the space of another, yet my own

¹³¹ Rukeyser herself suffered anti-Semitism during the war, when she published her biography of Willard Gibbs. She recounts an incident whereby E. B. Wilson, a student of Gibbs, wrote to a fellow scientist saying that he, Wilson, 'had looked into my [Rukeyser's] origins, and that for me to be writing about Gibbs, my ancestry being what it is, was as bad as for a Negro to be writing about a Southern gentleman'. See Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 95.

body'.¹³² While the breaking of boundaries is imagined between the child and the outside world in the seventh sonnet, in the eighth sonnet the speaker ponders the same process as enacted within her own body. She turns away from her contemplation of what seems a grim future and concentrates on her present condition, which offers a temporary refuge for both her child and herself. Here, the mother's body and consciousness are shared by her foetus:

Child who within me gives me dreams and sleep,
 Your sleep, your dreams; you hold me in your flesh
 Including me where nothing has included
 Until I said : I will include, will wish
 And in my belly be a birth, will keep
 All delicacy, all delight unclouded. (CP 282)

In these lines, the speaker finds a kindred soul who is both part of her and a distinct entity interacting with her. This creature shares her homelessness, since she is a single mother and the child would be fatherless, so each of them provides a physical and emotional refuge to the other. This seems to be an unavoidable condition until she affirms her original choice in setting up this process and consciously endorsing it. She even takes unsuppressed, sensual joy in the experience of pregnancy.

Moreover, just as foetus and mother share the same body, they share the subconscious level of their existence, their dreams. They affect each other through the physical sensations of pregnancy. The interaction between the two beings helps the mother discover a hidden aspect of her consciousness, which corresponds to the Jungian psychologist Frances Wickes's idea of the unconscious as a factor that joins the mother and her child.¹³³ Although Rukeyser

¹³² Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing Like a Girl' and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 49.

¹³³ Frances G. Wickes was a prominent Jungian analyst in the United States with whom Rukeyser corresponded between 1958 and 1967. Rukeyser dedicated *Body of Waking* (1958) to Wickes. She elaborates on her collaboration with the latter: 'The work I did for Frances

deals with the sensations of pregnancy in ‘Nine Poems’, her descriptions can also be compared to Wickes’s idea of childhood influences. The Jungian analyst believes that a child views her parents through her innermost perceptions of their actions rather than the cultural codes they may inculcate in the child. She affirms the significance of the mutual relationships that the unconscious establishes among family members: ‘Unless we understand the thing which the difficult, neurotic child may stir in our own unconscious, we cannot deal with him justly; nor can we estimate our influence over him unless we realize that all that we are is going to make up that influence’.¹³⁴ Wickes indicates that parents affect their children not only by teaching them social rules but also, inadvertently, in the hidden, psychic tension that their behaviour suggests to their children.

In her discussion of dreams, Wickes reveals that children’s dreams may reflect problems that the parents themselves have:

Since [. . .] the psychic life of the child is so closely linked with that of the parent, it is often difficult to distinguish whether a dream is really a portrayal of his own psychological condition or a picture of an intuited parental problem. [. . .] So keen are these intuitions of the unconscious that the dream may be a mirror of the parental unconscious.¹³⁵

In ‘Nine Poems’, the foetus, through its dreams, understands its mother’s unconscious more perceptively than any other entity in her life, ‘Including me where nothing has included’.¹³⁶

Wickes was a combination of expert “evoking” and editing. . . . [Neither] Mrs. Wickes’ writing nor my writing are commercial; this, however, was exacting, concentrated, one-to-one work with professional publication as an end’. See Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 617.

¹³⁴ Frances G. Wickes, *The Inner World of Childhood* (New York: The New American Library, 1966), 34.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹³⁶ Rukeyser is probably alluding to the fact that she was ostracised by her middle-class family for following a career that was not consistent with their expectations, among which being a poet had no place. She reminisces about her childhood: ‘There was no idea at that point of a girl growing up to write poems. That was a terrifying idea to my parents. Much

She affirms her choice of accommodating her child when she declares, in quasi-divine terms: ‘I will include, will wish / And in my belly be a birth’ (CP 282). The speaker takes the initiative in embracing and celebrating the physical as well as the subconscious aspects of her experience, instead of giving in to the feelings of helplessness it may inspire in her as a pregnant woman.

In the last stage of her experience, the speaker sums up its significance in an image from nature:

Rider of dream, the body as an image
 Alone in crisis. I have seen the wind,
 Its tall cloud standing on a pillar of air,
 The toe of the whirlwind turning on the ground. (CP 283)

Her pregnancy inspires her to think of a similar image, where a whirlwind appears to be stable as a ‘pillar of air’, yet it is full of movement in its root. Even if her body is calm on the surface, it is full of activity in its core with the foetus in residence. Thus she includes two contrary modes of existence. The speaker’s acute sense of her individual body is combined with her sensation of the movement and transformation that her child experiences in her body, which is one of the manifestations of Rukeyser’s idea of ‘rhythmic movement *within stasis*’.¹³⁷

The image once again recalls Merleau-Ponty’s notion of perception as based on a combination of immanence and transcendence. Pregnancy enables the speaker to acquire a heightened awareness of her physicality, which brings her into contact with earthly existence, as a whirlwind is attached to the world of objects on the ground. At the same time, the

later they said they thought they could have handled it if I had been a boy, but they were very strange in their feeling about anybody writing poems or doing anything serious in the arts’. Ultimately, Rukeyser’s father disinherited her for ‘her political views and “disobedience”’. See Rukeyser, ‘The Education of a Poet’, 281, and Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision*, 90.

¹³⁷ Daniels, ‘Muriel Rukeyser and Her Literary Critics’, 252.

condition inspires her to contemplate her relationship with another being that is both part of her and a distinct entity. So, through pregnancy she develops a close relationship with her body, and this sense is joined, and also transcended, by an acute perception of the existence of her child. The above image may also signify the protagonist's ability to draw inspiration from her pregnancy. So, like a whirlwind, although she is firmly established on the earth with her sense of corporeality, she is, on another level, the mental one, able to regard it as a source of creativity, as reflected in the poem's imagery.

Towards the end of 'Nine Poems' the speaker acknowledges the process of self-discovery she has undergone:

Have known in myself hollow bodiless shade,
 The shadow falling from the tree to the ground,
 Have lost and lost and now at last am found
 For a moment of sleep and waking, striking root. (*CP* 283)

The 'hollow bodiless shade' that the speaker has 'known' may stand for her abstract sense of the world prior to her pregnancy. The same motif of a 'shadow' appears in 'Ajanta' (1944), where the speaker attempts to escape the conflicts in her life by seeking the sense of immediacy evoked by the artefacts in a cave. Rukeyser is probably alluding to her devotion, in the early stage of her career, to abstract ideals and mythic forms. In the mid-1940s, she began to make a transition towards the unmasked depiction of practical, personal experiences, which seemed to her more concrete than her previous forms. Thus the speaker describes herself as losing, before she rediscovered herself through her experience of pregnancy. She finds the source of her creativity in her body, which potentially combines the contrasting states of 'sleep' and 'waking', since the mother and foetus may experience different levels of consciousness at the same time.

Offering a hymn, the speaker expresses the hope that the ‘homeless’ find shelter in their understanding of their physicality and their relationship with other beings, specifically in the condition of pregnancy, thereby achieving what Virginia Terris calls, in reference to one of Rukeyser’s themes, the ‘perceiving of the self through submersion in the Other’:¹³⁸

Praise that the homeless may in their bodies be
 A house that time makes, where the future moves
 In his dark lake. (*CP* 283)

Through her pregnancy the ostracised speaker adopts an unprejudiced view of both her body and her child. She is able to include and care for a baby disowned by its father and rejected by society. She embraces the future in its mystery or ‘dark lake’, since she is carrying a child whose character she cannot divine but is willing to accommodate.

The poem is characterised by an incantatory style that makes readers wonder about its significance in a sequence about pregnancy. Rukeyser’s form drew censure from Randall Jarrell, who, in his review of *The Green Wave* described her poems as ‘improvisations, easy reworkings of the automatic images of a rhetorical-emotional trance-state in which everything slides into everything else’.¹³⁹ The experimental, open-ended quality in much of her poetry gives it the appearance of being carelessly constructed compared to the meticulous verse of poets such as Marianne Moore or Elisabeth Bishop. Jarrell also draws attention to the wide-ranging associations, in disparate fields, such as politics, science and religion, which Rukeyser frequently creates in her poetry. These correlations make the poems less focused and ambiguous but, if viewed from another angle, they afford Rukeyser’s poetry the quality of being multifaceted and inclusive. The quasi-biblical phrases in ‘Nine Poems’ lend an affected and rhetorical air to the poem. All the same, this type of language extends the significance of the poem by counterbalancing its unadorned diction. The speaker endeavours

¹³⁸ Terris, ‘Muriel Rukeyser: A Retrospective’, 11.

¹³⁹ Randall Jarrell, cited in Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision*, 233.

to transcend the concrete elements of pregnancy by exploring its spiritual import, perhaps as a means of coping with its traumatic aspects. The biblical overtones suggest an analogy with the Virgin Mary, who also underwent childbirth without being married. The implied comparison supplies the speaker's sacrifice with a sense of purpose and is possibly the motivation for her persistence with her risky experience as a moral mission sustained by her belief in the virtuousness of her actions.

Rukeyser's incorporation of quasi-religious expressions supplements her choice of the sonnet form, which is not usually used for the poem's topic of pregnancy. Susan Eisenberg suggests that 'Using a received rather than open form adds historical weight to an event that is temporal and outside the traditional realm of poetic focus; in a sense, pregnancy itself is a received form passed generation to generation'.¹⁴⁰ Rukeyser's employment of hymn-like phrases in a traditional sonnet framework bestows an aura of sanctity on an experience that has been avoided or marginalised by writers, presenting the poet-speaker as a god-like figure who can both will another life into existence and select creatively a form that gives credence to that act.

The speaker in 'Nine Poems' finds in pregnancy a source of inspiration that is nurtured by the various aspects of her existence, none of which she excludes. The 'dark screen of loss' characterising her life at the beginning of the poem is transformed into a 'house', a form, inspired by her pregnant body, which is able to integrate her personality, her child, her art, and her relationship to the outside world. By means of her experience she conceives of an inclusive vision, through which she can reconcile three monumental tasks: 'To live, to write, to see my human child' (*CP* 283). Writing is here rooted in the speaker's quotidian life and is not separate from it. Her art stimulates her active and responsible involvement in life instead

¹⁴⁰ Susan Eisenberg, "Changing Waters Carry Voices": "Nine Poems for the Unborn Child", in *How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?: The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 185.

of isolating her from the social world. The literary achievement is a factor of change; it flows into her dedication to her child.

CHAPTER TWO

Rukeyser's Poetic Technique as a Dynamic Factor (1950s)

Part I: Rhythm

Rhythm is one aspect where Rukeyser experimented with various forms, combining them creatively in her poetry. In this part of the thesis, I discuss aspects of rhythm in two of her poems, where music and meaning operate in an interdependent manner. I analyse 'The Birth of Venus' to illustrate Rukeyser's idea of the poem as an organic system. In this poem, images of concrete reality are supplemented with resonant rhythms that make readers engage with the poem they are reading or hearing. The poetic sounds even reflect various stages or processes taking place in the poem. Rukeyser's organicist poetics embraces flexibly different forms of rhyme such as the repetition of sounds or phrases throughout a poem. The succession of phrases, which may indicate distinct aspects of a motif, creates its own rhythm; the sentence fragments supplement each other, both stylistically and thematically.

The other poem I analyse is 'A Birth'. It deals with the experience of childbirth that Rukeyser underwent and about which, as we have seen, she wrote a number of works. In this poem, she incorporates both standard and nonstandard types of metre. She makes an extensive use of consonance and rhyme, which sustain cohesion in the poem. By varying the forms of rhythm, Rukeyser keeps the words and sounds in a state of tension reflecting the speaker's different moods and the attitudes she adopts at various points of the poem. The sonorous sounds in her poems correspond to images of concrete aspects to the speaker's experience, where the body figures prominently. Rukeyser's integration of diverse types of rhythm sustains dynamism in her poems, where distinct stylistic elements function together in a holistic structure that flexibly accommodates them.

Rhythm, for Rukeyser, is an integral element of the poem as an artistic body. It operates through its relationship with other elements, such as imagery, to sustain the work's 'life'. Rukeyser uses the general term 'music' to describe the internal relationship between the elements of a poem, in addition to its sense as rhythm. In the following extract, she employs the word in a broad, flexible sense, to affirm the importance of poetic rhythm, which may participate in the production of a poem's perceived meaning:

The meanings of poetry take their growth through the interaction of the images and the music of a poem. The music is not the rhythm, which is a representation of life, alone. The music involves the interplay of the sounds of words, the length of sequences, the keeping and breaking of rhythms, and the repetition and variation of syllables unrhymed and rhymed. It also involves the play of ideas and images.¹⁴¹

Rukeyser's view of rhythm accommodates various aspects of the interrelations within a poem. Rhythm can be created not only through standard techniques but also through the 'interplay' of sounds and words in evocative ways that simulate established patterns of poetic music and stretch them to include other innovative ones.

In another excerpt, Rukeyser talks of the immediate and intricate relations binding the images and music of a poem, as each of its elements 'prepares' the reader for the next one:

The poetic image is not a static thing. It lives in time, as does the poem. Unless it is the first image of the poem, it has already been prepared for by other images; and it prepares us for further images and rhythms to come. Even if it is the first image of the

¹⁴¹ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 32-3.

poem, the establishment of the rhythm prepares us—musically—for the music of the image.¹⁴²

Rukeyser here seems to echo T. S. Eliot's statement that

The music of a word is, so to speak, at a point of intersection: it arises from its relation first to the words immediately preceding and following it, and indefinitely to the rest of its context; and from another relation, that of its immediate meaning in that context to all the other meanings which it has had in other contexts, to its greater or less wealth of association.¹⁴³

While Eliot considers the relationship between meaning and music within the bounded scope of the poem and its immediate context, Rukeyser emphasises the dynamism of this relationship; she accommodates the factors of change and development through time. This aesthetic notion derives from her relational philosophy, where living systems continue their existence and development by maintaining their internal and external relations within and outside the poem. Thus, a poem goes through cycles of revival when it is appreciated by different generations of readers at different times.

1) *Rhythm as an Organic Element in 'The Birth of Venus'*

Rukeyser's formal experiments drew censure from some critics, who viewed her poetry as having 'no restraint', and as 'haphazard'. A critic described her metrical forms as 'substantially amorphous: they are either inadvertent or an afterthought'.¹⁴⁴ Perhaps the reason for the supposedly chaotic appearance of Rukeyser's metre is that rhythm, for her, can

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁴³ T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), 32-3.

¹⁴⁴ John Peale Bishop, C. A. Millspaugh, and R. P. Blackmur, respectively quoted by Meg Schoerke, "Forever Broken and Made": Muriel Rukeyser's Theory of Form', in *How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?': The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 24.

take many forms, none of which is underestimated or marginalised. Rhythm in her poetry is often concentrated on the level of assonance, alliteration or consonance. It can also be observed on the phrase level as each phrase becomes a musical unit interacting with other phrases in a line or set of lines. Repetition is another source of rhythm for Rukeyser; a line, phrase, word, or an idea can be repeated for a melodic effect. The following remark by Rukeyser, from a 1974 interview, illustrates her style of repetition:

People ask me why I don't rhyme, and I find it impossible to answer. Because I rhyme, and go beyond rhyme. The return once is not enough for me. I will carry a phrase through. Or a sound, that may not be at the end of the lines, but I try to carry any sound that is important in the poem so that it comes back many times. I find returns very romantic in all things. I love the coming back at different times of all things, including sound, including words.¹⁴⁵

Rukeyser's style is characterised by exploiting and experimenting with the different possibilities of rhythm; she goes beyond standard metre to seek new forms based on the musical power of the words and phrases and the way that music interacts with meaning. The incantatory form adds a subtle type of music to the text, in addition to its function of emphasising specific themes.

Rukeyser employs creative techniques of rhythm through which she redefines traditional forms of music, creating slightly different ones that function in sync with the imagery and

¹⁴⁵ Rukeyser, 'Craft Interview', 162. Rukeyser uses repetition to supplement rhythm in her poetry as, for example, she does in *Orpheus* (1949), where the line 'The wounds : Touch me! Speak to me! Love me!' (*CP* 289) is repeated, with slight variations, in several parts of the poem. She makes use of refrains in her poem 'Mother Garden's Round' in the 1958 collection *Body of Waking*, where the invocation 'Garden my green may grow' (*CP* 336) appears after each stanza, which infuses the poem with a sense of optimism. Repetition creates the effect of rhyming as words and sounds are repeated throughout a poem.

theme of the artistic work. This can be observed in the first poem I analyse, which is 'The Birth of Venus':

Risen in a
welter of waters.

Not as he saw her
standing upon a frayed and lovely surf
clean-riding the graceful leafy breezes
clean-poised and easy. Not yet.

But born in a
tidal wave of the father's overthrow,
the old rule killed and its mutilated sex.

The testicles of the father-god, father of fathers,
sickled off by his son, the next god Time.
Sickled off. Hurlled into the ocean.
In all that blood and foam,
among raving and generation,
of semen and the sea born, the
great goddess rises.

However, possibly,
on the long worldward voyage flowing,
horror gone down in birth, the curse, being changed,
being used, is translated far at the margin into

our rose and saving image, curling toward a shore
 early and April, with certainly shells, certainly blossoms.

And the girl, the wellborn goddess, human love—
 young-known, new-knowing, mouth flickering, sure eyes—
 rides shoreward, from death to us as we are at this moment, on
 the crisp delightful Botticellian wave. (*CP* 356)

The poem starts with a title-like phrase, 'Risen in a / welter of waters', which forms the first stanza of the poem. While 'Risen' provides the sole source of stress in the first line, the second line is full of movement created by the consonance in the words 'welter' and 'waters'. Movement is further emphasised with the utilisation of the plural rather than the singular form of 'water'.

In the second stanza, the rhythm is easier and more melodic, since it deals with the idyllic scene of Venus's birth as portrayed by Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510). The alliteration linking 'saw', 'standing' and 'surf' emphasises that vivid image. There is a repetition of the wind-blowing 'f' sound in 'frayed', 'surf', 'graceful', 'leafy', as well as the soporific 'z' sound in 'breezes', '-poised' and 'easy', which supplement the impression of the idyllic scenery. The abrupt, alliterating 'k' sound in 'clean-riding' and 'clean-poised' provides a centre of stability that balances the other smooth sounds in the second stanza. In spite of the picturesque imagery in the stanza, the latter is characterised by a sarcastic tone. The stanza starts with the blunt negative 'Not' and ends with the ambiguous expression 'Not yet', which draws the reader to the next lines.

In the next two stanzas, music is also interconnected with imagery. The short third stanza introduces the violence in the fourth with the idea of a revolutionary birth that topples the 'father' with his 'old rule'. The consonance in the words 'wave' and 'overthrow' supplies the

impression of a 'tidal' force initiating transformation. The long vowel in 'old' and 'rule' is bluntly interrupted with 'killed', simulating the action of murder. In the fourth stanza, rhythm depends on repetition as the expressions 'sickled off' and 'father' are repeated to draw attention to the magnitude of the violent action done to the 'father-god'. The phrases in this stanza create rhythm with their accumulative effect. They also extend and complicate the initial image, which can be seen in the following lines:

In all that blood and foam,
 among raving and generation,
 of semen and the sea born, the
 great goddess rises. (*CP* 356)

The forceful imagery in this stanza starts with the castration of the 'father-god' and ends with 'generation' and 'semen' to show that destruction might be a necessary stage of creation or renewal, which is one of the motifs in a number of Rukeyser's poems.¹⁴⁶ Here, the patriarchal 'father-god' figure is demolished in order to be resurrected as a 'goddess' where the 'curse' or 'taboo' of rebellion and violence is turned into a 'saving image', as we shall see in the next stanza.

In the fifth stanza, we witness the transmutation of the images of mutilation and destruction in the previous ones to an image of the birth of Venus. The stanza starts with two words, 'however' and 'possibly', which soften the impact of the complete image reversal that

¹⁴⁶ One of the poems where this motif appears is 'Hero Speech' (1958), which describes the qualities of an 'ideal' political hero, as can be seen in the following lines:

But the seeds of all things are the ways of choice, of the forms
 Declaring the energy we breathe and man,
 Breaking. Changing. Forever broken and made. (*CP* 347)

Choice is affirmed here as a force that enables the protagonist to undergo a process of change where she may have to do away with some notions or attitudes and develop a different outlook on life.

will ensue in the poem. The consonance and assonance in the words ‘long’, ‘worldward’, and ‘voyage’ reinforce the sense of movement in ‘flowing’. The long vowel sounds provide the effect of forceful winds or tides heralding Venus’s birth. Supplementing the imagery of flowing motion, the four lines of the stanza make up one long sentence with interlinked phrases leading into each other. At the outset of the stanza, the speaker declares that the initial feeling of ‘horror’ associated with violence is being surmounted through an impending process of ‘birth’. The shorter vowel sounds crippled by the repeated ‘r’ in ‘horror’ are replaced by the long vowel sound in ‘birth’, where the ‘r’ does not represent an obstacle in pronouncing the vowel sound. Next, a metamorphosis takes place as the ‘curse’ is ‘being changed’ and ‘being used’; the continuous form of the copula affords emphasis to the verbs ‘changed’ and ‘used’, and produces the feeling of a process transpiring here. Next, the assonance of the long vowel sound in the words ‘far’ and ‘margin’ expresses the distance separating ‘us’ from ‘our rose and saving image’. The deployment of the verb ‘translated’ between the expressions of process and those of the result of change is significant and it shows that the emergence of Venus involves a new language reflecting equality. The concreteness of the event is conveyed through the consonance in the words ‘curling’, ‘toward’, ‘shore’, ‘early’, and ‘April’; the tongue-rolling ‘r’ sound supports the impression of tides moving towards the shore. The repetition of the adverb ‘certainly’, which is innovatively used as an adjective, provides a source of rhythm emphasising the words ‘shells’ and ‘blossoms’.

Rukeyser also introduces unusual expressions in the final stanza with the compounds ‘wellborn’, ‘young-known’ and ‘new-knowing’. The deployment of these neologisms betokens an attempt to forge a new language for the resurrected image of Venus. The order of the three expressions corresponds to the development of Venus’s awareness from her birth to the stage when she will constantly seek new knowledge. The implied movement, signifying

receptivity and enthusiasm, in the image ‘mouth flickering’ is counterbalanced with the stability of the ‘sure eyes’. The stanza ends with a mainly regular rhythm as Venus meets up with the present time, which reflects the ‘Botticellian wave’ with its ‘delightful’ but fragile, or ‘crisp’, reality. Underlying the romantic image of Venus in the Botticellian painting is a revolutionary event involving the violent overthrow of one entity and the materialization of a different one.

We can observe Rukeyser’s flexible view of rhythm in ‘The Birth of Venus’, where music comes in the form of patterns reflecting the stages through which the meaning of the poem is revealed in the different stanzas. The length of the latter is varied according to the mood and topic of each stanza. The first three are relatively short, since they merely present contrasting images of the Venus myth. The fourth and fifth stanzas are longer, as they cover specific details of the occurrence involved. While the fourth stanza is characterised mainly by nouns and verbs of violent action representing the destructive aspect of the revolution, the fifth is dominated by verbs of gradual movement signalling a new reality being constructed. Further, in the fifth stanza, the verbs, most of which are in the continuous form, are varied, since they reflect stages that follow from one to the other. The sound ‘g’ is employed in different ways, first as part of a process (in ‘changed’ and ‘margin’), with long vowel sounds, and then as its end result (‘image’), with a shorter vowel sound.

Rukeyser’s rendition hints at an issue not directly related to the Botticellian painting upon which the poem is based, especially with the reference to ‘the father’ being emasculated before the violent action is ‘translated’ into the emergence of Venus. The male figure is neutralised before being re-incorporated as Venus. ‘The Birth of Venus’ points to an attempt at finding a feminist language which may accommodate and exploit elements belonging to what some feminists viewed as patriarchal forms of writing. Rukeyser’s career is distinguished by the search for ‘saving images’ which pragmatically reconcile feminist with

patriarchal forms to produce poetry that is characterised by the inclusion and interdependence of distinct gendered forms. One of the images that she uses is that of birth, which brings the male and female in one cycle of regeneration and growth. Through the motif of birth, the physical body occupies a central place in this poem. Stylistically, the event of birth is a factor of balance in 'The Birth of Venus'; the rhythm becomes more regular with the new image of birth after the irregular rhythm characterising the earlier images of violence in the poem.

Reviewing Rukeyser's *Body of Waking* (1958), Kenneth Rexroth commented on the 'sonority' of her poetry and observed that the 'soft rumble and murmur of consonants . . . imparts naturally and beyond all argument that sense of at-homeness in the world that modern man so conspicuously lacks'. Rexroth indicates the deep and resonant sounds in Rukeyser's poetry, which echo the body-related imagery that characterises the poems. The resounding sounds and images of concrete existence offer a view of an author who is in harmony with the corporeal aspect of her life, to the degree of deriving inspiration from it. Rukeyser's technique gives the sense that the personas or speakers in her poems have experienced or witnessed practically the events they are depicting.

However, the images and sounds reflecting concrete aspects in Rukeyser's poetry are usually associated with spiritual concepts such as creativity, regeneration and the search for an inclusive form, especially when she attempts to discover the transformative potential of the experience she portrays in her poems. Her capacious vision was seen as an influence from Whitman's poetry and the transcendental perspective inspiring it. David Barber criticises this strand in her work:

Her sense of oneness with the American destiny, with humanity, with the entire universe never lacked intensity, nor did her faith in the poet's social function ever waver. But to express this vision in a prophetic, often mystical, often Whitmanesque

voice, it does help to be Whitman; and to the extent that Rukeyser attempted such a voice, she courted failure.¹⁴⁷

Rukeyser was censured for her attitude of self-identification, which is based on the assumption that her experiences and her perspectives are shared by people at large. Like Whitman, the perspective from which she writes brings together the author's private self and larger issues connected to society, politics or history. Thus, she oscillates in many of her poems between depicting personal experiences with their concrete aspect, on the one hand, and exploring the wider implications that these events suggest, on the other. This is echoed by her style, which is distinguished by shifting moods and forms of music, giving her poetry the impression of being erratic and chaotic. This contrasts with the poetic technique of relatively more traditionalist verse practitioners such as Elizabeth Bishop, who was a contemporary of Rukeyser. Bishop's poetry is characterised by careful rhythms that follow stable sound patterns, reflecting her meticulous description of minute details. She also hints at small truths derived from or related to these details. However, she does not explicitly link her portrayals to general questions in the consistent way that Rukeyser does. In 'The Birth of Venus', for example, the speaker alludes to another reality for the Botticellian painting from the beginning of the poem. In the third line, she declares, 'Not as he saw her', and then alternates in her interpretation of the work from its romantic aspect to the violent myth underlying it.

Distinction can be made between the Whitman influence in Rukeyser's poetry on the level of ideas and that pertaining to her technique. Rukeyser herself did not believe that Walt Whitman could be imitated in terms of his style without risking failure; she declares that

¹⁴⁷ David S. Barber, 'Finding Her Voice: Muriel Rukeyser's Poetic Development', *Modern Poetry Studies* 11 (1982): 128.

‘Anybody coming too close to the method of Whitman falls into a pit’.¹⁴⁸ While the nineteenth-century poet instituted a radical break from the traditional rules of prosody in many of his poems, Rukeyser’s technique was distinguished, especially in the early and middle stages of her career, by her juxtaposition of standard and non-standard elements.

On the thematic level, while she was influenced by Whitman’s ideas of transcendentalism, a specific aspect that Rukeyser appropriates from him is his reconciliatory attitude towards the contradictory elements of his psyche as well as the world around him: ‘It is in the remaking of himself that Whitman speaks for the general conflict in our culture. For, in the poems, his discovery of himself is a discovery of America; he is able to give it to anyone who reaches his lines’.¹⁴⁹ With its inclusive outlook, Rukeyser’s poetry brings together conflicting thematic and stylistic elements, especially concrete and spiritual aspects, exhibiting her idea of an artistic work as a body where different constituents are allowed to interact.

2) *Rhythm as a Conciliatory Factor in ‘A Birth’*

Rukeyser made use of her personal experiences to experiment, through poetry, with different combinations of forms and images. A poem where Rukeyser brings together standard and non-standard forms of rhythm for images that range between the spiritual and the physical and for a topic that aptly reconciles different perspectives and sensations, childbirth, is ‘A Birth’, included in the collection *Body of Waking* (1958):

Lately having escaped three-kinded death
 Not by evasion but by coming through
 I celebrate what may be true beginning.
 But new begun am most without resource
 Stupid and stopped. How do the newborn grow?

¹⁴⁸ Rukeyser, ‘Craft Interview’, 155.

¹⁴⁹ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 75.

I am of them. Freshness has taken our hearts;
 Pain strips us to the source, infants of further life
 Waiting for childhood as we wait for form.

So came I into the world of all the living
 The maimed triumphant middle of my way
 Where there is giving needing no forgiving.
 Saw now the present that is here to say:
 Nothing I wrote is what I must see written,
 Nothing I did is what I now need done.—
 The smile of darkness on my song and my son.

Lately emerged I have seen unfounded houses,
 Have seen spirits not opened, surrounded as by sun,
 And have, among limitless consensual faces
 Watched all things change, an unbuilt house inherit
 Materials of desire, that stone and wood and air.
 Lit by a birth, I defend dark beginnings,
 Waste that is never waste, most-human giving,
 Declared and clear as the mortal body of grace.

Beginnings of truth-in-life, the rooms of wilderness
 Where truth feeds and the ramifying heart,
 Even mine, praising even the past in its pieces,
 My tearflesh beckoner who brought me to this place. (*CP* 334-5)

‘A Birth’ starts with a stressed, bell-like sound in the word ‘lately’, to indicate the recentness of the experience presented in the poem and point to the importance of its timing. The latter is significant, since it points to a new stage in Rukeyser’s life, ushered in by her personal experience of childbirth in 1947. In this poem, first published in the January 1952 issue of *Poetry Magazine*, Rukeyser comments retrospectively on a turning point in the evolutionary process of her artistic vocation. The word ‘lately’ shows she is still living the experience of birth and the changes it has brought to her life and career.

The first line starts with two trochaic feet and culminates with a stressed sound, the word ‘death’, which ends with a non-sibilant fricative, to absorb and balance the ringing sound of the first sound in the line; the abrupt vowel sound in ‘death’ counterbalances the force of the long vowel sound at the beginning of the poem. The rhythm fluctuates between the trochaic and iambic metres; the speaker combines the two tendencies of tentative process and assertive enunciation in the same line. The second line starts with the stressed word ‘Not’ and contains an explanation of the action of escape mentioned in the first line. The speaker’s escape is not a form of ‘evasion’ or retreat but a brave act of moving to a better state, implied in the expression ‘coming through’.¹⁵⁰ The line leads on to the next one, where the speaker

¹⁵⁰ Rukeyser is probably alluding here to D. H. Lawrence’s ‘The Song of a Man Who Has Come Through’. In this poem, the poet imagines being carried away by a wind that ‘blows’ inside him: ‘If only I let it bear me, carry me, if only it carry me!’ He wishes to be sensitive and receptive enough to submit completely to the creative impulse within him. He even yearns for the inspirational potential that a violent experience may offer him:

If only I am keen and hard like the sheer tip of a wedge
Driven by invisible blows
The rock will split, we shall come at the wonder, we shall
find the Hesperides.

The poet wishes he would be resilient enough to withstand the force of his intuition, and to be perceptive enough to penetrate to the depths of insight through his creative experience. In ‘A Birth’, the speaker affirms that she has survived a life-threatening childbirth by acquiescing to it and enduring it, not by eschewing it. In this way she would be able to derive inspiration from her experience, regarding it as a transformative event in her life. See D. H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1964), I, 250.

announces the nature of the event described, adding a little uncertainty with the word ‘may’, placed in a strong rhythmic position, to affirm the mysteriousness of this physical and artistic experience. The third line is trochaic throughout, and the sounds are evenly distributed and balanced to draw attention to the general message of the line, which is the speaker’s ‘true beginning’. The regular rhythm in this line creates an optimistic tone and sets up the direction of the whole poem. The line denotes the productive potential of the speaker’s experience as it is portrayed in the poem. It provides a platform of stability after the impulsiveness implied by the inconsistency of the poetic rhythm in the first two lines of the poem.

After the declaration of celebration and the tone of jubilation in the third line, we are faced with frustration and indecision in the fourth; the speaker complains that because she is ‘new begun’, she is ‘most without resource’. Here again, the line starts with a trochee and ends with an iamb. The assonance in ‘most’ and ‘resource’ implies the speaker’s condition of confusion and frustration. In the next line, the reader encounters two words with hammer-like sounds, ‘stupid’ and ‘stopped’, which provide a feeling of shock and supplement each other with their consonance. While the adjective ‘stupid’ with its long vowel sound supplies the general mental state of the speaker, the participle ‘stopped’, with its blunt, abrupt vowel provides a definite, concrete description of the speaker’s situation. The two words are like two limp corpses thrown at the reader’s feet and they imply the sense of fatalism that the speaker is experiencing at this moment. Then, suddenly, the speaker starts to find a way to solve her problem by asking a question, ‘How do the newborn grow?’ The speaker does not identify the addressee of her query. Is it the poem’s reader, or is it just the speaker, wondering and asking herself that question. It could be both. The indeterminacy stimulates the readers’ contemplation of the protagonist’s experience of childbirth and its implications. The speaker further involves an external group, of which she is part, utilising the pronouns ‘them’ and

‘our’ in the next line; she is beginning to learn a new way of life by being or imagining herself to be part of a group of ‘newborn’ people.

In the seventh line, as the speaker approaches the tangible aspects of childbirth with its risks and difficulties, we notice a pervasive presence of consonance within and between the words ‘strips’, ‘source’, ‘infants’, ‘further’ and ‘life’. The orchestration of the sharp fricatives in this line provides a sense of the concrete aspect of her experience. The next line, which is the last one in the first stanza, ends with a hopeful note and a definite aim: ‘form’. The word ‘form’ shares a vowel with ‘resource’ in the third line and assonance with ‘grow’ in the fifth. There is a gradual revelation of the type of ‘resource’ to which the speaker refers. It has to do first of all with ‘growth’ and it will ultimately lead to the discovery of ‘form’.

The mood of the first stanza alternates between joy at beginning to find a new form and worry at the challenges involved in that, such as initial ignorance and the inevitability of ‘waiting’. The speaker realistically lays out the wayward and frustrating aspects of her experience, which complicate it by presenting a full picture of its intricacies. Both the positive and negative aspects are integral to the childbirth, out of which she seeks to develop an artistic framework that enables her to understand and express her situation.

In the second stanza, the dimensions of the speaker’s search for form are further clarified and concretised by means of verbs of action. The meaning is created, as in the first stanza, by the interaction between contrary attitudes and qualities. By being ‘newborn’ the speaker moves into a realm she calls ‘the world of all the living’, which she owns is just a ‘maimed’ though ‘triumphant middle’ of her way. In the third line, the ‘middle’ place is described as one ‘Where there is giving needing no forgiving’. This line is dominated by a series of verbs turned into gerunds to show that the actions described are actually part of each other. Ambiguity is added to the word ‘forgiving’ by virtue of its rhyming with the word ‘giving’.

‘Forgiving’ may either mean a previous act of giving to which the latter action is a response, or it could be taken for its literal meaning of the act of pardoning or absolving. The word ‘living’ in the first line provides a clue as it rhymes with ‘forgiving’. So, ‘forgiving’ may mean the act of actually living an experience before writing about it. That is why the speaker, in the next lines, regrets her previous writings and actions before her ‘song’ came to be shaped by her experience of giving birth to a ‘son’.

In the next lines, there is a note of desperation mixed with hope as the speaker describes the ‘present that is here to say’, and not to ‘stay’, as would have been a handy cliché to a despondent speaker. The word ‘say’ at the end of the line rhymes with ‘way’ in the second line, which suggests that the ‘way’ the speaker mentions is the direction of her art, specifically that of her poetry, if the poem can be regarded as autobiographical. She scrutinises her previous work and boldly affirms that none of it is what she needs or must write. So, through her experience of childbirth, the speaker goes through a critical stage that will radically change what she writes. The bold assertive tone can be observed in the repetition of the word ‘Nothing’, with its initial stress, at the beginning of the fifth and sixth lines of the second stanza, as well as the reiteration of the verbs ‘write’ and ‘do’, in their changed forms, in both lines. Rukeyser’s enigmatic use of the dash as a linking device at the end of the sixth line ushers in the hopeful tone of the last line in the stanza, where the contrasting images of ‘smile’ and ‘darkness’ reflect the speaker’s uncertainty and optimism when she risks binding the fate of her song to the birth of her son.

The similar spelling in ‘song’ and ‘son’ cannot be ignored; ‘son’ seems a source and root for the word ‘song’, which is consistent with one of the central ideas of the poem, the identification of the physical and artistic birth experiences. Rukeyser emphasises this notion by rhyming ‘son’ with ‘done’ in the previous line, intimating that having a son is regarded as a significant responsible action in the speaker’s life. Moreover, ‘son’ rhymes with ‘sun’ in the

second line of the next stanza, whose first two lines elaborate the image presented in the last line of the second stanza. The 'darkness' overshadowing the speaker's 'song' and 'son' is specified in the next stanza as 'unfounded houses' and 'spirits not opened'. The source of inspiration, 'my son', in the second stanza becomes the 'sun' surrounding 'spirits not opened', a manifestation of the mysterious 'darkness' in the previous stanza.

The second stanza is characterised by its confessional tone. The speaker advances from identifying with the 'newborn' in the first stanza to describing her own situation in the present one. So, although she confirms commonality with people who start their life anew, she recognises the peculiarities of her own situation and vocation. While she declares in the first stanza, 'I am of them. Freshness has taken our hearts', using pronouns that make her part of the 'newborn' group, she regrets that at present 'Nothing I wrote is what I must see written' and 'Nothing I did is what I now need done'. She further specifies the elements undergoing development in her life, which are 'my song' and 'my son'. Together with the sense of community she creates by identifying with the people who share her situation, the speaker scrutinises her personal life, producing the impression that the public and the private aspects of her life are closely connected. So, childbirth constitutes a creative resource that women can exploit in different ways, according to their personal lives.

In the third stanza, the speaker starts the first line with the initially-stressed word 'lately', just as she does in the first stanza. However, this time the word is associated with 'emerged' and not with 'having escaped', since she is on her way to arrival at a new form for her life and art. While 'having' is inserted between 'lately' and 'escaped' in the first line, to provide an initial standard rhythm, nothing is added between 'lately' and 'emerged', in the third stanza, which signifies the immediate impact of the speaker's physical experience of childbirth. In this stanza, Rukeyser makes an extensive use of caesurae; the separate parts of lines represent different aspects of the basic image in a line or set of lines. Rhythm is created

here by the succession of phrases as they support and complicate the sounds and sense of each other. For example, the 'spirits', which are 'not opened', are presented as 'surrounded by sun', which symbolises the insight the speaker would be able to receive by undergoing childbirth. The phrases include instances of consonance, which sustains the attention and interest of the reader by emphasising the harmonised sounds and the words they connect. Consonance can be observed in such pairs of words as 'seen' and 'spirits', 'surrounded' and 'sun', 'watched' and 'change', as well as 'house' and 'inherit'. The verbs of action in the first two pairs throw into sharp relief the object or agent succeeding them. In the next two pairs, the verb is accentuated by virtue of its position in the middle or at the end of the line. The 'spirits' are given importance as a medium of inspiration, as signified by 'sun'. The verbs are emphasised for their role in defining the action done to the 'Materials of desire, that stone and wood and air', in the next line. The third stanza ends with a line of regular blank verse; the phrase 'mortal body of grace' is provided with a melodious rhythm, which implies the state of elation the speaker feels as she makes sense of the process of change she witnesses in the concrete aspects of her experience.

The number of lines in the third stanza corresponds to that of the first one, while the second and fourth stanzas diverge from that number to provide a mixture of forms as dictated by poetic exigency and demanded by the topic and type of imagery used in the stanza. The first stanza is dominated by standard rhythms signifying an optimistic beginning. However, the next two stanzas derive their music from consonance and from the succession of phrases; the speaker is gaining the confidence to express freely the different aspects of her experience. In the last stanza we have only four lines dealing with arrival at the place where 'truth feeds'. The smaller number of lines affirms the final sense of arrival at the 'beginnings of truth-in-life'. In the second line of this stanza, the expression 'ramifying heart' suggests a locus of complex relations, hence the speaker's glorification of the 'past in its pieces'. The sense of

euphoria at the discovery of a source of truth, at the beginning of the stanza, is combined with the recognition of a previous state of fragmentation. This is succeeded by the idiosyncratic coinage ‘tearflesh’ in the last line. The word ‘tearflesh’, which holds at least two meanings, according to the heteronyms of the word ‘tear’, signifies the strong link, even identification, of the speaker’s son or song, as well as her pain, to her being and her process of inspiration as she reaches ‘this place’ of fulfilment and achievement. The compound contains resonant fricatives that call to attention the concrete elements indicated here. Thus, ‘truth-in-life’, which points to the insight that the speaker receives from her personal experience, is rooted in her, as well as her child’s, body, in the physical pain that the childbirth involves.

In her essay “‘Forever Broken and Made’: Muriel Rukeyser’s Theory of Form’, Meg Schoerke cites a portion of ‘Käthe Kollwitz’ to illustrate Rukeyser’s technique of blending two seemingly incompatible forms, free verse and standard metre, by establishing one as the base of the other. Rukeyser calls this technique ‘held rhyme’, and she defines it as one ‘in which all the rhymes are modulations of one central sound and move toward a tonic, if you like, which is the last word of the poem’.¹⁵¹ Similarly in ‘A Birth’, the non-standard rhythms are not wholly innovative; they are variations of standard ones, where the music is produced primarily through consonance and caesura. So, instead of a complete break with traditional modes of rhythm, Rukeyser adopts a conciliatory attitude where different variants of familiar forms are allowed to coexist in the poem. Schoerke links this technique of Rukeyser’s to her interest in S. T. Coleridge, who holds that ‘the composition of a poem is among the imitative arts; and that imitation, as opposed to copying, consists either in the interfusion of the SAME

¹⁵¹ After quoting Rukeyser, Schoerke goes on further to explain ‘held rhyme’ as a form that ‘both is and is not rhyme, for it breaks away from perfect rhyme and predetermined patterns, yet, through “modulations,” it reconfigures perfect rhyme; it is the same “substance” but has taken on a different “phase”’. See Schoerke, “‘Forever Broken and Made’: Muriel Rukeyser’s Theory of Form’, 28.

throughout the radically DIFFERENT, or of the different throughout a base radically the same'.¹⁵²

As we have seen, Rukeyser brings together different types of rhythm in 'A Birth'. The poem's metre alternates between the trochee standing for process, and the emphatic iamb giving direction to that process. The correlation of long vowel sounds with abrupt consonants lends a sense of the artistic work as a body where concreteness is combined with a sense of mystery, denoting the various aspects of childbirth. The forms, representing contrary tendencies, are supposed to interact with each other so that the meaning of the poem gradually emerges or is 'born' in this way. This reflects Rukeyser's idea of the poem as a system of relations between distinctive elements and aspects. The hopeful outlook of a transformed future is rooted in a realistic view of the present. Each stanza in the poem involves a struggle between conflicting notions and attitudes as the speaker is exploring the intricacies of her situation and attempting to come to terms with them. On the one hand, there is the new experience of birth with its implications of the possibilities of transformation; on the other, there are the risks involved in the newness of the experience like the speaker's initial ignorance and the struggle that the process of change entails.

Rukeyser's organicist poetics, which can be observed in her technique of putting disparate elements together in a holistic system that gains value through its interrelationships, was probably a response to the crisis of cultural identity that Americans encountered with the emergence and interaction of various forces, among which were leftist ones, during the 1930s. At that time, multiplicity was promoted as a way of bringing together the diverse elements of American society and asserting independence. According to David Eldridge, in that era 'Cultural pluralism and heterogeneity were used as evidence of "America's true

¹⁵² S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinion*, ed. George Watson, 2 vols (London: Dent, 1956), II, 72.

richness and its independence from Europe”¹⁵³. Rukeyser echoes this trend of the time and theorises it, as can be noted in the following quotation from *The Life of Poetry*: ‘We need a background that will let us find ourselves and our poems, let us move in discovery. The tension between the parts of such a society is health; the tension here between the individual and the whole society is health’.¹⁵⁴ Rukeyser posits two types of entities: an individual and a social one. The former requires the ‘freedom’ to interact with the surrounding social structure, even to the degree of causing ‘tension’, presumed to be a healthy phenomenon. Her notion of the tension between individual entities and society can be observed on the level of poetry. While stylistic elements maintain their individual significance in the poem, they gain more complexity by being juxtaposed with contrary elements. For example, ‘A Birth’ is characterised by images of process such as the ‘middle of my way’ and the ‘dark beginnings’. However, despite the significance they bear in defining the meaning of the poem, they cannot function alone. Counterbalancing them are images of a tangible locus for the speaker’s experience, a ‘house’ with ‘Materials of desire, that stone and wood and air’.

However, that is not to say that Rukeyser was constricted, in her relational poetics, by the exigencies of a specific stage of history and was not able to keep up with the changing realities of her time. Though she held on to her vision of holistic experience and knowledge long past the 1930s, her form underwent adaptations, which can be observed in the innovative experiments of her later poetry from the 1960s and 1970s, hence the emphasis in her poetry on transformation and rebirth. Therefore, we can say that Rukeyser’s career was a process of change where even failure is acknowledged and exploited, as Schoerke affirms: ‘Rukeyser’s devotion to process led her to publish gropings alongside achieved poems, because for her the

¹⁵³ David Eldridge, *American Culture in the 1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2008), 27.

¹⁵⁴ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 211.

search itself, as a means of resisting stasis, was as important as the result'.¹⁵⁵ We can observe Rukeyser's insistence on process in her ability to envision a way of using 'waste', as she does in the following lines from 'A Birth': 'Lit by a birth, I defend dark beginnings, / Waste that is never waste, most-human giving' (*CP* 335).

Part II: Diction

Rukeyser's poetry brings together disparate elements. It pinpoints relationships that stimulate readers' imaginations even when they do not agree with the correspondences she makes. Through the images in her poetry she speculates on the relation between the concrete, especially the corporeal, aspect of existence and more general concepts such as inspiration, the possibility of change and humans' sense of time or history. These associations prompt readers to reconsider their convictions and imagine a reality where their private life is closely connected to the world at large and the forces influencing it. Her assured manner of expression presumes her readers' familiarity with her motifs, themes, as well as her relational outlook. In this part of the thesis, I discuss Rukeyser's technique in terms of two contrary tendencies that coexist in her poetry: a coercive one through which she explicitly lays out mystical and philosophical views instead of hinting at them in a more complex and subtle artistic style, and a suggestive one where the images invite different interpretations from readers, making them more involved in a reciprocal relationship with the text. I study these two features by analysing the diction and imagery in a number of Rukeyser's poems, mainly from her collection *Body of Waking* (1958).

Rukeyser's poetic technique principally aims to involve readers in the poet's creative experience. This stems from her belief in poetry as a tool of social and cultural change; for her, one of the functions of poetry is that it 'invites' the readers' response, enabling them to

¹⁵⁵ Schoerke, "'Forever Broken and Made": Muriel Rukeyser's Theory of Form', 24.

constructively re-examine their preconceptions and their relationship to the surrounding world. However, Rukeyser was criticised for what was perceived to be her presumptuousness in assuming that her readers are willing to engage with or share her convictions and positions. Victor Howes, reviewing *The Speed of Darkness* (1968) for the *Christian Science Monitor*, thought that ‘With this poet there is always the danger of emotion running away with the poem, or of a private connection serving for a public one’.¹⁵⁶ William Meredith, in his review of *The Gates* for the *Times*, declared that ‘If you are not used to thinking of poetry the way Muriel Rukeyser does, her work can be hard to read. The reader must acquiesce, perhaps more openly than with more conventional poems’.¹⁵⁷ These comments call attention to the overwhelming tendencies in Rukeyser’s poetry, which are not as prevalent or conspicuous in her later volumes of poetry such as *The Gates* (1976) as in her mid-career, especially *Body of Waking* (1958). Rukeyser’s assertive tone, her use of recurrent motifs and symbols, as well as her frequent use of deictics, give the impression that her poetry requires prior knowledge of her work and thought on the part of the reader.

The writing in *Body of Waking* (1958) is dominated by an overwhelming tendency. With her interest in the body and the unconscious, she seems to be taking the reader by the hand to the depth of the experience she portrays in her poetry. Body-related images are incorporated even in poems that deal with intellectual creativity, such as ‘Phaneron’, where Rukeyser declares ‘Whatever plows the body turns to food’ (CP 333) and ‘The Return’, which contains the lines, ‘The Idea journeying into my body / returned, and I knew the nature of One’ (CP 341). In some of her poems, there is the implicit presumption that her readers agree or, at least, are familiar with the message or the motifs in the poem. Take, for example, one of her untitled poems, which starts with ‘A red bridge fastening this city to the forest, / Telling

¹⁵⁶ Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision*, 312.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 313.

relationship in a stroke of steel' (CP 386). Rukeyser offers the message of the poem in advance, before the readers attempt to discover it in their reading experience. Rukeyser assumes that the readers are already familiar with her relational outlook of interrelations among distinct aspects of existence, and she presents it at the beginning of the poem in order to extend it and reveal its manifestations, where contrary concepts meet: 'Glowing from fires of thought to thought's dense snows, / Growing among the treason and the threat' (CP 387). As we shall see in this part of the thesis, the coercive tendencies in Rukeyser's poems are the result of Rukeyser's interactive relationship with the times, and they have some bearing on her style as well as the reading experience. However, these tendencies are usually balanced by some other aspects of her style which invite a reader's interaction and response.

1) *Personification: A Connection to the Material World*

Personification in Rukeyser's poems serves the function of linking abstract ideas to concrete existence. A poem where she uses this figure of speech is 'After Their Quarrel', in *Body of Waking* (1958). Here, the speaker tries to find inspiration for a changed state of mind by reaching out and listening to the voices of nature. The speaker starts her series of personifications with the 'milkweed', which 'burst' and communicated to the speaker a calming message of hope in resolution and renewal:

A pod of the milkweed burst; it was speaking to me:

Never mind, never mind. All splits open. There is new inside,

We witness. (CP 339)

Rukeyser makes a careful use of personification; she introduces the milkweed pod's speech with its action of 'bursting', implying that it spoke to the speaker not directly but through its aforementioned action. The milkweed pod's inspiring message deals with hope in a

forthcoming revelation or positive future change, ideas which are symbolised by the pod's 'bursting' to reveal what is inside it.

The last statement that the 'pod' communicates to the speaker is 'We witness', which links the speaker to nature in its diverse phenomena. The speaker is taking her private crisis to the larger world of nature as a way of going beyond her smaller troubles. From that point, the speaker is led by 'asters' to observe the sky with its 'mixed oranges of sunset [...] glazing the first bare branches' (*CP* 339). The speaker portrays nature as ubiquitous and omniscient. The 'branches' transmit the same message as the 'pod' by declaring 'We know you'. Here, Rukeyser presents the act of witnessing as an interactive process: just as individuals witness events in their life and in the world, their actions are witnessed by living things in nature, and the latter can suggest messages and insights to humans.

Then the speaker turns to the world of memory and dream as additional sources of inspiration. Again Rukeyser is being careful in her use of personification as she employs it in the context of a dream. The speaker remembers a dream in which a tiger makes contact with her through its 'endless glowing look'. That intense 'look' of the tiger enables the speaker to 'fuse' her 'wishes to run', encouraging her to move on in her life despite the problem she has had. The tiger expresses sympathy with, and appreciation of, the speaker; it communicates the following statement to her: 'I recognize you. Kill them if they deny; or wake them. Now wake!' (*CP* 339) The invocations in this line are directed at a person who is seeking recognition, which people of her kind seem to deny her. The tiger inspires her to persist with her aspirations and effect change in her life.

Next, the speaker moves to another level as 'small animals' identify with her: 'You are like us, too. And the stars' (*CP* 339). She begins to understand that all creatures, no matter how small, play an integral role in sustaining life; the cosmos accommodates, in its

continuous process of development, even the elements typically rejected by people: ‘even the half-eaten and accursed can be a season’. Finally, the speaker is exhorted by the ‘field’ to turn to her inner self for inspiration and development: ‘Search yourself, said all the field, understand growth’. The field offers her an inspiring truth: ‘When lack consents to leave its seed, waste opens, you will see / Even there, the husband of the spring, who knows his time’ (*CP* 339). Lack and waste are seen here as positive, productive factors rather than useless or detrimental ones. We can observe that in each case of personification Rukeyser is careful to make the communicated message consistent with the symbolic character of the non-human speaker’s entity. While the forceful tiger’s statement involves assertiveness and self-confidence, the field’s words invoke the process it embraces and nurtures, which is growth.

Rukeyser’s use of personification in ‘After Their Quarrel’ reveals a coercive attitude towards her readers. In her special use of that figure of speech, when she enables inanimate things to ‘speak’, she assumes that a reader will readily accept it despite its unreal character. Nature, in this poem, seems to bear a greater degree of reality than the social world of people. The speaker flees a quarrel she has had with people to seek inspiration from the variegated aspects of nature. This attitude indicates Rukeyser’s estrangement from the social world, during the McCarthy purges, which acted to suppress and stigmatise leftist voices in America in the early 1950s. Moreover, some of the expressions Rukeyser utilises in ‘After Their Quarrel’ represent recurrent motifs in her poetry, which readers have to be familiar with in order to fully understand the poem. For example, she points to the mystical idea of an inner core of power and hope in the quotation ‘All splits open. There is new inside’, which the reader may not accept or imagine when she attempts to appreciate the poem, despite the affirmative statement, ‘We witness’, succeeding it. Towards the end of the poem, Rukeyser uses expressions such as ‘season’, ‘growth’, ‘seed’ and ‘waste’, which can only be

appreciated if a reader can accept or is familiar with Rukeyser's special use of them and her interest in mysticism.

On the other hand, Rukeyser's incorporation of the motif of speech in 'After Their Quarrel' can be linked to her notion of free expression as distinct from silence.¹⁵⁸ In this poem, there is a tacit invitation to the readers to probe their inner selves in order to find a source of power and the hope that this can help them through crises and conflict. One of Rukeyser's early poems that deal with the theme of speech is 'Effort at Speech between Two People' where elusive and intermittent attempts are made at conversation; the speaker confides in an addressee and consistently beseeches her to respond. The poem starts with the following desperate invocations, preceded by a colon, which acts as an incentive to respond, ' : Speak to me. Take my hand. What are you now? / I will tell you all. I will conceal nothing' (*CP* 9). At the beginning of each stanza, a colon is deployed, surrounded by extra space, perhaps to encourage the addressee to speak and to involve the reader in her conversation. When asked in an interview about her early achievement in this poem, she replies:

I think that was in answer to the silences, the things left out that I wanted to hear about, the—I suppose many of my poems are things that I wanted to hear—and certainly something that has gone through all the way from 'Effort at Speech' to a

¹⁵⁸ In one of her interviews, Rukeyser confides that what prompted her to write poetry was the silence on sensitive issues that she witnessed in her family during her early life. When asked about the 'early influences' that made her choose this career, she responded: 'It was otherwise. It was the silence at home. It was the river to which I have just come back and didn't realize how much I needed'. The question of silence is regarded as a source of inspiration where the poet may revisit and rediscover her childhood. See Rukeyser, 'Craft Interview', 153.

poem called 'Fragile' in *Waterlily Fire*—about the nature of speech and what action takes place in speaking. And the relation of speaker and listener.¹⁵⁹

Writing poetry is regarded here as a means of self-analysis and it leads the poet to self-discovery before it reaches the readers, who can also engage with it in their own way. The question of silence occupied Rukeyser throughout her career and stimulated her to investigate its significance in the process of communication.

Rukeyser employs the motif of silence to invite readers to probe themselves and discover their hidden thoughts, emotions and desires through their reading of a poem. In this way, the work serves as a communicative platform where readers respond to the poem by contributing their own effort at understanding and relation with it. In 'After Their Quarrel', Rukeyser provides the presumably silent or silenced elements in life a voice so that they express themselves, identify with people and inspire her as a poet. By speaking to things and allowing them to speak to her, the speaker is gaining insight about herself and her life in addition to maintaining an interactive relationship to her surroundings and her readers.

A poem where Rukeyser uses personification in an extended form or as an allegory is 'The Return'. In this poem, Rukeyser illustrates the nature and source of ideas and inspiration and the way that deeper truths are rooted in the materialist world. The poem describes the painful journey of a persecuted character named Idea and the places it stops at during that journey. These stops represent stages of 'return' for the Idea; it gradually approaches physical aspects of the speaker's life, where it finds its source. The Idea is first stopped by a child, who is able to inspire it with basic truths of the world:

The Idea leaned over those newborn eyes

¹⁵⁹ Rukeyser, 'Craft Interview', 170.

and dreamed of the nature of things:

the nature of memory and the nature of love;

and forgave itself and all men. (*CP* 341)

By contemplating the child's eyes, the Idea learns the reality of various things in its life and reconciles its past grievances to the present instead of repressing them, which is implied by the expression 'forgave itself and all men'. Rukeyser alludes, here, to her childbirth. In the autobiographical poem that she wrote about it, 'Nine Poems for the Unborn Child', she refers to a 'hollow bodiless shade' to which she was attached prior to that event. The 'shade' symbolises abstract ideas that Rukeyser maintained before she engaged in her physical experience of childbirth. The latter made her consider her previous idealistic principles in terms of the concrete aspect of her life, instead of regarding the two elements as independent from each other. Similarly, in 'The Return', the Idea, observing the child's eyes, recollects 'the flesh' and recalls the fact that it is 'not alone'.

As it moves closer to the speaker's breathing, it brings balance to the various aspects of her life:

The Idea voyaged nearer my breathing, saying

Come balance come

into the love of these faces and forces

find us our equilibrium. (*CP* 341)

When the Idea draws nearer the child's body, it is complemented by a physical element, which enables it to establish 'equilibrium' in the speaker's life. Up to this point, three

characters are distinguished in the poem: the Idea, the child, and a speaker who seems to be the mother tackling the implications of her childbirth.

Later, as the child starts asking questions and attempting to discover the world around her in her spontaneous way, the idea is able to express itself freely and confide its woes and sufferings; it becomes 'fleshly' in the way that flesh is fragile, concrete and perceptive:

The Idea grew more fleshly and spoke:

Beaten down I was

Down I knew very long

Newborn I begin. (*CP* 341)

The Idea remembers a time when it was demeaned and humiliated before it begins to assume a material form, which gives it meaning and raises it to a higher level of existence.

Rukeyser makes a creative use of personification here. The 'Idea' is concretised thematically by its close relationship to the body. At the same time, it is presented as a palpable, living entity through the stylistic device of personification, which makes it part of the speaker's material world as well as her character. In the following stanza, the elements of the speaker's identity are reconciled into a unified whole:

The Idea journeying into my body

returned, and I knew the nature of One,

and could forget One, and turn to the child,

and whole could turn to the world again. (*CP* 341)

Through the Idea's physical contact with the speaker, the latter gains knowledge of an entity she calls 'One', which may be an allusion to God, who combines the qualities of immanence and transcendence. This is a result of her ability to integrate both the material and the intellectual aspect of her character, thereby being attached both to her body and an element beyond it, which is her mind, through her experience of childbirth, where she also accommodates the life of her child.

In 'The Return', the Idea symbolises the transformations that a poetic idea undergoes in the poet's mind. It may be repressed in the subconscious, 'quieted in a sea of sleeping', until it is defined by its relationship to the body. Although the child's body operates, in the poem, as an inspirational and balancing force for the speaker, it is also a constraining factor as far as the reading experience is concerned, since readers have to accept Rukeyser's idea of the body as a source of creativity in order to fully appreciate the poem. However, this overwhelming aspect can provide a sense of purpose to the reading experience, turning it from a merely 'social' act to a responsible one, as McCorkle asserts in the following excerpt:

The space of writing is a shared, social space, yet it does not deny the individual act of creating that space. Such an act is profoundly difficult and one that requires an ethical responsibility or responsiveness, if it is to be authentic in its space and its outward regard. To not view poetry as an ethical process, is to initiate a disturbing levelling that extinguishes the very possibility of a responsive writing.¹⁶⁰

Here McCorkle acknowledges the social function of poetry through which both a poet and her readers can freely exchange ideas and feelings. He points to poetry's 'ethical' function as a factor of change that elicits the readers' response to a text. The entities in 'The Return' are

¹⁶⁰ James McCorkle, cited by Anne Herzog, "'Anything Away from Anything": Muriel Rukeyser's Relational Poetics', in *How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?: The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 36.

presented as symbolic ones; they evoke different interpretations in the minds of readers. Yet, the suggestive quality of Rukeyser's style is combined with a coercive quality that gives shape to her writing and ensures a sense of purpose in it, bearing in mind the complications that her complex form produces in the reading experience. While she includes thought-provoking echoes of her physical experiences and her personal vision, she reaches out to her readers by assuming their familiarity with the concepts she lays out in her poetry.

2) *The Present Tense: An Inclusive Vision of Time*

Now let us move on to a discussion of Rukeyser's use and treatment of verb tense. A dominant verb tense that Rukeyser employs in her poems is the perpetual present, which may accommodate the future as well as the present time, especially where a poem deals with different types of reality and holds multiple levels of meaning. In 'The Two Illuminations', Rukeyser uses the present tense to portray incompatible tendencies or aspects, in human nature and in time, as coexisting and balancing each other. Thus, a moment in time can be a 'meeting place' of different tendencies as well as the different eras of one's life. The poem starts with the following lines:

Storm and disorder and the giant emotions,
 The seven deadly sins, they scatter all my hope.
 To gather them in change I summon up the image
 Of all arrangement in equilibrium.
 Moments of poise in the middle of madness;
 Sharpened as a forest is sharpened by fire,
 I mean destroyed. (CP 342-3)

This stanza deals with the speaker's attempt to reconcile the contrary elements of her psyche, which represent a reflection of the Seven Deadly Sins. To bring them together, the speaker finds inspiration in a series of images. One of them is that of an 'arrangement' of things complementing each other despite their contrariness ('madness') when the tension between them turns into a relationship of balance, which binds them in a moment of 'poise'.¹⁶¹

In 'The Two Illuminations', Rukeyser uses the present simple in combination with the participle form to illustrate the central idea of the poem, which is the psyche's ability to reconcile contrary elements. This concept is extended to an idea of time as comprised of interconnected historical periods and tendencies; so, the present time is capable of accommodating a relationship to the past, and both may coexist in the future:

Now in a twilight moment I summon up twilight,

The two illuminations that can tell

Nothing in any second by themselves—

Only the body's knowledge, many fresh mornings (*CP* 343)

In this extract, the speaker suggests that time is comprised of moments balanced in a body-like entity, where the parts complement each other. The body itself is portrayed as holding

¹⁶¹ This image recalls one of James Clerk Maxwell's scientific theories, mentioned by Rukeyser:

There is a famous passage in the works of the great imaginative scientist, James Clerk Maxwell, in which he draws attention to the implications of what are called in mathematics 'singular points.' A stone poised on another stone, a ball rolling in perfect motion on a perfect wedge, a supersaturated solution, are examples, and the equations for their systems break down at these extraordinary moments in their history.

The instances in this excerpt illustrate the possibility that a combination of heterogeneous elements may accommodate a holistic relationship of balance among these elements at a certain moment of time. See Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 30-1.

knowledge of the relations between periods of time, possibly through the process of growth sustaining it. This view challenges the idea of time as comprised of independent moments, each of which bears no relationship to the ones preceding or succeeding it.

The style of the poem has an overwhelming effect on readers. It assumes their acceptance or understanding of Rukeyser's idea of relationship and equilibrium and the way it is applied to the psyche or to history. So, instead of presenting this idea as a specific tendency which may touch particular aspects of a person's life, she advances it as a general rule with examples and broad applications in life. Also, instead of letting readers discover this principle as they read the poem, she explicitly directs the process of revealing this concept by using the expression 'I summon up' before two of its manifestations, which denotes that she is holding control over the imagery she is invoking from her memory.

In 'Haying before Storm', Rukeyser uses the present simple tense in a complex manner. The poem is dominated by the present simple tense but the reality it describes straddles the present as well as the future time. The poem celebrates the beginning of a new stage of historical and cultural change, a moment of possibility where no barrier separates the present from the future. The speaker herself is a spectator of this change. She anticipates this state by observing the sky, which she describes in the following terms: 'This sky is unmistakable. Not lurid, not low, not black' (*CP* 333). The sky is not dominated by a single colour. It is seen as 'limitless' with the possibilities it holds. The image of a concrete place is given wider implications, which invites readers to explore the meanings that this image suggests.

Towards the end of the poem, different tenses are joined at a significant moment of possibility. In the following lines, Rukeyser deploys the colon as a link between different stages:

These images are all

Themselves emerging: they face their moment: love or go down,

A blade of the strong hay stands like light before me.

The sky is a torment on our eyes, the sky

Will not wait for this golden, it will not wait for form. (*CP* 333)

The speaker is describing a moment when the present holds the potential for a transformation that would take place in the future. This does not only reflect optimism on the part on the speaker; it also develops the notion that the present time can be linked to the future by envisaging the potential and opportunity that the coming time may bring. The speaker takes note of tangible things in her world, which indicate signs of another reality, a future form, to her. Readers, too, can contemplate the significance that these images hold beyond the basic meaning of the concrete entities they present.

In 'Not Yet' (1968), Rukeyser makes use of the perpetual present to portray events happening in overlapping periods of time. The poem starts with a dystopian image of war and destruction that may be taking place anywhere and at any time. The speaker proceeds to describe specific details of the repression of a regime which is bent on controlling all aspects of people's lives, including their sense of the passage of time.¹⁶² This turns their life into a 'dream', devoid of reality or meaning: 'I am looking at the times and time as at a dream. / As at the recurrent dream of a locked room' (*CP* 433). Time seems to be kept in strict control. Its boundaries are marked only by insipid, similar colours with different intensities: 'Long

¹⁶² Just as she attacks the despotic control of time in this poem, she also deplores modernity's attitude of valorising the possibilities that the present holds at the expense of a connection to the past. Clive Bush notes that 'Like Proust, Rukeyser was concerned that under the conditions of modernity, human beings would cease to be creatures of time in any profound way and lose a sense of the way narrative might deploy complex temporalities to register the depths and complexities of human experience'. Modern humanity's superficial way of reading a narrative is linked here to its inability to discern the interrelations binding and shaping moments of time. See Bush, *The Century's Midnight*, 423.

orange landscapes / shifting to yellow-orange to show a generation' (CP 432). The passage of time does not promise any change or development under a regime which aims to keep the various aspects of a nation's life in eternal stasis.

In this atmosphere of illusions and despair, the speaker wonders, 'How can this room change state? / I see its sky, its children. I cannot imagine' (CP 432). She attempts to find inspiration in children, who offer the only clue for the possibility of transformation, despite their being initially inculcated with the message of a repressive regime:¹⁶³

I look at the young faces of the children

in this tradition, far down the colors of the years.

They are still repeating their shut slogans

with 'war' substituted for freedom. But their faces glow. (CP 433)

In this excerpt, the speaker intersperses a sentence in the present continuous with two sentences in the perpetual present. The former provides a sense of inevitability while the latter points to the speaker's firm belief in a different future. Placing them together points to her optimism in spite of the feeling she has that the future is not likely to be different from the present.

¹⁶³ Children figure prominently in Rukeyser's oeuvre. She depicts their world, which is characterised by spontaneity and the passion for experimentation, in a series of photo-texts entitled 'Adventures of Children' (1939). In this work, she juxtaposes images of the life of children in diverse, modern and primitive, cultures. In *The Life of Poetry*, discussing children's sense of rhythm, she postulates: 'The child's sense of simplicity, his complex consciousness of rhythm, and in fact his concepts, cannot be satisfied or judged by adult standards. He is interested in things as themselves'. So, children's uncomplicated way of viewing the world around them is coupled with a sophisticated manner of dealing with it. Walter Benjamin also wrote about the imaginative faculty in children, indicating that their vision is distinguished by the 'unsevered connection between perception and action'. In 'Not Yet', despite being inculcated with certain ideas, the children, by virtue of their spontaneous way of thinking and behaving, represent a source of hope for political change. See Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 107, and Gander, *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary*, 55.

In this poem Rukeyser chooses the perpetual present tense to show the way that people's sense of the passage of time can be controlled and distorted by a repressive regime. Also, the present tense highlights the notion that though these types of regimes seem like fantastical phenomena, they may exist at any period of history and in any place on earth. So, Rukeyser's use of the present tense achieves the function of neutralising the sense of time to emulate the repressive outlook portrayed in the poem and enlighten readers of a reality that can be witnessed every day.

Towards the end of the poem, the tense also provides an optimistic view of a future which may be realized at any moment of time. In the following lines, Rukeyser employs the present continuous form to indicate the temporary quality of a distorted sense of time, and she uses the present simple form to express her hopeful 'solution' for this crisis, turning the 'chicken-egg' dilemma on its head:

I think of the solution of the sealed room mystery
of the chicken and the egg, in which the chicken
feeds on his cell, grows strong on the sealed room
and finally

in strength

eating his prison

pierces the shell. (*CP* 433)

The speaker conceives of a way to resolve the question of the causality of the political situation she portrays. She gives emphasis to the children's ability to change the conditions of

their country. Instead of viewing the people as mere victims of despotic policies, she affirms their ability to change matters.

Rukeyser's use of the perpetual present without the specifics of time or place in 'Not Yet' invites readers' involvement and response. This open form keeps readers informed and engaged in a world where repression still exists in our time. She is speaking to a receptive generation of readers, who started to take an interest in political affairs in the 1960s. Thus, her unambiguous diction in 'Not Yet' can be distinguished from the complex style that characterises her early poetry. In this poem, she gets closer to common or undiscerning readers. However, there are thematic and stylistic elements which point to a coercive tendency in the poem. One of them is the mood of unjustified optimism despite extremely grim circumstances. The reader may have to share this feeling in a situation which hardly merits it. Another overwhelming element in the poem is the speaker's predilection for soothsaying, when she anticipates future change at the hands of children. This prophecy, which represents the solution to the problem in the poem, is merely warranted by her faith and the force of her desire for change rather than a process of clear reasoning or a logical resolution. Readers would have to emotionally share her belief in this solution in order to fully appreciate the poem and interact with it.

3) *Hyphenated Compounds: A Combination of Tendencies*

Compounds provide a flexible tool for poets to combine words of different parts of speech in a creative way that can still be accommodated and tolerated by standard language rules, though they may not be incorporated in common language usage. John Keats, for example, who was one of Rukeyser's influences, employed hyphenated compounds extensively in his poetry. An example can be found in the phrase 'light-winged Dryad of the trees', in the poem 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Another example is the compound in the phrase 'full-throated ease',

in the same poem. In these two compounds, Keats creatively transforms two nouns, ‘wing’ and ‘throat’, not commonly used as verbs, into participles functioning as adjectives, thereby innovating by using the nouns in an unusual way and by attaching them to other adjectives in the compounds. This technique produces a cluster of images representing a full picture instead of the separate elements we would have if the parts of the compound were severed from each other. Two other examples from ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ are the phrases ‘deep-delved earth’ and ‘sun-burnt mirth’. In these two examples, the second part of each compound is comprised of a verb, turned into a participle and used as an adjective. Here we observe a more standard use of compounds, since the participles they include are generated from verbs and not from nouns, as is the case in the previous two examples. However, despite their variable degrees of deviation from standard usage, they all share the characteristic of being consistent with their context and closely linked to the nouns they modify. Their meaning is recognisable and they serve the function of developing and enriching imagery in Keats’s poem.

Turning now to some instances of Rukeyser’s use of hyphenated compounds, the first set of examples comes from ‘Haying before Storm’, where the sky is described as ‘Illuminated and bruise-color, limitless, to the noon / Full of its floods to come’ (*CP* 333). Although the compound ‘bruise-color’ is supposed to function as an adjective by virtue of its position, it is not an adjective, since both parts of it are nouns. So, instead of using ‘bruise-colored’, the speaker employs an unusual adjective, ‘bruise-color’. The use of a ‘noun-noun’ compound as an adjective is problematic, since we are not sure about the relationship between the compound and the noun.¹⁶⁴ Readers may wonder whether ‘bruise-color’ is an attribute of the sky, or a metaphor for it.

¹⁶⁴ According to linguist Laurie Bauer ‘a noun compound functioning as a modifier to another noun is probably not so much functioning as an adjective as forming a three-term noun

Another hyphenated compound in this poem is 'live-colored'. The speaker proceeds from a description of the sky, to the delineation of activities taking place on earth:

The valley scattered with friends, gathering in

Live-colored harvest, filling their arms; not seeming to hope

Not seeming to dread, doing. (*CP* 333)

These lines deal with the speaker's friends' action of reaping the harvest. They are so busy doing this that they do not notice the omens of change that the speaker is able to perceive in the atmosphere. Even the harvest bears a sign; it is 'live-colored'. The speaker's use of this compound is grammatical enough. However, it is unusual because it involves the use of metaphor. Rather than using a more straight-forward adjective like 'lively', the speaker attaches to the colour of the harvest an attribute which is typically used for living things, 'live'. The compound points to the dynamic quality of the colour, which imbues the image of the harvest with life and the potential for development.

Another poem where Rukeyser complicates the meaning of hyphenated compounds by employing metaphor is 'Mother Garden's Round' in the collection *Body of Waking* (1958). Here are the first four lines of the poem:

The year was river-throated, with the stare of legend,

Then truth the whirlwind and Mother garden. Death.

And now these stars, antlers, the masks of speech,

And the one ghost a glove in the middle of the floor. (*CP* 336)

compound'. See Laurie Bauer, *English Word-Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 210.

The compound 'river-throated' is an enigmatic combination of components. A compound with the participle 'throated' is familiar in English poetry, an example being 'full-throated ease', as we have seen in 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Keats's compound involves the use of metaphor; a physical quality of living things, 'full-throated', is attributed to an abstract concept, 'ease'. The adjective 'full' modifies the adjective 'throated' but it does not form a figurative relationship with it, so there is only the metaphor where 'full-throated' is linked to 'ease'. However, the compound in Rukeyser's poem is more complex; the participle 'throated' is deployed to modify 'river', and both words form a compound that is supposed to modify the word 'year'. The compound complicates the sense of the word it is supposed to define. The year is likened to a river, which is, in turn, likened to a living thing. The significance of this complex figure of speech can be found in a list of elements that include the tools of the speaker's art ('masks of speech'), which are 'legend', and her memory. These elements keep developing in the speaker's life like a river feeding her creativity and poetic inspiration. The compound 'river-throated' signifies inclusiveness, dynamism and spoken expression.

A poem in which Rukeyser creates unusual imagery using hyphenated compounds is 'Phaneron', included in *Body of Waking* (1958).¹⁶⁵ Rukeyser appropriates the concept of the 'phaneron' to illustrate her idea of the body as a source of creativity, which can be observed in the following lines:

Whatever plows the body turns to food:

Before my face, flowers, color which is form.

¹⁶⁵ 'Phaneron' is a term coined by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), who defines it as 'the collective total of all that is in any way or in any sense present to the mind, quite regardless of whether it corresponds to any real thing or not'. See Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, 8 vols (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), I, 141.

Cries plow the sea and air and turn to birth

Upon the people-sown, people-flowering earth. (*CP* 333)

These lines illustrate the process of human perception, which happens through a person's physical contact and interaction with the surrounding aspects of nature. Whatever comes into contact with the body, or vice versa, provides the mind with a source of thought and insight. Even the 'cries' of living things in the environment are internalised by people and they, in their turn, develop forms out of these physical phenomena. The excerpt includes two compounds, one of which has a passive participle, 'sown', while the other has an active one, 'flowering'. The two compounds, 'people-sown' and 'people-flowering', represent grammatically regular forms. What is extraordinary about them, however, is that Rukeyser takes two complex images demanding explanation and presents them as compounds with a simple one-to-one relationship between their elements. She takes the idea of people's interaction with their environment to an exaggerated degree; people are depicted as plants, which are close to the earth nourishing and sustaining them.

The last two examples of hyphenated compounds come from one of Rukeyser's untitled poems in *Body of Waking*. In this poem, there are two similar 'noun-verb' compounds with different verb forms, as can be seen in the following lines:

I have been lying here too long,

From shadow-begin to shadow-began

Where stretches over me the subtle

Rule of the Floating Man. (*CP* 351)

The speaker is complaining about the ubiquitous presence of the 'Floating Man' in her life. The two compounds, 'shadow-begin' and 'shadow-began', point to the length of time she lay in the shadow of the aforementioned man, which is what it takes the present time to become past, as shown in the tenses of the verbs. The verb 'begin' exists in both compounds, which implies that even when the event becomes part of the past it will still be a beginning. So, the presence of the man in question will be extended for still longer a period of time in the speaker's life. The unusual aspect of these two compounds lies in their indeterminate function in the sentence. It cannot be determined whether the compounds act as nouns, which they are supposed to be, according to their position between two prepositions, or as verbs, which their form indicates. Rukeyser here makes use of compounds to present a compact image of two time limits. Her deployment of verbs in these compounds signifies the continuous, inescapable presence of the 'Floating man' in the speaker's life.

Rukeyser's metaphorical use of hyphenated compounds keeps her readers engaged in the poetic experience; it stimulates them to contemplate the extraordinary combination of items in these compounds. The latter contribute to the dynamism of a poem, since the relationship between their parts is kept open to the reader's interpretation. The author allows her readers the opportunity to re-create the poem and incorporate their personal experience in the process of appreciating it.

As we have seen, compounds serve different functions in Rukeyser's poems. She exploits the flexibility of the English language to experiment with compounds. Most of the compounds discussed above contain verbs that are unusual in their sense and form; they do not, strictly speaking, seem to fit into the compound or the poem in which they appear. They struggle to fit into the poem even when it is daring in its subject matter or form. Through these forms and types of verbs, Rukeyser adds an element of surprise to the poem, which prompts readers to interact with it. The ambiguity of the compounds makes them flexible

enough to include different levels of meaning based on their relationship to their context within the poem. The compounds act mainly as figures of speech as do, for example, the two compounds, ‘people-sown’ and ‘people-flowering’ in ‘Phaneron’; people are not normally identified with plants in the way they are born or the way they grow. The compounds serve as body-related imagery that illustrates Rukeyser’s view of physical contact as a crucial factor of perception and inspiration.

In addition, by virtue of their function as figures of speech, compounds provide, as they do in poetry in general, a convenient way of presenting a compact image that can be easily associated with the thing it describes. A compound establishes, albeit tentatively and experimentally, a new idea in conjunction with its context. Geoffrey Leech draws attention to what he calls the ‘concept-making’ function of neologisms, which include compounds: ‘If a new word is coined it implies the wish to recognize a concept or property which the language can so far only express by phrasal or clausal description’.¹⁶⁶ So, compounding is a convenient way of presenting a condensed image or idea in a poem. The compound ‘people-sown’, for example, may embody a concept where we have humans being organically born out of their environment in the same way plants grow out of the earth and its elements. The compound’s body-related imagery highlights a creative sense of material reality that inspires the author to reconcile disparate elements of existence. The figurative images above provide a compact concept through which readers can contemplate their relationship with nature and imagine it as an intimate, constructive one.

Rukeyser’s poetic technique provides a stimulating experience that prompts readers to interact with her poems. The amorphousness of the compound in Rukeyser’s poetry triggers the readers’ effort to engage with the poem and work out its possible meanings. On the other

¹⁶⁶ Geoffrey N. Leech, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (London and New York: Longman, 1969), 44.

hand, Rukeyser's experimentation with compounds may compel readers to make associations that may not be logically supported within the context of the poem. A case in point is the compound 'river-throated' in 'Mother Garden's Round'. The expression describes a year but the poem does not provide a basis for this complex figure of speech. Her style is characterised by a combination of both overwhelming and thought-provoking qualities, which operate together to provide a sense of direction and encourage readers to ponder the levels of meaning that her poems suggest, bearing in mind the problems that her form entails for readers of her poetry.

Part III: Physical Design

In this part of the second chapter, I continue with the discussion of Rukeyser's style in terms of its being both coercive and suggestive. Here I study the physical aspect of her poetry, which she, with her organicist poetics, regards as an integral element of the writing and reading experiences. I explore the significance of various punctuation marks in her poems, specifically the colon in conjunction with extra spaces, as well as the combination of a full stop and a dash. These marks suggest ideas as to the relationship between images. For example, the colon both institutes open boundaries among images, which are both divided and bound by this device. Extra spaces serve as breathing points where readers may stop and imagine Rukeyser's associations, possibly comparing the latter to their own personal experiences and their idea of the interrelations among distinct aspects of existence. Moreover, the extra spaces around images allow for different types of relationships among them. Then I examine lineation in two of Rukeyser's poems. The meaning and form function interdependently to evoke distinct levels or aspects of the speaker's experience. Finally, I discuss the poet's juxtaposition of images, especially her experimentation with the montage, through which she reconsiders the boundaries separating the private and public aspects of her life, including those that isolate her existence from other people's lives. Rukeyser's creative

form encourages readers to contemplate the webs of meaning and the relationship among images in her poetry, yet overwhelming elements still exist in her writing. This combination may enrich the reading experience by providing an element of tension that involves the coexistence of contrary tendencies in the poem.

Physical features, which include punctuation marks and lineation, hold a prominent place in Rukeyser's poetics. She views punctuation as an organic factor that sustains relations among the parts of a poem and involves the reader and her body in the poetic experience when she reads and interacts with it: 'Punctuation is biological. It is the physical indication of the body-rhythms which the reader is to acknowledge'.¹⁶⁷ In an interview, when asked about her attitude to punctuation, she responds: 'I like punctuation very much. It is breathing. I had a rubber stamp made—"Please believe the punctuation"'.¹⁶⁸ This notion corresponds to Charles Olson's conception of the 'possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings'.¹⁶⁹ The physical process of breathing forms the basis of a poem's technique for Olson, as it does for Rukeyser. Both poets view the poetic experience as a mutual process, involving the body of the author as well as her audience. Just as a poem, for Olson, binds the poet's breathing to a reader's 'listenings', Rukeyser contended that 'Poetry is made by the hand of the poet, and if we read the poem, we take the imaginative experience through the eyes with a *shadow* of sound; if we hear it, we take it through the ears with a *shadow* of sight'.¹⁷⁰

Another idea where Rukeyser and Olson meet is that of the poem as an exchange of energy. Olson's hypothesis, framed in his idiosyncratic style, that 'A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the

¹⁶⁷ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 117.

¹⁶⁸ Rukeyser, 'Craft Interview', 165.

¹⁶⁹ Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 239.

¹⁷⁰ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 29.

poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader',¹⁷¹ was anticipated by Rukeyser's statement that 'In poetry, the exchange is one of energy. Human energy is transferred, and from the poem it reaches the reader'.¹⁷² The exchange of ideas and emotions between the writer and the reader is seen as a tangible process that can be observed, and perhaps gauged, just as natural forces are measured by scientists.

Therefore, in Rukeyser's poetics, both the poem and its readers enrich the reading experience with their interaction, despite their distinctiveness. This was echoed by Wolfgang Iser's notion of what he calls the virtuality of a work, which lies between the distinct realities of the text and the reader: 'It [the work] must inevitably be virtual in character, as it cannot be reduced to the reality of the text or to the subjectivity of the reader, and it is from this virtuality that it derives its dynamism'.¹⁷³ For Iser, as it was for Rukeyser, a work of art becomes concrete through the interaction between the reader and text. James McCorkle shares Rukeyser's notion of a poem as both an independent entity and a social one: 'The poem is always in the realm of betweenness or dialogue, neither wholly internal nor external; its space is autonomous yet can only be existent as a shared space'.¹⁷⁴ Although a text maintains a concrete existence in different forms, this aspect is extended when readers share in the writer's effort by engaging with the text and pondering its relevance to their personal life.

¹⁷¹ Olson, *Collected Prose*, 240.

¹⁷² Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 173. Peter Middleton suggests that Rukeyser's deployment of scientific concepts, such as energy exchange, stems from an interest, dominant in the mid-twentieth century among American writers and thinkers, in nuclear physics, which 'had such hegemonic cultural authority at the time that even thinkers whose domains might seem very far indeed from that of quantum physics nevertheless drew on its metaphors and epistemic status'. See Peter Middleton, 'Poetry, Physics, and the Scientific Attitude at Mid-Century', *Modernism/Modernity* 21, (2014), 153.

¹⁷³ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan, 1978), 21.

¹⁷⁴ McCorkle, cited by Anne Herzog, "'Anything Away from Anything": Muriel Rukeyser's Relational Poetics', 36.

1) *Punctuation and the Motifs of Speech and Silence*

Punctuation tools sustain the web of relationships holding a poem together, and may offer clues for levels of meaning that the text may suggest. For example, the extra space within lines supplements meaning and stimulates readers to consider its function in her poems. Her expressive use of space can be observed in ‘Poem Out of Childhood’, which is the opening poem in *Theory of Flight* (1935):

Breathe-in experience, breathe-out poetry :

Not Angles, angels : and the magnificent past

shot deep illuminations into high-school. (*CP* 3)

The first line is an invocation (its addressee may either be the speaker herself or the reader) to create poetry directly out of experience. The writing of poetry is portrayed as a natural, physical activity, one that is identical to the actions of inhalation and exhalation. An extra space separates this invocation from a colon at the end of the line. This space allows the reader to contemplate the previous statement and anticipate the ensuing part of the poem. It also emphasises the function of the punctuation mark it surrounds and charges the next statement with further significance. After depicting writing as an organic experience, the poem offers a succinct remark, ‘Not Angles, angels’, which is an adaptation of a saying ascribed to Pope Gregory the Great (540-604), when he saw a group of Angles at a slave market. By observing their ‘angelic’ appearance, Gregory wittily reconceived their label, using a pun which would have a great significance for England’s conversion to Christianity. So, here, a saying that is based on a personal impression and on an awareness of the power of punning, which relies on the physical affinities between words, has indirectly set in motion a great change in history.

By citing the pope's statement, Rukeyser affirms the links that bind the past to the present, and the private to the public. Her allusion to influences in her childhood stimulates her readers to re-visit their memory and explore seemingly insignificant details that may have determined the course of their life. The colons and spaces provide boundaries and bridges that simultaneously separate and link aspects of the speaker's life. They also prod the poem's readers to link the speaker's experience of writing poetry to their own attempts to understand their life. Joan Goodman records her impression of the innovative poetics of Rukeyser and Olson: 'My response to their poetry and poetics demands and affords me the journey into my own silences, delving for the story of myself—lost or invisible till now—resurfacing in the moment of telling my *istorin*, in reading, by writing, poems'.¹⁷⁵ Rukeyser's technique evokes the silences in Goodman's life and prods her to explore and express them in her own writings.

Another instance of Rukeyser's stylistic treatment of extra spaces as combined with colons can be found in the opening lines of 'To Enter That Rhythm Where the Self is Lost', included in *Waterlily Fire* (1962):

To enter that rhythm where the self is lost,

where breathing : heartbeat : and the subtle music

of their relation make our dance, and hasten

us to the moment when all things become

magic, another possibility. (CP 403)

¹⁷⁵ Joan Goodman, 'Eurydice Rising: Sound and Silence Perform the Body Poetic', *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* 4 (2007), 142.

The speaker provides a sense of her experience with a type of rhythm right from the outset. The reader reaches the verge of being ‘lost’ in the first line before being temporarily halted by the comma at its end. The second line is punctuated with two colons accompanied by wider spaces to give emphasis to the image of ‘heartbeat’ and illustrate its organic function in conjunction with breathing; the image of ‘subtle music’ illuminates the dynamic relationship between them. The colons signify the exchange that takes place between processes of breathing and heartbeats.

Rukeyser also employs the enigmatic technique of placing a colon at the beginning of a line, presenting a conversation without the names of its two participants. This gives the impression that the speakers could be any two people, including the readers themselves.

‘What They Said’, in *The Speed of Darkness* (1968), illustrates this special use of the colon:

: After I am dead, darling,

my seventeen senses gone,

I shall love you as you wish,

no sex, no mouth, but bone—

in the way you long for now,

with my soul alone.

: When we are neither woman nor man

but bleached to skeleton—

when you have changed, my darling,

and all your senses gone,

it is not me that you will love:

you will love everyone. (*CP* 439-40)

The colon at the beginning of each stanza is succeeded by an extra amount of space, to prepare for what would be a significant statement. The space signifies the mystery and silence that surrounds the subject of the afterlife, which people usually evade. It also prepares the reader for the shocking clause at the beginning of each stanza. In the first one, we have the macabre statement, ‘After I am dead, darling,’ which is mitigated and, at the same time, made ironic by a term of endearment; the second one starts with the stark and blunt ‘When we are neither woman nor man’. The speaker in the second stanza attempts to disillusion the other, beloved one. There seems to be a misunderstanding between the two speakers. The first one assumes that the other yearns for platonic or spiritual love, while the second is possessive of her lover and actually sceptical about purely spiritual love. The second speaker views the problem from a materialistic perspective. To her, death means dissolution and the substitution of a personal identity with a universal one. By adding colons without identified speakers Rukeyser hints that any part of the dialogue may belong to any type of interlocutor regardless of their gender. Through this tactic she avoids stereotyping the misunderstanding she raises in the poem.

As we have seen, Rukeyser’s employment of punctuation supplements meaning and the interactive relations among the parts of a poem. Colons hold her poem together by establishing a connection among its ideas and its images. They lend an element of ambiguity that challenges the reader to divine the purpose they serve in the text. They are utilised as porous boundaries that divide and, at the same time, link the parts of a poem, as Meg Schoerke observes: ‘Her [Rukeyser’s] colons sometimes suggest balance between lines or parts of lines, yet they also sometimes indicate division: the colons can serve as open gates,

but also as barriers'.¹⁷⁶ By means of this stylistic tool, the units of a poem appear as both distinctive from each other and interdependent. Colons stimulate what Rukeyser regards as a process of feedback among the various elements of a poem. She finds inspiration in the principle upon which engineering projects are founded:

Now a poem, like anything separable and existing in time, may be considered as a system, and the changes taking place in the system may be investigated. The notion of feedback, as it is used in calculating machines and such linked structures as the locks of the Panama Canal, is set forth.¹⁷⁷

Rukeyser makes an association between a technological concept and an aspect of poetic styles. Although the process she describes concerns a mechanical operation, it may apply to a poem, shedding light on the internal relationships characterising it. Her reference to changes happening within a poem might be an allusion to the manifold levels of meaning that an innovative style may offer to readers.

Spacing is exploited as an expressive tool in Rukeyser poetry. It performs the same function that silence does, in human speech. In an interview, she elaborates on her interest in this stylistic element:

I care very much about the air and the silence let into a poem, and I would like to work with other poets on ways of making this visual. Certainly the placement of a poem on the page can do most of it, but many readers do not take that meaning to be what it is, a metric rest. It's a question of measured rest in the poem.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Schoerke, "“Forever Broken and Made”: Muriel Rukeyser’s Theory of Form’, 29.

¹⁷⁷ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 186-7.

¹⁷⁸ Rukeyser, ‘Craft Interview’, 165.

Rukeyser points here to spacing as part of the rhythmic form of a poem. It is like adding complementary, harmonising notes to a piece of music. In ‘What They Said’ we can see how the space succeeding the colons provides ‘rest’ before the sudden impact of the beginning of each stanza.¹⁷⁹

Rukeyser’s manipulation of spaces within a poem corresponds to the scientific and engineering technique of ‘expansion joints’ as demonstrated in *The Life of Poetry*. This principle, which she regards as a universal one, is consistent with her relational poetics and her idea of the balancing forces in a poem: ‘Concrete must contain expansion joints, the strips of material that allow the forcing heat of these summers, the forcing cold of these violent white winters, to do their work. The principle of the expansion joint, you learn, runs through all’.¹⁸⁰ Extra spaces in Rukeyser’s poetry work like expansion joints; they organise the relationship between images, especially incompatible ones, if they are juxtaposed in an original manner. As we have seen in ‘Poem Out of Childhood’, seemingly unconnected aspects of the speaker’s life are placed together with extra spaces between them, as an acknowledgement of both their individuality and interdependence. Expressive spacing accommodates different types of relationships between images; an image can be flexibly

¹⁷⁹ The space at the end of a line in poetry may also operate within its metric system, as Christopher Ricks observes in his book *The Force of Poetry*. As well as marking the end of a line, a line ending can conversely function as a ‘pause’, technically and thematically linking lines together: ‘Unless the rhythm or the sense or the formal punctuation insists upon it, the line-ending (which cannot help conveying some sense of an ending) may not be exactly an ending. The white space may constitute an invisible boundary; an absence or a space which yet has significance; what in another context might be called a pregnant silence’. See Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 90.

¹⁸⁰ Rukeyser was interested in engineering projects and scientific principles since she was a child; she witnessed the building boom taking place around her then in her native city of New York. Moreover, her father worked in the construction business and he would take her on trips to some of the projects he was supervising. Addressing the reader, and herself, she reminisces in *The Life of Poetry*: ‘You are a part of the city. New York is a part of you. For your father is in the building business, and the skyscrapers are going up’. See Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 197-8 and 191.

related to either the preceding or succeeding image, or both; thus, it allows readers the chance to respond to the poem and generate feedback of their reading experience.

Iser points to the paradoxical situation of what he calls a gap or blank in a text: ‘Asymmetry, contingency, the “no-thing”—these are all different forms of an indeterminate, constitutive blank which underlies all processes of interaction’.¹⁸¹ The author elaborates on the source of this ‘blank’, contending that it ‘is not a given, ontological fact, but is formed and modified by the imbalance inherent in dyadic interactions, as well as in that between text and reader’.¹⁸² Disregarding the contradiction in terms of Iser’s statement, the latter does not address the question of a writer’s intentional formal manipulation of textual ‘gaps’. While he believes that ‘gaps’ represent an intrinsic aspect of the interaction between reader and text, Rukeyser intentionally and experimentally exploits stylistic tools, such as spacing, to stimulate that interaction.

Another instance of Rukeyser’s experimentation with punctuation can be observed in her combining of the full stop and the dash. In this way, her poem reconciles two contrary tendencies: that of the line to reach a terminal point, and that of its link to the next line in the poem. An example of this technique can be found in these lines from ‘A Birth’ (1958):

Nothing I wrote is what I must see written,

Nothing I did is what I now need done. —

The smile of darkness on my song and my son. (*CP* 335)

At the end of the middle line of the excerpt above, Rukeyser does not merely use a full stop to end the line, or a comma, either, to reveal the line’s connection to the next one, as she does in the first line. She deploys a full stop, to mark the conclusion of a temporal stage, together

¹⁸¹ Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 167.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

with a dash to show its connection to a new one; although we have two distinctive stages, one of them depends on the other. After the note of despair in the speaker's confession that what she did is not what 'I need done', the next line starts with a message of hope or 'smile'. The dash between them shows that only by failing will the speaker be able to move on from her previous situation and realise change in her life ('my son') and her art ('my song').

Rukeyser also employs this technique in 'Rite' (1958), which describes a girl's first menses and her coming to maturity. The following excerpt starts with the scene of a family grieving this event and ends with that of 'lions' being 'burnt' by 'hunters':

My father groaned; my mother wept.

Among the mountains of the west

A deer lifted her golden throat.

They tore the pieces of the kill

While two dark sisters laughed and sang.—

The hidden lions blare until

The hunters charge and burn them all. (CP 337)

In this poem, scenes from the speaker's life are interspersed with ones of symbolic significance.¹⁸³ Images of grief alternate with images of innocence and those of violence. The

¹⁸³ The poem contains allusions to two of William Blake's poems 'The Little Girl Lost' and 'The Little Girl Found' in his collection *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. The 'lions', which symbolise the power of 'experience' when a girl reaches the age of seven, in Blake's poem, are 'burned' by hunters in 'Rite'. While the mother's weeping in Blake's poem

symbolic images flow from and with the real-life ones so that they are part of each other. There is even enjambment linking the second stanza and the third one. However, Rukeyser applies the ‘full-stop-dash’ combination at only one of the junctures of the poem, as can be seen in the fifth line of the excerpt. It is used where the relationship between the images is not clear. The image of the two sisters laughing and singing is juxtaposed and compared with that of ‘hidden lions’ blaring until ‘burnt’ by hunters. By using the full stop together with the dash, Rukeyser shows both the contrast and identification of the two images, and the irony involved in that. By juxtaposing the two images, she points to the girls’ complete obliviousness of the momentous process, menstruation, occurring inside them. The lions signify the great potential of that experience, which may be wasted or distorted by the people witnessing or experiencing it.

As we have seen, punctuation institutes interactive relationships between the parts of a poem, contributing to its general effect as a web of connected images supplementing each other. In this way, punctuation acts as an organic factor in the poem, sustaining its dynamism and coherence, and providing a connection to readers, who can enrich the poem with their effort of engaging with its style.

2) *Lineation and Non-Linearity in Rukeyser’s Poetry*

Now we turn to an aspect of lineation in Rukeyser’s poetry, which is the way it breaks with linearity to reveal various levels of a speaker’s experience. The arrangement of lines on the page and in relation to one another suggests different nuances of feeling and levels of consciousness. Rukeyser uses ‘set-off’ lines to present a perspective different from the dominant one in a poem, as can be seen in ‘The Overthrow of One O’clock at Night’ (1968),

reaches a resolution when she views her daughter in a better ‘place’, the mother’s weeping in ‘Rite’ continues till the end of the poem, is ignored and the girl is allowed to undergo her full development.

which serves as the title and the first line of the poem. This is one of the poems written about the Vietnam War and it deals specifically with the time of day, at one o'clock, when it is both the middle of night and the start of day. At that time, people experience both night dreams, or nightmares, and the apprehensions of another day in war. Turning away from that atmosphere, the speaker searches for a source of hope and endurance in her personal life and accumulated wisdom:

Now I see at the boundary of darkness

extreme of moonlight

Alone. All my hopes

scattered in people quarter world away

half world away, out of all hearing.

Tell myself:

Trust in experience. And in the rhythms.

The deep rhythms of your experience. (*CP* 420)

The layout of these lines signifies aspects of the speaker's life. The lines on the right deal with her immediate reactions to war, from the perspective of her private self; the ones on the left are related to a broader, realistic view of the situation. The 'darkness' denotes the time of day and stands for her feelings of melancholy and hopelessness in response to the war raging in places away from her. At the 'boundary' of these emotions, there is intense light coming from the moon, which indicates a source of inspiration that the speaker detects. She is 'alone', since she cannot reach the people who are suffering in war. However, she maintains hope in these victims, who are 'out of all hearing', possibly imagining that they would

eventually be able to overcome their troubles. Towards the end of the poem, the speaker addresses herself with the invocation to derive enlightenment from her life experience and its 'rhythms', which are possibly the cycles of change characterising life and adding hope to it. So, on one side of the poem, we have the speaker's private sensations, which are driven by a superficial view of reality; on the other side, there is a wider outlook that takes into account the possibility of positive development, and it is based not simply on hope but on the speaker's practical experience.

In her war poems, Rukeyser's focus is on the human potential for endurance and change. These poems rarely contain gruesome details of war. For Rukeyser, a fixation with the actual brutalities of war limits the significance of a poem. Moreover, if the poem implies a specific political position, it may limit the possibilities of readers' interaction, since it directs their minds towards a predetermined viewpoint. Broaching the topic around the time of WWII, she expresses her disapproval of 'reactionary' war poetry:

One of the worst things that could happen to our poetry at this time would be for it to become an occasional poetry of war. A good deal of the repugnance to the social poetry of the 1930's was caused by reactionary beliefs; but as much was caused, I think, because there were so many degrees of blood-savagery in it, ranging all the way from self-pity—naked or identified with one victim after another—to actual blood-lust and display of wounds, a rotten sort of begging for attention and sympathy in the name of an art that was supposed to produce action.¹⁸⁴

For Rukeyser, the power of poetry lies in its ability to suggest ways of dealing with trauma instead of merely representing it, hence her transcendental outlook, tending towards mysticism, which some critics attacked, in their reviews of her poetry. Laurence Lieberman,

¹⁸⁴ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 210-1.

in his 1968 review of *The Speed of Darkness*, points to this feature when, commenting on the title of her poems, he notes: ‘The title of her new book is indicative of the oracular soothsaying of much of her writing. . . . Her mystical vision is so dominant in the mentality of some poems, the writing becomes inscrutable, as she packs her lines with excessive symbolism or metaphorical density’.¹⁸⁵ Lieberman’s criticism points to two qualities of her poetry: the ubiquitous existence of symbols and her vatic perspective of the issues she treats. Rukeyser saw these two qualities as balancing each other. While symbolism invites readers to appreciate and contemplate the aesthetic quality of her poems, the bardic outlook prompts a reader to be actively involved with the message of a poem, bearing in mind the overwhelming impact of this style, as suggested by Lieberman.

Rukeyser also experimented with ‘concrete’ forms of lineation in a number of poems in *The Speed of Darkness* (1968), such as ‘The War Comes into My Room’. In this poem, the lines are set in the form of what Victor Howes, in a review of *The Speed of Darkness* for the *Christian Science Monitor*, describes as ‘stairways of lines across the page’,¹⁸⁶ where each of what may be regarded as rungs occupies a separate line on the page. A set of short lines make up what appears as a full line before a new one is initiated, as can be seen in the following extract:

Knowing again
 that nothing
 has been spoken
 not now
 not this night time

 the broken singing
 as we move

¹⁸⁵ Laurence Lieberman, cited in Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision*, 309.

¹⁸⁶ Victor Howes, cited in *ibid.*, 311.

or of
 the endless war
 our lives
 that above all
 there is not said
 nothing
 of this moment (CP 425)

The lines represent attempts of the speaker to put into words her feeling of love for another person. As we visually follow the arrangement of the lines, we move further and further away from the rhythms of coherent expression towards fragments of speech, which seems partially suppressed, perhaps as a consequence of a social or political conflict. There is the feeling of something gradually diminishing, which is possibly the speaker's ability to express her love, by the end of each 'stairway'. What endures ultimately is the speaker's message, sent 'across the air'. In this poem, the form reinforces the meaning, conveying the stages through which speech passes before it becomes fragmented. The style is a stimulating one that elicits the readers' output. The silence implied at the end of each line invites their response, prompting them to ponder the truth of the situation alluded to in the poem.

3) *The Montage in Rukeyser's Poetry*

We have seen how punctuation and lineation operate in Rukeyser's poems: they reflect, in a visual form, the relations between the parts of a poem. In this way, they involve readers in the poem's speaker's experience by encouraging them to respond to the innovative technique. Rukeyser also incorporates montage techniques, presenting her imagery in thought-provoking combinations, although an overwhelming quality still exists in her poetry.

Rukeyser held a lifelong interest in cinematic arts and she worked on four films during the 1950s, two of which progressed beyond the 'idea stage', according to Rebecca Scherr.¹⁸⁷ She also worked at the Graphics Workshop in the Office of War Information, established during WWII.¹⁸⁸ Through her work, preparing and arranging posters, Rukeyser gained experience in the ways pictures and words can be juxtaposed and applied this knowledge to her writing. She thought of the artistic arrangement of images in modern poetry as similar to the montage techniques of cinematic art:

One characteristic of modern poetry is that arrangement of parts which strikes many people as being violent or obscure. It is a method which is familiar enough on the screen; when you see the picture of a nightclub, and then see the heroine's face thrown back as she sings, you make the unity without any effort, without even being conscious of your process.¹⁸⁹

Rukeyser calls attention to readers' reluctance to engage with modern poetry's unfamiliar, though innovative, presentation of imagery in the same way they do with cinema films, although both are guided by the same principle. Her observation underlies the encouragement

¹⁸⁷ Rebecca L. Scherr, 'Syn/aesthetics: Touch, Sound, and Vision in the Works of Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and Muriel Rukeyser', (PhD thesis, University of Minnesota, 2005), 170.

¹⁸⁸ In this period, Rukeyser began to develop distinctive views on politics and on the function of propaganda art in a time of war. She criticised the commercially-driven, manipulative practices of propagandists and this was probably one of the reasons she was not able to hold her post at the OWI for long. She sought to raise propaganda to the level of moralistic art, which brought her into disagreement with some of its practitioners: 'The advertising men made it clear that there were two ways of looking at ideas in a war against fascism. Those of us who were working on the project believed ideas were to be fought for; the advertising men believed they were to be sold'. A political view that is connected to this idea of propaganda is that governments at war tend to postpone clarification of its motive until the action ends. For Rukeyser, an ethical justification for war should be consistently clarified so that it is not exploited for other political purposes: 'During the war, we felt the silence in the policy of the governments of English-speaking countries. That policy was to win the war first, and work out the meanings afterward. The result was, of course, that the meanings were lost. You cannot put these things off'. See Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, pp. 20 and 137.

¹⁸⁹ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 18.

to readers to involve their physical senses more actively in the act of reading, instead of regarding it as a purely intellectual exercise.

‘Waterlily Fire’ demonstrates Rukeyser’s interest in the montage technique. It documents the fire that destroyed two of Monet’s paintings at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in April, 1958. The fire represents a watershed in Rukeyser’s life. By contemplating that incident, she is able to see her life as a process of change at times of difficulty. She uses the collage technique to express that process in all its aspects, the private and the public. Here, she questions the boundaries, or ‘walls’, separating her life, the painting, and the world at large:

The scene has walls stone glass all my gone life

One wall a web through which the moment walks

And I am open, and the opened hour

The world as water-garden lying behind it.

In a city of stone, necessity of fountains,

Forced water fallen on glass, men with their axes. (*CP* 406)

In the first line of the passage, the speaker displays a few facts of the scene, the materials out of which the museum is made. Then she links that event to her own life, since it marks an end of an era and the beginning of a new one. Through the fire she witnesses, she comes to the realisation that the paintings’ value depends on their relevance to her personal life and inasmuch as they embody a process of change, which they are supposed to symbolise, as Däumer observes in her comment on ‘Waterlily Fire’: ‘In the paintings’ dissolution of fixed forms, their attention to the changing movement of water and the play of color and light that

constitutes their endless appeal, Rukeyser would have found a pictorial analogue to her own poetic search for a “language of water,” undergirded by a relational vision in which everything is connected in fluid, sometimes mysterious, ways’.¹⁹⁰ Däumer’s remark intimates that the inspiration Rukeyser derived from the paintings before they were burnt enabled her to accept their destruction as part of a process with interconnected stages of development.

The poem’s images are interwoven so that each one flows from the other. The crumbling of the museum’s walls signals the opening up of the speaker’s personal life to the public world. Both realities are portrayed as a ‘water-garden’ similar to Monet’s imagery, where the depicted views are supposed to be indistinguishable from the viewer’s impression of them. Rukeyser applies the principle that guides the paintings to justify her juxtaposition of images, which reflects her idea of the overlap between the insular reality inside the museum and the one outside it, in the city at large and in her life. The style compels readers to make associations based on the speaker’s conception of a correspondence between her city, its museum and her personal life.

The speaker in ‘Waterlily Fire’ portrays her life as a process of growth taking place in a body which reflects all the stages of change instead of merely holding a finished product of any individual stage:

This is the long body : into life from the beginning,

Big-headed infant unfolding into child, who stretches and finds

And then flowing the young one going tall, sunward,

And now full-grown, held, tense, setting feet to the ground (*CP* 409)

¹⁹⁰ Elisabeth Däumer, ‘Context for “Waterlily Fire”’, in *Muriel Rukeyser: A Living Archive*, (2012) <<http://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org/essay/context-for-waterlily-fire/>> [accessed 10 November 2013].

The speaker's city and her life are viewed as a body where each stage of growth depends on previous ones. In this sense, the history of New York and her individual lifetime contain their stages of development at any moment in time. Rukeyser incorporates images of the growth of a physical entity to illustrate her notion of the processes of historical and personal evolution, which are closely related, as the poem suggests.

The idea of the interrelatedness of aspects of human experience echoes Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, to which Rukeyser alludes in several of her poems, such as 'The Place at Alert Bay' (1958), where the speaker offers the idea of a 'Tree of meanings where the first mothers pour / Their totems, their images, up among the sun' (*CP* 357). According to her, we nurture this 'tree' by providing it with our individual experiences:

We build our gifts: language of process offers

Life above life moving, a ladder of lives

Reaching to time that is resumed in God. (*CP* 357)

Human lives and experiences are rendered as a ladder with attached steps leading to a spiritual source. The latter provides a principle of development so that each life is linked to other lives. Rukeyser places together images of disparate elements which can only be related by their arrangement in the poem. An abstract concept, 'language of process' is described as furnishing individual lives, and the latter are seen to be similar to a concrete object, a ladder, which, itself, is given another dimension by being linked to history and to a divine entity. In order to accept all of these analogies readers would have to be familiar with, if not in agreement with, Rukeyser's interpretation and treatment of Jung's hypothesis of the collective unconscious.

Rukeyser also employs deictic expressions to affirm her idea of common threads underpinning human existence. In 'Waterlily Fire', the speaker repeatedly identifies herself

and her city with other people and cities in the world, reconsidering the boundaries separating her personal life from the public world. She expresses the notion that her city and the ‘walls’ of its museum, assumed to be immune to catastrophes, are as vulnerable to change as other places on earth: ‘Whatever can happen in a city of stone, / Whatever can come to a wall can come to this wall’ (*CP* 406). She later declares: ‘Whatever can come to a city can come to this city’ (*CP* 407). Rukeyser seeks to disillusion her American readers and counter their feeling of privilege, which may cocoon them and prevent them from imagining the possibility of crisis in their country or recognising the terrible conditions other people may suffer in the rest of the world. She assumes a common fate with the rest of humanity, with whom she shares a sense of vulnerability, which may inspire a desire for positive change.

Another example of self-identification in the poem is the speaker’s assertion that ‘Whatever can come to a woman can come to me’ (*CP* 409). Here, Rukeyser embraces her femininity with all the aspects it entails. She identifies herself with all women despite, or because of, their social and cultural differences. She bravely accepts her responsibility as part of a larger community of women, sharing their common experiences as part of her development. Rukeyser’s statement is more than an expression of solidarity with other women, or with other people in general, as she extends it later, ‘Whatever can happen to anyone can happen to me’ (*CP* 407). It is an act of opening up to life in all its complexity and unpredictability. It expresses the desire for sharing the calamities happening to unheard voices in the world, which is the essence of her idea of witness. Rukeyser goes beyond seeing what people see to implicate herself in what she witnesses so that she is responsible for dealing with it and responding to it.

Leslie Minot notes that ‘Deixis (the use of deictics) becomes in Rukeyser’s hands a way to ensure that poems and the world outside them interpenetrate, depend on each other, so that the reader must include the world beyond the poem in trying to understand the poem’s

meaning'.¹⁹¹ Rukeyser uses deixis as a means of transcending the boundaries that separate people from places, history and from each other. This stylistic tool enables her to create connections between the private and public aspects of her life, and make her existence and her poetry part of the life of her readers. She conceives of the different elements of her individual existence and those of other readers, as well as the social world in general, as interrelated and influential to each other. However, as Minot's comment makes clear, deixis constitutes a coercive factor of Rukeyser's style. She does not introduce a logical justification for her association of disparate elements, such as her personal life and the political world. The correlations are based on the force of her belief in their existence and in the overlap of the aspects of her and other people's lives. Unless readers are ready to embrace her perspective they will not be able to imagine the connections she makes in her poetry.

In the fourth section of the poem, entitled 'Fragile', Rukeyser incorporates an actual conversation, which she frames like a myth. She annotates it by saying that it 'deals with an actual television interview with Suzuki, the Zen teacher, in which he answered a question about a most important moment in the teachings of Buddha' (*CP* 620):

I think of the image brought into my room

Of the sage and the thin young man who flickers and asks.

He is asking about the moment when the Buddha

Offers the lotus, a flower held out as declaration.

'Isn't that fragile?' he asks. The sage answers:

¹⁹¹ Leslie Ann Minot, "'Kodak As You Go': The Photographic Metaphor in the Work of Muriel Rukeyser", in *How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?: The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 273.

‘I speak to you. You speak to me. Is that fragile?’ (CP 409)

In this part of ‘Waterlily Fire’, although the speaker is, apparently, aware of the interview as a television ‘image’, she ties it directly to her life by envisaging it as ‘brought into my room’. She deploys a word related to a television image, ‘flickers’, as a reaction of the young man in the show. Yet, she imitates the matter-of-fact language of a tabloid television show when she defines the lotus ‘offered’ by the Buddha as ‘a flower held out as declaration’. The images are characterised by a sense of confusion about what is merely part of a television studio reality, and the speaker’s perception of the show’s relevance to her life. This ambiguity paves the way for the interviewer’s questioning of the significance of a ‘fragile’ object in the ritual act of offering a flower to another person. The interviewee responds by affirming the value of the flower lies in the process of exchange involved and this is compared to communication in its validity and concreteness.

Through her rendition of the televised interview, Rukeyser raises the question of the significance of an image or a symbol, which may either be ritualistic or literary, for its viewer or reader. The act of exchange involved in both religious ritual and speech determines the value of the exchanged object or speech and makes them more concrete. Joan Adkins points to the import of the motif of verbal exchange in ‘Waterlily Fire’: ‘Communication [. . .] orders, arranges, and defines the disparity between the desire and the fulfillment’.¹⁹² Verbal contact gains a pivotal role here as a vehicle of both expression and action. When a message is exchanged, it fulfils its purpose, meaning, and potential. However, rather than clarifying this point, Rukeyser’s framing of the teacher’s response and subsequent question makes it ambiguous. We do not know exactly what is meant by the ‘fragility’ of a ritual or communication or what its inverse could be, in relation to the same acts.

¹⁹² Joan Adkins, ‘The Esthetics of Science: Muriel Rukeyser’s “Waterlily Fire”’, *Contemporary Poetry: A Journal of Criticism*, 1 (1973), 27.

By concluding the television interview in 'Fragile' with a response that valorises speech as a concrete, effective form of contact, Rukeyser indicates implicitly, in a self-referential manner, the significance of poetry as a connective, social process. Sherr, discussing Rukeyser's treatment of the motif of photography in her poem, argues that poetry offers the poet a more flexible means of presenting her imagery than photography would. She contends that poetry allows for a more democratic relationship between the writer and reader, enabling the author to eschew the power politics involved in the use of photography:

Rukeyser's an/aesthetics point to the impossibility of the photograph to convey meaning on its own [. . .] a critical, intermedial poetry can potentially de-mystify our culture's ways of seeing, revealing the power of the look, and then it can go deeper into corporeality.¹⁹³

Rukeyser extends the meaning of the television interview by including a reply that poses a question to the show's viewers and, indirectly, the poem's readers. She challenges the view that speech and, by extension, poetry is 'fragile' by affirming its social communicative value over other forms of representation.

Despite the emphasis on social communication in 'Fragile', the style of this section of 'Waterlily Fire' tends to be overwhelming, especially when the idea of a ritual act is extended to cover communication as a form of exchange. By framing the idea of speech in a television interview, Rukeyser exploits early television's potential for influencing and shaping public views and trends. In 'Fragile', Rukeyser incorporates a casual conversation in what is supposed to be a television show, challenging the boundary between the public and private in the same way early television did in a culture of consumption. Janet Thumim observes that

¹⁹³ Rebecca L. Scherr, 'Syn/aesthetics', 156.

in the 1950s, the domestic site of consumption and the self-conscious simultaneity of audiences' television experience makes it part of everyday life, part of mundane experience in ways that fundamentally alter previously crucial structuring boundaries such as those between past and present, here and there, self and other/s.¹⁹⁴

Rukeyser presents the idea of dialogue and verbal exchange as the factor which determines the meaning of cultural symbols and breaks the boundary between the public world, poetry, and daily life. However, readers may not share her view of the importance of speech or accept the implied address to them in the last line of the poem (“I speak to you. You speak to me. Is that fragile?”). As we can see from this discussion of Rukeyser's work, despite the web of meanings suggested by her juxtaposition of images and motifs, a coercive element lingers in her poems. This may create tension in her readers' minds between treating the poem as a stimulating artefact that invites their intellectual feedback, and viewing it as a transformative tool that triggers their active response and enables them to make poetry part of their daily life and their system of belief.

¹⁹⁴ Janet Thumim, *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris and Co Ltd, 2002), 3.

CHAPTER THREE

The Suffering Body in Rukeyser's Poetry:

From Immanence to Transcendence (1960s and 1970s)

Part I: The Ill Body

This chapter deals with Rukeyser's engagement with the suffering body in its different forms: the ill, the despised and the imprisoned one, respectively. It explores her depiction of experiences of physical trauma. The first part of the chapter discusses Rukeyser's definition of the relation binding an ill entity to its condition, which points to her conception of illness as a factor in the evolutionary development of the normative body and identity. I also study her portrayal of her personal experience of illness in a number of autobiographical poems. I examine the way that disability instigates her to search for a poetic form to represent it, and the conflict it generates within her as she negotiates her agency during illness, which has an effect on the manner she views the world around her and on her ability of using language for self-expression.

1) Illness and the Normative Body

The subject of illness occupies a prominent place in Rukeyser's poetry. One of her early poems that tackle it is 'In Hades, Orpheus', which was written in 1933 but not published until 1938 in *US I*. In the poem, the heroine, acting as a modern-day Eurydice, is in hospital. She is reluctant to leave and go back into the outside world with her lover, Orpheus, who tries to lure her away from the hospital. She erects a barrier to defend herself from the world of people, choosing instead the safety of the hospital with its 'mechanical white walls' (*CP* 118), which signify death or Hades, the sphere to which Eurydice, in the original myth, is confined. Eurydice prefers the stasis of her secluded realm to the social world of movement

and activity which, nevertheless, involves illness. Perhaps the female protagonist, who stands for Rukeyser herself, senses that this physical experience poses a threat to her creativity, which she seeks to protect from the traumatic aspect of her personal and social life.

In another poem, 'The Book of the Dead', illness is seen in more realistic terms. It is not viewed simply as a negative condition but as an element that might be interwoven with a person's life. One of the poem's sections, 'The Disease', is supposed, according to its title, to describe the symptoms of the disease in question, silicosis, and this seems to be its direction at its beginning: 'This is a lung disease. Silicate dust makes it. / The dust causing the growth of' (*CP* 86). The phrase stops here. There is a sudden shift to an exposition of the results of a diagnosis of a silicosis case. Instead of indicating the manifestations of the disease, the analysis draws attention to the affected parts of the body, suggesting that the illness has become part of the body:

This is the X-ray picture taken last April.

I would point out to you : these are the ribs;

This is the region of the breastbone;

This is the heart (a wide white shadow filled with blood).

In here of course is the swallowing tube, esophagus.

The windpipe. Space between the lungs. (*CP* 86)

After the objectless introduction, 'I would point out to you', the speaker delves directly into an analysis of the X-ray results. A list of the affected parts is given without the condition that has befallen them. The illness is dispersed over several parts and has established a strong bond with the body. That relation is next shown to be that of 'Model conglomeration' (*CP*

86), reflecting the complex ties between entities in the commercial world, since the poem deals with the Hawk's Nest tragedy, where miners died of silicosis as a result of corporate greed and negligence. The doctor's matter-of-fact analysis looks on illness as similar to a company with branches and relations extending over much of the body. However, there is no reference in the medical account to the suffering of a real human being who has to cope with her illness.

Juxtaposed with and offsetting the doctor's professional, unsentimental exposition is the subjective expression of a complaining silicosis victim:

‘It is growing worse every day. At night
I get up to catch my breath. If I remained
flat on my back I believe I would die.’ (CP 86)

Illness maintains a constant presence in the victim's body. The speaker makes adjustments for his illness by standing to ‘catch’ his breath and not lying down on his back for an extended period of time. The person who is addressed by the doctor enquires: ‘It gradually chokes off the air cells in the lungs?’ (CP 87). The victim and the illness compete for air; silicosis is personified and shown to be draining oxygen from its host's lungs. So, a reciprocal tie is gradually established between the illness and its victim. In spite of its detrimental influence, illness functions as an inseparable part of the body; silicosis is sustained by one of the body's resources, oxygen, just as the other organs are.

In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser mentions a visit she made to the Rockefeller Institute, where she observed a rabbit under ‘fluorescent lights’ that displayed not only the locations of cancer in its body but also the way that the illness had instituted a relationship of interdependence with the body. In this case, it is difficult to isolate cancer as the sole source

of the physical problem. The latter needs to be redefined in terms of the body's relation with its illness. Rukeyser overhears a conversation between a 'research doctor' and a 'biophysicist', who 'were dealing with cancer and the body on which it fed as one thing—an equilibrium which had been set up, in which the cancer fed on the host. One could not exist in this state without the other in that state. It was the relationship which was the illness'.¹⁹⁵ Rukeyser advances the scientifically-inspired view that illness is not merely an external influence caught from a creature's environment; it builds a relationship through which it coexists with its host and causes harm in her body. Rukeyser is probably reacting to what Avrahami calls 'the prevailing cultural imperative to treat disease as exogenous to the body and, by implication, as alien to life itself'.¹⁹⁶ This perspective may have motivated medicine's military metaphors, which demonise illness to provide patients with an incentive to fight and defeat it, instead of first understanding its relationship with the body. In the context of her discussion of the metaphors surrounding cancer, Susan Sontag expounds on this attitude, similar to a 'colonial war', where 'the disease itself is conceived as the enemy on which society wages war'.¹⁹⁷ Rukeyser's example of the rabbit experiment suggests that a militarist approach which does not take account of the way the body constructs a bond with its ailment may cause physical harm even as it seeks to eradicate the illness.

On an abstract level, the relation between illness and the body is similar to that between pain and the way it is concretely pictured in the mind, as delineated by Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain*. According to her,

pain only becomes an intentional state once it is brought into relation with the objectifying power of the imagination: through that relation, pain will be transformed

¹⁹⁵ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 12.

¹⁹⁶ Einat Avrahami, *The Invading Body: Reading Illness Autobiographies* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 22-23.

¹⁹⁷ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and Aids and Its Metaphors* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), 67.

from a wholly passive and helpless occurrence into a self-modifying and, when most successful, self-eliminating one.¹⁹⁸

Similarly, while illness, despite its physical symptoms, is essentially an intangible state that is not represented in the world of objects as a thing-in-itself, the body suffering from it constitutes an object that has a concrete presence. Thus, the two entities are complementary elements that depend on each other for their functioning. Illness induces a heightened degree of sentience in the body, which objectifies that sensation and physically frames it. In 'The Book of the Dead', silicosis brings to the surface the circumstances of the tunnel workers' suffering in the Hawk's Nest tragedy. The incident led to legal actions in favour of the workforce in general. Thus, the victims instigated, with their illness, change by indicating underlying social ills that infested the American capitalist system at the time. Rukeyser praises them and affords them a historical role:¹⁹⁹

These are our strength, who strike against history.

These whose corrupt cells owe their new styles of weakness

to our diseases (CP 109)

Silicosis is linked here to social problems that contributed to its development. The illness is not merely a condition that befell individual victims; it indicates larger issues that represent its roots and need to be addressed for the illness to be fully treated.

¹⁹⁸ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 164.

¹⁹⁹ Details of the Gauley Tunnel disaster gained the attention of media when *New Masses* published several pieces about it in 1935. Other publications, such as the *People's Press* and the *Daily Worker*, followed suit, especially when hearings were held about the incident at the U.S. House of Representatives in January and February of 1936. Through these and other activist efforts to publicise the incident, by the end of 1937, forty-six states passed legislation ensuring the protection of workers from the threat of silicosis in industrial sites. See Dayton, *Muriel Rukeyser's 'The Book of the Dead'*, 20.

Rukeyser questions the privileged status of health compared with that of illness, typically viewed as a temporary, despised state that does not have a constructive role for a person's identity or creativity. In *Orpheus*, she rethinks, through myth, the relationship between binaries such as the fragmented and the integrated body, art and the artist's personal life, as well as poetry and action. At different points of the poem, there is an incantation for the mutilated parts of Orpheus's body to come together so that he, and his art, can be resurrected. The protagonist's 'wounds' entreat him to acknowledge and include them: 'The wounds : Touch me! Speak to me! Love me!' (CP 289). The wounds seek physical contact, communication and emotional interaction from Orpheus. This attitude towards his wounds would ultimately turn them into an opportunity for self-understanding and artistic self-expression. The poem's hero sheds the constricting influence of sentimentality in order to reconcile the contrary elements of his existence:

And now the wounds losing self-pity change,
they are mouths, they are the many mouths of music.

And now they, disappear. He is made whole.

The mist dissolves into the body of song. (CP 293)

These lines mark two stages that Orpheus undergoes as he engages with his wounds: that of transforming them into 'mouths' and that of incorporating them into both his regenerated body and the work of art created by it. He gains a holistic sense of his identity and creativity by accommodating distinct aspects of his existence, such as his wounds, his art, his life, and his death, instead of thinking of them as binaries where an element exists by distancing or outlawing its counterpart.

Another poem where illness is embraced as integral to life and creativity is ‘Mendings’ (1976), dedicated and addressed to Alfred Marshak, a geneticist and ‘political radical’ who was a friend of Rukeyser from the time she lived and worked at the California Labor School in the mid-1940s.²⁰⁰ In ‘Mendings’, healing is seen to be the purpose and the end product for the scientist’s efforts in the same way other tangible items, such as bread and poems can be produced: ‘You made healing as you wanted us to make bread and poems’ (CP 560). The addressee is furnished with the divine act of healing. He prompts the speaker to regard the poems she writes with the sense of urgency he attaches to his medicine-related science, which is seen to be a gift that he offers to humanity:

In your abrasive life of gifts,

In the little ravine telling the life of the future

When your science would be given to all,

A broken smile. (CP 560)

The addressee’s moral attitude to his research is consistent with Rukeyser’s view of poetry, when she declares that ‘writing is only another way of giving—a courtesy, if you will, and a form of love’.²⁰¹ His efforts are sustained by the hope that their fruit will be available to all people one day. The scientist’s ‘gifts’ come out of struggle that involves the meeting of opposites. They are associated with both his ‘abrasive life’ and his ‘broken smile’.

The next lines deal with the relationship between illness and the healthy or healed body:

In the sun, speaking of the joining of nerve-endings,

Make the wounds part of the well body.

²⁰⁰ Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 634.

²⁰¹ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 55.

Make a healed life. (*CP* 560)

The image of ‘nerve-endings’ indicates the sensory system that enables the body to make contact with its surroundings, part of which is the ‘sun’. For the speaker, the medical procedure of ‘joining’ nerve-endings embodies that of integrating the ‘wounds’ in the normative body. Here, healing constitutes the reconciliation of illness and the healthy body, and the wounds contribute to the process of recovery.

Rukeyser continues with her description of Marshak, pointing to her impression of his physical defect:

You shouted, waving your hand with the last phalange

Of the little finger missing, you whole man,

‘Make it well! Make things accessible!’ (*CP* 560)

The addressee’s faculty of inspiring people complements his being; despite his physical impairment, he is ‘whole’ in the speaker’s view. Marshak’s vocation enables him to extend his being by reaching out to an audience. This makes him whole in the eyes of the speaker despite his disfigured finger. He empowers her to reconcile the conflicting elements of her character: ‘Marshak, I was your broken nerve-endings, / You made your man-made bridges over the broken nerves’ (*CP* 560). She looks on herself as fragmented ‘nerve-endings’. She seeks to overcome that condition by drawing inspiration from the teachings of her mentor, Marshak.

A poem where illness, medical treatment and the healthy body coexist and overlap is the light, short poem ‘Back Tooth’ (1976):

My large back tooth, without a mate for years,

at last has been given one. The dentist ground her down

a bit. She had been growing wild, nothing to meet her, keep her sane.

Now she fits the new one, they work together, sleep together,

she is a little diminished but functioning, all night all day. (*CP* 555)

The speaker's back tooth is personalised from the outset. It is portrayed as an individual entity seeking a 'mate' for some time. Providing it with a companion new tooth involves grinding it down. Its solitude causes instability in its 'character'; it acts like a recalcitrant person and the only solution for its crisis, according to the speaker, is a mate to keep it company. After being treated to fit the new one, and despite being reduced in size, the back tooth fulfils its existence and performs its regular 'activities' with its companion. Although the tooth has no control over its fate, it is satisfied with its changed state, since it is offered a way out of its seclusion. The speaker's sense of fatalism in the face of medical intervention turns into a feeling of optimism; her tooth is able to capitalise on its new, partly healthy state for a shared mode of being. The speaker copes with her treatment by thinking of the 'diminished' and the newly-installed tooth as complementing each other.

Rukeyser negotiates the question of illness with regard to another person, her sister, in 'Two Years', a short, autobiographical poem:²⁰²

Two years of my sister's bitter illness;

The wind whips the river of her last spring.

²⁰² The poem deals with the period of illness that Rukeyser's sister, Frances, suffered for two years. Frances, seven years Muriel's junior, died of cancer in 1971. According to Rukeyser's biographers, the reason her sister's illness is described as 'bitter' is that it could have been treated had it been discovered by physicians earlier. See Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 629.

I have burned the beans again. (*CP* 490)

This poem combines three ways of representing the speaker's sister's illness. The first line lays out the facts of the case, ostensibly without reference to the speaker's impression. Even the descriptive adjective 'bitter' is linked to the illness and not directly to her. Nevertheless, the expression carries an implication of grief on the part of the speaker. In the second line, the situation is rendered figuratively; the illness is compared to a wind that violently extinguishes the last trace of her sister's life. Although the metaphor constitutes a masked and indirect manner of approaching the situation, the forcefulness of the literary figure betrays the speaker's rage and regret at her sister's illness, the cause of her death. The third line marks a shift to a completely different mode, that of a casual reference to her daily life, excluding the sad memory of her sister's death from it. The image of the speaker burning the beans in the last line may also allude to her act of exaggeration involved in her metaphoric statement in the second line. This poem shows the difficulty of artistically transcribing the Other's illness when a personal, familial bond is involved and when the difficult balance between sentimentality and objectivity needs to be maintained.

2) *The Question of Representation in Rukeyser's 'Stroke' Poems*

Rukeyser's poetry underwent a process of transformation through her personal encounters with illness. A gradual change in her style commenced after her experience of caesarean childbirth and non-consensual hysterectomy, when she embarked on a process to break with her previous technique of employing myth, embracing instead a more personal form in her poetry, as can be seen in 'Nine Poems for the Unborn Child' (1948). This transition was probably accelerated by her successive strokes, the first of which she suffered in 1964.

Denise Levertov defines Rukeyser's first stroke as 'that crucial illness after which her work changed so much'. She compares it to her own early stage of learning: 'It rhymes with

my childhood in which I lisped very badly and came out of that'.²⁰³ For Levertov, Rukeyser became more articulate, as if she learned, through the painful yet ultimately constructive experience of illness, a new, more immediate way of expressing herself. Several other critics commended the development in Rukeyser's style starting with her volume *The Speed of Darkness* (1968). In his review of the latter, Lieberman approved of the direct style that began to distinguish her poetry at this stage of her career: 'Her firmest art is in the linear and straightforward delivery of her story-telling anecdotal poems, the longer biographical poems, and letter-poems to friends expressing an open declaration of personal faith'.²⁰⁴ This critical view reflects the transformation that aesthetic taste underwent between the advent of modernism and the late twentieth century. While modernism promoted the artistically complex depiction of poetic experiences, the American literary movements that gained prominence in the 1960s, such as that of the Confessional poets, emphasised the more candid portrayal of quotidian life situations.

The shift in literary taste was stimulated by the momentous changes in American life during the post-war years, such as economic growth and the advancements in communication technologies, among which came television, bringing images of the public world into people's homes. These developments especially caused what Leslie Ullman defined as the 'quaking of the boundaries between self and world even as the stronghold of the self was being celebrated as intact, in a presumed and superficial manner, by the wealth of conveniences and opportunities being made available to the individual'.²⁰⁵ Rukeyser herself anticipated and embraced these changes as early as 1958, when she witnessed the emblematic destruction by fire of a number of Monet's paintings at the Museum of Modern Art in New

²⁰³ Denise Levertov, cited in Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision*, 311.

²⁰⁴ Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision*, 309.

²⁰⁵ Leslie Ullman, 'American Poetry in the 1960s', in *A Profile of Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, ed. Jack Myers and David Wojahn (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 191.

York. In 'Waterlily Fire' (1961) she exploits that event to highlight the passing of an era and the coming of a new one where boundaries between people, and between them and the outside world, suddenly crumble and break. A stanza of the poem starts with an image of the speaker's vulnerability to the developments of her age and ends with the opportunity that that affords for a deeper mutual understanding between people:

This journey is exploring us. Where the child stood

An island in a river of crisis, now

The bridges bind us in symbol, the sea

Is a bond, the sky reaches into our bodies.

We pray : we dive into each other's eyes. (*CP* 409)

The passage betokens the time Americans lost their insularity around the end of WWII. They passed the stage of their 'childish' innocence, of witnessing but not engaging actively in world events. At this new stage, they were hurled into the realm of large-scale international politics. For the speaker, this situation, facilitated by the advances in communication tools, presents the chance of exploring cultural and psychical affinities among Americans and between them and other nations around the globe. This reality may confirm the Jungian idea of the collective unconscious, hence Rukeyser's reference to 'symbol' and the 'sea' as 'bridges' and a 'bond', respectively. Through technologically-induced communication, a body-based spirituality can emerge, seeking fulfilment in human broadmindedness and contact.

Rukeyser's late poetry heralds a new stage in her career that is concomitant with the upheavals in American culture and society during the mid-1960s. Her poems develop a direct style, as they are liberated from the comparatively more esoteric quality distinguishing many

of her poems in her early and middle career. The complex, modernist-inflected poetry had passed through a process of ‘purification’, as Kertesz terms it,²⁰⁶ and it became more accessible to a youth generation that recognised the implications of literary, cultural and political issues in their daily life. This transformation in Rukeyser’s style can be observed by comparing ‘Woman as Market’ (1968), one of her illness poems, to one of her mid-career poems, ‘Night Feeding’ (1958). The latter depicts a personal, physical, female experience that had been rarely if ever portrayed before, which is that of breastfeeding. Like ‘Woman as Market’, this poem starts with the speaker’s oscillation between remembering and forgetting, which the new experience has instigated, ultimately turning away from intellectualising that condition and towards instinctual belief in its potency. The poem is dominated by symbols that indicate Rukeyser’s interest in Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious, in addition to her trademark mystical expressions, such as ‘seed’, ‘burning’, ‘growth’ and ‘renewal’.

After presenting the literary figure of ‘the black snake with gold bones’ at the end of the first stanza, the speaker makes extensive use of symbols in the second one, delineating her sensations of waking to breastfeed her baby:²⁰⁷

Black sleeps, gold burns; on second cry I woke

fully and gave to feed and fed on feeding.

Gold seed, green pain, my wizards in the earth

walked through the house, black in the morning dark.

Shadows grew in my veins, my bright belief,

²⁰⁶ Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision*, 311.

²⁰⁷ The symbol of a snake, which appears in many myths, is employed, in relation to the colour black, to signify the deeper self of the speaker, whose body responds instinctually to her baby’s cries when she experiences a state of semi-wakefulness that seems to evoke her subconscious.

my head of dreams deeper than night and sleep. (*CP* 340)

The speaker attempts to depict the alternating degrees of consciousness using convoluted colour imagery. While black stands for the unconscious, since it is associated with sleep, gold, which is associated with the conspicuous act of ‘burning’, appears to represent full awareness and knowledge. The speaker points to the sensuous feeling she derives from her motherly act of breastfeeding with the expression ‘fed on feeding’. This may also refer to the potential her experience holds as a source of creativity, itself rooted in the physical body and in earthly existence as the images ‘Gold seed, green pain, my wizards in the earth’ suggest. There is a sense of incongruity as ‘shadows’, perhaps standing for levels of reality or consciousness, are provided with life (‘grew’) and flow like blood in the speaker’s veins. Belief is also vested with a colour quality, ‘bright’, which raises intuitional faith to the status of knowledge and assurance.

‘Night Feeding’ starts with a confident portrayal of the speaker’s initial stage of awareness, which is ‘Deeper than sleep but not so deep as death’. On the other hand, ‘Woman as Market’ begins with a modest sense of inquisitiveness; the speaker reiterates the open question ‘What was it?’ The speaker of the former knows where she is going, so to speak, finding an alternative to her forgetting in belief and the subconscious, but in the latter the state of indeterminacy persists until the poem’s end, where the speaker declares ‘I have forgotten what it was / that I have been trying to remember’ (*CP* 441). The imagery of ‘Night Feeding’, with its symbols and the blending of the abstract and the tangible through myth, affords the impression of a journey inside the self and towards the subconscious. However, in ‘Woman as Market’, Rukeyser maintains her deployment of concrete and straightforward imagery throughout the poem. Basically, we have grocery items that the speaker encounters in her daily activity of shopping. These items undergo a superficial process of rearrangement; they are seen in a new light as a result of the stroke, or ‘lightning’ that she momentarily

suffers. Instead of the assured note and the symbolic imagery of her earlier poem, here readers are afforded an insider's view of the poet's struggle to find a new structure to express her illness, with questions such as 'What did those forms say? What words have I forgotten?' (CP 441) She has her poetic material but is trying to find a suitable framework to express it.

In 'Woman as Market' we initially have a view of shop items placed in standard arrangements, as 'ranks of eggs' and 'loaves of dark and light'. Abruptly, with the condition the speaker experiences and consciously acknowledges as a 'moment of morning' and the 'moment of the eggplant', the items lose the impression of order imposed on them.²⁰⁸ The speaker recognises that they are enriched by their variety and their separate, concrete contours and hues:

the lemons? the fresh eggs?

with their bright curves and curves of shadow?

the reds, the yellows, all the calling boxes. (CP 441)

While the items mentioned at the beginning of the poem are preceded by direction prepositions and organised into phrases, the ones in the second list above are displayed as individual and distinctive. The speaker attempts to extrapolate a meaning out of the configuration of these fragmented items. She tries to find a source of inspiration in her

²⁰⁸ Rukeyser believed firmly in the idea of a sustaining artistic form, but hers was a flexible one, as the following excerpt reveals:

People have said that we contemporary poets are writing without form. I was brought up with forms and care very much about them. [. . .] But the idea that form has to be the forms of the past is nonsense. I was startled to read of Thurber's anger when he found out that the world wasn't necessarily round, that it might be pear-shaped. He said he couldn't stand it, he wanted to have form. I'd be happy with the form of a pear.

As we can see, Rukeyser accommodates both the traditional and innovative types of form. She even manages to reconcile them in original ways in some of her poems, such as 'Käthe Kollwitz' (1968). See Rukeyser, 'The Education of a Poet', 284-5.

experience. She suggests tentative answers: ‘God in the cloud? my life in my forgetting?’ In her process of self-probing and the search for form, she ‘forgets’ the content of what she seeks to recall.

Rukeyser’s employment of the literary figure of ‘lightning’ in ‘Woman as Market’ raises the issue of the metaphorical rendition of illness. Sontag indicates the risks of employing metaphors to allude to illness, citing TB, cancer and AIDS. She explains that masked expressions may engender myths and stereotypical notions that distort an ill person’s self-image and damage her social relations. Although she concedes that ‘one cannot think without metaphors’, she affirms that ‘the most truthful way of regarding illness—and the healthiest way of being ill—is one most purified of, most resistant to, metaphoric thinking’.²⁰⁹ For Sontag, so long as the mystery of fatal illnesses, such as AIDS, remains unsolved for lack of an effective cure, they invite negative metaphors that denigrate the ill and exacerbate their feelings of shame and guilt. Nonetheless, many writers have criticised this radical, though well-intentioned, rejection of illness metaphors. They argue that the employment of metaphors may offer a convenient way of depicting pain, which already presents challenges to writers, since it is difficult to delineate linguistically. Virginia Woolf describes her illness in despairing terms: ‘A physical feeling as if I were drumming slightly in the veins: very cold: impotent: and terrified. [. . .] No atmosphere round me. No words’.²¹⁰ Thus, metaphor affords a necessary, though risky, tool of alluding to an experience that can be rarely expressed in words.

Rukeyser’s use of the metaphor of ‘lightning’ in ‘Woman as Market’ allows her to put into words an event that is so sudden that it is impossible to capture except as a fleeting sensation, like the abrupt, blinding one of seeing lightning. Illness here gives the impression

²⁰⁹ Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 3 and 91.

²¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, cited by Kathlyn Conway, *Beyond Words: Illness and the Limits of Expression* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2007), 86.

of inspiration with the moment of transformation it promises. Thus, it is portrayed as light by the unassuming speaker, who has not yet fathomed its full physical impact. The value of this metaphor is that it renders verbally a momentary sense of shock, foreboding and mystery that happens before the body realises the stroke's consequences. Even so, the image obscures the concrete physical and personal aspects of the speaker's infirmity and her attempts at coping with it, emphasising instead the significance of that experience to her writing and her search for a language to express her illness.

In this poem, Rukeyser adopts a radically different view of form from that of *Orpheus* (1949), where the speaker asserts that 'All myths are within the body when it is most whole, / all positions being referred to flesh in unity' (CP 288). Here the protagonist experiences a moment similar to Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, which 'manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of special identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality'.²¹¹ Orpheus's creative initiative is based on turning his mutilated, fragmented body and song into an organised whole. The mythical narrative in this poem operates as a framework that gives meaning to Rukeyser's personal experience and allows her to express it without referring to it directly, which would have been anachronistic at the time the poem was published. On the other hand, in 'Woman as Market', the speaker's stroke causes a reaction against rigid structures. She regresses to a formative stage similar to Julia Kristeva's *chora*, in which 'the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his [*sic*] unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him'.²¹² It is a watershed moment for the speaker, since she loses memory of the standard rules of logic and expression previously organising her life. She reverts to a psychic

²¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Publications, 1977), 4.

²¹² Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 28.

stage through which she views the shop items in front of her as fragments. They are no longer distinguished by the usual way in which they are arranged or grouped. She is able, in her sharpened sense of vision, to see the concrete, individual qualities, the ‘curves’ and colours of these items. Andrea Wright comments on the poem’s ‘raw’, ‘rough’ and ‘unfeminine’ language through which Rukeyser ‘convey[s] the necessity for discovering and writing a female language’.²¹³ ‘Woman as Market’ can be regarded as a feminist effort at finding a language free from the influence of ‘patriarchal’ forms, to which Rukeyser was prey at one stage of her career, and the rebellious, innovative spirit of emerging movements in the 1960s may have facilitated or justified this act of revision.

Another poem where images of routine activities are interrupted by ‘lightning’ that the speaker experiences is ‘Before Danger’ (1976). Rukeyser reinforces the impression of a terrible, sudden incident, occurring at the end of the poem, by initially offering a series of observations that reveal the speaker’s fertile imagination when she makes note of even the minute objects surrounding her, in order to make poems out of them. There is no shortage of material that can be turned into poetry even in an urban environment such as Broadway, the setting of the poem:

Blowing across traffic. Against the legs.

Held for a moment on the backs of hands.

Drifts of poems in doorways. (*CP* 551)

The speaker suggests that quotidian life brims with poetry-inspiring scenes, affording a source of images for the perceptive and creative mind. However, there is a transitory quality

²¹³ Andrea Rohlf's Wright, ‘Masks Uncovered: Fe(male) Language in the Poetry of Muriel Rukeyser’, *Conference of College Teachers of English Studies* 60 (1996): 36.

to these views of daily life; the speaker has to be as vigilant as a photographer waiting to catch an image before it disappears and hides among other things.

The portrayal of people as parts of bodies, legs and hands, evokes an image of the body as fragments in poems such as *Orpheus* and 'The Antagonists' (1949), where 'pieces of animals, pieces of all my friends' are in conflict before they 'meet and resolve' in the speaker's 'being' and the history of her land. In *Orpheus*, the protagonist is resurrected when the fragments of his body meet and become whole through his song, whereas the parts of people's bodies in 'Before Danger' do not come together to make up a holistic entity. They end up being 'drifts of poems', which suggests an image of things heaped together by wind, and soon to be dispersed by it, randomly finding their way near the doors of houses.

This precarious state of being is affirmed when the speaker suffers a stroke in the second stanza of the poem:

Late at night, in a dark-blue sleep,

the paper stopped blowing.

Lightning struck at me from behind my eyes. (*CP* 551)

The advent of 'lightning' is first felt in her 'dark-blue sleep'. This is foreshadowed by another occurrence: the 'paper', which stands for her ability to perceive things and turn them into images in her poetry, (the expression appears as 'torn paper' on people's 'faces' in the first stanza) ceases to 'blow'. The condition becomes more concrete and traceable when it 'strikes' the speaker 'behind' her eyes, affecting her vision, the principal faculty through which she observes and appreciates the world around her. Thus, the stream of images does not continue past this point, and here lies the significance of the poem's title 'Before Danger'; rather than delving into the impressions of the illness, the poem mainly attempts to re-capture

some ephemeral images witnessed before the speaker's stroke. 'Lightning' is experienced in daylight in 'Woman as Market', where the speaker's predicament inspires her to question traditional standards of writing and rediscover, or 'remember', different ones. Conversely, in 'Before Danger' the illness, at least in its initial stage, does not have a constructive role in the speaker's search for an expressive form of writing. It simply prevents her from the full interaction with her material as an artist.

A poem where Rukeyser faces up bravely to the challenge of representing pain, forging her own language to do this is 'Resurrection of the Right Side' (1976). Here, we join the speaker's desperate attempts to transcribe her experience of a stroke and the process of coping with and, later, recovering from it.²¹⁴ The poem starts with images where senses become confused when part of the body is alive and another dead:

When the half-body dies its frightful death

forked pain, infection of snakes, lightning, pull down the

voice. Waking

and I begin to climb the mountain on my mouth,

word by stammer, walk stammered, the lurching deck of earth.

Left-right with none of my own rhythms

²¹⁴ Rukeyser contextualises this poem by mentioning, in a public reading of it, the story of an ill man having treatment for partial paralysis in hospital. The man keeps telling the hospital staff that there is a dead person in the bed next to his. They tell him that he is mistaken and that something like that would not happen at the hospital. He is not convinced, saying: 'It did happen and I'm going to sue the hospital'. They discover that he is actually referring to his 'repudiated, injured, ailing side', so his disability has made him deny a part of his body, of himself. 'Resurrection of the Right Side' portrays the speaker's attempt to keep hold of her body as a holistic entity despite the fracture it suffers. She reiterates the expression 'left-right', maintaining a connection to both sides of her body throughout her experience, which leads, in the poem, to her process of recovery. See Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 633.

the long-established sex and poetry. (*CP* 545)

By virtue of her partial paralysis, the speaker is in an extraordinary situation; using the part that is still alive, she is able to witness the death of a part of her own body, with all the pain that that conflict entails. It is a traumatic event that produces the sense of being buried in a grave with the 'infection of snakes'. The speaker's voice is smothered. Upon waking, she commences the strenuous effort of speaking, like that of climbing a mountain, as if doing that for the first time. The effort is so demanding that it is similar to walking on an unstable, shaking surface, 'the lurching deck of earth'. Rukeyser juxtaposes distinctive ways of communication and movement, 'word by stammer, walk stammered', to illustrate their overlap for the speaker as well as her struggle to get over her confusion, when she no longer controls the sustaining forces, or 'rhythms', of her life, which are 'sex' and 'poetry'. For her, these two elements typically act like music, giving a sense of purpose and dynamism to her existence.

The speaker moves on to the question of agency when she offers the image of her pushing up a ball, saying: 'I go rolling this ball of life, it rolls / and I follow it whole up the slowly-brightening slope' (*CP* 546). The illness creates a distance between herself and her life, which is characterised by an effort that evokes Sisyphus's futile act of rolling a ball up a slope, just to see it sliding down again. Yet Rukeyser does not carry the metaphor to the extent of futility. Instead, she reveals the mechanical character of a routine action: 'I walk the long hall to the time of a metronome / set by a child's gun-target left-right'. This happens together with another development, when agency begins to shift in the speaker's favour: 'A whisper attempts me, I whisper without stammer' (*CP* 546). She is able to speak properly by succumbing to her powerlessness, allowing her body to act on its own and inspire her effort at recovery.

Another poem that deals with the issue of self-control during illness is 'Recovering' (1976). Here, Rukeyser explores the sources of inspiration to which illness leads her despite the loss of agency it involves. She is in direct contact with revelations that attach her to communal psychic and historical realms:

Dream of the world

speaking to me.

The dream of the dead

acted out in me.

The fathers shouting

across their blue gulf. (*CP* 552)

The speaker is being addressed by different types of voices and she serves as the medium through which they are 'acted out'. The underlying image of a common consciousness through which she is bound to her forebears and to 'dreams' of people in general, even dead ones, recalls once again Carl Jung's idea of the collective unconscious. If we regard the poem as an autobiographical one, this is a theory that Rukeyser believed in for much of her life. Still, through her stroke, she was able to experience personally that reality, as the poem reveals. Her powerlessness exposes her psyche and her body to inspirational forces that aid her self-expression.

Later, as the speaker begins to recover from her condition, she undergoes stages in the regaining of self-control. The poem's layout, composed of distiches, simulates the fluctuations and the momentary nature of the impressions associated with the speaker's situation:

Something again

is beginning to be born.

A dance is

dancing me.

I wake in the dark. (*CP* 553)

In the last stages before recovery, the speaker initially takes a detached stance towards her illness, demonstrating that the latter has robbed her of her ability to control her body. She elaborates on this with the image of a 'dance' manipulating her into dancing, an action that requires the agent's intention and initiative in order to be realised. Finally, the speaker demonstrates her gradual process of reclaiming her power over her body by applying the personal pronoun 'I'; she is able to undertake the action of waking, despite the partial quality of her recovery, since it takes place 'in the dark'.

Part II: The Despised Body

In this section I discuss Rukeyser's view of the relationship binding the elements of several types of binaries. She presents constituents of dichotomies such as female-male, body-mind, private-public, and poem-poet, initially as distinct but equal, and subsequently as interdependent. The boundaries that are supposed to separate the items of a binary overlap, and although they are merely instituted for logical and practical convenience, they are, in some cases, essential for a process of material exchange that creates dynamism in human life. Then I focus on Rukeyser's positing of the question of prejudice, which is founded on a binary where one element is inferior to another, assumed to be superior. This can be clearly observed in the social phenomenon of racism, in which essentialist notions of the body result in an antagonistic relation with the Other. We witness Rukeyser's definition of the Other and

her depiction of attempts to deal with it, to the extent of sacrificing the self by embracing the despised entity.

1) *Binaries and the Relationship between their Elements*

Rukeyser participated actively in the liberal atmosphere that began to pervade American culture in the 1960s. A poem where she rebels against long-held myths in Western thought is 'The Speed of Darkness', included in her volume of the same name, published in 1968. The poem starts with a series of sweeping, Whitman-like statements that challenge myths of sexuality and gender:

Whoever despises the clitoris despises the penis

Whoever despises the penis despises the cunt

Whoever despises the cunt despises the life of the child.

Resurrection music, silence, and surf. (CP 465)

Here the speaker gives a list of sexist positions towards gendered parts of the body, deploring these attitudes and affirming the equality of the genitals of both sexes. She attempts to demystify, and even sanctify, these physical organs by ultimately linking them to the 'life of the child'. The comparisons allude to historical gender conflicts and the way they are associated with a reluctance to acknowledge sexuality, as well as the other gender, as represented by parts of the body. This issue is contextualised by underlying voices, 'resurrection music', 'silence' and 'surf', deployed separately from the first three lines of the poem. These voices, serving as stages of cyclical history, are made distinct, with extra spaces, yet they coexist and indicate a process of transformation. The speaker hints at a significant historical stage that may cause change to the biased notions of gender distinctions outlined at the outset.

Rukeyser's direct reference to sexual parts of the body recalls Freud's theory of 'penis envy', which conceives of female as derivative of male sexuality; the former develops as a feeling of loss, since a young girl regards her vagina as a 'wound' resulting from castration of an originally existing penis. Thus, according to Freudian psychoanalysis, she looks on the male organ as a part that complements hers, and she covets her father's possession of it. This yearning finds an outlet in her desire to have a child, which is supposed to compensate for her lack of a penis.²¹⁵ By equating female genitals with male ones, Rukeyser affirms that women have their own sexuality, independent and equivalent in status to male sexuality. The poem echoes feminist criticisms of the Freudian theory's 'patriarchal' strains. These concerns came to the fore with the second wave of the movement, represented by feminists such as Betty Friedan, who held that 'Freud's feminine psychology did not promote gender equality but perpetuated the age-old suppression of women'.²¹⁶ His ideas of female sexuality were attacked some time before that, as early as the 1920s, by such psychoanalysts as Karen Horney and Melanie Klein, but the 1960s provided an especially propitious atmosphere for the advancement of this debate.²¹⁷

After identifying myths attached to the gendered body, Rukeyser goes on to set forth instances of the cultural binaries, suggesting that they are not exclusive opposites but complementary elements. Silence, typically the inverse of its privileged counterpart, speech, is seen in a positive light, as a chance for contemplation that paves the way for a timely

²¹⁵ Samuel Slipp, *The Freudian Mystique: Freud, Women, and Feminism* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1993), 16.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

²¹⁷ These contemporaries of Freud disapproved of his application of the Oedipus complex to female psychology. They denied that 'penis envy' or the 'castration complex' were the principle factors for the evolution of a feminine identity. Instead they asserted the role of the mother, the family and culture in the pre- and post-oedipal stages contributing to the formation of a gendered identity. Rukeyser associates 'despise' of the vagina, significantly deploying the denigrating, taboo expression 'cunt', with that of the child's life, therefore affording the mother a pivotal role in the early stages of human development. See Slipp, *The Freudian Mystique*, 15 and 16.

response to a new stage in history, conveyed by the image of darkness invading the atmosphere:

No longer speaking

Listening with the whole body

And with every drop of blood

Overtaken by silence

But this same silence is become speech

With the speed of darkness. (*CP* 465)

Though it is not of her choosing, being ‘overtaken’ by it, the speaker is able to capitalise on her imposed silence by ‘listening’ with the ‘whole body’ and with ‘every drop of blood’. This condition prepares her for speech, at an auspicious moment, when it is most needed, which is that of the ‘speed of darkness’. She implies that speech and silence are complementary rather than irreconcilable. The expression, a reiteration of the title, posits ‘darkness’ not merely as the negative counterpart of light but as an aspect that provides meaning to the silence indicated in the poem, turning it into speech. The allusion to ‘darkness’ in terms of its speed makes it a process that does not preclude the existence of light. We get the sense of a cyclical process: light and darkness are interdependent, since one leads to the other in the same way that night and day are ordinarily interlinked.²¹⁸

²¹⁸ Rukeyser’s reference to ‘silence’ and its significance is probably connected to the period in her career, during the 1950s, to which she referred as the ‘intercepted years’, when her writing activity slackened after she was prolific between the mid-1930s and the late 1940s. The diminishment of her output was due to factors such as the censorship Communist-affiliated writers suffered during the McCarthy purges as well as the demands parenting exerted on her as a single mother until her son entered college in 1964. However, speaking of that period in retrospect, Rukeyser did not believe that she was compelled to choose between mothering and writing. She possibly regarded that period as an opportunity to discover new poetic forms by engaging more fully with her personal experiences. It was

In the fourth part of the poem, Rukeyser elaborates on the relation binding other types of binaries. After the depiction of a city in the wake of ‘heavy rains’, when the ‘lifting of mist’ makes the sky appear clear, bringing activity back to the place, the speaker reflects on the significance and function of boundaries in daily life:

I remember the buildings are space
 walled, to let space be used for living
 I mind this room is space
 this drinking glass is space
 whose boundary of glass
 lets me give you drink and space to drink
 your hand, my hand being space
 containing skies and constellations
 your face
 carries the reaches of air
 I know I am space
 my words are air. (*CP* 465-6)

The passage starts with the image of buildings not as exterior to space, protecting people from the outside world. The buildings here are actually space, ‘walled’ to allow a proper utilisation of it. For the speaker, the buildings’ walls are not supposed to isolate people from

succeeded by a new stage of her career when she became more outspoken about public concerns of her time, especially after her first stroke, in 1964, hence her allusion, in this poem, to the ‘speed of darkness’. See Daniels, ‘Preface: “In Order to Feel”’, xiii.

their environment, instituting exclusive binaries of what can be regarded as ‘outside’ and/or ‘inside’; they enable the occupants to use space effectively. The significance of the boundary separating the buildings from their surroundings is reduced to that of absolute expediency.

The exemplified concept becomes clearer with the image of a glass in which a drink is offered to somebody else. The glass boundary facilitates this act and it is the means through which the other person partakes of the contained water that she needs. The glass embodies a form whereby the hands, ‘containing skies and constellations’, are empowered to conduct the specific task of offering water, in its container, to its recipient.²¹⁹ In the same way, the face, as part of a living thing, holds significance beyond its limited features, since it ‘carries the reaches of air’. The speaker characterises herself as ‘space’, in line with her inflated description of hands, and depicts her ‘words’, pointing to the poem in a self-referential manner, as ‘air’, which gives form to the space that her body represents. The poem offers a concrete way for readers to interact with the author in the same way the air that living things breathe enables life to exist on earth. This suggests that people’s need to exchange poetry is comparable to their demand for air, which is constantly exhaled and inhaled in a life-sustaining process. Rukeyser lays out what appears to be a philosophical treatise on the relationship between humans and objects: rather than merely instituting material boundaries in relation to people, objects act as a means of exchange among them, thus fostering the

²¹⁹ This instance of a drinking glass giving an exchangeable structure to water brings to mind Rukeyser’s idea of poetic styles, whether conventional or innovative, as an essential means of transcribing an experience and sharing it with readers. In response to the charge that contemporary poets write without form, she notes: ‘In order to give something to somebody there must be the form to shape the experience. It’s difficult to make the equivalent of an experience, to make a poem that is so full of the resources of music and of meaning, and that allows you to give it to me, me to give it to you’. So both writers and readers need form as a medium that binds them together and to the poem, which is thereby enabled to communicate to its audience. In this sense, it sustains and extends the dynamism of the poem rather than constraining it despite the necessarily bounded framework it constitutes. See Rukeyser, ‘The Education of a Poet’, 285.

cosmic connections binding people together and to their environment, or the ‘space’ they live in.

The trope of poetry as air appears in Rukeyser’s translation of Octavio Paz’s poem ‘Life of the Poet’, included below in its entirety:

Words? Yes, made of air,
 And in the air dissolved.
 Give me your gift, to lose my self in words,
 Let me become the air on living lips,
 One breath that goes wandering without barriers,
 Scent of a moment in the air diffused.

Even so light in itself is lost. (*CP* 363)

The speaker takes a realistic view of poetry. To her, the poem, essentially composed of words created by the imagination of its author, is similar in its intangibility to air. Once it is offered to the general public it is even ‘dissolved’, losing its original identity and assuming another, since it forgoes its original connection to its author. The speaker wishes to be reincarnated in her poetry so that she is liberated from the constraints of her existence. Therefore, her life can be perpetuated beyond ‘barriers’ as her work reaches readers or ‘wanders’ among them. In the last, separate line the speaker proclaims that the details she has outlined in the poem hold significance in spite of the fact that light is transitory, triggering a comparison to air as a figure for writing; a poem fulfils its existence by reaching out to its readers, notwithstanding the risk of its being dispersed, like air, when it gains levels of meaning different from its original ones.

After addressing the gender dichotomy in the first one, the tenth part of ‘The Speed of Darkness’ tackles the body-mind binary. We witness a scene where two lovers are ‘lying’ beside each other, with the feeling of excitement and dreaminess that this situation evokes. However, the speaker appears to be in a reflective mood:

Lying

blazing beside me

you rear beautifully and up—

your thinking face—

erotic body reaching

in all its colors and lights (*CP* 467)

The beloved is elevated in the speaker’s mind when she discovers that both the ‘thinking face’ and ‘erotic body’ equally reinforce the beauty of the person she loves. Then the speaker progresses from the act of balancing to one of reconciliation, where the body is composed of parts that are not merely discrete and equal in status but actually complement each other:

not colored body-and-face

but now entire,

colors lights the world thinking and reaching. (*CP* 467)

The poem advances from the resolution of the mind-body or instinct-intellect dualism to an all-inclusive platform, confronting other manifestations of polarity. The body, in its sensual and intellectual aspects, is viewed in terms of the problem of binaries in the public arena, where the body-mind question becomes multifaceted, involving resolution of the different

types of social conflicts instead of the single, bounded entity that the speaker or her beloved represents. The poem attempts to overcome not only the boundaries separating the individual body from the mind but also those dividing the lovers from the world outside the small private realm of their relationship.

‘The Speed of Darkness’ presents, in its twelfth part, an image that alludes to Rukeyser’s hypothesis of the poem as a transcendent entity. The speaker dreams of a ‘big-boned’ young man who tries with difficulty to ‘get the live bird out of his throat’. The speaker is negotiating the possibility of identifying with the young man, the bird, or both, recognising the unstable reality of the experience she describes: ‘I am he am I? Dreaming? / I am the bird am I? I am the throat? (CP 467) She considers the image’s significance to her personal life, tending to relate to both of its elements, therefore conflating them. The bird is supplied with concrete features: ‘A bird with a curved beak. / It could slit anything, the throat-bird’. It has an independent life and character distinct from its ‘father’, yet it is still connected to its source, the throat it has emerged from. The bird’s ability to ‘slit anything’ is combined with that of singing, since it ‘Begins to sing’.

The image of the ‘throat-bird’ implies the impression of the poem as both an independent entity that can be flexibly interpreted by different readers, and a living testament of the author’s experience, life and creativity. The poem, once it is put on paper and published, has a life of its own but it retains its link to its author, whose existence is perpetuated with her poem when the latter is appreciated by its readers. Rukeyser’s reference to the bird’s ‘curved beak’ resonates with Emily Dickinson’s injunction to ‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant’,²²⁰ proceeding with the justification that:

Success in Circuit lies

²²⁰ Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. R. W. Franklin (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 494.

Too bright for our infirm Delight

The Truth's superb surprise²²¹

According to Helen Vendler, Dickinson's statement may be a response to Jesus Christ's defence of allegorical parables in relation to sinners, which is 'That seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand; lest at any time they should be converted, and their sins should be forgiven them'.²²² Vendler argues that Dickinson's precept runs counter to this statement, since the former aims 'not to hide it [truth] from those preferring untruth [as Jesus' utterance seems to recommend], but rather to mediate it, out of kindness, to those as yet too weak to bear its glare'.²²³ Rukeyser goes a step further by conceiving of the figurative language of art as an active tool, bearing the potential of instigating change; the speaker asserts that the 'throat-bird' with the curved beak 'could slit anything'. Through this image the author rethinks the boundaries that are supposed to separate dreams or the unconscious from daily reality, as well as an author from her work of art. She also rejects the barriers keeping a poem away from practical life.

2) *The Marginalised Other and Its Relation to the Self*

The question of boundaries in relation to buildings is tackled from a different angle in 'Despitals' (1973). The poem commences with a vow not to 'despise' an aspect of city planning, which is its 'backside':

In the human cities, never again to

despise the backside of the city, the ghetto,

²²¹ Ibid.

²²² Mark 4:12, cited by Helen Vendler, *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), 431.

²²³ Helen Vendler, *Dickinson: Selected Poems and Commentaries*, 431.

or build it again as we build the despised

backsides of houses. Look at your own building.

You are the city. (*CP* 471-2)

The speaker criticises not only a derisive attitude to ghettos but also the policy of partitioning the city so that it is composed of a privileged section and a marginalised one, where undesirable elements are isolated. Yet she is not targeting a present phenomenon. She is warning builders or occupiers not to re-adopt a prejudiced position that was prevalent at a previous stage of history. In addition, she sets up an analogy between the public world of the city and the private one of individual houses. She implies that it is difficult to separate oneself from any part of the city, since readers embody that entity as a whole.

The speaker goes on to list what she perceives to be ‘despised’ races in her society: Jews, described as ‘ourselves’, blacks, portrayed as ‘our darkness’ and homosexuals, seen as building other people with their ‘touch’. She disregards the imagined threat of these elements and promotes a type of democracy that embraces them ‘wherever it takes us’. Here she transcends the ‘separate but equal’ legislative doctrine with its repercussions in social and cultural life, to suggest that different races cannot be severed from each other, since aspects of them form part of every American. She reassures readers that it is unrealistic to envision these minorities as submerging the white majority, since the latter, with whom the speaker identifies herself, are ‘too productive, too reproductive / for our present invention’ (*CP* 472). Perhaps ‘present invention’ refers to the American democratic system, which underwent noticeable changes during the late 1960s, when oppressed sections of society, principally

black Americans and women, were able to achieve some of their rights as a result of long-running struggles.²²⁴

The expression ‘present invention’ implies a precarious situation; the speaker is unsure of its continuance into the future, like an experiment which may or may not succeed. If the expression pertains to democratic developments at the time, it anticipates further tensions among social groups. Rukeyser explores the idea of liberation giving way to other forms of discrimination in ‘What Do We See’. The poem provides instances of privilege to some groups giving way to acts of injustice to others. Here is how it starts: ‘When they’re decent about women, they’re frightful about children, / When they’re decent about children, they’re rotten about artists’ (CP 472). ‘What Do We See’ concludes in a fatalistic, despairing note:

When they’re decent to Jews, they dread the blacks,

When they know blacks, there’s always something : roaches

And the future and children and all potential. Can’t stand themselves

Will we never see? Will we ever know? (CP 473)

²²⁴ By the time ‘Despisals’ was published, in 1973, marked progress had been achieved on some of the civil rights fronts. The efforts to end racial and gender discrimination, which included court cases, strikes, demonstrations, as well as violent action, resulted in President Lyndon Johnson’s endorsement of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965. These acts, which sought to end discrimination in public facilities, workplaces, schools, and in voting practices, were embraced by the majority of Americans. However, shortly after they were adopted, a number of disadvantaged Americans protested the acts and what they perceived to be their breach of meritocracy and individual rights, especially with the enforcement of employment and admission quotas. The creator of the New York Housing Authority commented, at the time, on this phenomenon: ‘The year 1965 is seeing the racial issue snarled in conflicts between one right and another. Equality under laws is confronted by the claim that the long subordination of the Negro’s rights demands preferential treatment, which in turn is attacked as “discrimination in reverse”’. With her warning note at the beginning of the poem, Rukeyser is concerned about a regression to the times of open and legislated prejudice as well as any newly-generated type of it. See Dennis Deslippe, *Protesting Affirmative Action: The Struggle Over Equality After the Civil Rights Revolution* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2012), 2.

The speaker pinpoints the fact that justice to one social group comes at the expense of oppression to another one. She espouses a realistic outlook towards equality initiatives, invoking readers to be vigilant to their possible undesirable consequences.

The speaker's comparison of cities' ghettos to houses' 'backsides' in 'Despised', alludes to the rapid growth of suburbs in the post-WWII era, when Americans sought to flee the noise and crowdedness of cities towards the security and privacy of newly-constructed houses around urban areas. Suburban houses were available to buyers who could afford them, and those were mainly middle-class white Americans. Thus, cities came to be dominated, at least in some of their parts, by racial minorities, especially black Americans, who were kept at bay, within their urban ghettos, through the process of suburbanisation. Robert Norrell notes that virtually all the public-housing projects launched in American cities during the two decades after WWII 'conformed to existing patterns of racial segregation—i.e. projects identified as black went up in existing black ghettos and those viewed as white were built in white areas'.²²⁵ By relating the issue of racism with city and house planning, Rukeyser points to the racial principle motivating the reorganisation of cities, cautioning against its maintenance at a time, the late 1960s and early 1970s, when American society was liberalising.

The metaphor in the expression 'despised backsides of houses' indicates backyards and the way they betoken the desire for privacy from outside influences. Though the backyard is part of the suburban home, it mainly constitutes a protective layer separating the home-owner from the unknown hazards of the streets or areas at the back of the house. According to Dianne Harris, 'Postwar backyards were inherently more private than their predecessors because most development plans of the period did not include service alleys or back lanes running behind the lots, so that the rear garden became less subject to intrusion than ever

²²⁵ Robert J. Norrell, *The House I Live In: Race in the American Century* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 165.

before'.²²⁶ Rukeyser criticises discriminatory attitudes on the private level of people's homes and on the official one of city planning. For her, segregated or marginalised elements of society are part of each individual. Thus, exclusion of these identities on the public level contributes to the repression of integral elements in the individual's psyche. Here, Rukeyser makes a connection between public practices and their repercussions in a person's private life.

In an attempt to offer a radical and thus more lasting alternative to lawfully sanctioned or enforced equality, Rukeyser zooms in to the body, which is both a universal and individual entity. She points to the cultural tendency of privileging parts of the body and disdaining others:

In the body's ghetto

never to go despising the asshole

nor the useful shit that is our clean clue

to what we need. Never to despise

the clitoris in her least speech. (*CP* 472)

The body is portrayed as a city with a ghetto of body parts that are 'despised', owing to the assumption that they are inconspicuous and do not seem to serve any useful function for the body. Associating the latter with the city, the speaker suggests that common notions of the body are culturally-acquired rather than inbred, just as monuments are man-made and not natural. The passage encourages readers to reconsider their culturally-developed conceptions and regard their bodies in purely objective terms that embrace all parts or aspects as equal in

²²⁶ Dianne Harris, 'Race, Class, and Privacy in the Ordinary Postwar House, 1945-1960', in *Landscape and Race in the United States*, ed. Richard H. Schein (New York: Routledge, 2006), 138.

functionality and utility. The poem hints that this idea can be applied to the question of racial identity, suggesting that undeniable physical appearance differences between races do not justify racist attitudes, which are cultural constructs.²²⁷

‘Despises’ reaches a crucial stage as it draws to its end. After tackling examples of separate despised parts of the body, the speaker celebrates the physical aspect of her identity, therefore reconciling its fragments after their equal value has been asserted in the previous stanza:

Never to despise in myself what I have been taught

to despise. Not to despise the other.

Not to despise the *it*. To make this relation

with the *it* : to know that I am *it*. (*CP* 472)

The speaker makes a decision to cope with the alienated elements in herself and her surroundings, rebelling against the notions she has been ‘taught’ and embracing the Other in its different forms. She concentrates her efforts on accommodating what is denigrated by virtue of its material character. She progresses from establishing a relationship with the ‘it’ to identifying with it. ‘It’ may refer to many things, but it applies principally to the speaker’s

²²⁷ Rukeyser’s view of racial identity corresponds to that of Franz Boas (1858-1942), who was a pioneer of modern anthropology. Boas wrote extensively on racial antagonism and scrutinised the biological, historical and cultural justifications supporting it. In an essay entitled ‘Class Consciousness and Race Prejudice’, published in 1943, he holds that ‘The existence of any pure race with special endowments is a myth, as is the belief that there are races all of whose members are foredoomed to eternal inferiority’. Boas’s view is based on the notion that most racial groups from different parts of the world have experienced a great degree of intermingling over time, so there are no exclusively distinct physical or mental characteristics which completely distinguish groups from each other. Rather, there are combinations of traits that different races share by virtue of intermixing. Likewise, with her identification of racial identity and the body, Rukeyser suggests that both are composed of combinations of distinct yet interrelated elements upon which life, both of the individual and of society, depends for its sustenance. See Franz Boas, *Race and Democratic Society* (New York: Biblio & Tannen, 1969), 19.

body, according to the context of the lines above. The pronoun ‘it’ is initially italicised, which suggests that it is an ill-fitting element. Next, it is incorporated as a congruous part of the sentence, functioning first as an object and then as a subject complement. The speaker even revises the English grammatical rule that narrowly categorises the pronoun ‘it’ as corresponding to non-human creatures or things. When applied to the physical aspect of character, this standard linguistic rule institutes the Cartesian theory of a mind-body binary, where the mind ends up being the privileged constituent and the body the undervalued one. The poem challenges that theory by presenting the body as the self rather than a separate aspect of it.

The speaker identifies with her body in absolute, non-gendered terms. She transcends gender differences by thinking of herself as an ‘it’ rather than a ‘he’ or a ‘she’. She intimates that an essentialist perspective of biological distinctions is founded on cultural constructs, and advances the idea of the body as a neutral or androgynous entity, emerging as a unifying rather than a divisive factor. This recalls Simone de Beauvoir’s remark when she notes: ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine’.²²⁸ De Beauvoir is one of the feminists who downplayed the role of biological factors in defining gender. She admits that a woman’s physical attributes help us understand her, but she repudiates the idea that they ‘establish for her a fixed and inevitable destiny’, arguing that ‘They are insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes; they fail to explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her to remain in this subordinate role for

²²⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), 273.

ever'.²²⁹ This view would be picked up by a later feminist writer, Monique Wittig, who asserts that 'what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction [. . .], which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as any others but marked by the social system) through the network of relationships in which they are perceived'.²³⁰ Wittig's opinion of the body goes beyond a simple male-female dichotomy. She rejects the tendency to define a man or woman in terms of their adherence to or divergence from stereotypical notions associated with one or the other gender; so if a lesbian, for example, refuses the roles of a woman, it does not necessarily mean that she decides to assume the roles of a man.

In 'Despitals', Rukeyser conceives of the body as an open entity, creating in effect an intricate formula to accommodate homosexuals, who do not subscribe to heterosexual notions of a normative, exclusive gender division. 'Despitals' is a development and concretisation of the concept of the artistic body as an androgynous entity, which she presents in poems such as *Orpheus* and 'Käthe Kollwitz', where the artist is able to sustain her creativity by reconciling the female and male elements of her psyche. The speaker in 'Despitals' rises above sex labels by announcing 'I am it'. This contradicts her essentialist perspective of the female body, which she explores in poems such as 'Nine Poems for the Unborn Child' (1948) and 'Night Feeding' (1958). As we have seen, 'Nine Poems' portrays the experience of pregnancy, although the depiction of its physical sensations is mediated by an extensive employment of metaphorical imagery. Childbearing affords the speaker a way of appreciating and rejoicing in her female character. At the same time, she acknowledges that her experience involves including within her body another being with a distinct identity. In 'Night Feeding', the experience of breastfeeding enables the speaker to understand her psyche and the creative

²²⁹ Ibid., 60.

²³⁰ Monique Wittig, 'One is Not Born a Woman', in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 266.

potential in the different phases of consciousness when she wakes to feed her baby. This act confirms and supplements her view of her body and her subconscious as sources of her creativity: ‘Shadows grew in my veins, my bright belief, / my head of dreams deeper than night and sleep’ (*CP* 340).

Susan Ayres associates Rukeyser’s changed perspective to her treatment of binaries in a number of her poems. She contends that the ‘unresolved tension between a constructivist and essentialist view in Rukeyser’s work arguably has the same political and strategic effect as problematizing binary systems’.²³¹ She notes that ‘In both instances she refuses an either/or solution and instead allows both possibilities’.²³² The various ways in which Rukeyser depicts her physical experiences points to a capacious outlook on female identity. However, it is also possible that the shift in her perspective is linked to cultural factors. The essentialist position that she adopted in the middle period of her career may have been a reaction against America’s post-war conservative literary culture, which censored the physical aspects of a woman’s life, including the experience of mothering, prompting her to assert that ‘birth as trauma has an important repressive role in our art—our literature, in particular’.²³³ On the other hand, her view of the body as a transcendent entity in ‘Despitals’ is a response to the racial and gender tensions as the civil rights struggle reached a critical stage with the legislation of anti-discrimination laws in the late 1960s. Here she is trying to deal with the identity conflicts that physical difference engenders by putting them in the context of an inclusive, generic idea of the material human body.²³⁴

²³¹ Susan Ayres, ‘Outlaw Against the Thinking Fathers’, in *How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet? : The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 157.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ Rukeyser, ‘A Simple Theme’, 237.

²³⁴ The shift in Rukeyser’s perspective may have come about as a result of the changes taking place around her in America during the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s. An emblematic incident of that movement happened on 7th September, 1968, when a group of

A poem where the speaker conducts an analysis of her own prejudice against the Other and attempts to overcome it practically is 'St. Roach' (1976). This is written in the form of a confession that deals with the negative stance that the speaker maintains against a type of creature, which is, according to the title, the cockroach. At the beginning, the speaker defines her discriminatory attitude and justifies it. This is done retrospectively, since she now realises the problem she has:

For that I never knew you, I only learned to dread,
 for that I never touched you, they told me you are filth,
 they showed me by every action to despise your kind (CP 533)

The speaker absolves herself of the responsibility for her antagonism to cockroaches. She claims being ignorant of their existence, having learnt to 'dread' the creatures, and the fact that she never touched them since she was told they are 'filth'. It is not clear what the pronoun 'they' refers to. It could be her family, her social milieu, or her culture. Anyway, at this point of the poem, she tries to escape from her problem by laying the blame on other people instead of taking responsibility for her actions.

The poem provides further details of the speaker's relationship with cockroaches:

I could not tell you apart, one from another,
 for that in childhood I lived in places clear of you,

women picketed outside the location of the Miss America pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey, to protest what they considered to be hackneyed perceptions of femininity that that occasion embodies. They dumped clothing accessories such as high heels, girdles and bras, which they termed 'instruments of torture' into a large 'Freedom Trashcan' as a symbolic gesture of their rebellion. In 'Despisals', Rukeyser challenges repressive biological or cultural conceptions of race or gender, substituting them for that of the human body as an autonomous entity free of the associations of a restrictive man-woman dichotomy. See William H. Chafe, Harvard Sitkoff, and Beth Bailey (eds), *A History of Our Time: Readings on Postwar America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 223.

for that all the people I knew met you by
 crushing you, stamping you to death, they poured boiling
 water on you, they flushed you down (*CP* 533)

Here we reach a stage when the details hint at a larger issue, specifically that of racism. The fact that the speaker cannot distinguish the creatures from one another alludes to the racist notion that members of an inferior race are all identical in appearance. Her living in places away from cockroaches implies the procedure of racial segregation, which creates ghettos where despised groups are isolated from the privileged ones. The speaker confesses that discrimination ultimately results in violent acts that aim to eradicate those perceived to be inferior. Although the images of extermination point to common treatments of cockroaches, by now readers can realise the underlying message of the poem. This is especially so with the speaker's claim that she had no knowledge of the creatures' 'poems', and is not able to 'speak' or 'read' their 'language'. She lacks the tools for understanding the Other or communicating with it. There is confusion about the assigning of responsibility or the justification of the speaker's actions, which is typical of a racist mind-set. She claims ignorance of the other group, imposed by her people, but she deliberately perpetuates racism by teaching her children not to 'eat' their 'food' or 'know' their 'poems'. She contributes to the construction of boundaries between herself and cockroaches.

Finally, the speaker takes the initiative to reconsider her position. She starts by 'looking' at a light-coloured member of the despised, typically dark-coloured, group, realising that its colour is 'neither good nor bad'. Although the speaker appears to have overcome, if partially and temporarily, her prejudiced preconceptions of that group, hers is actually a biased stance since it is directed towards an anomalous and not a representative member of the group. Next,

she is actively involved in the attempt to discover and establish contact with another, this time unidentified, cockroach. She addresses it thus:

Today I touched one of you for the first time.

You were startled, you ran, you fled away

Fast as a dancer, light, strange and lovely to the touch.

I reach, I touch, I begin to know you. (*CP* 533)

The speaker overcomes her fear of, and prejudice against, cockroaches and takes the courageous step of touching one of them, therefore experiencing the Other physically and concretely instead of merely imagining or contemplating a possible relationship with it. All the same, the cockroach reacts with surprise and runs away, since it is a new, unfamiliar occurrence. Nonetheless, the speaker has achieved a symbolic victory over her aversion to the Other. It is a first step towards change for her, hence the optimistic note at the end of the poem.

Rukeyser encapsulates manifestations of prejudice, embracing their targets wholeheartedly in 'Desdichada' (1973).²³⁵ At the beginning of the poem, which is autobiographical, as is the case with many of Rukeyser's late poems, the speaker lays out the problem as that of not being acknowledged by another person or group of people. Being a victim of prejudice, she realises the emotional suffering that that entails and chooses to recognise and pay tribute to the 'anonymous unacknowledged men and women' (*CP* 474).

²³⁵ 'Desdichada' is a Spanish expression that translates as 'poor, wretched one', or 'unfortunate, unlucky one', according to the notes in Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 627.

The speaker outlines the memories she retains of her city, its river and the traces of age that time has drawn on her hands, 'the years of the shadow on the delicate skin'. Her loyalty to her memories compels her to pardon the people who disowned her because of her actions:

Disinherited, annulled, finally disacknowledged
 and all of my own asking. I keep that wild dimension
 of life and making and the spasm
 upon my mouth as I say this word of acknowledge
 to you forever. *Ewig. Two o'clock at night. (CP 474)*

Despite the persecution she experiences as a result of her deeds, the speaker is ready to absolve and honour the people who disinherited and 'annulled' her, possibly her family.²³⁶ She holds on to the direction she has chosen for her life, not sacrificing, at least from her side, neither her relation to her parents nor her 'unacceptable' manner of living, 'that wild dimension of life', denoting activism and rebellion with the words 'making' and 'spasm'. She expresses with her physical being, her 'mouth', both her determination to persist in her endeavours and her acknowledgement of the people who reared her, in spite of later disinheriting her.

In the second part of the poem, the speaker justifies her stubborn decision to determine her fate by affirming her acknowledgement of the connections binding her to people around the world and the difficult conditions they may live. After recognising the marginalised people occupying a realm she can acknowledge but cannot for the moment inhabit, she states:

²³⁶ In Rukeyser's memoir *The Orgy*, her persona confides the fact of her sister's and her disinheritance. She says of her father: 'He died—both his children disinherited. For disobedience'. See Muriel Rukeyser, *The Orgy: An Irish Journey of Passion and Transformation* (1965; Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1997), 90.

Then I do take you,

but far under consciousness, knowing

that under under flows a river wanting

the other : to go open-handed in Asia,

to cleanse the tributaries and the air, to make for making,

to stop selling death and its trash, pour plastic down

men's throats (CP 474)

Calling to mind once more the Jungian theory of the collective unconscious, the speaker asserts that she and other people share a deeper level of consciousness. She does not seem to be able to embrace them consciously, perhaps for political reasons. Yet she recognises the psychic ties binding her to the rest of humanity. Her specific mention of Asia is connected to the Vietnam War (1965-1973), which was taking place around the time the poem was published.²³⁷ In spite of war, she affirms the bonds that tie her to the antagonised Other in that war. The image of 'selling death' alludes to the fact that war is motivated partially by the unethical political strategy of improving the economy via weapons production and sales. The

²³⁷ Rukeyser protested the Vietnam War and was arrested for it. In 1972, she travelled with Denise Levertov and Jane Hart to Hanoi to denounce the war and sympathise with its victims. Levertov records her impression of Rukeyser during that trip:

She saw and felt everything so deeply, but while Jane [Hart], I think, relied (at first) on a certain scepticism to protect herself from some of the impact of what we experienced, and while I tended to seesaw between euphoria and despair, Muriel stood rock-like in the midst of what we all knew to be American shame and Vietnamese courage, never losing either her compassion or her humor.

From the excerpt we can discern Rukeyser's unsentimental attitude towards a difficult, real-life situation, which she confronts with equanimity. This is echoed in 'Desdichada', where we can observe the speaker's assurance in her poetic mission and her moral principles. See Denise Levertov, 'On Muriel Rukeyser', in *How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?': The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*, ed. Anne F. Herzog and Janet E. Kaufman (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 292.

‘pouring’ of ‘plastic down men’s throats’ stands for American troops’ use of the lethal weapon of napalm, one of whose ingredients is the plastic polystyrene, in the war.

After intimating her determination to protest the war and support its victims, the speaker goes as far as accepting and welcoming a fact very few people are ready to concede, let alone meet, which is death. Perhaps she anticipates martyrdom as a result of upholding her political convictions:

Death flowing down past me, past me, death
 marvelous, filthy, gold,
 in my spine in my sex upon my broken mouth
 and the whole beautiful mouth of the child;
 shedding power over me
 death
 if I acknowledge him.
 Leading me
 in my own body
 at last in the dance. (*CP* 474-5)

Death is depicted as a river initially passing by the speaker, then submerging her and penetrating into her body. She even relishes it sexually, as if it is a physical being, by virtue of its concrete engagement with the body. Death will not silence her as it typically does to living things. Her acceptance of death will empower her to express herself in another way, guiding her through a different existence and a new beginning, symbolised by ‘mouth of the

child'.²³⁸ The speaker's positive attitude towards death will immortalise her, enabling her 'body', which possibly stands for her life achievements, including her writings, to survive her.

Part III: The Imprisoned Body

The imprisoned body is both fetishised and transcended by the protagonist gaining an intensified sense of her materiality but seeking to reach out to a world beyond it in order to discover the wider implications of her experience. Rukeyser explores this theme in a number of poems, such as 'Akiba', 'Breaking Open', and 'The Gates'. The first one deals with the imprisonment of a religious figure in ancient times, revealing the influence of investigative and torture techniques on the victim's sense of integrity. The second probes the situation of a prisoner of conscience in another setting, America, during the Vietnam War. We explore the protagonist's negotiation of the question of individuality while being in prison. Finally, we look at Rukeyser's depiction of incarceration under a despotic regime where a poet confronts death as a result of upholding activist views or expressing them through the medium of art. In 'The Gates' the speaker endeavours to discover ways in which the imprisoned poet maintains contact with his readers despite being in detention and facing execution.

²³⁸ Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death*, which, according to Clive Bush, Rukeyser read, points to the problem of revulsion from death, demonstrating that it stems from the repression of bodily, specifically sexual, impulses. Employing Freud's concept of the Eros, he declares: 'Only if Eros—the life instinct—can affirm the life of the body can the death instinct affirm death, and in affirming death magnify life'. Brown theorizes that Eros involves two contrary tendencies: one to establish 'union with objects outside the self' and the other is 'narcissistic, self-loving'. One of the instances where these two inclinations are reconciled is that of the infant being breastfed. In this situation, 'the first satisfaction of the sexual instinct is simultaneously the first satisfaction of the self-preservation instinct (or ego instinct)'. Probably this example, with which Rukeyser may have been familiar, provided her with a way of reconciling life and death, both physically experienced and accommodated, hence her reference to the 'child's mouth'. Her persona's sensual engagement with death enables her to confront one of her repressed instincts. She accepts and appreciates death as an essential process of her physical being. See Bush, *The Century's Midnight*, 391, and Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1959), 45, 52 and 109.

1) *Imprisonment and the Sense of Identity*

Akiba (aka Akiva) ben Joseph, the central character of the poem of the same name, published in *The Speed of Darkness* (1968), is a Jewish rabbi or tanna who lived between c. 40 and c. 137 C.E.²³⁹ In one of her essays, Rukeyser provides a few relevant details of his life, which partially explain his appeal to her:

Akiba was the martyr who resisted the Romans in the first century and who was tortured to death after his great work for the Song of Songs. He was flayed with iron rakes tearing his flesh until at the end he said, 'I know that I have loved God with all my heart and all my soul, and now I know that I love Him with all my life'.²⁴⁰

Based on these biographical facts, affinities can be noted between Rukeyser's and Akiba's ideas and life. The rabbi was in favour of accepting the Song of Solomon into the canon of Jewish religious books.²⁴¹ He may have been imprisoned for religious reasons (teaching the Torah, forbidden by the Romans then) as Rukeyser hints. Historians also link his execution to

²³⁹ In addition to other factors that contributed to her interest in this historical figure, Rukeyser had a personal, emotional link to him since she was told by her mother that she is one of his descendents. In an interview she supplies the context of the poem and its significance for her. Speaking of Akiba, she reminisces: 'Our mother told us that we were descended from him. Now that isn't anything that anybody can trace or prove. It was a total gift to a child'. The rabbi provided material for the child's imagination, as well as a model of political involvement and dedication to a cause that the mature poet could identify with and emulate. See Rukeyser, 'Craft Interview', 169.

²⁴⁰ Rukeyser, 'The Education of a Poet', 282.

²⁴¹ There was a debate among theologians in the first century C. E. as to the canonicity of the Song of Solomon in Jewish religious literature. Akiba recommended including it among religious books, forbidding its use in popular festivities, as may have been the custom previously. Its erotic content, where two lovers express their sensual feelings to each other, may have made it suitable for such occasions. Akiba, though, adopted a different view of it, interpreting its two main speakers, a bridegroom and a bride, as God and Israel, according to a number of sources. To those who doubted the Song's canonicity, the rabbi proclaimed that 'all of eternity in its entirety is not as worthy as the day on which Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, but Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies'. See Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Texts and Traditions: A Source Reader for the Study of Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism* (Hoboken: KTAV Publishing House, 1998), 120, and John Davidson, *The Song of Songs: The Soul and the Divine Beloved* (Bath: Clear Press Limited, 2004), 62.

his support of an insurrection that took place in Judea between AD 132 and AD 135, led by Shimeon bar-Kosiba, who was known as Bar-Kochba, ‘son of a star’.²⁴² So, Akiba was involved in the politics of his time, just as Rukeyser was for most of her career. Moreover, his convictions and his vocation were integral to his life, and he was ready to sacrifice himself to his faith. This is paralleled by Rukeyser’s belief in her ideas and her poetic mission of instigating change with them.

In the section of ‘Akiba’ entitled ‘Akiba Martyr’, readers are presented with the scene of the rabbi’s torture at the hands of his ‘friend’, Rufus, the Roman governor of Judea at the time:

When his death confronted him, it had the face of his friend

Rufus the Roman general with his claws of pain,

His executioner. This was an old man under iron rakes

Tearing through to the bone. He made no cry. (*CP* 458)

Instead of portraying Akiba himself as seeking self-sacrifice, the old man (who was 97 or 98 years old when he was executed) is shown to accept stoically his fate for actions for which he was held responsible. Death meets him in the form of ‘iron rakes’ that penetrate his frail body to reach his bones, testing his endurance. The poem implies that his torturer had been his friend but the relationship was ruptured because of developments in the political world.

Before his support of the bar-Kosiba rebellion, Akiba had been a pacifist. He even interceded to end conflicts at different points of his life. Nonetheless, he was not willing to compromise on what he perceived to be his religious calling, as indicated in these lines:

²⁴² Joan Comay, *Who’s Who in Jewish History*, 2nd edn, rev. by Lavinia Cohn-Sherbok (London: Routledge, 2002), 16 and 17.

Does the old man during uprising speak for compromise?

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

For this religion is a system of knowledge;

Points may be one by one abandoned, but not the study.

Does he preach passion and non-violence?

Yes, and trees, crops, children honestly taught. He says:

Prepare yourselves for suffering. (*CP* 458)

Akiba was one of the founders of Jewish philosophy, hence the reference to his conception of religion as a ‘system of knowledge’.²⁴³ He had discovered a form of thought that constituted one of his principles and he struggled fiercely to preserve it, probably so that it could reach future generations and define their Jewish identity. Despite upholding peace and love for most of his life, there was a limit to his conciliatory attitude when his ideals were threatened and he was compelled to abandon them. His life combined pacifism with political involvement, and he was prepared to endure corporal punishment for his views and actions.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Akiba held many conciliatory views that may have inspired Rukeyser’s idea of binary elements as complementary rather than incompatible. For example, he thought of predestination and free human choice as functioning in unison and not in opposition to each other. He postulated that ‘everything is foreseen; but freedom of will is given to every man’. See Ari Ben-Menahim, *Historical Encyclopedia of Natural and Mathematical Sciences*, 6 vols (New York: Springer, 2009), I, 365.

²⁴⁴ This combining of contrasts can also be found in Rukeyser’s career. While she is commonly known as an activist for most of her life, her stance oscillated between patriotism, at the beginning of WWII, when she wrote *Wake Island* (1942), and her opposition to war during the Vietnam War. She theorised on peace and its meaning, which is, for her, the wide-ranging and lasting equilibrium between incompatible elements, both on the individual and the social level. Rejecting the notion of peace in political agreements, since ‘their promise is only the lack of war’, she adopts the basic sense of the word in ‘one long-standing language’,

Religious faith empowers Akiba to withstand torture, through which his body is ultimately reconciled with his mind. It enables him to cope with physical suffering since his body reflects his persevering soul. The fact is lost on his torturer, who wonders sceptically about what some believers would take to be Akiba's supernatural power to deal with his physical pain, as can be seen in this scene:

Rufus looks at him over the rakes of death

Asking, 'What is it?

Have you magic powers? Or do you feel no pain?' (*CP* 458)

To exert pressure on Akiba, Rufus, through his interrogation, derides two aspects of his victim's life: his physical ability to withstand pain, and the possibility that his suffering could be overcome through 'magic' stemming from his religious faith. Elaine Scarry avers that 'what the process of torture does is to split the human being into two, to make emphatic the ever present but, except in the extremity of sickness and death, only latent distinction between a self and a body, between a "me" and "my body"'.²⁴⁵ Similarly, the torture Akiba receives is aimed at instituting a rift and conflict between his body and his spiritual belief, so that his torturer would be able to manipulate him through the pain he inflicts on him.

Even with the pain Akiba tangibly feels, he would not allow the elements of his identity to be severed from each other. In response to Rufus:

The old man answers, 'No. But there is a commandment

saying

which is that 'peace is completeness'. She affirms that subscribing to this concept of peace 'belongs to the same universe as the hope for the individual as full-valued'. See Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 209.

²⁴⁵ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 48-9.

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart,

with all thy soul and with all thy might.

I knew that I loved him with all my heart and might.

Now I know that I love with all my life.' (CP 459)

Here, Rukeyser presents Akiba's words in a different manner from her citation of his statement in the essay quoted above. In the latter, the dying man mentions that he has loved God with all his soul and heart, without reference to his body. However, in the poem, there is an implied reference to his body in the word 'might', so his answer tallies with Rufus's question about his ability of sensing pain. Therefore, the clue to his mysterious capacity for tolerating torture is his reconciliation of his body to both his emotions (heart) and his mind (soul). This equilibrium causes him happiness that distracts him from the trauma he undergoes:

The look of delight of the martyr

Among the colors of pain, at last knowing his own response

Total and unified.

To love God with all the heart, all passion,

Every desire called evil, turned toward unity,

All the opposites, all in the dialogue.

All the dark and light of the heart, of life made whole. (CP 459)

The rabbi does not overcome his feeling of pain by despising and ignoring his bodily sensations as would be expected by ascetics seeking to free themselves from the shackles of

earthly existence to achieve a purely spiritual one, especially for a person approaching his death. Akiba endeavours to harmonise, through his love of God and his sacrifice, the contrary aspects of his character, and the belief that he has achieved this enables him to regard his pain with equanimity and even jubilation.

After delineating events of the rabbi's life, the speaker poses the question of its relevance to readers in our time by meditating on the 'witness' of Akiba's story and the way to engage with it. She urges readers to 'Take from us acts of encounter we at night / Wake to attempt, as signs, seeds of beginning' (*CP* 459). Thus readers can regard the lives of historical figures as sources of practical lessons, as 'signs' and 'seeds of beginning' that can be reinterpreted and appropriated by different types of readers, including the speaker and her audience. Then, she addresses the latter with this statement: 'You are made of signs, your eyes and your song. / Your dance the dance, the walk into the present' (*CP* 460). Rukeyser reconsiders the distance separating her readers from Akiba's life. Their lives resonate with the one she depicts. She suggests that their negotiation of the question of identity might be an echo of the rabbi's during his eventful life.

A poem where Rukeyser treats Jewish identity as a source of inspiration appears in a sequence, 'Letter to the Front' (1944), which was published during WWII, when news may have reached her of the Holocaust. Here is the first part of the seventh sonnet of the sequence:

To be a Jew in the twentieth century

Is to be offered a gift. If you refuse,

Wishing to be invisible, you choose

Death of the spirit, the stone insanity.

Accepting, take full life. Full agonies:

Your evening deep in labyrinthine blood

Of those who resist, fail, and resist: and God

Reduced to a hostage among hostages. (*CP* 243)

Being Jewish is, for the speaker, a ‘gift’, of a spiritual nature, whose price is suffering at a time in the twentieth century when it was hazardous to keep it. Though its holders have the chance to disown it and adopt a different one, they do so at the risk of undergoing ‘death of the spirit’. For the speaker, Jewish character is not principally represented by a specific religious creed or distinctive racial traits; it is distinguished by the desire for freedom, since its bearers risk discrimination by maintaining it. Those who acknowledge that ‘gift’ may have to oppose policies that seek to repress them and curtail their liberty. They may be obliged to make sacrifices to protect and maintain their identity. The speaker invokes these people to uphold their Jewishness and resist those who target it, since it is a ‘guarantee’ for their freedom.

The sonnet does not address the calamity of those who suffer not as a consequence of their assertion of independence or their resistance to oppression but gratuitously, simply for possessing racial traits that, in the eyes of their indiscriminating enemies, define them, as in the Nazis’ acts of genocide against European Jews during WWII. Rukeyser’s emphasis on resistance may be an allusion to events such as the 1943 Warsaw ghetto uprising, where Jews actively fought Nazis and risked death by doing so. It is also possible that Rukeyser, as is the case with many Americans around the time the poem was written, in the early 1940s, had not heard of the full extent of the Holocaust.²⁴⁶ Even for those who heard of it, its details were

²⁴⁶ Novick observes that this was the case until the end of the war. He notes that as late as the end of 1944 (the year Rukeyser’s poem was published), ‘three quarters of the American population believed that the Germans had “murdered many people in concentration camps,”

ignored, even by American Jews, as a small part of the atrocities of WWII in general. Many preferred to think of themselves as assimilated Americans and chose to distance themselves from the affairs of European Jewry.²⁴⁷ After the war, as the full extent of the tragedy began to emerge, news of the Holocaust engendered more scepticism in these Americans towards their religion; they questioned the existence of a God who, in their view, did not or could not interfere to end the plight of millions of Jewish victims.²⁴⁸ Rukeyser chooses to downplay the religious factor, since it tends to be understood and exploited in highly contentious ways. Hence the reference to God as ‘reduced to a hostage among hostages’.

We move now to a modern-day situation in ‘Breaking Open’, where Rukeyser depicts her own experience of incarceration. This happened as a result of her participation, along with a group of others, in a protest against the Vietnam War. The poem starts with glimpses of the speaker’s life in her home country, where she is supposed to be isolated in her busy, daily life

but of those willing to estimate how many had been killed, most thought it was 100,000 or fewer’. See Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 24.

²⁴⁷ In one of her essays, Rukeyser provides a portrait of complaisant, assimilated, American Jews:

I grew up among a group of Jews who wished, more than anything else, I think, to be invisible [. . .] They supported big charities. They gave generously of their money. Some of the women even gave their time. But they wanted a religion of reassurance; they listened to the muted organ, and refused to be involved in suffering that demanded resistance, and refused to acknowledge evil. If they had a mission as a responsible and inspired people, they did not want it. It was enough to be Jewish.

From this passage we can discern the poet’s emphasis on activist politics as the ultimate expression of an identity and the ideals that it embodies. See Muriel Rukeyser, ‘Under Forty’, *Contemporary Jewish Record*, 5 (1944), 4-9, Reprinted in *Bridges*, 1 (1990), 27-8.

²⁴⁸ One thinker whose views represented those of many Jews after WWII is Richard Rubenstein, who rejected the notion of an omnipotent God in control of history. He defines the era of the ‘death’ of God ushered in by the Holocaust: ‘When I say we live in the time of the death of God, I mean that the thread uniting God and man, heaven and earth has been broken. We stand in a cold silent unfeeling cosmos, unaided by any purposeful power beyond our own resources’. He argues that belief in an all-powerful God amounts to condoning Nazi crimes against Jews as punishment for their ‘sins’: ‘I fail to see how this position can be maintained without regarding Hitler and the SS as instruments of God’s will’. See Richard Rubenstein, cited in Dan Cohn-Sherbok, ‘How Odd of God to Choose the Jews’, in *Religion, Society and God: Public Theology in Action*, ed. Richard Noake and Nicholas Buxton (London: SCM Press, 2013), 21-22.

from the scene of action in Vietnam. She enters an elevator in an apartment building and, feeling constrained in its bounded, 'empty', sealed-off space ('stainless-steel' walls), she communicates her frustration by 'yelling'. All the same,

The metal nor absorbs nor reflects

My yelling.

My pulled face looks at me

From the steel walls. (*CP* 522)

The speaker receives no response to her shouts. She faces up to an entity, probably an allusion to the political establishment, which is deaf to her cries of anger and disappointment. Only her own image is reflected on the opaque surface of the elevator's walls: she is merely speaking to herself, though she seems to expect a reaction from the unheeding elevator. So we have two sets of realities opposed to each other: that of the speaker's life in relation to the wider world, and that of a realm oblivious or indifferent to the views she attempts to voice.

There is a development in the next scene, where the speaker travels enthusiastically to Washington in order to participate in a protest, where a 'petition' is presented. Having submitted their demands, a group of petitioners leave, possibly sensing the ineffectiveness of further action. The speaker, however, persists in the protest by staying on, 'lying', not casually but 'gravely down / on that cool mosaic floor' of the 'Senate'. She reproaches her capital city: 'Washington! Your bombs rain down! / I mourn, I lie down, I grieve'. Buoyed up by her firm belief in her action, she suspends her daily life and engages fully in her activism, treating it as a religious ritual, akin to prayer at the Wailing Wall, following from her reference to Jerusalem at the beginning of the poem. She is possibly 'mourning' the Vietnam War's victims or what she sees as the failure of democracy in her country.

The speaker confronts the court's ruthlessness when she is prosecuted, apparently for her political action. There is a consensus among the jury, 'each closed face', to indict her; they decide that she is 'guilty', and the word is repeated five times, which conveys a sense of the finality and, at the same time, banality and meaninglessness of that pronouncement for the speaker. While this is taking place, her mind is elsewhere: 'I see myself in the river-window. River / Slow going to its sea'. She is tracing the links binding her country to another in an inevitable, natural process similar to that of the flow of a river towards the sea, regardless of the constraints that official authorities impose among nations for political reasons. Still, the court's decision affects her deeply, depriving her of hope for change and causing her to direct her attention towards her private feeling of despair, which she renders in a series of fragmented expressions: 'An old, crushed, perverse, waiting, / In loss, in dread, dead tree' (CP 523). A vestige of hope lurks among the speaker's emotions of fear and dejection: she is 'waiting', probably for something better to happen, and she is to some extent 'dead' but like a tree which maintains its erect position even past its demise. This denotes the speaker's perseverance in her activism, undeterred by its dire consequences.

In one of the poem's sections, the speaker quotes an old man, who declares that 'The introversion of war / Is the main task of our time'. It is not clear what the statement means. It probably indicates that modern wars are no longer motivated by clear goals that the public in general can understand, intimating that they are rather motivated by concealed pragmatist or imperial aims, of which only elite politicians are aware. This was the state of affairs during WWII, according to Rukeyser, who held a sceptical view of it after initially supporting the American military forces in *Wake Island* (1942), construing the Allies' campaigns as a fight against fascism. Later, she came to see the war as morally senseless and purposeless: 'During the war [WWII], we felt the silence in the policy of the governments of English-speaking countries. That policy was to win the war first, and work out the meanings afterward. The

result was, of course, that the meanings were lost. You cannot put these things off'.²⁴⁹

Alternatively, the old man's utterance may point to the moment in history, in the late 1960s, when American policy makers began to turn away from involvement in foreign conflicts, especially the Vietnam War, and focus, instead, on social problems, which were fomenting increased internal unrest at the time.²⁵⁰

The 'introversion' of war that the speaker mentions causes a reaction in her. She withdraws into herself to explore and deal with her psychic conflict:

Now it makes its poems, when the sky stops killing.

I try to turn my acts inward and deeper.

Almost a poem. If it splash outside,

All right. (CP 524)

At the war's end, the speaker finds an opportunity to write poetry, which represents a 'splash' of the self-probing process on which she embarks. Nevertheless, presenting her most private

²⁴⁹ Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, 20. This passage also applies to the event taking place during the writing of 'Breaking Open', the Vietnam War. Hannah Arendt draws attention to one of the reasons that the war was opposed by many Americans, namely that its motives were not clear: 'not only are the people and their elected representatives denied access to what they must know to form an opinion and make decisions, but also the actors themselves, who receive top clearance to learn all the relevant facts, remain blissfully unaware of them'. Arendt goes on to say that the war's participants' failure to acquire the facts they need is due to the conditions under which they work, allowing them neither the 'time' nor the 'inclination' to go searching for facts among the documents, most of which are either classified or inapplicable. This analysis indicates that the war was not justified by an announced, clear-cut and consistently-held rationale, at least for the public and low-level officials observing or engaged in the conflict. See Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 30.

²⁵⁰ Jack Holmes offers a view of the situation at this juncture of American history: 'Vietnam, by the apex mood year of 1968, was seen as an area in which the United States was overcommitted and overextended'. He notes that politicians 'found a need to first deal with domestic problems, such as equality for minorities, as well as to change the thrust of their world reform efforts from direct involvement to example-setting'. See Jack E. Holmes, *The Mood/Interest Theory of American Foreign Policy* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 35.

thoughts and sensations to the public is not the main purpose of that experience. She even deploys a dialectal construction, 'if it splash', to convey her modesty and her lack of assurance about the impression that what she regards as 'almost a poem' may create in her readers.

Next, the poem shifts to a different scene, where the speaker enters prison, perhaps for her involvement in anti-Vietnam-War protests:

Going to prison. The clang of the steel door.

It is my choice. But the steel door does clang.

The introversion of this act

Past its seeming, past all thought of effect,

Until it is something like

Writing a poem in my silent room. (*CP* 524)

The speaker furnishes an account of her first impressions of prison. She is acutely aware of the mundane, concrete aspects of her situation, such as the 'clang of the steel door'. Although it is the result of an action she has done of her own volition, the jarring sound carries a sense of doom for her. She acknowledges and affirms her spontaneous physical reaction to her surroundings. Now she is compelled to keep to herself and focus on her individual self and her private existence. The sound of the steel door opening and closing behind her triggers a state of introversion similar to that offered by the solitude of her 'silent room', where she writes her poems.

Subsequently, the speaker begins to scrutinise her place of isolation. She senses acutely its tangible features, which have an overpowering impact on her:

In prison, the thick air,
 still, loaded, heat on heat.
 Around your throat
 for the doors are locks,
 the windows are locked doors,
 the hot smell locked around us (CP 525)

Bodily sensations assume a central role in the speaker's engagement with the prison atmosphere. The shared air and the body-generated heat of a group of people kept in one place, are felt concretely, 'around your throat', like a stifling leash for the speaker. Apertures (doors and windows) in this setting are perceived as 'locks' rather than as openings suggesting freedom. The world undergoes a process of what Elaine Scarry calls 'unmaking'.²⁵¹ A place in general represents an 'enlargement' of the body in its ability to include and house a person; the latter's body is no longer an 'obsessive object of perception and concern' and it is here that the 'external world comes into being and begins to grow'.²⁵² On the other hand, in the case of the poem's prisoner, who gains a sharpened sense of her physicality in a negative manner, both the body and the place she occupies become complicit 'weapons' in contributing to her suffering, physical and psychological, just as actual torture would.²⁵³ Here, the prison's air is perceived as both prisoner and jailer: it is helplessly 'locked' around the speaker and other inmates but it has a suffocating effect on them by virtue of the state of confinement they are suffering.

²⁵¹ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 45.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 40 and 47.

Imprisonment transforms the speaker's view of herself and the other inmates in relation to the objects around them:

In prison, the prisoners,
all of us, all the objects,
chairs, cots, mops, tables.

Only the young cat.

He does not know he is locked in. (*CP* 525)

As an initial response to her experience, the speaker, with her sense of individuality, reacts against being forcibly located with strangers in a place where everything and everybody are treated similarly without regard to their distinctive character, until humans are viewed as things. The first statement of the passage is left incomplete, which signifies the fragmentariness that the group in question suffers. Accordingly, despite the existence of the prisoners and things together they do not make up a normative society with identifiable collective traits. The inmates' presence together in captivity robs each of them of their individuality without creating a group identity joining them.²⁵⁴ Only the cat, owing to its in-between status in the human-object scale, is able to enjoy its individuality. Its ignorance of its

²⁵⁴ Mary Bosworth, in her more recent sociological study of women's imprisonment, points to the latter's threat to the prisoners' 'ontological security':

Interpersonal security and trust are to a large extent suspended in prison, making it difficult to retain a strong sense of self. The women are placed within a community of strangers, who are often perceived as hostile or untrustworthy, a setting which compounds their sense of personal insecurity, making it difficult to maintain a coherent self-image.

Boswell's analysis may apply to the speaker in 'Breaking Open'. The prisoner's existence with unfamiliar people possibly aggravates her feeling of loneliness. Rejecting the prison reality, in which she is sealed off from the social world outside, she loses faith in her own, as well as the other inmates', identity, viewing all as objects. See Mary Bosworth, *Engendering Resistance: Agency and Power in Women's Prisons* (Aldershot: Ashgate & Dartmouth, 1999), 110-111.

situation frees it of the sense of isolation the prisoners have. As opposed to the speaker's sentimental response to her experience, the envied animal seems to meet its world in purely practical, if not stoic, terms.

An inmate tries to overcome her feeling of loneliness by socialising with the speaker. The former struggles to make sense of her world by interrogating her imprisonment and the language with which she is familiar:

In prison, the prisoners.

One black girl, 19 years.

She has killed her child

and she grieves, she grieves.

She crosses to my bed.

'What do *Free* mean?'

I look at her.

'You don't understand English.'

'Yes, I understand English.'

'What do *Free* mean?' (*CP* 525)

The prisoner that the speaker meets has murdered her child; she is repenting and 'grieving' her crime. This attitude is emphasised to denote the depth of the inmate's regret as well as the speaker's sympathy with her. Supposing the speaker to be Rukeyser's persona, the 19-year-old black girl overcomes the barriers of age and race to approach her middle-aged, Jewish

companion and address her with a question that challenges the notion of freedom.²⁵⁵ The written question juxtaposes two nonstandard forms: first, on the level of grammar, it employs the dialectal construction ‘do’ instead of ‘does’ for a third-person singular noun; second, on the level of punctuation, the word ‘free’ is capitalised and strangely presented in italics, so it seems out of place in the question. The two forms are opposed. While the dialectal structure reveals the enquirer’s poor level of education, the word ‘free’ is afforded a privileged status by being capitalised and highlighted. This suggests the gap between the concept of freedom as an avowed principle of American democracy, and the way it is realised in the daily life of common people, especially ostracised members of society such as black Americans and, as in the case of the speakers in ‘Breaking Open’, prisoners from different backgrounds.²⁵⁶ The speaker responds to her interlocutor by stating the assumption that the black girl does not

²⁵⁵ Also regarding the speaker as the author’s persona, it is significant that she, a political dissident, is placed in custody with a person convicted of a crime. This may reflect a development in the official treatment of protesters of the Vietnam War as akin to criminals. This was made manifest even in Richard Nixon’s 1968 presidential campaign, which, capitalising on their ‘fears of social disintegration’ amid the tumults of the late 1960s, approached voters on a ‘law-and-order’ platform. The campaign included advertisements that deployed similar imagery for different types of violations, suggesting the ‘equivalence of political protest and violent crime’. This is consistent with the speaker’s impression that the differences between individuals are disregarded in prison. See Lee Bernstein, *America Is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 25.

²⁵⁶ The poem hints at conditions in American prisons, especially before what came to be known as the prisoners’ rights movement, in the 1960s and 1970s. A law journal survey issued in 1963 provides a glimpse into the degree of freedom behind bars just a decade before ‘Breaking Open’ was published:

Forms of expression traditionally protected by the first amendment are subject to severe and even total curtailment in prison. Severe infringements on freedom of speech and association in prison have been upheld by the courts or ignored by them under the rubric of the hands-off doctrine. . . . The broad principles of censorship and restricted mailing lists have been approved by the courts as a non-reviewable exercise of the discretion entrusted to prison authorities.

Later, American prisoners actively opposed these and other conditions, filing lawsuits against them. These legal actions, as well as violent riots, such as that which took place at New York’s Attica Correctional Facility in 1971, put pressure on judicial authorities to change their policy towards prisoners and allow them a wider margin of freedom. See Ronald L. Goldfarb and Linda R. Singer, ‘Redressing Prisoners’ Grievances’ in *Prisons, Protest, and Politics*, ed. Burton M. Atkins and Henry R. Glick (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 81-2.

‘understand’ English, which she denies, asserting her knowledge of the language. The poem ends at the moment the speaker directs the original question (‘What do *Free* mean?’), back to her cellmate. By doing this, the speaker urges the girl to consider the concept of freedom, the way it is politically exploited in the American system of democracy, hence the reference to its meaning in ‘English’. Her contemplation of this question may help the disgruntled prisoner make sense of her world in relation to her personal convictions.

In the next section of the poem, the speaker starts to adapt to her daily life in prison. She begins to regain her sense of individuality through the objects she owns:

In prison a

brown paper bag

I put it beside my cot.

All my things.

Comb, notebook, underwear,

letterpaper, toothbrush, book.

I am rich—

they have given me another toothbrush.

The guard saying:

‘You’ll find people share here.’ (CP 525)

The phrase ‘in prison’ is repeated at the beginning of each of the three poems above, which underscores the special circumstances under which the speaker attempts to maintain her hold on her individuality. In this section, the speaker begins to develop a personal attachment to a

set of objects, calling them 'my things', which she is given by the prison authorities. These possessions are limited in number and not of a high value, yet they provide her with a relative feeling of self-sufficiency. Therefore, she excitedly declares, after being given an extra item, 'I am rich'. In a place where the speaker's identity seems under threat, simple tokens of individuality are of great importance to her. However, she is confronted by the guard's apathetic announcement 'You'll find people share here', which, although it is articulated in a casual style and does not imply a compulsory rule, holds force as a fact of life in prison. The statement, by virtue of its flexibility, does not displace the speaker's sense of individuality, since she does not reconcile herself to her being part of a community by the end of the section. Yet, the guard's utterance is deployed as an incontrovertible, though tentatively-expressed, fact integral to the reality of life behind bars. Thus, the two concepts of individuality and shared experience are juxtaposed in the poem, and the speaker has to cope with their overlap and interdependence in her daily life in prison.

In 'Breaking Open' Rukeyser resorts to a style that contrasts in complexity with that of her early poetry. The speaker merely registers the immediate sensations of her experience, as if the latter has also constricted her response; her form reflects her condition of confinement and her sense of suffocation as a result. Sophisticated art seems out of place in such a setting. The speaker's state of introversion excludes all but the most concrete impressions of her surroundings. The things and people in the sections discussed above lack any further dimensions but the most basic ones. The prison cell is nothing but locked air and heat. The people are identified with the objects around them. The poem's language is straightforward and casual to suit the speaker's mood of despair and helplessness; she seems to have lost faith in aesthetic art's ability to redeem her. Introversion, which represents a link between her inner self and her conscious sensations, turns into a preoccupation with the most tangible elements of her situation, and the concrete images reflect this. The poem is bare of

Rukeyser's characteristic rhetoric, but it also lacks the sense of mystery that infuses her previous works, such as 'In Hades, Orpheus' and *Orpheus*, where a mythical framework is employed to portray the protagonist's situation in a multifaceted manner.

Rukeyser's style in 'Breaking Open' reflects her stance towards her previous, modernist-inflected style, which she rejected in favour of more immediate forms of expression, when she proclaimed, in 'The Poem as Mask' (1968), 'No more masks! No more mythologies!' (CP 413) In the late stage of her career, Rukeyser shed the intricate forms, principally myth, which offered her an artistic structure, especially to tackle autobiographical experiences, in her early career. The style of her late poems is distinguished by a greater degree of immediacy. Here she dispenses with the aesthetic forms of modernist art or the standard ones cherished by the New Critics, which Adrienne Rich may have meant when she applied the image of 'asbestos gloves' to characterise the style she utilised in her poetry before the advent of the 1960s.²⁵⁷ In an introduction to a poetry reading in 1964, Rich viewed the 'perfection of order' as incompatible with the notion that 'experience is always greater and more unclassifiable than we give it credit for being'.²⁵⁸ This raises the issue of the effectiveness of language in communicating or transcribing a poet's experience as presented in her poetry. Albert Gelpi expresses this dilemma aptly when he wonders, 'If language has no power to affect the given, then is the resort to language an evasion of action, as the revolutionaries charge?'²⁵⁹ In acknowledgement of this challenge, rather than treating language as an end in itself, which may detract from the poem's underlying sense, many poets began to turn language into an expedient if not subservient means of poetic expression, attempting styles that permitted a more spontaneous rendition of their experiences and inner

²⁵⁷ Adrienne Rich, cited in Ullman, 'American Poetry in the 1960s', 192.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Albert Gelpi, 'Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change', in *American Poetry since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives*, ed. Robert B. Shaw (Cheadle: Carcanet Press, 1973), 137.

selves.²⁶⁰ These poets, in line with the changes taking place at the time, such as the technological advancements in communications and the Vietnam War, underwent a transformative process whereby they questioned long-held aesthetic standards and turned in on themselves to discover forms that better reflected their individuality.

2) *Transcending the Confines of Prison*

A poem where imprisonment prompts the speaker to consider the ties binding an individual to other people despite the condition of isolation in prison is 'The Gates', included in the volume of the same name and published in 1976. The title refers, on a literal level, to the gates of a prison in South Korea where the poet and then-dissident Kim Chi Ha was held in solitary confinement and was expected to be executed. In the summer of 1975, in her capacity as president of PEN American Center, Rukeyser travelled to Korea to support this poet and appeal for his release. Notwithstanding her failing health, having suffered several strokes and with diabetes, she stood vigil for a whole day outside his prison cell. She also visited his house and met his family, among them his child, who figures prominently in the poem. For Rukeyser, the prison's gates evoke various meanings. She thinks of them as 'the gates of

²⁶⁰ Leslie Ullman, inspired by Laurence Lieberman's 1968 essay 'The Expansional Poet: A Return to Personality', categorises these writers as 'expansional'. The list includes James Dickey, Adrienne Rich, John Logan, Alan Dugan, Richard Hugo and Muriel Rukeyser. The poets' writings are shown to have undergone a stylistic transformation in the 1960s, when their poetry, influenced by the then-recent movements of Confessional poets and 'Deep Imagists', began to assume a less rigorous, more transparent form. However, Rukeyser does not exactly fit this group. While the other poets started publishing poetry in the 1950s and early 1960s, when New Criticism still held sway, at least in the academy, Rukeyser's start was in the 1930s, during which various movements, including Marxist and modernist ones, were competing to achieve prominence in literary circles. She produced poetry that blended standard and innovative forms, and engaged with social as well as artistic themes, at a time when it was anathema to juxtapose these elements. When the New Criticism came into prominence in the 1940s, Rukeyser, though sharing some of their tenets, rejected what she viewed as their rigid poetics and held on to her organicist theory of poetry, which accommodates the life of the author and readers' response as essential to the meaning of a poem. With the advent of the late 1960s, her writing became more relaxed and less complex formally; standard forms were relegated to a secondary place in her poetry, in line with the revolutionary and liberal spirit of the times. See Ullman, 'American Poetry in the 1960s', 213.

perception, the gates of the body'.²⁶¹ The expressions suggest forces that have the ability to transcend the limitations imposed on them. 'The Gates' explores affinities between the author's personal life and that of a foreign poet that she barely knows, living in a land distant from hers. Underlying the poem is Rukeyser's desire to get closer to the imprisoned poet and discover a source of power in his private life and among members of his family.

At the poem's outset, the speaker asserts that the reason for her interest in Kim Chi Ha is not merely his writings. She is 'drawn' to the poet:

Through acts, through poems,

through our closenesses—

whatever links us in our variousness;

across worlds, love and poems and justices

wishing to be born. (*CP* 562)

The speaker extends the dimensions of literary appreciation to include the author's life, his actions, as well as the common perceptions ('closenesses') building a relationship between the writer and his readers. This connection to the poet constitutes a process of rebirth as the speaker, comparing her experiences with other ones, gains insight into her own life and its events. This counters Roland Barthes's idea of the 'death' of the author, where the merits of an artistic work are seen as independent from an artist's life or historical context. Rukeyser's poetics is based on the idea of poetry as a vehicle of change. It entails exploring an author's life itself in order to find her sources of inspiration, which may enrich the readers' appreciation of her art and stimulate them to engage actively with it as a transformative factor in their life.

²⁶¹ From the author's annotations in Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 561.

The political conditions in Korea evoke some memories for the speaker. When she arrives there, she meets friends of the imprisoned poet and they allude to the underhand intelligence operations of their repressive regime, reminding her that, being a foreigner, she is not liable to them:

There will be no car

driving up behind you, there will be

no accident, he says. I know these accidents.

Nothing will follow you, he says.

O the Mafia at home, I know, Black Hand

of childhood, the death of Tresca whom I mourn,

the building of New York. Many I know. (*CP* 562)

The speaker, acting as Rukeyser's persona, does not compare the foreign government to her own, which practised repression during the McCarthy purges, since the latter may have seemed, to many people at the time, legitimate procedures of a democratic government. The regime in Korea, though backed by the U. S. government, reminds her of groups, such as the American Mafia, with sophisticated, highly-organised power networks, similar to those of states, which are involved in criminal acts on a large scale. Carlo Tresca was a labor leader who was assassinated by a member of the Mafia, in 1943. To the pragmatically-minded speaker the development of New York as a financial centre was partly due to the activities of this and other organisations, just as American support to authoritarian regimes, such as the South Korean one of the time, helps sustain the great power's strategic interests in the world.

On a personal level, the child of the incarcerated writer reminds the speaker of her own, similarly deprived of a father but for a reason that is not related to politics. This takes her back to sad memories of difficult circumstances that she was ultimately able to survive and overcome:

Long ago, soon after my son's birth
 —this scene comes in arousal with the sight of a strong child
 just beginning to run—
 when all life seemed prisoned off, because the father's other son
 born three weeks before my child
 had opened the world
 that other son and his father closed the world—
 in my fierce loneliness and fine well-being
 torn apart but with my amazing child
 I celebrated and grieved. (*CP* 567)

The speaker draws an analogy between the poet's child, who is 'just beginning to run', and her own, whose birth after another child for her married lover made it impossible for the latter to claim him.²⁶² That act of abandonment was supposed to 'close' the world for the speaker and her child, causing them to live in a kind of prison, with no source of income and

²⁶² In her posthumously published notes to 'The Gates', Rukeyser further illuminates the analogy between her child's situation and that of the Korean poet's by describing America's post-war conservative norms as 'the imprisoning culture of that time'. This phrase alludes to the prejudice single mothers and their children suffered in a culture that condemned and ostracised them. See Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems*, 635.

in difficult circumstances. Against these odds, the speaker accepts her life with its hardships and derives strength from the motherly love she feels towards her child. Her realistic attitude to her experience ('I celebrated and grieved') may have helped her cope with it. By comparing the present problem to her own past one, she envisages a source of hope for the poet's child, suggesting that a single mother's determination and resilience can make up for the loss or disappearance of a father.

The prisoner's mother joins the speaker in her vigil outside the poet's prison cell. She is portrayed in concrete terms that reveal her reaction to her son's predicament:

Woman seen as a slender instrument,
 woman at vigil in the prison-yard,
 woman seen as the fine tines of a pitchfork
 that works hard, that is worn down, rusted down
 to a fine sculpture standing in a yard
 where her son's body is confined. (*CP* 565)

The serene mother creates the impression, in the speaker, of a solid pitchfork standing straight on its tines. In her fortitude of a nearly mechanical quality, the woman is similar to an instrument. She is sustained by her belief in her son's case in addition to her motherly emotions. The effort she expends for him concentrates her physical strength, and she ends up being like a work of art offering significance to the perceptive speaker. This image of rigidity is alleviated when the mother, next, turns into 'waving lines against yellow brightness' and 'her fine body becomes transparent in bravery'. The imagery evokes the tight relationship binding her belief to her body in that each of them reflects and gives form to the other. It is

through this state that the mother hopes to reach out to her son from behind the prison's walls, in the same way that 'her son's voice does stand / across the world speaking'.

From the other side of the prison's boundary, the poet strives to communicate with the outside world. Through what the speaker takes to be his desire to break the barriers separating him from his readers, he sends messages in spite of his total isolation. Using what she hears of the conditions of his detention, she attempts to draw a picture of him:

Glare-lit, I hear,

without books, without pen and paper.

Does he draw a pencil out of his throat,

out of his veins, out of his sex?

There are cells all around him, emptied.

He can signal on these walls till he runs mad.

He is signalling to me across the night. (*CP* 566)

Probably as a form of torture, the poet is exposed to harsh light and deprived of books to read and writing tools.²⁶³ The latter are especially essential for his existence since they are the means through which he expresses himself and the connective, social aspect of his identity.

²⁶³ Kim Chi Ha was placed under very strict surveillance conditions especially after he wrote and smuggled a 12,000-word memorandum, allegedly 'scratched in mud on paper stolen from prison authorities', which he called 'Declaration of Conscience'. In this message he declared his innocence and revealed the torture conditions under which he was forced to make a false statement indicting himself. After the smuggling was discovered and in order to isolate and closely monitor him, he was confined in a prison cell surrounded by several empty ones and watched twenty-four hours a day via television camera. See Bruce Cumings, 'The Kim Chi Ha Case', *The New York Review of Books*, 16 October 1975, <<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1975/oct/16/the-kim-chi-ha-case/>> [accessed 30 March 2015], and Harold Hakwon Sunoo, 'The Story of Kim Chi Ha', *Worldview*, 1 June 1976, p. 18.

Since his art emerges from his body, from his desire to speak out (his ‘throat’), his deeper self or subconscious (symbolised by the blood in his ‘veins’), as well as his sexuality, which inspires his work, the latter represents an effort to be in bodily contact with his readers, since they would, in their turn, appreciate his writing with their physical senses. No matter how his jailers wish to silence and suppress him, he continues to ‘signal’ to the speaker through the prison’s walls, across the barriers that the repressive regime has erected around him.

Finally, although the speaker does not accomplish her mission of contributing to the release of the imprisoned poet, she has another task in mind; she is taking some lessons home with her. As a reader of the poet, she has some questions to ponder and answer:

How shall we venture home?

How shall we tell each other of the poet?

How can we meet the judgment on the poet,

or his execution? How shall we free him?

How shall we speak to the infant beginning to run?

All those beginning to run? (*CP* 570)

The speaker’s questions raise the issue of the extent of poetry’s relevance to its readers and their personal life. She thinks of the changed way she will go back home after her trip. She would share her reading and activist’s experience with other people, discussing the imprisoned poet even though she did not have the chance to know him personally. The speaker wonders about the manner in which that person could be evaluated, both based on his work and his personal life. The readers’ interest in the poet involves assessing and contesting official punitive procedures against him as well as an active attempt to save his life, which

does not end with him; it is continued with his son, who is just beginning his hope-filled life. It is also extended with the efforts of readers who are ready to be transformed by his poetry, who would be born anew, like his son, with his work, into a different understanding of the world around them. So here, as we have seen, Rukeyser rethinks and questions the boundaries separating an author's personal life from her work as well as those dividing readers' practical reality from the poetry they read and the life of the writer reaching out to them through her writing.

'The Gates' aims to transcend biased partisan positions to advance a time-defying revelation carrying relevance to a wide range of readers. The writing of political poetry involves challenges that few poems in that category meet. It requires the balancing of elements that are not typically combined in poetry, such as the perfection of an aesthetic form and the use of direct language for immediate effect. Reviewing the protest poetry of the 1960s, Robert Shaw demonstrates this problem in a useful if exaggerated manner: 'More than for other sorts of poetry, the ways in which *this* sort can go wrong seem clearly defined and aggravatingly predictable. Everywhere we see egos asserted, truths debased, reason abandoned and craft ignored'.²⁶⁴ Shaw's criticism is mainly directed towards purely documentary or vituperative poems where the factual content or emotion is highlighted at the expense of poetic technique, which may be marginalised, as was the case with many poems written in response to the Vietnam War.

Although she deals explicitly with an instance of state oppression, Rukeyser avoids a prejudiced analysis of the situation when she concentrates on the imprisoned poet's condition, presenting it, instead, as a human rights issue connected to freedom of speech. Further, the web of correspondences created in the poem between the protagonist's and the speaker's personal life undercuts the bias that underlies the political content of the poem and

²⁶⁴ Robert B. Shaw, 'The Poetry of Protest', in *American Poetry since 1960*, 45.

enables readers to identify with both characters. The imprisoned poet is not merely presented in the narrow role of a dissident who is punished for his protest; he is also depicted as an ordinary person, with a private life of his own. Moreover, a factor that counterbalances the political message (resistance to oppression) and extends its purport in 'The Gates' is Rukeyser's incorporation of mystical elements in the poem. This can be discerned in the positing of the poet's child as a symbol for hope and for the ability to embark on change and renewal in life. The poet's mother's perseverance is afforded a spiritual aspect, which, however, finds form in and is, in turn, sustained by her physical action. In addition, despite the poet's imprisonment and the unavailability of the means of writing, he strives to break free of prison by communicating with his readers. The speaker speculates about the possibility that his messages transcend the physical boundaries and reach her.

Finally, the relationship between the poet and the speaker gains a transcendental quality when the latter contemplates its enduring significance for her and other people as she sets out on her journey back to her home country. In all these instances, there is an overlap between the private and public realms, as well as the conscious and subconscious levels of existence, which fulfils the two senses of the word 'gates' in the title, as 'the gates of perception, the gates of the body'. The mystical dimension in the poem provides it with a wider appeal that the political theme cannot achieve alone. The political reality may change in time and so may the poet's position towards it. However, questions such as his or her manner of engagement with public events physically and through art, and the repercussions of activism in private life maintain their relevance across generations of readers.

CONCLUSION

Thus the artist's body has a prominent presence throughout Muriel Rukeyser's poetry. We find it in her depiction of personal experiences, where her personas engage with practical events in their daily life and, as a result, gain a sharpened awareness of the concrete aspect of their identity. We can observe this in Rukeyser's poem 'Ajanta', where the protagonist embarks on a journey away from war and towards the isolation of an ancient cave with artistic paintings. In this cave, she comes in contact with the purely corporeal aspect of life. As a result, a tension develops between the sense of immediacy she derives from the images of the body in the cave and the conflict that characterises the social world outside, where truth seems lost with the fallacies that people imagine and create. The protagonist feels compelled to accommodate this tension by embracing the different aspects of her existence. Other instances of physical experiences can be found in Rukeyser's poems *Orpheus* and 'Nine Poems for the Unborn Child'. In the former, the artist attempts to discover a form that includes his personal, physical experience of mutilation and death. The significance of this discovery is highlighted by being associated with an act of resurrection. In 'Nine Poems', Rukeyser adopts the autobiographical form to portray her experience of pregnancy and effect the reconciliation of her quotidian life with her art. In all of these poems, we witness the author's endeavour to derive inspiration from practical, physical experiences, in order to include them in her art, therefore reconciling two essential aspects of life.

On the level of technique, Rukeyser incorporates the body through her organicist poetics and in the different ways she attempts to make contact with her readers through her style. Her view of technique as an integral element which functions interdependently with other elements is illustrated in her poems, where the rhythm, for example, reflects different tendencies and combines, accordingly, various musical forms. The same principle runs through the diction and physical features of her poems, where she introduces innovative

techniques that reflect daring ideas within the poem. Through her style, the author reaches out to her readers by combining both a tendency to coerce them into accepting her outlook, and a tendency to invite their responses by presenting her images in a thought-provoking manner.

Rukeyser engages with the body directly through the experience of physical suffering. Illness, which is seen as an integral element of existence, stimulates the artist to search for a way of expressing it. This contributes to a transformation in Rukeyser's artistic form. The despised body is viewed as an essential part of the social body. It indicates people's notions towards their own individual bodies. Rukeyser, in one of her autobiographical poems, identifies with this type of body and accepts the consequences for that, to the degree of embracing death as a physical experience. The imprisoned protagonists in her poems contend with questions about their identity and individuality, and reach out to the world outside the prison through their experience of physical suffering. The latter becomes a factor that extends the characters' perception of their identity and makes them aware of the different facets of their existence, including the bodily one.

As we have seen, the body is viewed as a source of inspiration for Rukeyser. Physical experiences serve as a factor in the search for an artistic form, and in reconsidering the relationship between binaries such as body-mind, female-male, and private-public. The poem as an organic entity is a means for Rukeyser's attempt to make contact with her readers. Thus, the body as a holistic entity inspires the reconciliation, in her poems, of the disparate aspects of the artist's life, especially the personal and the vocational. Her poetry brings together distinct fields, such as myth, psychoanalysis, politics and science, to indicate their interrelatedness, at least in the poet's creative imagination.

Rukeyser's reconciliation of elements in existence through the motif of the body calls to mind Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological notion of perception, which constitutes a

combination of two positions: immanence and transcendence. The former involves the person's awareness of herself as part of the things she perceives, while the latter concerns her concomitant consciousness of a distance separating her from the things around her. Just as Merleau-Ponty's idea of perception combines the two elements of immanence and transcendence, which are interdependent despite their distinctness, Rukeyser reconciles, in a number of her poems, her consciousness of her individual physical presence and experience with an awareness of the intricacies of the world around her, which are seen as interrelated. Her treatment of the concrete body involves the attempt to draw inspiration from it for the reconciliation that she endeavours to achieve between the elements of her identity, as well as her personal life and her art. She recognises the tangible presence of the individual body among other bodies and other things in the world, through the physical experiences she depicts, but she seeks to draw inspiration from these events for a holistic vision that brings together the concrete and abstract aspects of life. So she engages with the palpable body in order to develop a perspective that takes account of its relation to factors beyond it, thereby resolving the conflict between corporeal and conceptual entities by reconciling them within the framework of her poetry.

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