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‘Atlantis Buried Outside’: Muriel Rukeyser, Myth and the Crises of War

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‘Atlantis Buried Outside’: Muriel Rukeyser, Myth and the Crises of War

In 1968 Muriel Rukeyser wrote a poem called “Myth”, responding to Moreau’s 1864 painting *Oedipus and the Sphinx*:

MYTH

Long afterward, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the roads. He smelled a familiar smell. It was the Sphinx. Oedipus said, “I want to ask one question. Why didn’t I recognize my mother?” “You gave the wrong answer,” said the Sphinx. “But that was what made everything possible,” said Oedipus. “No,” she said. “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.”¹

Oedipus fails to recognise the mother because he refuses to acknowledge the feminine. He gives “the wrong answer”, revising the entire story: the patriarchal “correct” answer is refigured as a mistake, a blindness to female difference that is shown to be the origin of Oedipus’s misfortunes. The sphinx, meanwhile, both

reclaims woman from the hegemonic category Man and rejects the presumptuous universalism of Oedipus's second person pronoun. Rukeyser's version is an alternative explanation for Oedipus's blindness, but also a troubling of mythic origin itself: where Oedipus's victory over the man-eating *femme fatale* "made everything possible" in the original, his mistake has a doom-laden legacy here, in itself a counter to the Old Testament origin-myth of the Fall through Eve, and perhaps even to narrative in general. Inverting and undermining Oedipus at the same time as using his story to make a point distorts the usually unsullied window onto human consciousness myth is assumed to be.

This essay will sketch a movement in Rukeyser's career, which "Myth" performs in miniature, from the revision of individual myths, adapting their political content to the demands of testimonial witness, toward an interrogation of the mythopoeic itself, occasioned by the loss of direct witness during the Second World War. "Myth" is a cheeky poem facetiously wielding Oedipus as a stick with which to beat lazy gendered language. Throughout her career from the early 30s to 1980, though, Rukeyser would insist on the necessary energy of myth for the writing of all political poetry, for the articulation of "everything possible". Her central statement on the imagination, *The Life of Poetry*, written over a ten-year period in the 30s and 40s, places myth at the centre of the poet's proposed contribution to "the future":

If our imaginative response to life were complete, if we were fully conscious of emotion, if we apprehended surely the relations that make us know the truth and the relations that make us know the beautiful, we would be—what? The heroes of our myths, acting perfectly among these faculties, loving

appropriately and living with appropriate risk, spring up at the question. We invented them to let us approach that life. But it is our own lives of which they remind us. They offer us a hope and a perspective, not of the past in which they were made—not that alone—but of the future. For if we lived in full response to the earth, to each other, and to ourselves, we would not breathe a supernatural climate; we would be more human.²

Here myth functions as a reminder of desire and possibility: its resonances are not rooted in humanist universals, but are the potentially temporary resonances of lives lived incompletely. Myth for Rukeyser was a central mode of passion, a powerful expression of struggle: when we see ourselves in myth, we do not see our uncorrupted, primitive being, but a common desire for a better world. Rukeyser allies myth to poetry as a “type of creation in which we may live and which will save us”.³ It comes from what Rukeyser called “the lost, the anonymous, the dream-singers”: myths are forgotten dreams rather than hidden qualities, and as such they are contingent. Myth is found in Indian tribes “singing of how they would save themselves, and would rise and fight; and then, losing that promise, began to tell, to sing their dreams, fusing their wishful dreaming”.⁴ Myth is struggle for Rukeyser, but it is also “morphology” — in articulating desire, myth does not only express frustration and struggle, it also imagines fulfilment, that we can be “heroes of our myths”, since “[t]he world of this creation, and its poetry, is not yet born”.⁵ In sum, Rukeyser conceives of myth as a projective resource, propelling us with a unique visionary energy to seek fulfilment as a society, in a struggle retaining heroic and utopian possibility. As I will outline, Rukeyser’s modernist mythopoeia is distinctive in its refusal of origin.

Two immediate factors complicate and galvanize Rukeyser's commitment to mythopoeia. "Myth" shows one of these clearly: the Oedipus myth must be exposed for its patriarchal assumptions to be made usable. The other is her literary and political alignment with the radical left. Rukeyser's approach to modernist experimentation, where we unsurprisingly see the roots of her mythopoeia, is with a foot already in the camp of a proletarian aesthetic, a tension flourishing in the unique visionary-documentary style that would typify her work. How, then, does the feminist-Marxist engage with myth? We can sketch these starting positions separately. The phallo- or at least androcentric nature of most myth has been well documented since Rukeyser died in 1980. Jane Caputi's notion of "psychic activism" as a counter to such patriarchal narrative suggests one possible response. This is the strategy of "fight[ing] fire with Fire" — to reclaim the power of the female from phallogocentric contexts of myth, to reassert the mythic force of the Goddess.⁶ The American poet Robin Morgan's conception of this power is uncomplicated, for example: "We are the myths. We are the Amazons, the Furies, the Witches. We have never not been here, this exact sliver of time, this precise place."⁷ As well as a response to the deep history of narratives that women were not involved in writing, this is also a corrective to the twentieth century's particular reading of myth, be it in the passive-mother-fertility female figure that dominates Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, or Pound's macho inhabiting of Isis gathering the limbs of Osiris.⁸ Rukeyser directly takes up such a revisionary approach — indeed, Isis herself is the empowered figure at the centre of *The Book of the Dead*, her first mythopoeic writing. Rukeyser goes beyond this, however, to perform the equally necessary task of challenging the biological naturalism implicit in myth per se. Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto"

is of interest here. Haraway calls her cyborg figure a “myth”, but distinguishes it fundamentally from the “organic” mythmaking of her contemporaries:

American radical feminists like Susan Griffin, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich have profoundly affected our political imaginations — and perhaps restricted too much what we allow as a friendly body and political language. They insist on the organic, opposing it to the technological. But their symbolic systems and the related positions of ecofeminism and feminist paganism, replete with organicisms, can only be... oppositional ideologies fitting the late twentieth century.⁹

In Griffin, Lorde and Rich for Haraway, the organic or given is privileged over the made or *technē*. Cyborg myths, on the other hand, “subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture” itself, challenging the myth of myth, as it were. Not merely oppositional, such post-humanist mythopoeia, full of “creatures simultaneously animal and machine”, rejects the essentialism of traditional myth (there’s an Amazon in every woman) with an emphasis on the created and contingent nature of myth itself.

The links of this mythopoeic machinery to Rukeyer’s wider proletarian impulses are found in her orientation to the wider literary culture in which she participated, and that culture’s own complex positioning of myth. She was, perhaps more than any other experimental poet of the period, involved in the project of proletarian writing: her poems, reviews and articles naturally gravitated toward *New Masses* as well as Louis Zukofsky’s “*Objectivists*” *Anthology* or *Partisan Review*. The stance of *New*

Masses toward experimental modernism is complex, but its generally social realist tendency had space for a poet like Eliot. This space was small, however (even unorthodox Leftists, like Adorno and Horkheimer, have been dismissive of myth as the bourgeois siren-song of pre-capitalist fantasy, “the nostalgic stylization of what may no longer be sung”), and would ultimately be unsatisfactory for Rukeyser.¹⁰ Alongside the usual anti-intellectual denunciations of *New Masses* editor Mike Gold, who deemed Eliot “dull, bloodless, intellectualistic” though “well-tailored”, there were serious engagements with Eliot’s work.¹¹ Joseph Freeman, also an orthodox communist, could make the distinction between the Eliot of 20s and the Eliot of the 30s, claiming in the pages of *New Masses* that Eliot only *turned* reactionary and that, indeed, his early work was “revolutionary”, with his aesthetic and political trajectory mirroring that of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s. The Russian D. S. Mirsky was gushing in his praise for the “unsurpassed... bourgeois poet” whose “rare poetic gift is allied with a social theme of real significance”.¹² Rolfe Humphries admired “the white-hot fervor of energy which fused and smelted the scrap-metal in *The Waste-Land* [sic] to durable poetic amalgam”, and called Eliot “a prophet of the revolution”.¹³ In all this appreciation of Eliot, however, there was a still a fundamental reserve: Eliot was finally an enemy, a poet whose brilliance lied in his ability to manifest the symptoms of his decadent class. Humphries, for example, concluded: “he has written, with poetic authority too great to be questioned, the elegy of an age that is passing. Let us not be so boisterous shouting our war songs that we fail to hear from the citadel of our enemies the cry of capitulation.” In essence, the proletarian critic could only engage with Eliot as a reconnaissance exercise, with suspended disbelief. In other words, the formal achievements of a poem like *The Waste Land* could not be conceptualized in a way that could be put to *use* by radical

poets. This essay will explore Rukeyser's own dissenting interrogation of high modernist myth, but it is worth pointing out from the start that she differed from *New Masses*-type readings in that she thought mythical modes like Eliot's were worth investigating in the first place. Rukeyser shows us how the radical writer could exploit the mythopoeic achievements of Anglo-American experimental verse, however much they carried assumptions about history at odds with her own as a Marxist. Rukeyser, though she mixed in CPUSA circles and was a regular contributor to *New Masses*, and though she even appeared at the first Soviet-sponsored American Writers Congress, undoubtedly felt frustrations with the critical reception of experimental poetry on the radical left. Her review of John Wheelwright's *Rock and Shell* in 1934, for example, praises the collection's intertextual exploration of religious texts at the same time as predicting its neglect by other communist critics:

Fine poetry which is not obviously propagandist has confused the critics again and again... Here is a book of fine poetry that must have an uneasy reception... [Wheelwright's] work cannot be dismissed as confused or confusing. Too many poets whose work might be exhibited as vital influences have been too faintly praised... Such writers are laying a base of literary activity and revolutionary creation...¹⁴

Wheelwright, dismissed as a follower of Eliot by Hicks, is here praised as a visionary poet because of his complex intertextual "passing from religious preoccupation to activity in the revolutionary movement". "Faint praise", a kind of toleration, is perhaps the best way of describing the reception of such poetry in the pages of *New Masses*. Through her early work, I will claim, Rukeyser shows us how the apparently

obscurant or mystical technique of writers like Eliot or Wheelwright might be a “vital influence” in spite of their apparent incongeniality to Rukeyser’s political concerns.

As I have suggested, the impulse to challenge phallogentrism and reactionary nostalgia combined with Rukeyser’s commitment to the mythopoeic to give rise to a complex dialectic. On the one hand, particular patriarchal and reactionary narratives need to be combatted, but on the other there is a danger that the very act of revision will reinforce the primacy and privileged status traditionally reserved for myth *per se*. How, for example, can the feminist stop short of characterizing that power as primal, primitive and therefore somehow the “true”, presocial version of human relations? Which is to say, how can the very *form* of myth be challenged at the same time its content is revised? Myth *revision* is not itself new: *Book of the City of Ladies*, a fifteenth century text by one Christine de Pizan put what one might call a “feminine slant” on Western myths about women to show the “massive ingratitude of... men”.¹⁵ Such examples suggest that tinkering fails to fully challenge what is fundamentally a patriarchal and conservative *form* that emphasizes essential biological characteristics and timeless universals over changeable and historical forms of political agency and identity.

Rukeyser’s mythical revisions are hardly of this order, but they do focus their efforts on transforming mythical *content*. In *The Book of Dead*, Rukeyser’s 63-page quasi-epic and most famous “mythical” poem, documentary collage is used to adapt, revise and reenergise myth. Here Isis and the Egyptian Book of the Dead are used to establish female political agency in the face of political outrage (the poem concerns an industrial disaster in which 700 men died as a result of Union Carbide’s

opportunistic greed). The emphasis is on the appropriation and exploitation of certain myths to transform feminine lament into a spur to action and life — exactly what Isis, whose tears were said to flood the Nile each year after the death of Osiris, represents. In one of the work's central poems, "Absalom", the female speaker assumes the phallus through a reworking of the central fact of the Osiris myth, his re-membering by Isis, placing all the work's agency with the living and present woman rather than the dead, lamented son — a reversal enforced, as it were, by the reportage of the poem, which sees the mother "begging of X-ray money", taking on the court, and honouring the dead's memory. In another, "The Cornfield", Rukeyser gruesomely inverts the natural fertility myths so beloved of modernism, here associating the corn-gods Isis and Osiris with the corrupt undertaker who secretly buried black workers on arable land. Such manoeuvres are primarily re-imaginings of mythical content. What we witness at the start of and during the Second World War, as I will describe now, is a questioning of the underlying assumptions of mythopoeic form, an interrogation of the basic structure of an Eliotic "return to the sources".¹⁶

World War Two was peculiarly double-edged for a poet who had until the war based her career in a poetics of witness,¹⁷ but who now, as a woman, found the position of witness and the poetic authority of direct experience denied her. The revision of myths in the light of witness remains central to Rukeyser's poetics in her firsthand experience of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, the most famous episode of her career. Rukeyser's great poem about Spain, "Mediterranean", retains the poet's central task of testimony evident in *The Book of the Dead* and other poems from *U. S. 1*. Indeed, "Mediterranean" is premised on the responsibility of witness more than any other work in the collection. The war was the beginning of the end of Rukeyser's testimonial poetry, as it physically denied women any vantage of direct witness. The

way in which the crisis of war forced Rukeyser into a different, more distant perspective regarding it, necessarily leads Rukeyser to a different concern with myth that nonetheless maintains focus on the central fact of war. Namely, the project to reframe certain myths with the concrete details the occasional, makes way — partly as an accommodation for the unavailability of direct experience, partly as a response to the Nazi mysticism that had drawn myth-making itself urgently into question, and partly as a response to the *total* nature of a war whose occasions were used for as propagandistic symbols in other political poetry of the period — to a concern with the mythopoeic itself.

The gender trouble of the war had especially profound implications for Rukeyser's work. At the broadest level, the paradigms of war poetry existing at the beginning of the war simply left no place for a female voice. There was *no such thing* as women's war poetry. Rukeyser herself was excluded from all-male anthologies like Alan Calmers's *Salud! Poems, stories and sketches of Spain by American writers*, despite the vastly superior quality of her work on the subject. This terrain is succinctly outlined by Susan Schweik:

In the modern war poem as it is usually defined, the experience of the masculine soldier and the voice of the masculine author predominate. In 1941, when American editors and critics sought to answer that urgent and irritating question — “Where are the war poets?” — they expected, and were expected, to seek out military men, men whose poems could engage the war with the effect of authenticity, of earned outrage and courage, which the poems of the famous Great War soldier poets, then again widely in circulation, possessed.¹⁸

The Great War poets' focus on the body and direct experience as the clearest demystification of war rhetoric made for a legacy that, as James Mersmann has shown, dominated the American poetry of war at least up until the US invasion of Vietnam, when its method became a rhetorical shorthand for "the horror of war".¹⁹ In its original incarnation, modern war poetry identifies how bodily experience is obscured by an often versified jingoistic idealism, that the poet should correct this, and since it is the man who experiences war *directly*, this poet will be male. In the context of the First World War, of course, such a shift in focus on the material experience and physical trauma of war had much to recommend it, and represented a commitment that Rukeyser, a materialist pledged to the responsibility of the author to know directly the material she treated, would have taken for granted. The problem, then, is that women are denied the authority of experience by war: in the case of the Spanish Civil War, as Rukeyser repeats many times, she wanted to stay and support the fight but was forced into the "exile" of evacuation and "never allowed to return" despite repeated attempts to do so.²⁰ The way the war distanced women from its centre was a singular problem for Rukeyser since her own poetics had been based around an ethics of witness, and an insistence that the poet address the most important political subjects of the day.

Symptoms of concerns explored more fully in "Mediterranean" can be found in Rukeyser's news dispatches from Spain, where she had been sent by *Life and Letters To-day* to cover the anti-fascist First People's Olympiad. Three articles were published by Rukeyser, the most detailed of which was in *Life and Letters* itself, with the other two in *The New York Times* and, later, *New Masses*.²¹ In each, the authority of the reportage is in Rukeyser's being a witness: the motif is of the survivor "escaped to tell thee", with Rukeyser's evacuation from Spain mentioned each time. As part of

this, Rukeyser insists on distancing herself from the tourist, especially in the *Life and Letters* report. In Moncada, where her train halts as war breaks out, she facetiously collages advice from a travel guidebook: “There is nothing in it that need detain the tourist.” Tourists themselves, Rukeyser’s fellow travellers, are the constant butt of satire in the report, as in an “English couple, on their way to Mallorca, have it in for the man from Cook’s, who should have told them there was to be a revolution”.²² The detachment of the tourist to the crisis is repeatedly the subject of sarcasm: “All during the hot noon, the train waits for the attack. The tourists set up bridge games.”²³ The inadequacy of bourgeois exoticism is summed up toward the end of the article in a juxtaposition of Rukeyser’s account of the war with the landscaping of travel literature, with “all the cars armed and painted” as “churches are burning all over the city” set alongside Barcelona’s “*splendid situation opposite the Mediterranean*”.²⁴ Anxious to distinguish herself from such dilettantism, Rukeyser stresses her vocation. In a story that Rukeyser would tell again and again in various versions, the chief organiser of the Games says to a mass meeting attended by Rukeyser that evacuated foreigners “will carry to their own countries... to the working people of the world, the story of what they see now in Spain”.²⁵ Rukeyser, in the unfolding of this “story”, is a witness with great responsibility.

Closely following this account, “Mediterranean” is, on the surface, a paradigmatic occasional poem, and can be placed comfortably in the agitational poetry of occasion extending back at least to Shelley’s “Mask of Anarchy”. Published as both a fundraising pamphlet for the Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy and in *New Masses* shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War, and written, as it were, on the spot, the poem conceives of crisis in the classic sense of a “turning point” just as Auden’s

“Spain 1936” had. Rukeyser’s excitement at the immediate “pulse of war” is part of the situation’s urgency. The demands of testimony are made clear:

Here is home-country, who fights our war.

Street-meeting speaker to us:

“... came for Games,
you stay for victory; foreign? your job is:
go tell your countries what you saw in Spain.”²⁶

The poem’s relation to the events it describes, however, is far more complicated than this directive seems to require. The reportage central to *The Book of the Dead* is, in “Mediterranean”, problematized by the distance that has been forced on Rukeyser as an evacuee unable to fight in the war — a point made even in the news dispatches, where “foreigners stand helplessly around the fringes”.²⁷ It is for this reason that the dominant theme of the poem is exile, the exile of a poet literally at sea, a theme announced in the opening lines: “At the end of the July, exile. We watched the gangplank go / cutting the boat away, indicating: sea.” From the beginning of the poem, Rukeyser is cut off from the event to which she would give witness. The war is “home” for Rukeyser, but something to which she has been rendered “foreign”.²⁸ As the metaphor of exile suggests, leaving the war occasions pain in Rukeyser, not least because it is a separation from a lover: “I saw first of the faces going home into war / the brave man Otto Boch, the German exile...” As a “brave man” with “strong square breast”, the German Boch is permitted to go “home into war” in a way Rukeyser, a female foreigner, is not.

The symbolic relations established in this first section of the poem are clear enough. Spain represents an ideal, a noble struggle and therefore a home to which the sea, the space of Rukeyser's evacuation, is exile:

The Games had not been held.
A week of Games, theatre and festival;
world anti-fascist week. Pistol starts race.
Machine gun marks the war. Answered unarmed,
charged the Embarcadero, met those guns.
And charging through the province, joined that army.
Boys from the hills, the unmatched guns,
the clumsy armored cars.
Drilled in the bullring. Radio cries:
To Saragossa! And this boat.²⁹

The comfort of sea is ruefully compared with the action, guns and charging of war. The excitement and urgency of "To Saragossa!" is pointedly contrasted to the unheroic evacuation, "And this boat" serving as a resented shadow and afterthought. It is this relation between land and sea, between war and peace, home and exile, that informs the central myth of the poem, the myth of Atlantis, which makes the coordinates of these symbols more complex and dynamic than they appear. Atlantis is first glimpsed, through mysterious Minoan ghosts, as Rukeyser reevaluates her "escape":

Escape, dark on the water, an overloaded ship.
Crowded the deck. Spoke little. Down to dinner.

Quiet on the sea: no guns.

The printer said, In Paris there is time,
but where's its place now; where is poetry?

This is the sea of war; the first frontier
blank on the maps, blank sea; Minoan boats
maybe achieved this shore...³⁰

Beginning as a trivial cruise diary, Rukeyser's account of the voyage is transformed by the printer's question, at which point the sea becomes "the first frontier". The sea, that is, emerges as the frontier of witness: it is the poem's testimony, away from the war proper, that can fill its readers in on what is currently "blank on the maps".

Why, though, is this role attributed to poetry, rather than the journalism Rukeyser was officially in Barcelona for? "Mediterranean" tells us of one key difference between these two forms of communication. Poetry, unlike the "fact" of reportage, contains the mythopoeic, and therefore carries a projective quality absent in journalism. It is the myth of Atlantis that proves this for Rukeyser, and that is central to her negotiation of witness in a context of distance. As a space equally "blank on the maps" and only available through the mediation of the sea, Atlantis is invoked and equated with the Spain Rukeyser has left behind. Atlantis is present throughout the poem as an absence, a no-place, a utopia:

Frontier of Europe, the tideless sea, a field of power
touching desirable coasts, rocking in time conquests,
fertile, the moving water maintains its boundaries

layer on layer, Troy...³¹

Troy, lost like Atlantis, shows us the power of the sea to thrust forward as “moving water” — a “tideless” force that consigns Troy, and may consign the colonial aggression of the last war, to what the poem calls “the overthrown past”.³² The sea, therefore, is a “frontier” in the sense that it is incessantly at the forefront of the world’s movement and change (as well as in the more obvious sense that Rukeyser is among the first to carry news of the war beyond the shores of Spain). At this point, Rukeyser’s position as an exile on the sea takes on projective qualities:

The wheel in the water, green, behind my head.
 Turns with its light-spokes. Deep. And the drowning eyes
 find under the water figures near
 in their true picture, moving true,
 the picture of that war enlarging clarified
 as the boat perseveres away, always enlarging,
 becoming clear.³³

The movement of and through the sea is equated with clarification and enlargement here. The central factor in this enlarging clarification is the depth of the sea, with an obvious pun on the word itself and a reference to the phenomena of magnification through water. Rukeyser’s seeing is now no longer the presence of direct witness, but the clarifying vision of absence: “Deep in the water Spanish shadows turn, / assume their brightness past a cruel lens, / quick vision of loss.”³⁴ The absent poet’s vision represents loss, but not obscurity — rather, the war “assume[s] brightness” at this distance. Looking down, that is, leads the poet to look up as the enlarged war now

casts its shadow across the sea, beyond its borders, like a shadow orienting the vision toward what casts it. Depth here, then, is an illumination of surface. It is also, though, a realisation of blockage: of how the “cruel lens” of distance necessitates vision at a remove.

This new, stranger sense of witness allows Rukeyser to invert the Atlantis myth in the poem’s remarkable closing lines, delivered after the boat has come to port in the relative, if temporary, safety of France:

Barcelona

everywhere, Spain everywhere, the cry of Planes for Spain.

The picture at our eyes, past memory, poem,
to carry and spread and daily justify.

The single issue, the live man standing tall,
on the hill, the dock, the city, all the war.

Exile and refugee, we land, we take
nothing negotiable out of the new world;
we believe, we remember, we saw.

Mediterranean gave
image and peace, tideless for memory.

For that beginning
make of us each
a continent and inner sea
Atlantis buried outside
to be won.³⁵

The usual currency of Atlantis as a lost past to be found, a forgotten way of being to be remembered, repeated in Modernist poems like Crane's *The Bridge* and H. D.'s *Trilogy*, or even in Auden's more sceptical "Atlantis", is subverted here to create a projective rather than archaeological myth. Its utopian associations are clearly retained from Plato, Francis Bacon and Thomas More (and indeed from the nineteenth century pseudohistorian Ignatius Donnelly, responsible for the modern popularity of the myth). Rukeyser's utopia, however, is much closer to the etymology of the word, "no-place", with the poem's conclusion rejecting backward-looking searches for exotic prehistory, instead insisting on "The picture at our eyes, past memory" that we must "daily justify". It is for this reason that Spain is, ironically enough, termed "the new world", a "beginning". The myth is still at stake, to be decided, paradoxically "buried outside / to be won".

The clearest indication of the strangeness of Rukeyser's poem considered as an occasional poem is in its revision for fundraising purposes, published in 1938 as a small pamphlet for the Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy.³⁶ The much shorter revised version excises almost all reference to problematic themes of exile and distance. The abridged poem removes the first section, for example, and so begins at the "Frontier of Europe". This version capitalises on precisely the sense of witness that the original poem troubles, with no reference to the gendered perspective so central to it. All reference to evacuation and the poet on the sea are removed to make it seem that Rukeyser is really still there, as an eyewitness, as the demands of direct and immediate agitation call for quite a different poem, one less true to Rukeyser's experience. The revised poem's uncomplicated "occasional" nature, of course, fits better with the urgency of the form in which it is published — as the pamphlet's back

cover says: “One hundred and thirteen surgeons, nurses and ambulance drivers, with fifty-two ambulances and tons of medical equipment are saving hundreds of lives daily. What you contribute today, will receive the heartfelt thanks of a heroic people.” There is no suggestion Rukeyser did not believe in the pamphlet: it does reveal, however, that direct poetic involvement in such events, or the writing of conventional war poetry, would require a certain level of self-censorship. In the full version utopian myth has already, as it would more completely during the war proper, begun to qualify and stand in for testimonial access in a way that could not be introduced to the agitational pamphlet.

Self-censorship is one of two routes Rukeyser explores after the watershed of “Mediterranean”. It is the more quickly abandoned, however, not least because of its lamentable result: 1942’s pamphlet *Wake Island*, a celebration of the defence of its eponymous Pacific military base by US Marines, linking it and the US entry to the war with a worldwide struggle for “Freedom”. The poem differs little in purpose from US propaganda poems for the war, like Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “Murder of Lidice”, and therefore exhibits an uncomfortable relation to the State, far from in keeping with Rukeyser’s earlier work. Where Rukeyser’s earlier agitational work was rooted in particularity, *Wake Island* tends toward empty abstraction. One page reads:

Proof of America in a fighting age—
 we see the face of the world, and its eyes are brave,
 the men and women we stand with fight to save
 our hope, our discovery, our unappeasable rage
 against the enemy cutting us apart.³⁷

Were it not for its bathos the poem could seem dangerously jingoistic. It resembles the “policy of the governments of English-speaking countries” criticised in *The Life of Poetry*, written in the war years, “to win the war first, and work out the meanings afterward”.³⁸ *Wake Island* was rightly savaged by a range of critics, and though it was attacked most famously in a misogynistic *Partisan Review* piece entitled “Grandeur and Misery of a Poster Girl”, a review that would lead to a debate known as the Rukeyser Imbroglio, women poets were equally unimpressed, including Louise Bogan, who lamented its “rhetorical hollowness and limpness”.³⁹

Wake Island is an anomaly in Rukeyser’s *Collected Poems*, however (it was excluded from a previous *Collected*), especially in the context of collections appearing before and after it. The evidence in the trajectory of Rukeyser’s career suggests that she knew the shortcomings of the poem, and saw that its techniques were not an adequate poetic response to the war. Indeed, Rukeyser makes such a conclusion explicit later in the decade:

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 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 bloodlust 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.⁴⁰

The “occasional” here is linked to the kind of graphic directness typical of the heroic suffering of the First World War poets — poets defined by their bodily, direct, “naked” experience of the horrors of war. Rukeyser is not simply rationalising the rejection of a position that is in fact unavailable to her, critiquing wound-display to compensate for her own lack of wounds. Rather, her point that new forms of “social poetry” would need to be conceived is a response to the need to represent the experience of previously unrepresented constituencies, and to imagine new resistances to new forms of war and politics.

It is, as I have been hinting, the total nature of the Second World War that forces Rukeyser’s eventual rejection of the occasional. The war proper, unlike its prelude in Spain where Rukeyser could conceive herself as at least indirectly involved, necessitates a move away from poetic attempts to affect immediate events. World War Two, that is, casts historical events in a totalized light that seemingly precludes such conceptions of direct poetical agency, where the Spanish Civil War had been a crisis in the sense of a turning point, an opening and opportunity for change in which the poet was explicitly called upon. The distinct phenomenon of the Second World War is discussed by Maurice Blanchot as

the fundamental crisis... we do not know how to measure for lack of language... that keeps getting deeper and that literature also conveys according to its mode, war is always present and, in some ways, pursued... the Second World War was not only a war, a historical event like any other, circumscribed and limited with its causes, its turns, and its results. It was an *absolute*.⁴¹

Poetry as the *pursuit* of the war would become central to Rukeyser's work in what is perhaps her most powerful and complex collection, *The Beast in View* (1944). We witness a shift in the focus of Rukeyser's mythopoeia in this collection, even further away from the use and revision of individual myths toward a conscious interrogation of the structure of modernist myth itself. Rukeyser moves away from the reframing of myth through documentary fact for three reasons: firstly, she observes fundamental problems with the poetics of the occasional in this period; secondly, she feels, as many writers did during the war, an urgent need to revisit myth in the light of problematic political manifestations; and thirdly, because myth critique functions as a necessarily indirect engagement with the war that is nonetheless penetrating, and can therefore serve as a response to the blockage of witness while getting to the heart of the war's political issues.

Firstly, then, the Second World War means that particulars, central to the poetry of witness and occasion, have become absorbed into an all-embracing absolute that alienates and bewilders individuals. It is the idea that the war can be *changed* through a focus on any of its single occasions that Rukeyser points to as "a rotten sort of begging for attention and sympathy in the name of an art that was supposed to produce action". The war must be accepted, in Wallace Stevens's term, as the "fact" for which a conception of poetry as direct agitation for action will ring hollow, as the most famous occasional poems of the period, like "The Murder of Lidice" or MacLeish's *Colloquy for the States*, show. For Rukeyser, however, poetry can at least go some way to making the fact of the war less overwhelming, stepping in where a "lack of language" currently fails us. One problem of language immediately evident to a poet like Rukeyser, committed throughout her career to the mythopoeic, was the

dominance in political discourse and propaganda of a certain kind of myth.

Rukeyser's shift is similar to the twentieth century's great philosopher of myth, Ernst Cassirer, who turned away from examining *mythology* to interrogate *mythopoeia* in the face of Nazism. Individual myths, Cassirer wrote, cannot be fought, however "ludicrous": to "combat" the adversary we must "study the origin, the structure, the methods, and the technique of the political myths".⁴² To *pursue* the war, to understand it, an interrogation of mythopoeia is necessary, an interrogation that poetry, for Rukeyser, is uniquely positioned to undertake.

Before examining Rukeyser's response to these new demands, it is necessary to contextualize the nature of the problem by returning to Pound and Eliot, who were also transforming their relation to myth in the late thirties.⁴³ Both poets distance themselves from the mythical methods of the twenties in a manner that literalizes myth. Where they could be seen to *use* myth in a relativistic way before 1925, in quite a different way to writers like Yeats or D. H. Lawrence, who seem rather to have placed myths at the centre of their whole belief system, the crisis of the war gives rise to a need for more than "fragments" to shore against ruin, and calls upon myth to establish conviction. What is important here is how Pound and Eliot's renewed mythopoeia is figured as history in the late 30s onward. Both poets construct a mythological history that, due to its appearing to *be* history, obscures its mythopoeic nature: both Eliot's "dissociation of unified sensibility" and Pound's route through Dante to pre-Socratic thinking to the sources of *virtù* are mythical structures figured as historical truth. The picture is complicated in Eliot's case with the increased importance of Christianity, which does not fold easily into either category, but in Pound, the more worrying poetic voice of the Second World War, the conflation is

much more clear-cut. Pound's dogmatism was permitted by the belief that he had, in the very uncovering of medieval, Confucian and other pre-modern thought, rid language of its metaphoricity. It hardly needs pointing out that the supposed historical shift from a "language beyond metaphor" to symbolic sensibility, encapsulated in the fact that Dante "tends toward actual reproduction of life, while Shakespeare tends towards a powerful symbolic art", is a mythical narrative of history pretending to non-symbolic objectivity.⁴⁴ Though Pound ignored its roots, what this claim to objectivity allowed for was the articulation of conviction. The implications of this trade-off are at the heart of attitudes toward Pound today.

For Rukeyser, there is obviously a great deal to recommend a poetry that reconciles myth and conviction. Her definition of poetry as a "gesture of the imagination which takes its side" is on one reading compatible with the major Anglophone modernist "mythopoeists" (Yeats, Pound and Eliot) where myth is a means of access to the *conviction* that modernity had made problematic, a route to the underground roots of belief buried by the relativism of the modern world (Eliot's "futility and anarchy that is contemporary history").⁴⁵ Equally, however, each of these poets publicly expressed at some point, and to varying degrees, fascist sympathies. In each poet's work myth is literalised from its original universal humanism, meaning what was formerly a plurality of worldviews is pressed into a singular mythical history that is, especially in Pound's case, not recognized as such. Again, the move away from myth as the embodiment of a supposedly universal human condition towards a use of myth to explain the processes of history is a progressive one that would have considerable appeal for a poet like Rukeyser. Nonetheless, the application of myth to history is hardly likely to be straightforwardly compatible with the dynamic historical

materialism Rukeyser and other Left poets were invested in, privileging as it does a lost past. The real problem, though, was in how Pound treated this mythical historiography literally. That Pound's sense of the past begins and ends in literary history is no accident: the historical is to a great extent collapsed into the mythopoeic, as *virtù*'s battle with *usura* is retrenched to the point of dogma. In Pound's Chinese and John Adams Cantos (*Cantos LII–LXXI*, 1940), documentary form obscures the mythical historiography at work — indeed, the lack of imaginative work on the historical material seems to many a major shortcoming of these cantos. The apparent disappearance of the aesthetic from them can, though, be seen as the ultimate literalisation of myth, a claim to objectivity and truth that earlier poems like *The Waste Land* were likely to express as fiction and imaginative exploration. Ultimately, the mythological is so thoroughly a *source* in Pound's thought, so absolutely the foundation of his poetics, that it becomes naturalized and effectively unnoticed. The link of such a dynamic to a wholly more sinister absolute is obvious enough.

Rukeyser's working definition of politically engaged mythopoeia is in opposition to Pound's in important ways. We see its outlines in the first words of her great book-length statement on poetics, *The Life of Poetry*, published in 1949 but mostly written much earlier in the decade:

In time of crisis, we summon up our strength.

Then, if we are lucky, we are able to call every resource, every forgotten image that can leap to our quickening, every memory that can make us know our power...⁴⁶

The notion of a forgotten underground has resemblances to the stereotypical modernist notion of myth as source, but this idea, the central motif of the book, is far richer than that. “Strength” is a “resource”, not a source; remembrance is projective, “quickenning”; memory itself is primarily a reminder of “power”, of creativity, of potential — of what could once be *done* and could therefore be done again. The past here is not returned to as origin, but as a reminder that the past was once a present — that the present has powers of originality, creativity and agency, and can assume them again. Crucially, these resources are not the universals of a static humanism, but are there to be chosen:

The silence of fear. Of the impoverished imagination, which avoids, and makes a twittering, and is still... Now we turn to memory, we search all the days we had forgotten for a tradition that can support our arms in such a moment. If we are free people, we are also in a sense free to choose our past, at every moment to choose the tradition we will bring to the future. We invoke a rigorous positive, that will enable us to imagine our choices, and to make them.⁴⁷

Memory “arms” us in this dialectic of bringing a tradition to the future. As Rukeyser concludes this argument, in words surely in part addressed to other modernist writers: “The way is before us, and culture is the future as well as the past.”⁴⁸ The “rigorous positive” provokes the freedom to create, to “make” choices and to make; it refuses to rest, as Williams described Pound and Eliot, “content with the connotations of their masters”.⁴⁹ Rukeyser reminds us that the past has always had a *future*, and that we,

concerned with our own, may use that past to overcome the currently impoverished imagination that prevents us conceiving it.

The dynamics of this projective sense of memory — exactly how one might *do* the rigorous choosing to bring a tradition to the future — is dramatized in Rukeyser’s capacious 1944 collection, *The Beast in View*. At the centre of the collection’s many mythological scenarios is the figure of the eponymous “beast”, based on Dryden’s lines from “The Secular Masque”:

All, all of a piece throughout:
 Thy chase had a beast in view;
 Thy wars brought nothing about;
 Thy lovers were all untrue.
 ’Tis well an old age is out,
 And time to begin a new.⁵⁰

As I will outline, this beast is the mythical figure of the minotaur and a metonym for the mythical quarry of meaning more generally. The “chase” for this beast, however, is a symbol of predestination, of a mythopoeic process that cheats, making history “all of a piece throughout” because of its duplicitous *design*. What is made to look like a “chase”, or search for history unfolding, is in fact a trick always directed to an end, “a beast in view”, that is resigned and reactionary: “Thy wars brought nothing about; / Thy lovers were all untrue.”

Dryden's lines are directly referred to throughout the collection, but Rukeyser joins Dryden's critique best in the book's title poem:

Configurations of time and singing

Bring me to a dark harbor where

The chase is drawn to a beginning.

And all the myths are gathered there.

... I came here by obscure preparings,

In vigils and encounters being

Both running hunter and fierce prey waring.

I hunted and became the followed,

Through many lives fleeing the last me,

And changing fought down a far road

Through times to myself as I will be.

Chaos prepared me, and I find the track,

Through life and darkness seek my myth—

Move toward it, hunting grow more like...⁵¹

This hunting is the corrective to what Dryden satirizes. The chase here is a discovery: the “myths are gathered there”, but instead of being taken as authoritative and given they must be sought and chosen. Rukeyser is out to “seek my myth”. The crucial revision of the “beast in view” is that the hunter also becomes the hunted: the chase is

self-constituting, the “running” a form of self-invention, a “changing”. The quarry here has not been earmarked in advance: our “obscure preparings” are chaotic, and what we “will be” radically open and contingent on the hunt in which we determine ourselves. Rukeyser interrogates mythologies that tie the future to the past in endless self-fulfilling projection under the guise of investigation. By performing an actual “chase”, open-ended and without a predestined prey in view, she attempts to prove the final lines of her epigraph: “’Tis well an old age is out, / And time to begin a new.” The beast is the proto-cyborg mytheme that “Myth” would later facetiously exploit. Its ambiguity as subject and object is intentional and crucial to the poem’s enactment of the hunt’s process: seen and unseen, contingent, unfolding in a *now* that cannot be bracketed off as the steady recapitulation of mythical universals always known beforehand.

Such beginning anew is premised on three things: the avant-gardist axiomatic of future-orientation; a feminist anti-essentialism, as later humorously sketched in “Myth”; and a Marxist commitment to changeability. Overhauling Eliotic collage techniques that seek a “return to the source”, Rukeyser seeks out myths that “offer us a hope and a perspective, not of the past in which they were made—not that alone—but of the future”.⁵² The machinery of this hopeful perspective is comprehensively shown in the collection’s long opening poem (after a brief dedication to Otto Boch), “Ajanta”. The title refers to Indian cave frescoes: Rukeyser describes these in the collection’s endnotes as characterized by “their acceptance of reality which may be filled with creation”, noting, in the motif that is central to the poem: “The wall is accepted; the air, the space between the walls and the observer, is filled with

creation.”⁵³ The poem’s first section, “The Journey” stages the same distancing gesture as “Mediterranean”:

Came in my full youth to midnight cave
 Nerves ringing; and this thing I did alone.
 Wanting my fullness and not a field of war,
 For world considered annihilation, a star
 Called Wormwood rose and flickered, shattering...⁵⁴

Her “nerves ringing” at the confusion of war whose star was Hitler (Wormwood) and that has the effect of “denying all our words”, Rukeyser searches for meaning in a world of otherness (she never went to the caves herself): “Nothing was left among the tainted weather / But world-walking and shadowless Ajanta.” Though the imaginative journey to Ajanta represents “a moment of peace” away from the war, its momentariness is just as important as its peacefulness, as the poem will demonstrate. Likewise, the motif of escape is further complicated by its figuring as “A hollow behind the unbreakable waterfall” — which is to suggest a space of refuge, but nonetheless a space that allows one to *see* the waterfall, and close up. In the second section, now in the “cave where the myth enters the heart again”, Rukeyser qualifies this space further:

Space to the mind, the painted cave of dream.
 This is not a womb, nothing but good emerges:
 This is a stage, neither unreal or real,
 Where the walls are the world, the rocks and palaces

Stand on a borderland of blossoming ground.⁵⁵

The cave is not a “womb”, not a return to infancy or primitivism, but a “stage” that should be read as temporary in the manner of Thoreau’s hermitage on Walden Pond, rather than as a permanent refuge from the “real” world of the war. The mythical importance of the paintings is as resource rather than as source: again here, the cave is defined as a “space” rather than an originary destination. Such space is primarily an instrument for greater clarity: “there is no frustration, / Every gesture is taken, everything yields connections”, “nothing leads away, the world comes forward”. The world is figured as present in the cave: “the walls are the world”, but they have been illuminated by the imagination of the paintings, made clearer by the “space” this mythical art has created. Indeed, throughout the poem it is never the content of the myths (the paintings depict the Jataka tales of the Bodhisattva) but in the imaginative energy (“creation”) they transmit to the present. They are *for use*, technological in the manner of the cyborg rather than organic in the manner of reactionary myth, space-making rather than source-tracing, future-oriented rather than originary.

Illumination is a crucial term for the poem, which constantly opposes the darkness of its contemporary moment to “shadowless” Ajanta. The “black blood” of history is placed outside the cave, but its “acts” constantly cast a shadow over the poet’s experience: “I am haunted by interrupted acts, / Introspective as a leper, enchanted / By a repulsive clew, / A gross and fugitive movement of the limbs.”⁵⁶ The light of Ajanta is not so much undermined by such hauntings, but rather all the more necessary. At the beginning of the poem’s final section a broken contemporary world

is again invoked in its absence, but at this point Rukeyser gives a pointed account of how the light of distant Ajanta may help us see it:

No shadows fall. There is no source of distortion.
In our world, a tree casts the shadow of a woman,
A man the shadow of a phallus, a hand raised
The shadow of a whip.
Here everything is itself,
Here all may stand
On summer earth.
Brightness has overtaken every light,
And every myth netted itself in flesh.
New origins, and peace given entire
And the spirit alive.
In the shadowless cave
The naked arm is raised.⁵⁷

Ajanta brings clarity, “no source of distortion”. Its brilliance displays a world as “itself”, without the shadows of contemporary oppression and deceit. The cave’s display reminds of hope, and at this point the poem becomes projective: “Here all may stand / On summer earth.” “New origins” are invoked as the spirit again becomes “alive”. Now the world may enter again, in all its shadowiness, in the lines immediately following:

Animals arrive,

Interlaced, and gods
Interlaced, and men
Flame-woven.
I stand and am complete.
Crawls from the door,
Black and my two feet
The shadow of the world.

World, not yet one,
Enters the heart again.
The naked world, and the old noise of tears,
The fear, the expiation and the love,
The world of the shadowed and alone.

The journey, and the struggles of the moon.⁵⁸

Ajanta has given the poet the strength and completeness to confront the “world of the shadowed and alone”, to see “the expiation and the love”. Rukeyser has come back up from the depths of myth and found the possibility of purity in resolve: as these lines remind us, even the moon has struggled for her own purity and brilliance. The caves and the poem, then, ultimately come to offer hope. These closing lines are remarkably close to *The Life of Poetry*’s comments on myth that opened this essay: “We invented them to let us approach that life. But it is our own lives of which they remind us. They offer us a hope and a perspective, not of the past in which they were made—not that alone—but of the future.”⁵⁹ Rukeyser’s interrogation of myth in “Ajanta” has

revealed a world incomplete, “not yet one” and thereby open to the hearts and will of the living, to be struggled with and for. The cave paintings are there to remind us that now, as then, the world is full, still, of undecided life.

The quest of “Ajanta” is imaginative in a conscious and literal sense, viewing its flight of fancy at a post-romantic distance. This distance is what distinguishes the poem from Pound’s war *Cantos*, which conceived of themselves as an interventionist discourse — as *proof* of the historical catastrophe of usury. Not only does such a method obscure the *mythos* at its centre, it is also a pose unavailable to Rukeyser, as we have seen: the blockage of her engagement with the material realities of the war, and the totalized nature of that war, forces interventions in imaginative language itself that are at once distancing and more thoroughgoing. “Ajanta” therefore must also be distinguished from the anti-Poundian mythopoeia of H. D.’s *Trilogy* in which, as she wrote, “the outer threat and constant reminder of death drove me inward”.⁶⁰ Rukeyser’s withdrawal is a strictly temporary measure for gaining perspective, a means through which her actual distance from war’s occasions is given imaginative space, and where an engagement with that war’s dangerous imaginative assumptions could still occur. “Ajanta” presents a Marxist-feminist mythmaking in complex and intricate ways. In exploring the “new origins” offered by the mythic imagination, Rukeyser simultaneously unmoors myth from its usual organic ahistoricism and self-consciously dramatizes the distance of symbolic *poesis* from the material fact of war. In this, she opens a space for alternative imaginings of the future whilst, through the imaginative turn to the cave itself, exposing the inescapable political dangers and patriarchal exclusions of the present. Rukeyser’s “borderland of blossoming ground”, that is, is a threshold precisely in the space between “animal and

machine” that Haraway outlines — a site on which the given and irreducible reality of the present is manifest (the cave wall, the geopolitical fact of global location), but is also a ground on which *technē*, making, must work (the frescoes, the poem’s imaginative speculations on them).

In *The Beast in View*’s most direct riposte to the “direct” war poem, “Letter to the Front”, an explicit revision of the usual authority of the “letter from the front”, Rukeyser begins: “Women and poets see the truth arrive.”⁶¹ It is a strange statement that only takes on meaning in the context of the whole collection. Both poets and women, that is, away from the “blood-lust” of the masculine “occasional poetry of war”, see arrival through distance imposed on them. Rukeyser’s great achievement in the war years is to make a virtue of this distance, to make of it a space able to look beyond crisis, in which poetry can project different futures and possibilities from the same sources that have constituted our current reality. Rukeyser’s move from an aesthetics of witness into a poetics of the visionary is at the centre of her remarks toward the end of *The Life of Poetry*: “To be against war is not enough, it is hardly a beginning... We are against war and the sources of war.”⁶² In the thirties this may have read as Marxist common-sense, as a political statement, but by the forties these “sources” are explicitly psychic, in the structure of our symbols:

In a time of long war, surrounded by the images of war, we imagine peace.
Among the resistances, we imagine poetry. And what city makes the welcome,
in what soil do these roots flourish?

For our concern is with sources.

The sources of poetry are in the spirit seeking completeness. If we look for the definitions of peace, we will find, in history that they are very few.⁶³

The tension here is obvious: our concern today is with sources, but there are “very few” sources of peace. Rukeyser’s answer to this is to rethink the idea of source itself: “the sources of peace are everyday”, she writes. Which is to say they are, like modernist myth, foundational springs of creativity, but forms of creation that must be constituted by ourselves. Rukeyser’s beast in view is, as she wrote in a statement for an 1945 anthology, *The War Poets*, “the living changing goal” of possibility: “[We] can work together for a wide creative life. I believe that poetry is part of that, of the means which is peace, and of the living changing goal.”⁶⁴

Notes

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- 1 Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 480.
 - 2 Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (Ashfield, Mass.: Paris Press, 1996), 41.
 - 3 Ibid., 213.
 - 4 Ibid., 91.
 - 5 Ibid., 183, 213.
 - 6 Jane Caputi, “On Psychic Activism: Feminist Mythmaking”, in *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* (London: HarperCollins, 1992), 428.
 - 7 Cited in Caputi, “On Psychic Activism”, 431.
 - 8 See Ezra Pound, “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris”: a sequence of twelve articles in *The New Age* from 7 December 1911 to 15 February 1912.
 - 9 Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 31.
 - 10 Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment”, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *New German Critique* 56, (Spring-Summer 1992): 109.
 - 11 Mike Gold, *Daily Worker*, 13 June 1934: 5.
 - 12 D. S. Mirsky, “The End of Bourgeois Poetry”, *New Masses* (November 13, 1934): 17, 18.
 - 13 Rolfe Humphries, “Eliot’s Poetry”, *The New Masses* (August 18, 1936): 26.
 - 14 Rukeyser, “With Leftward Glances”, *New Masses* (July 10 1934): 28.
 - 15 Christine de Pisan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1982), 3.
 - 16 T. S. Eliot, “War-Paint and Feathers”, *Athenaeum* (October 17, 1919): 1036.

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- 17 The term is Rukeyser's own. "Witness", she says, is a preferred term due to its "overtone of responsibility" (*Life of Poetry*, 174-75).
- 18 Susan Schweik, *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 4.
- 19 See James F. Mersmann's introduction to *Out of the Vietnam Vortex: Study of Poets and Poetry Against the War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986).
- 20 Rukeyser, *Barcelona*, 14, 5.
- 21 Rukeyser, "Barcelona 1936", *Life and Letters Today*, 15 (Autumn 1936): 28-35. Autumn 1936). The other articles appeared as "Start of strife in Spain as told by an eyewitness", *The New York Times* (July 29, 1936), and "Death in Spain: Barcelona on the Barricades", *New Masses* (September 1, 1936). All citations to the *Life and Letters* article refer to *Barcelona, 1936: Selections from Muriel Rukeyser's Spanish Civil War Archive*, ed. Rowena Kennedy-Epstein (New York: CUNY, 2011), where it was reprinted.
- 22 Rukeyser, *Barcelona*, 12.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 15-16.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 19.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 26 Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 147.
- 27 Rukeyser, *Barcelona*, 15.
- 28 Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 145.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 146.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*, 145.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 149.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*, 151.
- 36 The pamphlet can be seen in the New York Public Library's Berg Collection.
- 37 Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 203.
- 38 Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, 20.
- 39 "Grandeur and Misery of a Poster Girl," *Partisan Review* 10 (1943): 471-73.
- Louise Bogan, review of *Wake Island*, *New Yorker* (October 31, 1942): 68.
- 40 Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, 210-11.
- 41 Maurice Blanchot, "War and Literature", in *Friendship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 109.
- 42 Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 296.
- 43 My analysis here is heavily indebted to, though also at odds with, Michael Bell's brilliant discussion of Pound and Eliot in *Literature, Modernism and Myth* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 120-47.
- 44 Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (London: J. M. Dent, 1910), 26, 166-67.
- 45 Eliot, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1975), 177.
- 46 Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, 1.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 49 William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1954), 21.

- 50 John Dryden, *The Poems of John Dryden, Volume Five: 1697-1700* (Abingdon, Oxford: Routledge, 2014), 605.
- 51 Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 238-9.
- 52 T. S. Eliot, 'War-Paint and Feathers', *Athenaeum* (October 17, 1919): 1036; Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, 41.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 611.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 207.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 208.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 209-10.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 210-11.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 211.
- 59 Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, 41.
- 60 Cited in H.D., *Trilogy* (New York: New Directions, 1998), viii.
- 61 Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 239.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 213.
- 63 *Ibid.*, 209.
- 64 Oscar Williams (ed.), *The War Poets: An Anthology of the War Poetry of the 20th Century* (New York: John Day, 1945), 4.

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