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## **‘Bad Influence’ and ‘Willful subjects’: The Gender Politics of *The Life of Poetry***

**Rowena Kennedy-Epstein**

### **Abstract**

In *The Life of Poetry*, Muriel Rukeyser writes that the resistance to poetry comes not just from its being viewed as ‘intellectual and obscure and confused’ but also because it is considered ‘sexually suspect.’ In bringing together these questions about gender and genre from the outset, it is clear that one of Rukeyser’s central projects in the text is to unveil and confront the gender norms of Cold-War containment culture, norms that positioned the queer body and the communist body as dangerous, the male body as antagonistic to the female body, and that underscored the policing of literary and disciplinary categories. The gender politics of the text, however, only become fully legible when read along with ‘The Usable Truth’—the lectures delivered through the 1940s that would become the 1949 book—and in context of her unpublished essay about women poets, *Many Keys*—commissioned but rejected by *The Nation* in the 1957—that expands on underdeveloped ideas in *The Life of Poetry*. While Rukeyser was deeply engaged in thinking about the place of the woman writer, this essay considers the repressive conditions that contributed to the absence of an overt gender analysis in the final version of *The Life of Poetry*, while exploring Rukeyser’s wilful persistence in pursuing radical textual and sexual theories of multiplicity.

**Keywords:** Muriel Rukeyser; feminism; queer theory; women writers; the Cold War.

In the opening ‘Note from the Author’ of *The Life of Poetry*, Muriel Rukeyser writes that the resistance to poetry comes not just from its being viewed as ‘intellectual and obscure and confused’ but also because it is considered ‘sexually suspect.’<sup>i</sup> Shortly afterwards, she observes, ‘have you noticed that our bestselling books are written in reaction to the dominating woman? This code strikes deep at our emotional life.’<sup>ii</sup> In setting up these questions at the outset, it is clear that one of Rukeyser’s central projects in *The Life of Poetry* is to unveil and confront the gender norms of Cold-War containment culture, norms that not only drove the policing of literary and disciplinary categories, but positioned the queer body and the communist body as dangerous, the male body as antagonistic to the female body, and reinforced the gendering of literary genres: ‘almost any man will say that [poetry] is effeminate.’<sup>iii</sup> The gender politics of the text, however, only become fully legible when read along with ‘The Usable Truth’—the lectures delivered through the 1940s that would become the 1949 book—and in context of her unpublished essay about women poets, *Many Keys*—commissioned but rejected by *The Nation* in 1957<sup>iv</sup>—that expands on underdeveloped ideas in *The Life of Poetry*. While Rukeyser was deeply engaged in thinking about the place of the woman writer, it is important to consider the conditions that contributed to the absence of a more overt gender analysis in the published text, as well as to explore Rukeyser’s radical approach to thinking about gender and the body, one that eschews ideological binaries for progressive notions of sexual fluidity and multiplicity. In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser’s hesitation to discuss gender explicitly as a condition of literary production is contradicted by her attention to women’s bodies and voices: in her use of Diotima to situate her poetics, and in her own autobiographical narratives that open and close the book; in her analyses of

Whitman, Crane and Melville's poetic drives, in context of sexual conflict; in her discussion of Dickinson's archival obscurity at the hands of her family's moral and editorial silencing; in her description of the 'amputated' consciousness of American masculinity and her use of feminist psychoanalyst Karen Horney; and in her analysis of the wasted potential of women, who are themselves an untapped resource. Ultimately, *The Life of Poetry* offers important revelations about the deeply powerful 'repressive codes' at mid-century that affected the bodily and intellectual life of both men and women. Rukeyser's recuperation of a radical and homosexual Whitman as a defining force in American poetry, for example, stands in contrast to his heretical position at mid-century.<sup>v</sup> When Rukeyser writes of the critical assessment of Whitman's 'bad poems' and 'bad influence'<sup>vi</sup> she is describing a poetry that 'cannot be imitated', where the musicality prized in English poetics is 'lost' and replaced with 'one's own sources, the body and the ancient religious poetry.'<sup>vii</sup> That is, she is situating not only Whitman but her own work in a tradition that stands outside of Western patriarchal literary norms. She extends this by identifying herself with other 'bad influences' targeted by the 'power culture': 'the Negroes, the Reds, the Jews, the "place" of science, the "place" of labor, the "place" of women'<sup>viii</sup>. Not just bad influences, these categories contain narratives of 'willful subjects', as Sarah Ahmed describes, those who persevere 'in the face of having been brought down, where simply to "keep going" or to "keep coming up" is to be stubborn and obstinate. Mere persistence can be an act of disobedience.'<sup>ix</sup> In order to understand the centrifugal forces at work in *The Life of Poetry*, one has to better understand Rukeyser's persistence in the face of Cold-War gender and sexual norms, norms her critics often accused her of breaking. The text—its forms, the lineages it traces and the story of its production—is a narrative of 'willful subjects.'

## **Tradition is not repetition**

In a recent essay on feminism and modernism, I argue that Rukeyser's reception in the post-war period, and in particular the response to her public lectures which would become the *Life of Poetry*, 'would position her as an exemplary target for the gender and aesthetic ideology-making of the Cold War period', and that by examining the reception of her work 'we can better understand not only how ideologies of exclusion were constructed, through literary, academic and political values,' but also how they can be resisted. <sup>x</sup> In order to understand the gender politics inside *The Life of Poetry*—which often points outward towards Rukeyser's own biographical experience on the literary marketplace—I think it is important to re-articulate the historical conditions in which the book was written. As new scholarship on the Cold War has documented, following the Second World War the U. S. government funded the production of literary journals and academic monographs. Area Studies was formed, and canons, prizes, and exhibitions were instituted, all to promote one version of Anglo-American cultural hegemony, and to counter the perceived threat of communism. Greg Barnhiesel notes, in *Cold War Modernists*, that a period once constituted by 'wildly disparate' artistic movements and politics was newly 'presented as a pro-Western, pro-"freedom," and pro-bourgeois movement.'<sup>xi</sup> The spectre of communism was conflated with avant-garde artistic movements, feminism, homosexuality, sexual freedom and single motherhood, unaligned radicalism, pacifism, anti-war and civil rights activism, and anti-colonialism. Alan Filreis demonstrates, in *Counter-Revolution of the Word*, how radical modernism—the impulse to join aesthetic experimentation to left-aligned radicalism—was effectively dissolved in the post-war years as 'bad writing', and 'many heretical writers were being rejected automatical-

ly by publishers and editors, not because of a deficiency of literary quality, but because they [had] dared being critical of prevailing political and cultural reaction.’<sup>xii</sup> I argue that at the same moment which saw the ‘general pattern of mid-century efforts to forget or conspire to repress both radical left poets of the 1930s and Revolutions of the Word from the 1920s’<sup>xiii</sup> also saw women’s newly won roles in the public sphere under attack as part of Cold War political and aesthetic programs intent on reshaping women’s bodies and voices. Consider Betty Friedan’s description of the gender reversal that occurred in the post-war years:

By the end of the 1950s, the average marriage age of women in America dropped to 20, and was still dropping into the teens. Fourteen million girls were engaged by 17. The proportion of women attending college in comparison with men dropped from 47 percent in 1920 to 35 percent in 1958. A century earlier, women had fought for higher education; now girls went to college to get a husband. By the mid-fifties, 60 percent dropped out of college to marry, or because they were afraid too much education would be a marriage bar.<sup>xiv</sup>

‘The punishment for willfulness is a passive willing of death, an allowing of death’, writes Ahmed,<sup>xv</sup> and it is in this same context that Rukeyser found her work increasingly dissonant with the gender, genre, and political publishing practices of the period. My recent recovery of her Spanish Civil War novel *Savage Coast* (Feminist Press, 2013)—a generically hybrid mod-

ernist war narrative full of avant-garde experimentation with sound, documentary pastiche, intertextuality, un-aligned radical politics, and female sexual agency—was rejected by her publisher in the late 30s because the reader report pronounced it ‘BAD’,<sup>xvi</sup> and she was encouraged by her editor, Pascale Covici, to focus on her poems instead. As I have suggested elsewhere,<sup>xvii</sup> this is because both the form and content of the novel transgressed the gender/genre norms of the period: those promoted by left-wing literary communities, which saw her work as too avant-garde, as well as by the burgeoning New Critical establishment, which viewed her work as aesthetically weak, both sides adopting new gender codes for women’s writing. Louise Bogan, for example, the American poet who served as poetry editor for *The New Yorker* from 1931 to 1969, proved to be a particularly powerful figure in the deployment of an explicitly gendered New Criticism. In 1951, she famously enacted a particularly sexist dualism, praising Adrienne Rich’s first book of poems for being ‘neatly and modestly dressed’, while attacking Rukeyser for putting on ‘sybil’s robes, nowadays truly threadbare,’ and writing that the latter’s work is ‘filled with gloomy humanitarianism’ and ‘deflated Whitmanian rhetoric.’<sup>xviii</sup> She continues, ‘finally, women, along with everyone else who has examined nineteenth century literature in English, now recognize the distinct line that rules off formal from “popular” expression.’<sup>xix</sup> Perhaps Bogan’s schooling and scolding of wayward women poets was written against *The Life of Poetry* intentionally, for in it Rukeyser writes that Whitman, with whom she strongly identifies, ‘remembered his body as other poets of his time remembered English verse. Out of his own body, and its relation to itself and the sea, he drew his basic rhythms...Not out of English prosody, but the fluids of organism.’<sup>xx</sup>

Rukeyser began the project that would become *The Life of Poetry* in a moment when she desired to find a ‘a new language for discovery’,<sup>xxi</sup> to engage in a multi-materi-

ality that included cross-genre, politically radical, and collaborative works, ones that were running against an increasingly hegemonic and policed cultural moment. Her novel was rejected; the work she had hoped to undertake at the Office of War Information (OWI) as a visual information specialist in 1942 was rejected and replaced with ad men's commercial propaganda—'there were many ways of selling out',<sup>xxiii</sup> she writes; her radical photo-text collaboration with Berenice Abbott was rejected multiple times by publishers;<sup>xxiii</sup> her experimental biography of Willard Gibbs ran up against both his family's wariness of her project and archival closure, as well as the often scathing reviews at her presumption to write about science; and she became a target of both FBI surveillance—monitored from 1937 until the mid-70s—as well as an increasingly static and reactionary literary and political culture. With this in mind, it is important to situate her lectures and the final published version in context of the relationship between state surveillance and the conservative turn occurring culturally—that is, while public-private boundaries were being annihilated by the state's ability to monitor, investigate, and legislate private lives, the conservative cultural response was to mask that process by creating the appearance of ever-more-rigid boundaries between public and private, between disciplinary and formal categories, between bodies and nations (from a woman's 'place' in the home to isolationist policies). First delivered at Vassar in 1940, 'The Usable Truth' begins by exploring these conflicts:

There is, under all the surface shouting of the year, a silence in this country now. We feel it in the contemplation of all the facts, too large, too violent to accept with reason; we know this silence in its symptoms, the turn of the arts,



the glossing over of the presidential election, all the omissions of the deep conflict which we feel this year. I wish to speak of this silence, the fear which has fathered it, the communication which may break it, and make it possible to meet the world with all the resources we have, the fund of faith, the generous instruments of imagination and knowledge. I wish to speak to you of poetry as a sum of such equipment, as an image of the kind of weapon that can best meet these enemies, the outer cloud, the stealthy inner silence of fear. Now we invoke memory, we search all the days we had forgotten for a tradition that can support our aims in this moment.

We have our own tradition to retrace. So many times, when our scholars have talked of tradition, they have been thinking, ‘Repeat! Repeat!’ mourning some Golden Age to whose special knowledge they were admitted. But tradition is not repetition, that is blasphemy against tradition. It is, rather, the search for the clew—to know oneself in one's own labyrinth, and be suddenly aware that by a thread, a subtle thread, by a thread only could the center be reached.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Rukeyser’s call for a new tradition is essential to understanding both the theoretical and feminist project she is undertaking in *The Life of Poetry*. She knows that women have historically been left out of canonical narratives of intellectual and literary traditions (though not tradition-making itself), but so too have those whose bodies and works have

failed to conform to gender and textual norms. Melville and Whitman are her main subjects of analysis, in part because they were under-acknowledged and excluded in their own times, while undergoing a revitalisation in the 1940s (see Catherine Gander's essay on Rukeyser and the 'Melville Revival'<sup>xxv</sup>), but also because they offer examples of those who were able to write of their experiences of contradiction, in context of political crisis, and turn them into art: Melville's poetic transformation of 'the human integral clove asunder' and Whitman's 'lost to myself, ill-assorted, contradictory'.<sup>xxvi</sup> In *Savage Coast*, Rukeyser's autobiographical heroine Helen asserts that 'her symbol was civil war'<sup>xxvii</sup>, an echo of the 19th-century American tradition of inner and outer conflict that Whitman, Melville, and Dickinson represent in *The Life of Poetry*. In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser reads these writers through their inner or bodily contradictions: she writes of reading Whitman's autopsy, and how, 'in light of what we know about the suprarena-pituitary-sex hormone relation, certain conclusions probably may be reached' about the 'inclusive personality which Whitman created from his own conflict'—conclusions that offer 'proof of a life in which apparent antagonisms have been reconciled and purified into art.'<sup>xxviii</sup> The women writers she references most—Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Stevie Smith—are unified by their transgressions of gender and genre, which can be followed through both their biographies and their poetic processes, in each performing and subverting their gender roles. Of Smith, Ogden Nash famously wrote, 'Who or what is Stevie Smith/Is she woman/Or is she myth?'<sup>xxix</sup> Stein's sounds of lesbian sex and 'laugh like a beefsteak' made Hemingway recoil forever.<sup>xxx</sup> Rukeyser returns the most to Dickinson, writing that she had an 'unappeasable thirst for fame' that ran contrary to gender and family norms,

and that she had ‘to fight through—“Vesuvius at Home”<sup>xxxix</sup>; Dickinson’s ‘willfulness’, she recognizes, ‘persists even after death.’<sup>xxxii</sup>

## **Women and Waste**

‘And these poems of Emily Dickinson? How much shall we leave to natural waste here? How much of the loss is the story of our art, with its curious penalties and guilts under this cultural sun?’<sup>xxxiii</sup> Rukeyser asks in *The Life of Poetry*. In *Many Keys*, Rukeyser expands her thinking on Dickinson and a ‘flight’ of modern women writers, entitling her essay after a line from one of Dickinson’s poems—‘the earth has many keys’—but unlike in *The Life of Poetry*, she elevates Dickinson’s work besides Whitman’s as another ‘bad influence.’<sup>xxxiv</sup> It is clear from her references—her discussion of Otto Rank, her attention to waste and influence, an expansion of her analysis of Anne Bradstreet—that her essay dedicated to women and poetry expands from materials she used in making *The Life of Poetry*. In it she beautifully theorises what it means for a woman to be a producer of art in context of family, education, the work of motherhood, and the experience of the young girl as she comes up against silencing gender roles; but, most importantly, the essay is an exploration of how women learn to author, to come to their own speech and find their own traditions. This is especially important because, as she notes in a draft of the essay, to trace the ‘influence’ on women poets is a difficult task, for women’s lives and influences do not necessarily conform to the ‘Poet’s Plotto’ where one can trace ‘a set of recognisable influences whose elements are juggled.’<sup>xxxv</sup> That is, women writers do not necessarily work with the materials of the patriarchal canon that can be easily spotted and

reproduced by male critics and poets alike, and therefore may be judged inferior. Instead she demonstrates how women have, like Whitman, turned to their own inimitable music and sources: she quotes Bradstreet's 'I took my power in my hand/ and went against the world', and Marie De Lavaega Welch's 'The black of magic/Is in not knowing/Oneself/ the Magician.'<sup>xxxvi</sup> Rukeyser writes of nourishing influences, of the work of poetry as it goes out into the world, but also of waste as an influence: 'there is waste in nature, waste in art, and plenty of waste in the lives of women. Waste is an influence, and the making of poetry works against waste.'<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Rukeyser's interest in wasted imaginations—the 'buried lives' of those whose illuminations were dissonant with the moral, artistic, and political codes of their times—is an essential part of *The Life of Poetry*, as many have noted; but in 'The Usable Truth' lectures she talks specifically of women:

for you see why I am so angry at all the lack, all the hesitation and loss. It is again the spectacle of the history-books, and at every page the countless faces of the anonymous going down; the search through country after country for greatness, for great women—take an example—when one may be sure that, as far as women are concerned, the great ones are all anonymous; the drives in art that have pushed through to set the great ones at the top, great rush of energy and spirit, laughter, darkness, and the marvelous knowledge; and so many wishes gone down in hesitation and despair and decoration.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

There is no statement in the published version of *The Life of Poetry* that so explicitly addresses the experience of women as this—one which deeply resonates with Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*—and it seems important to consider why this declaration of the lost potential of women is obfuscated in the final text.

In *Many Keys*, Rukeyser echoes Simone De Beauvoir's discussion of the social constraints placed on the young girl which stunt her mind and imagination:

We all know the hesitation before experience which is one of the most deeply-felt truths of the adolescent girl. She goes through a discipline so implacable toward her growing powers, in our civilization, that only the disciplines of art are fair mirrors of it, or the spiritual discipline that brings one concisely to the next level of one's life. But on the writing of the young who express the images of this hesitation you will often find the teacher's single word, "IMMATURE."<sup>xxxix</sup>

Here Rukeyser is being very explicit about another kind of bad influence, one that informs women's work: the sexism that stunts imaginations. And yet, in the rejection letter from *The Nation*, Robert Hatch claims that Rukeyser fails to explain her ideas fully to the reader, writing, 'as you go further into your ideas, you tend to overlook the probable stumbling stones. For example, the notion of influences resisted—extremely interesting in itself—is never brought to the point of illustration, or at least I do not find the examples. By the time you have reached page 4, I am afraid you have left your readers behind.'<sup>xl</sup> In fact, on page four of *Many Keys*, Rukeyser is extraordinarily clear about the

influences we need to look for in women's writing: she states, 'in a group brought up primarily to be audience, there are shared attitudes towards experience and towards art.' Women, she points out have to learn 'to write as if oneself were the audience.'<sup>xli</sup> Without a feminist theorisation of the position of women in society, Hatch could not see Rukeyser's influences, and so he marked his inability to understand the lineages and sources she is writing about as a sign of her own deficits. Her own analysis of women's writing—that the hesitation to be an author and maker when one has been conditioned to be a passive listener is misread as immaturity—engenders the same misreadings as the works themselves. In part, then, we might read Rukeyser's subdued discussions of women and gender in *The Life of Poetry* as a response—or a reflexive response—to her continual misreading by critics. To return again to the rejection of *Savage Coast*, a novel that explores a young woman's 'hesitation before experience' and ultimately its transformation into action, the reviewer, failing to perceive this crucial trope, assumes it was the author's own lack of confidence and her immaturity that was the problem, ultimately writing a piece of criticism so cruelly sexist and wrongheaded it is hard for me not to come back to it again and again. The reviewer writes:

The book has been a waste of time—and I doubt if at any moment in the writing of it (If I can judge from the evidence before me) Miss Rukeyser had any confidence in setting down a single paragraph. The manuscript reminds me of the terribly bad examination papers that are sometimes written by excellent students, or the tests of I.Q. in which unusually brilliant students receive a rat-

ing that is so subnormal that one is willing to believe that the tests are meaningless. I believe that this manuscript proves merely that Miss Rukeyser has written one of the worst stretches of narrative that I have ever read.<sup>xlii</sup>

Surely this is the stamp of “IMMATURE” that Rukeyser writes of in her essay, for the tone of the letter is so patronising, associating the adult woman writer with a student who has gone astray, who has wilfully flouted the norms so dramatically that the norms must be re-evaluated by those in authority ‘who know better.’ It is unsurprising that after this, Rukeyser would need to begin to theorise waste and hesitation, and to respond to the ways in which women’s work is evaluated not on its own terms but through the patriarchal gaze that turns every gesture, every line, into a reading of their bodily and intellectual deficiencies.

Rukeyser would experience a particularly public and gendered criticism along similar lines. Delmore Schwartz, writing anonymously as editor in the *Partisan Review*, penned a long, sexist critique of Rukeyser entitled *The Grandeur and Misery of a Poster Girl* (in private, he wrote in an especially homophobic rant that she was ‘a Helen who was a lesbian’<sup>xliii</sup>). The history of this attack has been amply covered,<sup>xliv</sup> but particularly devastating critiques include: “she flew an airplane like an Auden character, and said “Yes” like Molly Bloom, to the working class”—an insidious transformation of a woman who authors into a woman who is authored by men. The *Partisan Review* editorial’s gendered language was emblematic of the period in which women who asserted authority were consistently put in their place. Schwartz continues about Rukeyser’s lectures ‘The

Usable Truth', delivered to 'Vassar Girls', writing, 'here she was revealed in a new role: that of a big-league representative of the "creative spirit," speaking her piece with all the unctuousness and culture-*schmerz* of a junior theologian of poetics.'<sup>xliv</sup> In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser provides a psychoanalytic reading of her critics. She writes, 'we have seen the crooked ascendance of a sort of criticism by projection, in which the "critic" suffering from a specific form of guilt accuses the writer of that particular guilt.'<sup>xlvi</sup> In the only footnote of the entire text, which billows across the bottom of two pages, she speaks of this criticism, which she experienced so often:

The pattern is this: there is a general accusation, likely to be personal or political—it is hardly ever aesthetic—which is followed by an open lie. Then the accusation is declared proved. 1) The critic will say the poet's most recent book is bad, but the book before that was good, and the decline in the work is unfortunate, and then produce the lie; 2) the critic will say that the poems all demonstrate one sorry fact about the poet (without, of course, offering the reader even a fragment for his consideration), and then produce the lie.<sup>xlvi</sup>

That *The Life of Poetry* often reads as a personal defence highlights the gender politics of the text itself. Even though Rukeyser fails to name it directly, her question, 'have you noticed that our bestselling books are written in reaction to the dominating woman?', is not



just a question about American masculinity, but a question about what happens when that woman writes a book, when that woman authors and speaks.

## **Tendencies**

‘For poetry,’ Rukeyser writes, ‘in the sense in which I am using the word, is very like the love of which Diotima told Socrates. She, speaking of love, told how it was of its nature neither good nor beautiful, for its desire was the beautiful, its desire was the good. I speak, then, of a poetry which tends *where form tends, where meanings tend*.’<sup>xlviii</sup> In *Sorcerer Love*, Luce Irigaray argues that Diotima’s teachings are not dialectical in the Hegelian sense, but rather that ‘she establishes an *intermediary* that will never be abandoned as a means or a path....It is love that both leads the way and is the path.’<sup>xlix</sup> For Rukeyser it is poetry, a form of love, that ‘leads the way and is the path.’ That Rukeyser situates Diotima in such a way in her own book is important, for Diotima is a spectral presence, the first female philosopher who we never hear or read, but whose vision of becoming shapes the text. Here is how Irigaray introduces her:

In the *Symposium*, the dialogue on love, when Socrates finishes speaking he gives the floor to a woman: Diotima. She does not take part in these exchanges or in this meal among men. She is not there. She herself does not speak. Socrates reports or recounts her words. He praises her for her wisdom and her power and declares that she is his inheritor or teacher when it comes to love, but she is not invited to teach or to eat. Unless she didn't want to accept the invitation? But Socrates says nothing about that. And Diotima is not

the only example of a woman whose wisdom, especially about love, is recorded in her absence by a man.<sup>l</sup>

Rukeyser engages Diotima in a dialogue—Diotima's intermediary love is analogy for Rukeyser's poetic tendencies. According to Irigaray, Diotima, of whose voice and presence there is almost no record except the record of a man speaking her words, 'teaches the renunciation of already constituted truths.'<sup>li</sup> For Rukeyser to situate Diotima's speech as the foundation for her own theoretical exploration into 'the renunciation of constituted truths'—a fitting way to describe *The Life of Poetry*—is to embody a female legacy that has failed to be fully corporealised and vocalised because, as Anne Carson notes, 'putting a door on the female mouth has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present.'<sup>lii</sup> For Rukeyser to animate theories that resist teleological systems and 'false barriers' that are made to seem intrinsic is to participate in a tradition that makes a space for women's voices in public.

In *Many Keys*, Rukeyser writes that one tradition in women's writing is 'fascinating and difficult to trace, consisting of those influences rejected in the writer's work. We don't have the biographical methods, or the critical beginning, to let us perceive the struggle against influences, and how these reactions may be used, turning rebellion, hostility, the desires begun in hatred and dread into the moves that, reaching art, may surpass these origins.'<sup>liii</sup> This 'struggle against influences' is essential to *The Life of Poetry*, and to works by women more generally: how do we trace the cultural and literary influences that demand women's silence, obedience, and conformity, influences that are renounced in order to produce the very work itself? How do we trace the influences of 'waste'? Rukeyser is anticipating a feminist criticism that will develop in the

subsequent decades, one that uses interdisciplinary methods similar to her own for uncovering the struggles against patriarchal influence. Perhaps the most radical and feminist position in *The Life of Poetry* is that, like Diotima, it is teaching us to read for ‘the renunciation of already constituted truths’ and to look for the place where that renunciation is transformed into poetics: ‘the truths of outrage and the truths of possibility.’<sup>liv</sup>

In *Many Keys*, Rukeyser continues, ‘It is easy enough to find the long tradition. We all, women and men, know it in ourselves. It is that of the woman as listener. Trained to perfect herself in receiving, educated as appreciator, she classically was exalted, set on a mountain as a muse...one of those who taught the sphinx the riddle which finally lay in wait for answering Oedipus. That the answer to the riddle was known to such a woman and simply confirmed by Oedipus is not taught to either girls or boys.’<sup>lv</sup> In 1973, she will of course return to this in ‘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.”<sup>lvi</sup>

In *Many Keys*, as in *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser has trouble finding female foremothers and returns often to classical traditions in order to find them. This is as much a part of the modernist turn to antiquity as it is a revision of women's place in those histories. She writes in *Many Keys*, 'But Sappho was here. And before her, the lyric of the old testament: Miriam's song.'<sup>lvii</sup> Echoing her quotation in *The Life of Poetry* of Stein's 'Who do you write for? ... Myself and Strangers',<sup>lviii</sup> in *Many Keys* Rukeyser quotes George Misch's<sup>lix</sup> assertion that Sappho changed autobiography because she 'opens the search for melody in the soul', and that 'the audience, as it were, is the writer herself.'<sup>lx</sup> Rukeyser adds, 'this is one of the starting points of self-portrayal. To do this, to write as if oneself were the audience and to make communication, means that one had dived deep enough to reach the place where obscurity, that terrible middle depth is passed, deep enough to be where all is shared again.'<sup>lxi</sup>

Autobiography is an essential part of *The Life of Poetry*: it opens the book as she delineates the circumstances of her poetic and political undertaking; it is how she describes the act of poetic composition, using her poem 'Orpheus' as the example; and it is the bildungsroman of 'wilfulness' that illuminates her theoretical conceit in the penultimate chapter. Carson writes, 'every sound we make is a bit of autobiography. It has a totally private interior yet its trajectory is public. The censorship of such projections is a task of patriarchal culture that divided humanity into two species'.<sup>lxii</sup> Diotima does not speak, but Rukeyser speaks for her and speaks for herself. For the woman writer to write of herself is both an act of liberation, as feminist criticism has long taught us, but it is also the beginning of literary craft. In the biographical section of *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser asserts a particularly important radical and feminist conceit: 'One works on one's self; one writes poems, makes the movie, paints, and one is changed in the process. The

work is what we wanted, and the process. We did not want a sense of Oneness with the One, so much as a sense of Many-ness with the Many. Multiplicity no longer stood against unity.’<sup>lxiii</sup>

### **‘Willful’ Archives**

‘There is no building in which the documents of wilfulness are deposited’ writes Ahmed but ‘perhaps a document is a building, one that houses or gives shelter. A wilfulness archive would refer to documents that are passed down in which wilfulness comes up, as a trait, as a character trait.’<sup>lxiv</sup> The archive is where you might find the narrative of the wilful subject, but also the texts that act like archives. Rukeyser’s archive offers us a tradition that has otherwise been marginalised as suspect, queer, female, and contradictory, and that has persisted in spite of that. *The Life of Poetry* is an archive of that history: ‘When the books do not exist, we must visit the houses for the papers themselves’,<sup>lxv</sup> Rukeyser advocates. In *The Life of Poetry*, writing that the reasons given for why Dickinson’s manuscripts were kept out of public was because of their economic value, she asserts ‘the rights of the reader are surely the rights of the people’, not merely the ‘art business.’<sup>lxvi</sup> But she does not say that underneath that economic imperative there was a social one: that Dickinson’s family altered, destroyed and kept her work out of public for fear of what the archival materials would disclose (queer desire, antinomianism, a young woman wearing ‘a beard’ and speaking of herself in Calvary), or that Dickinson did not publish in her lifetime because she did not want to alter her prosody or the content of her poems to comply with the gender and genre demands of the literary marketplace in her time. Dickinson’s archive offers us insight into the relationship between the economic reality of women’s lives and their artistic production; Rukeyser’s archive offers something similar. Like much of her work, *The Life of Poetry*,

its reception, and the surrounding texts exemplify the conditions of the woman cultural worker at mid-century who failed to conform to the prevailing gender or genre norms and suffered economically because of it. Just as Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938) details the sexual politics of money, in *The Life of Poetry* Rukeyser is continually aware of the rewards for conforming—for 'selling out'—aware of growing up in a 'materialist world that exposed the American danger, in materialism, to be mystical about material values.'<sup>lxvii</sup> But it is clear that her motivations in continually reshaping and reiterating the ideas and projects that make up this proliferating series of texts were economic as well as artistic. Raising a young son alone, the work Rukeyser produced in the post-war years was often aimed towards commercial ends—films, plays, popular magazine articles, even expansions on previously published work like an additional chapter of *The Life of Poetry* proposed in 1959—while at the same time attempting to preserve her radical vision. Her loss of a multi-book contract with Double Day because of politics was economically devastating, yet this was the condition of many radical writers and artists, particularly women, in this period (Berenice Abbott struggled to get her innovative science photography funded in the 50s and Josephine Herbst felt locked out of publishing opportunities because of her political beliefs, for example<sup>lxviii</sup>).

The gender politics of *The Life of Poetry* only become truly legible when read across Rukeyser's archive—when we readers or scholars are also 'willful subjects' as we seek out this work, so often denigrated or misread or lost, and bring it into view again. In an unpublished 1978 interview by Louise Bernikow, Rukeyser articulates her most feminist vision of poetics, illuminating *The Life of Poetry*'s attention to those who failed commercially and failed to conform poetically in their own time: 'What I care about in Whitman is the extreme fight to keep my skin

together, the extreme contradictions. I don't turn my back. The violence, shamefulness, willfulness are in myself. I wish to make music of them.'<sup>lxix</sup> Speaking of women poets she continues,

So much is possible for everybody. People assume we have to have national and paternal civilisations, but it has to be re-imagined. The woman poet seems to me the sign of it....I wish we were better. I wish the cute and coy element were purged. I know it's attractive, but it isn't what I need in poems. I think a lot of June Jordan, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde. Black women know how to rebel. I try to hold in my mind somebody who sees it all—some future unborn black woman poet. The woman's movement is turning loose fantasy in poetry. Woman's own music will emerge. I think we also will find the lost poems of this—these secrecies and these rebellions. At least, I hope so, but that may be my vulgar optimism.<sup>lxx</sup>

Indeed, it is only through reading Rukeyser's lost and unpublished works that we might understand not only the intricacies of her own gender politics, but the ways in which women writers produce and persist under patriarchy.

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<sup>i</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1996), p.x. Hereafter *LoP*.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid*, p.17.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*, p.11.

<sup>iv</sup> The essay was originally entitled ‘The Glass Woman’ and was rejected by Robert Hatch literary editor of *The Nation* ( Berg Collection, MR. TLS. 22 April 1957. In folder: Incoming correspondence, *The Nation*, New York to Muriel Rukeyser. 1 TL, signed Ben Blake, 1 TL, signed Robert Hatch. Jan. 28, 1937 and April 22, 1957.) Thanks to Eric Keenaghan for sharing his archival findings with me.

<sup>v</sup> This is very nicely documented in Alan Filreis book, *Counter-Revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry, 1945-1960* (Charlotte: University of North Carolina Press, 2008). Likewise, F.O. Methiessen, a friend of Rukeyser, had already begun a revaluation of Whitman in his 1941 *American Renaissance*, but he came up against similarly repressive codes as Rukeyser (and she dedicated a poem to him after his death).

<sup>vi</sup> *LoP*, p. 79.

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>viii</sup> *LoP*, p.9.

<sup>ix</sup> Sarah Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2014), p.2.

<sup>x</sup> Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, ‘The Spirit of Revolt: Women Writers, Archives and the Cold War,’ *Modernism/Modernity Print Plus* (2017), web. <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/spirit-revolt-women-writers-archives-and-cold-war>

<sup>xi</sup> Greg Barnhisel. *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia, 2015), p.2.

<sup>xii</sup> Alan Filreis, *Counter-Revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry, 1945-1960* (Charlotte: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), p.98.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid*, p.166.



- <sup>xiv</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963), p.45.
- <sup>xv</sup> Ahmed, p.1.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Box 1:32, Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Hereafter MRP.
- <sup>xvii</sup> See my 'Introduction' to *Savage Coast* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013), and my essay, "‘Her Symbol Was Civil War’: Recovering Muriel Rukeyser’s Lost Spanish Civil War Novel", 'Women’s Fiction, New Modernist Studies, and Feminism' special issue: *Modern Fiction Studies* 59.2 (June 2013), pp.416-439. Also, see Kate Daniels, 'Muriel Rukeyser and Her Critics' in *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers*, eds. Margaret Dickie and Thomas Travisano (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), pp.247-263.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Louise Bogan, *Verse*, *The New Yorker*, Nov. 3rd, 1951, p.150-51. Rich of course would throw off that label, becoming an essential voice in the women’s movement in the mold of Rukeyser whose work she championed.
- <sup>xix</sup> Ibid, p.151.
- <sup>xx</sup> *LoP*, p.77-78.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, *Willard Gibbs* (New York: Dutton, 1942), p.5.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Ibid, p. 207.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> See my article, 'So Easy to See: Muriel Rukeyser and Berenice Abbott’s Unfinished Collaboration,' *Literature and History* (In press, 2018).
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, Holo. draft of Parts 1 and 2 of *The Life of Poetry*, MRP, I: 43.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Catherine Gander, 'Muriel Rukeyser, America, and the “Melville Revival,”' *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 11. (2010), pp.759-775.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> *LoP*, p.74, p.76.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, *Savage Coast* (The Feminist Press, 2013), p. 8.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> *LoP*, p.76.

- xxix Quoted in William May, *Stevie Smith and Authorship* (Oxford University Press, 2010), p.130.
- xxx Ernest Hemingway, *A Movable Feast* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), p. 118.
- xxxi *LoP*, p.90.
- xxxii Ahmed, p.1.
- xxxiii *LoP*, p.95.
- xxxiv MRP, Box 1:16, unpublished, 'Many Keys', ND [1957].
- xxxv MRP, Box 1:16, 'Draft: Many Keys,' n.d. [1957].
- xxxvi 'Many Keys', p.11-12.
- xxxvii Ibid, p.9.
- xxxviii 'The Usable Truth', p.32.
- xxxix 'Many Keys', p.7.
- xl Robert Hatch to MR. TLS, 22 April 1957. NYPL, in folder: The Nation, New York to MR.
- xli 'Many Keys,' p. 4.
- xliv Reader report for *Savage Coast*, MRP, 1:23, unpublished, ND.
- xlvi Quoted in James Brock. "The Perils of a "Poster Girl": Rukeyser, Partisan Review, and *Wake Island*." *How Shall We tell Each Other of the Poet?*. eds. Anne Herzog and Janet Kaufman (Palgrave, 2001), p. 256.
- xliv See Brock, Bergman, Daniels, Kertesz, Filreis, for example.
- xlvi The editors (R.P.S.). "The Grandeur and Misery of a Poster Girl." *Partisan Review*. September 1943 (Vol. 10, No.5).
- xlvi *LoP*, p.48.
- xlvi Ibid, p.47-48.
- xlvi Ibid, p.20.
- xlvi Luce Irigaray, "Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato, Symposium and "Diotima's Speech," *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1984) p.20-21.
- <sup>1</sup> Ibid, p.20.

li Ibid.

lii Anne Carson, 'The Gender of Sound,' *Glass, Irony, and God* (New York: New Directions, 1995), pp.119-139, p.121.

liii 'Many Keys', p.2.

liv *LoP*, p.66.

lv 'Many Keys', p.3.

lvi Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, eds. Anne Herzog and Janet Kauffman (Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press, 2006), p.480.

lvii 'Many Keys', p.3.

lviii *LoP*, p.97.

lix Georg Misch was a German philosopher who wrote the multivolume work, *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity*, the first part of which was published in 1950.

lx 'Many Keys', p.3.

lxi Ibid.

lxii Carson, p.130.

lxiii *LoP*, p.207.

lxiv Ahmed, p. 13.

lxv Ibid, p.94.

lxvi Ibid, p.97.

lxvii Ibid, p.206.

lxviii On Abbott, you can read about this in the forthcoming biography by Julia Van Haaftan (Norton, 2018) or in her Selected Photographs and Essays, *Berenice Abbott: A Modern Vision* (NYPL, 1989), as well as Terri Weissman's *The Realism of Berenice Abbott* (UC Press, 2011). For Herbst, there is only one source other than the archives (at Yale), Elinor Langer's biography (Northeastern, 1994).

lxix Louise Bernikow, MRP, 'Biography', Box 1:4 1978. p.8.

lxx Ibid, p.9.