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The Relationship Between Technology and the Body in Muriel Rukeyser's Poetry

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TECHNOLOGY AND THE BODY IN MURIEL
RUKEYSER'S POETRY

By

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Thesis

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in

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Thesis Committee:

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DEDICATION

To my late father, who would have been exhilarated to see this effort, and whose love of knowledge and learning has always inspired me.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis studies Muriel Rukeyser's view of the relationship between technology and the body by analyzing some of her poetry in her *Collected Poems* and her philosophy of poetry in her book *The Life of Poetry*. The thesis also deals with the relationship between science and art; Rukeyser thought of science and art as supplementing and complementing each other through her idea of dynamism in nature and in artistic thought. In addition, my thesis discusses some critical responses to Rukeyser's poetry and philosophy of art. The theories that form the basis of my study are Rukeyser's idea of relational form and Julia Kristeva's theory of the *chora* stage. My study reveals how Rukeyser conceived of both technology and the body as sustained by one process of vitality and creativity, which is relational form. I will argue that Rukeyser's idea of a dynamic human inner self, in which the body is brought into realistic and responsible contact with its physical surroundings, including technology, relates to more recent thinking about the relationship between art and science, as seen in Kristeva's idea of the *chora* stage, which represents a source of dynamic creativity and connectivity that is apparent in the different aspects of life, including the body and technology. I will also study how Rukeyser's idea of the body as a source of dynamism and creativity anticipated Hélène Cixous's ideas of feminist writing.

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Introduction

Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980) is a prominent American poet and thinker who contributed to the world a lot through her literary achievements and unflinching support of peace and human rights in the United States and throughout the world. She led an incredibly active and responsible life, and she enjoyed it despite the difficulties and alienation she experienced, sometimes from her fellow writers and poets. Rukeyser lived in the century of great wars with a full awareness of her role as an artist and a poet to effect change and transform the modern materialist sensibility, bringing it into contact with the creative forces of a continuous and deeply-felt history. Rukeyser's achievements reflect her insatiable interest in knowledge and her passion for experimentation and innovation in the art of writing.

Rukeyser was a prolific writer; she published fifteen volumes of poetry, three biographies, a musical (*Houdini*), and a book, *The Life of Poetry*, in which she expressed and explained her vision of the importance of poetry and how readers should understand and interact with inspired, creative poetry. Rukeyser received several awards during her life; she received the Yale Younger Poets Award for her first volume of poetry, *Theory of Flight*, at the age of twenty-one, as well as the Harriet Monroe Poetry Award (1941), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1943), and the Levinson Prize (1947), and she was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1967. There is no question that Rukeyser received some attention during her life, with critics responding to her poetry with positive or negative reviews. However, I believe that the critical recognition Rukeyser received in her life and since her death has not been consistent with her stature as one of the greatest and most inspired of American poets and visionaries in the twentieth century. Rukeyser is a poet of generations and could never be confined to her time and generation of readers, knowing that she was never properly and comprehensively studied or understood even in her time. She was placed in specific categories (which I will deal with in some detail in the

section in my thesis on how Rukeyser's ideas have been received and understood) that some of her critics found handy for confining her, little knowing that that only proved how limited their understanding of her was. Moreover, few of the studies that have been conducted since the revival of interest in her in the nineties of the past century do justice to the scope of her ambitiousness and the reach of her message and vision, which can only be compared to that of Walt Whitman or D. H. Lawrence, authors who have been extensively studied and anthologized. What is the reason for this neglect of the poet who is a true representative of the conscience of the American psyche in one of the most turbulent and formative periods of its history? I think that the atypical nature of Rukeyser's poetry and philosophy provides part of the answer here. Rukeyser has been like a litmus test for generations to see if revolutionary poetry of witness and change, written by a woman in a subtly patriarchal world built on repression and stultifying notions, can be appreciated and embraced. Rukeyser also represents a test of readers' commitment to a poetry that keeps challenging them and stretching their powers of insight, as well as their ability for change. For Rukeyser, reading poetry was like life: it requires an ongoing process of learning, gaining wisdom, and nurturing a genuine potential for change and development. Interest in Rukeyser will have to be revived and maintained because of the great extent of her contributions to literature and because of our need for her unique vision in art and life.

I think that the present study bears a great significance for several reasons. First, Muriel Rukeyser is a representative of a line of visionary poets seeking to bring change into our lives and create dynamic, independent, and broad-minded readers with a liberal way of living and dealing with the world around them. Other poets associated with this line are Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, William Blake, D. H. Lawrence, and T. S. Eliot. What distinguishes

these poets is their ability to engage with their times, diagnose the ills of their culture, and, sometimes, prescribe creative and insightful ways of dealing with the areas of stagnancy in that culture, by mobilizing and exploiting the potential in human beings to change themselves and the world around them. Rukeyser should be cherished as one of the few prophets who lived through our times and had the opportunity to comment on them in innovative ways that can enrich Western culture and develop a broader awareness of worldwide issues and humanistic problems. Rukeyser's poetry goes to the core of our being, discovering our basic instinct for connecting with a vibrant, interactive world. Rukeyser is best remembered by the writers and poets who drew inspiration from her life and writings and who treated her like a dear, larger-than-life mother. Anne Sexton named her "Muriel, mother of everyone" (Ostriker xiv). Adrienne Rich has always admired Rukeyser and acknowledged the influence she has had on her: "... I found her to be the poet I most needed in the struggle to make my poems and live my life" (Rich, *Arts* 126).

Second, Rukeyser enjoys an important place as a vortex or "meeting place" for different schools and philosophies, like Romanticism and Marxism; and her ideas anticipated some postmodern movements, like reader-response theories and deconstruction, as well as the posthumanist thinking represented by Donna Haraway's theory of the cyborg. The most obvious influence in her poetry is that of Whitman, as she sought to build an intimate and dynamic relationship with her readers. Rukeyser embraced all aspects of her existence to build a broadminded personality that interacted with the contrary elements in life and in the self, and this was reflected in her poetry. Moreover, her poetry reminds us of Lawrence's philosophy of establishing meaningful, constructive, and unprejudiced contact with other beings, and trusting the basic human instincts for life-sustaining wisdom and judgment. Her imagination is the creative type that Coleridge described as a dynamic one, which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in

order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead” (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, I: 304). Rukeyser experimented with and reconciled different philosophies, finding common principles uniting them. Out of those philosophies that she contemplated and rethought, she created her own philosophy, combining elements of the traditional philosophies while questioning and improving on them. Rukeyser created a Romantic theory of dynamism that suited our technological age and anticipated several contemporary critical theories. So studying Rukeyser is an exciting attempt at understanding the capacious and visionary mind of an ambitious writer who built bridges to both the past and the future.

Rukeyser made many great achievements in the world of literature and stylistics, which are worthy of extensive studies. Rukeyser defied and rebelled against the stereotypes of women’s writing in her time as she experimented with styles and subjects that were associated with male poets rather than female ones in her time. Rukeyser created many innovative combinations that enriched her poetry and made it a truly comprehensive one. Rukeyser blended the private and the public in her poetry so that it reflects autobiographical details that ultimately point to political realities. Scientific principles as well as journalism and cinematic arts were artistically and boldly incorporated into Rukeyser’s style. Rukeyser experimented with combinations of genres in her writings so that some of them are difficult to categorize, like her biography of Wendell Willkie entitled *One Life*, which she termed “a story, and a song” (Rukeyser, *One Life* xiii), and her novel *Orgy*, which is like a poetic memoir. Another of Rukeyser’s achievements is the great impact she had on many feminist poets and writers who were her contemporaries or who came after her. Rukeyser advanced many ideas and experimented with styles that served and inspired the feminist movement though she did not specifically belong to it.

One of Rukeyser's great contributions to literature is the way she promoted a new understanding of poetry, especially in her monumental book *The Life of Poetry*. For Rukeyser, reading poetry is an essential inspirational force in our life that should be shared and maintained, no matter how serious our traditional resistances to it are. Also, for her, reading poetry is not simply a momentary pastime or study requirement but a potentially transformative experience that can impel us toward a new understanding of life and responsible, positive action; and she demonstrated this in the purifying and sobering sense that one gets upon reading her powerful poetry. Rukeyser worked hard to revive people's interest in poetry, and I think that she should be an integral part of any serious academic or cultural effort to revitalize the role of poetry in our life.

The objective of this thesis is to study Rukeyser's view of the principle of dynamic relationship as reflected in the different aspects of life and as it links the different fields of knowledge together. I focus in my thesis on Rukeyser's idea of the relationship between the body and technology, as she presented it in her writings. The thesis discusses Rukeyser's idea of a dynamic human core as it is consistent with Julia Kristeva's idea of the *chora* stage. This human core is a center of relationships linking the human body to all aspects of life, including technology.

My thesis is composed of three chapters. The first chapter is entitled "Critical Responses to Rukeyser's Poetry, and Rukeyser's Philosophy of Reading Poetry," and it represents an introduction to my study of Rukeyser's poetry and philosophy. It is an essential part of my thesis as studies of Rukeyser and her poetry are still scarce, even thirty-one years after she died. Rukeyser is still unfamiliar to many students of English literature, and an introduction to her will

illustrate the importance she bears among contemporary American poets, in terms of her poetry and her bold ideas on art and culture.

The second chapter in my thesis is entitled “Rukeyser’s Philosophy of the Relationship between Science and Poetry,” and it deals with Rukeyser’s idea of the common points where science and poetry meet. I approach this question, of the relationship between science and art, through the idea of dynamism. This study of dynamism, as Rukeyser thought of it, will be very useful as we specifically cover the common qualities that bind technology with the body in Chapter III of this thesis. Just as dynamism sustains creativity in art and in nature, dynamism forms an integral part of the processes sustaining life in the body and in technology.

This extensive study of Rukeyser’s poetry and philosophy makes an important contribution to a more integrated understanding of the relationship between the range of subjects in her work, which were typically discussed in separation from each other. These subjects are nature, science, poetry, technology, and the body. I treat these topics in the way Rukeyser thought of them, as inextricably related to, and actually reflecting, each other. I adopt Rukeyser’s relational philosophy for an interpretation of her poetry, attempting to visualize the possibilities through which the above-mentioned concepts can be brought together. Studies of Rukeyser’s art, which are still, 31 years after she died, scarce and not at all reflecting her status as a major contemporary American poet, tend to focus on her poetic style, philosophy, and political poetry. Yet they rarely analyze Rukeyser’s relational philosophy in terms of its existential value and in terms of its ability to enrich knowledge by bringing the different disciplines together.

The studies I have used for my thesis on Rukeyser’s view of the relationship between the body and technology can be divided into three categories: studies of Rukeyser’s critical reception; studies focused on her poetic style; and studies exploring her relational philosophy.

Among the studies dealing with Rukeyser's critical reception, I relied most on Kate Daniels's article "Muriel Rukeyser and Her Literary Critics" and Louise Kertesz's book *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser*, one of the few book-length studies on Rukeyser and her poetry, which provides a background and brief analysis for each of Rukeyser's works, as well as an overview of the critical response each of Rukeyser's works garnered during her life. What Kertesz fails to provide is Rukeyser's own response to the often virulent attacks from critics. Rukeyser consistently articulated her philosophy and poetics of art in general and poetry in particular, and that philosophy should offer clues for critics and readers alike to better appreciate Rukeyser's poetry and interact with it. Daniels, in her above-mentioned article, presents Rukeyser's poetics and the way in which Rukeyser responded to critics' attacks and misunderstandings with a philosophy of her own, side by side with the reactions of different critics to Rukeyser's poetry. I complement these general studies by concentrating on and applying Rukeyser's relational philosophy to the relationship between technology and the body in Rukeyser's poetry.

Second, there are the studies that focus on Rukeyser's style. David Barber's article "Finding Her Voice: Muriel Rukeyser's Poetic Development" criticizes Rukeyser's style in terms of the conventions and expectations that poetry is typically expected to follow, without looking closely into Rukeyser's own philosophy of poetry, which explains all the unconventional and innovative aspects of her poetry. I think that any reader of Rukeyser's poetry, should, before he goes ahead to compare her poetry to other contemporary poetry, study Rukeyser's own explanation of her technique and her outlook on poetry in general. Andrea Wright's article "Masks Uncovered: (Fe)male Language in the Poetry of Muriel Rukeyser" discusses Rukeyser's idea of a woman's writing that is able to incorporate, while questioning and subverting, patriarchal poetics. Rukeyser suggests a way of writing, through the image and experience of childbirth, which

brings together opposites instead of being wholly independent and self-sufficient. Wright does well in her article by trying to grasp Rukeyser's view of women's writing from her idea of the female body. Lorrie Goldensohn's article "Muriel Rukeyser's Body Politic and Poetic" also represents a good attempt at understanding Rukeyser's style as it approaches the subject of Rukeyser's technique from the latter's view of the body and its relationship to feminist writing. Goldensohn discusses briefly Rukeyser's relational philosophy before she embarks on a study of Rukeyser's style as it is based on her perception of the body. My thesis combines the above points, which are all essential to a comprehensive view of Rukeyser's poetic style. I study in detail Rukeyser's relational philosophy, as it surfaces in her understanding of poetry, and as it stems from her interest in a scientific method that brings different aspects of knowledge together. I also study Rukeyser's idea of women's writing, which is based on an inspiring view of the female body. From there I go on to discuss Rukeyser's technique as it reflected her view of the body.

Third, there are the studies that focus on Rukeyser's relational philosophy and its manifestations in Rukeyser's poetic style and in her idea of unity in knowledge, politics, and history. Examples of these are David Barber's article "'The Poet of Unity': Muriel Rukeyser's *Willard Gibbs*," Richard Flynn's article "'The Buried Life and the Body of Waking': Muriel Rukeyser and the Politics of Literary History," contained in the collection of essays entitled *Gendered Modernisms: American Women Poets and Their Readers*, as well as Anne Herzog's "'Anything Away from Anything': Muriel Rukeyser's Relational Poetics," and Meg Schoerke's "'Forever Broken and Made': Muriel Rukeyser's Theory of Form," contained in the collection *"How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?" The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*. Focusing on Rukeyser's biography of Willard Gibbs as reflecting her view of unified,

dynamically-connected time and history, Barber also discusses the general lessons that Rukeyser learned from Gibbs's life, which influenced her art and her vision of life and history. However, Barber does not specifically talk about Gibbs's Phase Rule—something I investigate in this thesis—and the way it influenced Rukeyser's art and philosophy. Also Barber does not explain Rukeyser's view of the possible relationship between art and science as she presented it in her biography of Willard Gibbs. Flynn's article takes us more deeply into Rukeyser's philosophy of relationship and its impact on her art. He shows how Rukeyser constructed her philosophy from her perceptive and liberated view of the body and the way it can form the basis for women's writing. Through her relational philosophy, Rukeyser formulated a poetics that distinguished her from other artists and critics of the twentieth century, even the feminist ones. Herzog's article was one of the most useful ones for me because it concentrates on Rukeyser's relational philosophy and the way it was inspired by Rukeyser's idea of the relationship between science and poetry. I have also used Schoerke's article to talk about the idea of dynamism as it runs through, and brings together, all aspects of Rukeyser's philosophy and art. I have applied the general ideas of dynamic relationship in the last two articles to my conception of Rukeyser's view of the relationship between the body and technology.

A number of studies shed some light on technology in Rukeyser's poetry, but they usually discuss technology, especially the cinematic technology, based on Rukeyser's interest in cinematic arts, as it is reflected in Rukeyser's style. The most-discussed Rukeyser poem in this regard is *The Book of the Dead*, and one of few book-length studies on Rukeyser's poetry that specifically discuss this poem is Tim Dayton's book *Muriel Rukeyser's The Book of the Dead*. *The Book of the Dead* certainly contains many allusions to Rukeyser's perspective on technology and the body, and I even use one of its sections, "The Dam," in my thesis, but I believe that the

foundations of Rukeyser's philosophy of technology and our relationship to it lie, in a more straightforward and detailed way, in her early volume of poetry *Theory of Flight*. For my discussion of *Theory of Flight* I have found Lexi Rudnitsky's article "Planes, Politics, and Protofeminist Poetics: Muriel Rukeyser's 'Theory of Flight' and *The Middle of the Air*" to be useful as it studies the poem in the context of other movements where the body and technology occupied a prominent place. Rudnitsky's article is also useful as it discusses how Rukeyser's idea of technology leads to a new outlook on a feminist art of writing that is independent at the same time as it is inclusive and open to different historical and philosophical trends and forces.

Now, let's turn to the significance of Rukeyser's collections of poems (*Theory of Flight* and *The Body of Waking*) that I am concentrating on in my thesis, among the other poems she wrote during her career. Rukeyser started out writing in a courageous and confident spirit, and she addressed, in her early poems, issues that were discussed and debated by the important poets of her time. The views she presented in *Theory of Flight* were contributions to be added to the comments that poets like Hart Crane and T. S. Eliot made on the condition of Western culture between the two great wars, in the mid-thirties of the twentieth-century. Also Rukeyser's view of the relationship between the body and technology represented a response to previous ideologies like Naturalism, Futurism, and Fascism, which viewed that relationship from a purely patriarchic perspective. So one of the values of studying Rukeyser's early poetry in *Theory of Flight* is to see the way it emerged from and commented on Western culture at a decisive historical moment, when it was poised on the brink of a new era of technology, a new place for literature, and different cultural ethics. *Theory of Flight* takes us back to the time when so many new ideas for cultural reform were in the air, competing with the developments in art, science, and technology. In its time, this volume of poetry drew the wild admiration of some critics and bitter censure

from some others; it helps us see the way readers dealt with Rukeyser's poetry from the start and their resistances to it. *Theory of Flight* holds most of the ideas Rukeyser would maintain and elucidate throughout her life and in her different publications, so it represents an early hallmark and contains the seeds for her sustained ideas of creativity and responsibility. My second principal source, Rukeyser's collection of poems *The Body of Waking*, represents a mature development of her ideas on our relationship to technology and a development of her ideas of the body and sexuality. Like its predecessor, *The Body of Waking* holds bold ideas on establishing new and transformative relationships with our selves and the world around us. It has a cosmic outlook and carries a prophetic message, this time concerning the body and our responsibilities toward understanding it and developing a new relationship with it. Moreover, in this volume, Rukeyser returns to the issue of the relationship between technology and the body with fresh insight and a mature outlook that complements and augments her early views of that relationship.

My study of the relationship between technology and the body is based on Rukeyser's idea of relational dynamism as it exists in the human psyche and body, and essentially in the various forms of life, including nature and technology. In order to illustrate and explain relational dynamism I have used Julia Kristeva's theory of the *chora* stage. By *chora* Kristeva refers to the early stage of infancy when the child is symbiotically attached to the mother and spontaneously follows her rules, which have a special bond to physicality. This stage takes place before the Symbolic or Paternal Order takes control and initiates the symbol/language stage. So the *chora* stage is a reflection of the potential power of subjectivity and emotionalism as sources of perception and learning, not only during infancy but, since the *chora* stage remains dormant and hidden, during the different stages of human development and growth. The *chora* stage is governed by a set of dynamic processes that maintain the subject's ability and openness to

transformation and development. In the *chora* stage, as the different drives are engaged in a process of continuous clash and interaction, the subject is simultaneously destroyed and regenerated. Kristeva declares that “the semiotic *chora* is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 28). So human development and growth take place as a result of a necessary process of dynamic tension and transformation in the psyche. Kristeva’s theory is based on the idea that the speaking subject is a subject-in-process; that is, it is split and divided between the semiotic and symbolic orders. There is a constant interaction and struggle for control between the two laws, the maternal and paternal.

The idea of the *chora* stage has offered me a model of a human condition, based on the immediate connection to the body and to physicality, which can be extended and applied to both nature and technology, revealing common dynamic, relational processes in both the body and technology and linking them to each other. This idea of relational dynamism will establish and introduce new ways of understanding our relationship to technology and how that relationship can be developed to be realistic, constructive, and inspiring. My thesis is based on the search for aspects of dynamism that can explain and link the different forms of life and fields of knowledge both to each other and to a common, collective source of creativity. This search is inspired by Rukeyser’s search for a source of wisdom that transcends the conventional logical and objective ways of thinking; this source is rooted in the deeper self with its special connection to the body and the cosmos in general. Rukeyser was involved, throughout her career, in the search for a general, encompassing form that can bring the different aspects of our existence, like technology and the body, as well as the different fields of knowledge, together, so that these fields can benefit from their relationship to each other. This effort was inspired by Willard Gibbs’s pursuit

of a private law that explained different physical phenomena and can be applied in different disciplines. The private law Gibbs proposed was the Phase Rule, which explains the forces and relations that hold a mixture together. Gibbs's Phase Rule inspired Rukeyser's theory of relational form, which she applied to her conception of the poem as a dynamic system of relationships. My thesis follows Rukeyser's effort to find an artistic form that reflects art's relationship to truth, to the inner self with its cosmic connections, and to other fields of knowledge, like science and philosophy. So, in addition to Kristeva's idea of the *chora* stage I have also used Rukeyser's theory of relational form, which can be observed in her view of the poem as a triadic system, the body, technology, and even politics and democracy. Rukeyser's relational philosophy is based on the idea that a living system can sustain its life and its integrity through the dynamic relationships of interaction and tension between its parts, including the contrary ones. This process of interaction is the source of creativity, regeneration, and growth in any vital system, and it is the principle that can bring the different fields of knowledge together.

1) Chapter I: Critical Responses to Rukeyser's Poetry, and Rukeyser's Philosophy of Reading Poetry

Muriel Rukeyser is one of the most enigmatic, and most essential, literary voices of our time. She is also one of the most difficult writers to categorize, and including her in the canon has been a great challenge to anthologists of twentieth-century poetry and prose. Rukeyser consistently tests the broadmindedness of any anthologist to accept the unorthodox yet mature, confident, and creative views and forms of her writing. In this chapter, the first chapter of the thesis, we lay the foundation for our study of Rukeyser's poetry and philosophy by exploring the way Rukeyser was received, especially by her contemporaries, and the way she responded to these views with her theory of art and of reading poetry. This chapter is composed of three parts. The first part, entitled "Rukeyser and Proletarian Poetry," begins with a study of how Rukeyser's early poetry was first identified with proletarian poetry, and the nature of Rukeyser's interest in proletarian issues, looking at the historical situation in the period before WWII and Rukeyser's activism as she constantly monitored and commented on political events of her time. In the second part of this chapter, entitled "Rukeyser's Theory of Criticism," we shall study Rukeyser's response to a school of criticism which gained prominence in the West during the middle of the twentieth century, namely New Criticism. Rukeyser criticized what she saw as the rigidity of the New Critics' analysis of texts, and she advanced a way of looking at a text as a dynamic system that works flexibly in coordination with factors that can be inside or outside the text but are part of the creative experience of writing. In the third and last part of this chapter, we shall explore what Rukeyser called modern readers' "resistances" to poetry. We shall discuss the value of poetry and its type of knowledge to our modern life with its challenges and the

developments that take place in our world every day. Finally, we shall talk about the best way of approaching and understanding Rukeyser's poetry.

Part 1.1: Rukeyser and Proletarian Poetry

Reading Rukeyser's work and life represents difficulties for the contemporary reader on different levels. One of these is the level of categorization and definition. Some of Rukeyser's contemporaries considered it a negative trait of her literature that it does not belong to an identifiable group of writers or thinkers in an exclusive manner. In her article "Muriel Rukeyser and Her Literary Critics," Kate Daniels sums up the problem in the following lines:

What an overview of the critical response to Rukeyser's work reveals to us is the situation—uncomfortable and in-between—of that individualistic poet whose work fails to entirely conform during his or her lifetime to the critics' prevailing notions of what good work is—who fails to fit completely and neatly into a category that has been critically recognized, defined, and canonized. (247)

Rukeyser has been claimed and disowned by different movements in her life, but she never chose to rigidly align herself with any specific intellectual, political, or literary group, and she explicitly expressed her individualistic stance in her writings.

Rukeyser's first published volume of poetry, *Theory of Flight*, sparked the enthusiasm of some Marxist or proletarian writers and critics who thought of Rukeyser as an asset for supporting their ideals. Kenneth Burke, in a 1936 review for the *New Masses*, a journal affiliated with proletarian writers, commented on *Theory of Flight* by congratulating "the Communists on having gained Rukeyser as an ally" (Daniels 250). However, what seem to be ideas that draw from Rukeyser's interest in proletarian issues are presented and molded, almost

inextricably, in a purely artistic way, in Rukeyser's vision of how art is created, so that the editor of her first published volume of poetry, Stephen Vincent Benet, viewing the book from an aesthetic and apolitical perspective, chose to regard it as simply an artistic work; he did not regard it in the context of what he called the "dreary and unreal discussion about unconscious fascists, conscious proletarians, and other figures of straw which has afflicted recent criticism" (Benet, quoted by Daniels 250).

Rukeyser was identified with proletarian poets at a time (the thirties of the twentieth-century) when the most effective power standing up against fascism was Communism. Even powers who took a neutral position toward fascism were at constant risk of joining it, in a world where fascist achievements were continuously exhibited in fascist media and propaganda. Rukeyser, with her sensitive nature and her interest in genuine, embracing democracy, had decided early in her life to stand for oppressed and ostracized groups and individuals, and to support whoever stood for them. Though she was born into a well-to-do family (a father who partly owned a construction company) and a sheltered existence, among "maids and nurses and chauffeurs" (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 192), she was able to cultivate, early in her life, a sense of the act of destruction that underlies acts of construction. In an early poem, "Sand Quarry with Moving Figures," as Rukeyser recalls being taken by her father on excursions to see the construction work his company conducts, her mind reverts to the lives that were shattered before construction was achieved. The money her father gained, which was supposed to draw her father nearer to her, reminded her of the class system, and set her apart from her father: "and the wealth of the split country set us farther apart ..." (*Collected Poems* 15). Instead of contemplating, as her father suggested to her, all the things she would be able to buy with the money they would get, her mind could not resist looking at the full picture, even with its grim and tragic aspects: "... but

I remembered the ruined patches, and I saw the land ruined, / exploded, burned away, and the fiery marshes bare” (*Collected Poems* 15).

This realistic way of thinking has always distinguished Rukeyser’s poetry from other proletarian poetry of the time. Most proletarian poets viewed the machine as the hope for a new era of dynamic poetry that would reflect life in its various aspects and address the common reader’s interest in practical matters, especially the technological developments that characterized the twentieth century since its early days. These proletarian poets portrayed the machine as the benign tool of progress, as opposed to some of their contemporaries, like T. S. Eliot and the Imagists, whose attitude toward technology tended to be much more ambivalent. As for Rukeyser, she took from technology the most useful influences for her art and her vision, and she expressly tackled the possible destructive use of technology. Rukeyser’s interest in technology is not the fetishistic and idealistic passion for the practical applications and objects of technology. She was realistic about all aspects of technology that can be utilized by people, yet she was able to creatively exploit the aspects of technology relevant to her dynamic ideas and poetics: “The miracle for her is in what has become usual, and she is concerned in her poetry to give the flavor of the precise, often flat prose of engineering and science that, in its ordinariness, conveys miracles of understanding and achievement” (Kertesz 10).

Rukeyser was interested in the dynamic principles underlying science and in scientific methods as useful tools to study the relationships that link the different fields of knowledge, especially science and poetry. In her biography of Willard Gibbs, Rukeyser announces at the outset her aims of writing the book: “To know the processes and the machines of process: plane and dynamo, gun and dam. To see and declare the full disaster that the people have brought on themselves by letting these processes slip out of the control of the people” (Rukeyser, *Willard*

Gibbs 12). In her poem *Theory of Flight*, as Rukeyser ecstatically describes the technology of flight, she does not forget its dark side, and the destructive use to which it could be put. It is because of this comprehensive way of viewing topics that I find it difficult to categorize Rukeyser as simply a Romantic poet in the line of Emerson and Whitman, as some critics have done. She certainly has the optimistic, open, embracing soul of Whitman, and this is reflected in her poetry, but she also brings her practical sense of the reality of matters into her poetry, so it gets more suited to the contemporary mind as Rukeyser's poetry examines the ways that technology can be used as a tool of war and destruction if it falls into the hands of tyranny, and if it is not exclusively used for the benefit and enriching of human life and human thought in all its interlinked fields.

Rukeyser's interest in Communism derives from her unflinching defiance of political and cultural fascism, and she suffered from that association with Communism, even at a time when the United States was aligned with the Soviet Union during World War II. In 1978, Rukeyser received a file from the Department of Justice detailing the FBI's efforts to monitor Rukeyser's actions and correspondence since the year she applied to the Office of Emergency Management, in 1942. Rukeyser was interviewed in 1943 by an FBI agent, Ronald A. Reed. She repeatedly insisted in that interview that her main aim of joining political action is fighting fascist values and practices. Despite what fascists saw as their mission to represent the future of an affluent, progressive humanity, Rukeyser saw into their racist and dictatorial policies and fulminated against them. In the above-mentioned interview, when she was "asked about her objections to fascism," Rukeyser affirmed that they were "based upon the fact that it was intent upon the destruction of democratic government; that under it, freedom of thought and speech could not

survive and that because of its rapidly moving progress, America was imminently in danger of its threat” (Perreault 152).

The campaign against Rukeyser took a significant turn when she was reviled by the conservative press at the time she was working for the Office of War Information during World War II. A May 7, 1943, column in the *New York Times* referred to Rukeyser as “Poetess in OWI Here Probed by U.S. as Red.” She was also described as a “well-know young poetess ... alleged to have mixed considerable left-wing politics with her iambic pentameters” (Perreault 154). Those descriptions of Rukeyser were typical of the way some editors in the press nurture the reader’s prejudice, or “contempt,” which is based on a shallow understanding of people and events. “Publishers,” Rukeyser wrote, “accept this contempt, which declares the imaginative level of the American audience to be that of a twelve-year-old, and keeps it there, by omitting the audience work that would make and acknowledge a change” (*Life of Poetry* 46). Rukeyser’s way of forming opinions and positions is based on the independent, individual search for truth in all its forms and sides, no matter how grim or painful, and even if its source is an unofficial or unorthodox view of a story. She rebels against the tendency of some Americans of her generation toward uniformity in thinking and believing, which is “the shared norm of ambition and habit and living standard ... [O]ur emotions are supposed to be uniform. Since that is impossible, our weaknesses send us to meet any divergence from the expected with dread or conflict” (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 17).

Rukeyser’s vigilant conscience was at work, detecting injustice and exposing it even in her early poetry, when she is talking about her childhood, in “Poem Out of Childhood”:

We sat on the steps of the unrented house
raining blood down on Loeb and Leopold,

creating again how they removed his glasses

and philosophically slit his throat. (*Collected Poems* 3)

Rukeyser shows how grown-ups underestimate children's ability to observe events and judge them in the kids' innocent, unprejudiced minds:

How could they know what sinister knowledge finds

its way among our brains' wet palpitation,

what words would nudge and giggle at our spine,

what murders dance? (*Collected Poems* 4)

After presenting images of the classical stories of Virgil and Sappho, which might keep the precocious child (who has decided as her wish for the future to be "Maybe : something : like : Joan : of : Arc. . . .") secluded from public events and problems, Rukeyser expresses her rejection of that cocooned world with this charged line: "Not Sappho, Sacco" (*Collected Poems* 3,4).

Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were two Italian immigrants who were anarchists and were convicted on suspicion of robbery and murder. They were electrocuted in 1927. "Many national and international observers of the trial believed Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted by a conservative and reactionary judge and jury unduly influenced by a potent postwar red scare environment as opposed to clear and conclusive evidence of their guilt" (Selmi 115). Rukeyser saw in this case an example of the intolerance the state practices against what it perceives to be alien or contrary forces in society. For Rukeyser, multiplicity and the inclusion of contradictions are necessary for a dynamic, healthy society. The case also represented an example of how a powerful force would take advantage of a time of crisis and imagined threats to practice injustice and discrimination against innocent people whose only crime is to have unorthodox ideas that are

thought to be dangerous at one time or another. Later, Rukeyser revisits this formative event in her celebrated book *The Life of Poetry* as she says, “Sacco and Vanzetti are dead, and something is signified by this that cannot be put aside” (*Life of Poetry* 200). When Rukeyser reads an event, she reads it as an intelligent, participating witness, observing its different sides and looking at its significance in history in terms of other events, past and present ones.

Rukeyser belonged to the Left as long as it represented her rebellion against injustice and intolerance. She was not tied to any single ideology, and her poetry reflects her celebration of the continuous democratic interaction between contrary forces and ideas without one necessarily cancelling the others or suppressing them. “Muriel Rukeyser was in fact a passionate and idealistic American, too given to humanist values to be considered anything but bourgeois by doctrinaire Marxists” (Perreault 146). Rukeyser’s concern with the artistic form of the poem, which she thought as integral to the life and effect of a poem, won her enemies in the camp of Marxist writers. Her unique way of using punctuation to convey a deeper meaning and enrich the poetic experience was condemned by Stanley Burnshaw, editor of *New Masses* when Rukeyser started submitting her work there, as a bourgeois way of complicating the experience of reading poetry and making it inaccessible to the ordinary reader: “We think that a revolutionary magazine should not put any blocks in the way of communication, and in the opinion of [Joshua] Kunitz and myself, the punctuation, or rather lack of it in your poem should be changed” (Daniels 252). Rukeyser’s principled response to such views is that “punctuation is biological. It is the physical indication of the body rhythms which the reader is to acknowledge” (*Life of Poetry* 117). It is interesting here that Rukeyser sought to transmit the poetic experience as a necessarily physical one, making the reader involved in that experience with his whole existence

rather than experiencing meaning in a purely mental or spiritual medium that could be disentangled from the reality one lives.

Rukeyser's range of innovations in her art, which distinguishes her from writers of propagandistic proletarian poetry, is manifested in different aspects. She arranges impressive imagery in her poems in a dreamlike, overlapping manner, which derives from her interest in photography and cinematic arts. Rukeyser lets images themselves speak, in their independent and idiosyncratic way, directly to the reader, sometimes minimizing the degree to which she, as an artist, controls the response a poem would generate in the reader. This technique accommodates the independent life that images have and the interaction they perform to maintain the life of a poem and keep its full-value connection to a participating reader, or "witness," as Rukeyser prefers to call him.

Another quality that distinguishes Rukeyser's poetry from other proletarian poetry is the successful combination and blending of the private and the public in her poems, of daily, ordinary life and political and historical events, surrounding the reader with "public catalogues through personal entrance halls" (Novak 534). In her poetry, we can witness views of her private life continually transcending its limited field to explore and interact with a broader, public reality, where she is awake to everything happening to the people and world around her. In her early poem, "In a Dark House," for example, two lovers mount stairs in a dark house, and the higher they climb, the further they move away from the outside world and from their past memories, into an isolated existence that acknowledges only the individual's life in a perpetual present deprived of the depth of the past or the continuity of the future. However, the outside world, in terms of the other dimensions of time and the other people in their life, keeps clamoring for the characters' attention and for a place in their life, creating a struggle that reveals

the characters' inner nature and sense of responsibility. The perceived relation between the private world and the public world is a factor in the characters' maturity in this poem, so that at the end of the poem, "Large female : male : come tiredness and sleep / come peace come generous power over no other, come Order here" (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 9). The point here is that all powers are equal, male or female, private or social; no power wins at the expense of the others and all co-exist and interact within a frame of the unity of purpose, which is the maintenance of the highest degree of open-mindedness, and the ability to benefit from variety and contrariness.

Rukeyser's recurrent desire in her poems to transcend the individual's experience and be a witness to a wider world of political and historical reality, which leads to a greater maturity and the enrichment of the life experience, made some critics cynical about the ambitiousness of her goals and the optimism with which she expresses them. The broad scope of experience her poems explore was seen as a deviation from a typical female poetry, which was taken as a standard for all women poets to follow. There is, for example, Louise Bogan's belief that "The chief virtue of women's poetry is its power to pin down, with uncanny accuracy, moments of actual experience. From the beginning of the record, female lyricism has concerned itself with minute particulars, and at its best seems less a work of art than a miracle of nature—a flawless distillation, a pure crystallization of thought, circumstance, and emotion." However, she asserts that Rukeyser's poetry does not belong to that poetry as she is "the one woman poet of her generation to put on sibyl's robes, nowadays truly threadbare" (Bogan, quoted by Kertesz 43). Rukeyser's poetry is, in fact, an expression of her defiance of the roles traditionally assigned to poets, especially female ones, in society. While some female poets of Rukeyser's generation produced poetry that focused on the poet's private life, Rukeyser sought to discover relations in

poetry and in life so that her poetry reflected both her private life and her interest in public issues. The tendency in Rukeyser's poetry toward transcendence, which has been compared to Whitman's, is not, for Rukeyser, an anachronistic attempt to distance herself from modern readers with their preoccupation with private problems and highly specialized interests, which have pervaded all aspects of life, even poetry and writing. To the contrary, Rukeyser's aim of a transcendent experience in her various books is the seeking of essential connections between all forms of creativity in our life, creativity in poems, in images and things, in the poet, and in the reader.

And are the sibyl's robes that Rukeyser is assumed to be wearing "nowadays truly threadbare"? It seems that in our modern times, we have an even greater need for a guiding voice, for somebody who will take the role of a seer to bring humanity into a wakeful recognition of their potential for making creative connections with the world and the people around them. Rukeyser's assured language comes from practicing, since her youth, what she preaches in her poetry. Her social and political activism lent her a maturity of vision and an emotional intensity that she expressed and shared in her poems. Although Rukeyser's poetry is distinguishably female and she clearly writes as a woman, she continuously seeks to transcend, in her poetry, the social rules she is expected to follow as a woman and as a female poet. Rukeyser's poetry is characterized by constant, lively movement and vigorous imagery. "Hers is not a tender but a strong lyricism that does not aim to distill or crystallize an emotion or an experience. Rukeyser's aim is to follow the powerful rhythms of experience in herself (and often in her imagining of another) in a world which in its fears about economics and war has conspired to be silent about the deepest human values and to repress impulses which interfere with 'getting ahead'" (Kertesz

75). Rukeyser had to face up to stereotyping even later in her career, in the 1970s, when she was chastised for writing a biography of Thomas Hariot:

Well, one of the attacks on me for writing that Hariot book spoke of me as a she-poet—that I had no business to be doing this and I was broken for a while and looked out the window for a while. And then I thought, yes, I am a she-poet. Anything I bring to this is because I am a woman. And this is the thing that was left out of the Elizabethan world, the element that did not exist. Maybe, maybe, maybe that is what one can bring to life.

(Packard 175-176)

One of Rukeyser's early poems defying the stereotypical roles assigned to women is "Letter, Unposted." In this poem, the speaker is a lover waiting for a beloved to come back. The sex of the speaker is not determined, perhaps intentionally, to show that though it is traditionally the male lover who goes away into the outside world and the female is the one who typically waits for him, there is no reason why the roles cannot be reversed. However, it is easier for the reader (again stereotyping) to assume the speaker is female as the poet is female, and the situation is typically experienced by a female. The waiting lover's life, in this poem, does not revolve around the beloved. The movement of the universe will not cease, and nature will continue its various processes while the beloved is away. Even the waiting lover will not cease to communicate normally with all the human and natural forces around her or him, and that might even enrich the love relationship in one way or another. Despite the beloved's absence,

.... summer lives,

and minds grow, and nerves are sensitized to power

and no winds wait, and no tree stands but gives

richly to the store of the burning harvest :

the door stands open for you, and other figures pass,
and I receive them joyfully and live : but wait for you ... (*Collected Poems* 14)

This poem stands contrary to a form of sacrifice that cancels one for the sake of another. It affirms the view that various things and forces can co-exist in their full and unique existence without the need for anyone to be dissolved in or sacrificed for another. For Rukeyser, being female is not a constricting or limiting identity, just as no label we provide to people or things should limit their ability to transcend that identity and be subject to change.

One of the reasons for the difficulty in categorizing Rukeyser as precisely proletarian, feminist, or any of the labels that critics find suitable to identify a writer with is that the idea of transcendence and the process of change is at the very core of her philosophy of writing poetry. Transcendence for Rukeyser means that all elements in existence, no matter how different or contrary they seem, are part of each other. They keep interacting and connecting to each other in subtle ways that we need to explore and understand, as part of the secrets of being. Rukeyser benefits from all the spectrums of identity, knowledge, and politics to build a personality that can view an event with the full perspective of a wise prophet who is able to include and embrace the different aspects of any experience, even the seemingly wayward or irrelevant ones. Ironically this tendency toward transcendence, which is supposed to reflect an extraordinary and richer view of knowledge and art, was seen by some critics as the reason for Rukeyser's failure to reach a wider audience among contemporary readers. David Barber, in his article, "Finding Her Voice: Muriel Rukeyser's Poetic Development," criticizes what he believes is Rukeyser's adoption of the expansive voice of Whitman. "Taking Whitman in particular as her model and guide, Rukeyser insists on the underlying unity of all life, the power of imagination and creativity to help us live more fully, and the poet's capacity to regenerate society. She has in fact been called

(unhappily – for who can survive such a comparison?) ‘a female counterpart to Walt Whitman.’” Barber does not find a problem with Rukeyser’s ideas themselves, but with the fact that she expresses them in Whitman’s “prophetic, often mystical” voice and “to the extent that Rukeyser attempted such a voice, she courted failure” (Barber, “Finding Her Voice” 128). Barber does not provide the reason why Rukeyser is not qualified to speak in the voice of Whitman, if she does so, but it seems that his criticism comes down to the fact that Rukeyser would not, in the words of Adrienne Rich, “trim her sails to a vogue of poetic irony and wit, an aesthetics of the private middle-class life, *an idea of what a woman’s poetry should look like*” (Rich, “Beginners” 68, emphasis added). Why could not Rukeyser, being a female poet, have the broad perspective and the ambitious vision of Whitman, even in our modern times and among the generation of poets and artists she worked with, keeping in mind that Rukeyser’s relationship to Whitman is not that of imitation but that of guidance and inspiration? What is perceived here as Rukeyser’s failure in reaching a wider audience could be the audience’s psychological difficulty in internalizing and interacting with Rukeyser’s message, with its bold exhortation for a greater open-mindedness and acceptance of the idea of constant connectivity and change. Another quality that possibly contributes to the controversiality of Rukeyser’s poetry is her emphasis on the reader’s ability to respond to the poem and create change, as the ultimate goal of the reading experience. Poetry is not traditionally viewed as a vehicle for action; rather it is seen as a medium for thinking and feeling but not usually for positive, responsible action.

In addition to the critical and cultural attitudes that the reception of Rukeyser’s poetry points to, it sometimes indicates and reveals personal problems between some critics and Rukeyser, as in the attacks Rukeyser was subjected to during the 1940s. A critic who consistently attacked her and who, as Kenneth Rexroth expressed it, “carried on what can only be called a malevolent

vendetta with Muriel Rukeyser, which can only be accounted for by some unknown personal motivation” (Kertesz xiii-xiv), was Louise Bogan. Bogan described Rukeyser in one of her reviews as a poet who “has always stood four-square in her time,” as her poetry represents, in Bogan’s view, “the fashionable attitude, the decorative emotion, the sweeping empty enthusiasm ... that we are at once carried off into a ‘period’ mood of one kind or another” (Kertesz 42-43). Weldon Kees described Rukeyser in his 1942 review of *Wake Island* by saying that “there’s one thing you can say about Muriel: she’s not lazy.” In one of the *Partisan* reviews of Rukeyser, her poetry is seen to “resemble a bathrobe” (Daniels 249). It is difficult to understand the basis of these attacks as Rukeyser has, since the beginning of her career, worked to define and clarify her ideas and her method in different publications and in her book *The Life of Poetry*. She was not the type of poet who did not care about the way her poetry is received and understood. The way her poetry is received is even part of her mission as a poet. Louise Kertesz, in her book *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser*, sums up the problem by declaring that “Literary criticism is perhaps the most relative of all attempts to evaluate the productions of human beings. What is a bald cliché, a prosy abstraction, an outlandish combination, a raw gobble to one decade of critics and readers may be a stunning method to another” (39).

Part 1.2: Rukeyser’s Theory of Criticism

Rukeyser has made many contributions in the field of criticism as she explained the most perceptive way to approach poetry. She commented on the different trends of criticism in her time, especially New Criticism, which is contrary to her belief of the comprehensiveness of the reading experience and its emotional depth. For some New Critics, Rukeyser’s poems do not bend themselves to the tightly controlled way of analysis that New Critics employ for reading poetry. One of those critics complains that “[the poems] have never been learned as ways of

feeling and attitudes of control for both feeling and emotion, but operate rather as a vehicle of spontaneity” (R. P. Blackmur, quoted by Daniels 255). Rukeyser believed that the living and freeing of “emotional truth” is what poetry is all about. For Rukeyser, “One writes in order to feel: that is the fundamental mover” (*Life of Poetry* 55). The development of emotional intensity in the poetic experience, whether it is the composition or the reading of poetry, is a stage further than or beyond logic here. Though logic organizes the images of a poem, the poem must reach out to a deeper source of consciousness than mere logical relations. “The statement of ideas in a poem may have to do with logic. More profoundly, it may be identified with the emotional progression of the poem, in terms of the music and images, so that the poem is alive throughout” (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 33). Rukeyser holds that emotional truth is not measurable or identifiable in a language or terms of its own, but an effort by writers can be made toward the achievement of that:

The terms have not been invented; and although that does not impede expressive writing—a poem, a novel, or a play act emotions out in terms of words, they do not describe—the lack does impede analytical work. We have no terms, for example, for ‘emotional meaning’ or ‘emotional information.’ We have not even the English for Claude Bernard’s ‘*milieu interior*,’ that internal condition of a body, the *in*vironment where live the inner relationships. (*Life of Poetry* 13)

Emotion here is not the impression or transitory state of feeling that a person is subject to from time to time; it is conviction as originating from a deeper source of consciousness and instinctual wisdom, one that draws from honesty in facing up to truth inside ourselves instead of hiding it, adorning it, or escaping from it.

New Criticism, as a movement, was established to systemize the study of literature and poetry in particular. It presents the study of literature as an analytic science with specific rules and criteria. The poem is an object with qualities and ideas that can be separated and scrutinized, and the value of a poem can be fixed in time, inasmuch as it conforms to the value rules of a New Critic. New Criticism has contributed a lot to making literature an important discipline in college education, and in systematizing the reading and study of literature for common readers and for the average student. However, it has robbed the experience of reading literature of some of its most important elements, like the impact that the reading experience may have on the reader's personality and belief system, or the way that the reader can connect, through the poem, to the poet and her sources of creativity. For a New Critic, the poem is a piece of art to be studied in separation from all but its confined presence on the page, and the composition of its parts and images. Rukeyser criticizes this way of approaching a poem:

We have used the word "poem" and now the people who live by division quarrel about "the poem as object." They pull it away from their own lives, from the life of the poet, and they attempt to pull it away from its meaning, from itself; finally, in a trance of shattering, they deny qualities and forms and all significance. Then, cut off from its life, they see the dead Beauty ... For all things change in time; some are made of change itself, and the poem is of these. It is not an object; the poem is a process. (*Life of Poetry* 174)

Rukeyser is pointing here to the New Critics' way of including or excluding works of literature in what they used to call a "tradition," or what is now called "canon," based on criteria that they have set up for the purpose. This is done to determine whether a piece of writing is, in a final and unchangeable way, qualified to be regarded as Literature or not. Rukeyser believes the value of a

poem cannot be fixed in time; it is evolving and it undergoes different stages of development and rapport with a single reader and with readers in different generations and historical periods. For New Critics, studying a poem is not a subjective experience influenced by the reader's personal impressions; it is a piece of work analyzed using a set of rules that preserve the act's objectivity and protect it from abstractness. Mark Schorer, a New Critic, observes, in his 1948 essay, "Technique as Discovery," that "Modern criticism has shown us that to speak of content as such is not to speak of art at all, but of experience; and that it is only when we speak of the *achieved* content, the form, the work of art as a work of art, that we speak as critics. The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content, or art, is technique" (Schorer 67). Though Rukeyser shares with New Critics the belief that the poem is a system that can be analyzed in scientific terms, or using principles from the world of science, Rukeyser's science is a dynamic one. She is interested in living things and their connections with their surroundings. She attaches a great importance to the human aspect of the reading experience, whether from the poet's or the reader's side. The poem for Rukeyser is alive with the interactive movement it maintains throughout its parts and the connections it makes between the poet and the reader.

Rukeyser views the reading of poetry as an intimate experience that makes its impact on the reader's whole existence. The ideal reading of a poem, for Rukeyser, is one that would bring the reader to a rethinking of his past life and join the artist to the reader in the same creative experience, with its psychological and emotional roots, which could not be reduced to a single event in the poet's or the reader's life:

Experience itself cannot be seen as a point in time, a fact. The experience with which we deal, in speaking of art and human growth, is not only the event, but the event and the entire past of the individual. There is a series in any event, and the definition of the event

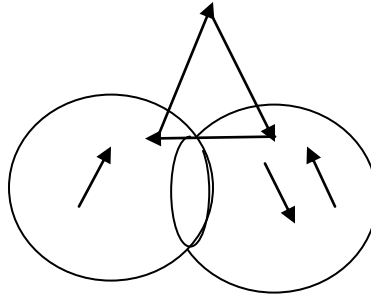
is the last unit of the series. You read the poem: the poem you now have, the poem that exists in your imagination, is the poem and all the past to which you refer it. (*Life of Poetry* 177-178)

Regarding the reading of poetry as experience will definitely involve a reader's subjective views and impressions; however, Rukeyser, with her characteristic intrepidity and self-confidence, asserts that "all we can be sure of is that at our most subjective we are universal; all we can be sure of is the profound flow of our living tides of meaning, the river meeting the sea in eternal relationship, in a dance of power, in a dance of love" (*Life of Poetry* 187). Here Rukeyser is suggesting that, as the reader searches for the meaning of the poem in his own psyche and life experience, the reader will finally reach the same source of creative experience in its deep, common roots that the artist has drawn from to communicate her experience in a poem. This notion of the personal unconscious as part of a universal, human record or history is described efficiently and beautifully in the following lines from Rukeyser's poem "Breaking Open":

The conviction that what is meant by the unconscious is the same as what is meant by history. The collective unconscious is the living history brought to the present in consciousness, waking or sleeping. The personal "unconscious" is the personal history. This is an identity ... The "unconscious" of the race, and its traces in art and in social structure and "inventions" – these are our inheritance. In facing history, we look at each other, and in facing our entire personal life, we look at each other. (*Collected Poems* 522-523)

In this piece of Rukeyser's poem the speaker is suggesting the idea of the collective unconscious as an accumulated common source of intuitive knowledge which is directly connected to, and

can be reached through, personal or subjective wisdom. This source can lead to clues of the repressed, abandoned, and forgotten old arts and traditions that were created by a sensible, unshackled spontaneity of imagination and belief. This source can only be reached as people connect fully and naturally with their selves and with each other: “Our relation¹ to each other and to ourselves are the only things with survival value ...” (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 177)



Now we come to Rukeyser’s famous diagram of the intricate relations that link the poem to the reader and the poet. As we can see in the diagram above, there are two intersecting circles: one that stands for the poet, and one that stands for the reader. The triangle that meets them both and joins them together is the poem or the “artwork,” as Rukeyser calls it. In this diagram, the conception and composition of a poem, by the poet, and the reading experience that the reader goes through in addition to the poem, as a living and interactive system, cannot be separated from one another. The poem cannot be analyzed or understood as an autonomous entity, in isolation from the writer’s and the reader’s subjective experience of it. “Now a poem, like anything separable and existing in time, may be considered as a system, and the changes taking place in the system may be investigated. The notion of feedback, as it is used in calculating machines, and such linked structures as the locks of the Panama Canal, is set forth” (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 186-187). Rukeyser deals with the poem as a distinguishable system to study the

¹ Rukeyser uses this noun in its singular form, though the plural form seems more appropriate.

points of strengths in it that qualify it to enter the dynamic triad of relations between the poem, the artist and the reader. However, she basically thinks of the poem as an event that is tied up to a network of causes, and one that generates, in its turn, a network of responses and reactions. “We know that poetry is not isolated here, any more than any phenomena can be isolated” (*Life of Poetry* 187). So the poetic truth cannot be reduced to a single cause and a single effect surrounding the reality and tangibility of the poem. It is like a natural phenomenon, inseparable from the complex web of natural causes that make it a recognizable whole:

Einstein says, “Now I believe that events in nature are controlled by a much stricter and more closely binding law than we recognize today, when we speak of one event being the *cause* of another. We are like a child who judges a poem by the rhymes and knows nothing of the rhythmic pattern. Or we are like a juvenile learner at the piano, *just* relating one note to that which immediately precedes or follows. To an extent this may be very well when one is dealing with very simple and primitive compositions; but it will not do for an interpretation of a Bach fugue.” (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 176)

The dynamism of a poem, as a system, is characterized by the relations it establishes with the related factors in Rukeyser’s triad (the poet and the reader, and their evolving systems of belief and culture), but it is also represented by the relations between the images and ideas within the poem. The images in a poem are not static, individual parts that can be studied separately, each for its force and significance in transmitting a specific idea. They have to be studied as each contributes to the strength and life of the other images in the poem. Rukeyser believes the poem has to be alive in order to enter a living experience with the poet and the reader:

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

us for further images and rhythms to come. Even if it is the first image of the poem, the establishment of the rhythm prepares us—musically—for the music of the image. And if its first word begins the poem, it has the role of putting into motion all the course of images and music of the entire work, with nothing to refer to, except perhaps a title. (*Life of Poetry* 33)

Above, we have talked about the qualities and the internal mechanism in a poem that enable it to live and transcend its concrete existence on the page to make a connection to the reader's deeper self, linking the reader to the poet's sources of feeling. However, how does Rukeyser achieve this in her poetry? How does she connect to the reader? What means or routes does she provide in her poems to allow the reader to participate creatively and continuously in her poetic experience, making it part of the reader's lifelong development of consciousness? Rukeyser does this by providing what she refers to, in the construction terminology, as "expansion joints." Rukeyser had an early interest in construction and the scientific principles underlying it, being the daughter of an engineer who managed a construction company. Rukeyser explains the building principle that would guide her poetry and her philosophy: "Concrete must contain expansion joints, the strips of material that allow the forcing heat of these summers, the forcing cold of these violent white winters, to do their work. The principle of the expansion joint, you learn, runs through all" (*Life of Poetry* 197-198). Just as expansion joints are essential for the stability and endurance of construction, though they superficially look like weak spots or gaps, a poem needs prepared spaces, which seem empty and mysterious gaps, but are actually for the reader to position herself in the poem and become part of the poetic experience. Rukeyser achieves this by making the poetic image as expansive and as meaningful as possible so that the poem, even in its most personal sentiment (personal to the poet) can be relevant to a reader's

own personal experience. That is why even Rukeyser's personal poems always tend toward the generality and inclusiveness of a common, public experience, inviting a shared experience with the reader, who is to Rukeyser part of her self. Rukeyser also incorporates the "expansion joint" principle in her poetry in her use of expressive punctuation, which she views as an organic aspect of the poem as a system. Her use of punctuation enables Rukeyser to add to the complexity and meaningfulness of the poem and invites the reader to contemplate the different aspects or sides of a question that the poetic line poses in its attempt for inclusiveness: "... punctuation in poetry needs several inventions. Not least of all, we need a measured rest. Space on the page, as E. E. Cummings uses it, can provide roughly for a relationship in emphasis through the eye's discernment of pattern; but we need a system of pauses which will be related to the time-pattern of the poem" (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 117). Ironically, it is these extraordinary attempts by Rukeyser to get the reader involved in her poetic experience and vision that make her poetry seem obscure to some readers. Rukeyser counters the charge of obscurity by directing the blame on the reader's readiness and ability to receive the message that the poet is trying to communicate through the poem, and to understand the poet's method in doing so. The reader is sometimes not accustomed enough to the world of poetic images and poetic creativity, and sometimes there are resistances (which we will discuss in detail later on) that stop the reader from a full reading experience:

The charge of obscurity, however, must be looked at very closely. It is one of the major charges brought against contemporary poetry, and it must always be taken as a declaration by the audience, which says "I find this poem obscure," and which tells us, at first, very much about the audience and nothing about the poem. It should rank with the complaint, "I do not understand this poem," as a statement descriptive only of the one

who makes it. Nothing has yet been said about the poem, in either charge. If you are going to follow up this challenge, you must then inquire into the consciousness of the challenger. Is the challenger prepared to receive the poem? (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 54).

Now, the poet's role in Rukeyser's triad of relations is, to some extent, clear and straightforward. The poet is in part the factor that establishes the poetic experience and the one who manages to create the first spark or connection, which can be extended and consummated with the reader's experience of reading the poem, or witnessing the poetic truth. However, the poem's life journey does not end with the reader's experience of reading and responding to the poem. The poem is a system which has a life of its own, as its images keep interacting with and reinforcing each other, and, at the same time, it maintains a continuous connection between the creative resources of both the artist and the reader. However, what is exactly the role of the reader or the type of effort he is expected to expend in and upon reading the poem? Here is Rukeyser's reply to this question:

The audience, in receiving the work of art, acknowledges not only its form, but their own experience and the experience of the artist. Both artist and audience create, and both do work on themselves in creating. The audience, in fact, does work only on itself in creating; the artist makes himself and his picture, himself and his poem. The artwork is set to one side with a word, then, as we look at the common ground, the consciousness and imagination of artist and audience. (*Life of Poetry* 50)

Rukeyser believes there is a purely human, uncorrupted core inside each of us, deep down, hidden by various repressions, delusions, prejudice, material interests, and the desire for uniformity. Rukeyser's poetry works to bring the reader into recognition and contact with that human core, and then it prods him to *act* according to it, in an immediate and candid way. The

reading of a poem does not stop with contemplating the poem's aesthetic value. It has a psychological impact, and it seeks a practical result. That is why Rukeyser prefers the word "witness" to "reader," to describe the receiver of the poem. The word "witness" involves responsibility for bearing the message and acting on it. The reading of a poem is a life-transforming moment in the history of an individual. "A poem does invite, it does require. What does it invite? A poem invites you to feel. More than that: it invites you to respond. And better than that: a poem invites a total response" (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 11).

Part1.3: Rukeyser's View of the "Resistances" to Poetry

In an ideal reading experience, a poem can hold the seeds of self-discovery for the reader and positive change in a whole society. However, there are factors that can weaken the chain of relations in Rukeyser's triad and prevent a full, productive reading experience from happening. Some of these factors have to do with the reader and how he receives and interacts with a poem. An example of these factors is the inability of the modern reader to make poetry part of his daily life. Poetry, with its mainly idyllic vision, is out of place in our practical, busy life. "Poetry is foreign to us, we do not let it enter our daily lives" (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 9). However, poetry has a great value as a provider of spiritual guidance. It can enlighten our ways of feeling and behaving. Poetry can guide us away from social and cultural chaos and confusion, as much as scientific knowledge and the different forms of art can. Rukeyser asserts that even in our modern times, when we cannot deal with, process, or analyze the huge amounts of images, knowledge, and existential dilemmas that the media offers daily to our minds, we can seek philosophical and practical wisdom from genuine poetry:

Now, when it is hard to hold for a moment the giant clusters of event and meaning that every day appear, it is time to remember this other kind of knowledge and love, which

has forever been a way of reaching complexes of emotion and relationship, the attitude that is like the attitude of science and the other arts today, but with significant and beautiful distinctness from these—the attitude that perhaps might equip our imaginations to deal with our lives—the attitude of poetry. (*Life of Poetry* 7-8)

Here Rukeyser is talking about the conditions in her time, specifically the fifties of the twentieth century, the time when her book *The Life of Poetry* was written. However, the situation she describes is the same today, and we can benefit from Rukeyser's message to develop what she calls an "attitude of poetry." I think that what Rukeyser means by the attitude of poetry is the ability to view the world and its events in terms of relationships. Images and events appear to us, through the media, stripped off or devoid of meaning or any way of linking them to other events or facts. Poetry, with its method of divulging and building relations between general truths, as well as its ability to link the events to our inner nature or psychological reality, can help us interpret and deal with events in our life. Poetry can also enlighten those who specialize in the different fields of knowledge to envision the possible relationships linking the different disciplines. Rukeyser was a contemporary pioneer in tackling the fields of knowledge as bound by an interlinked web of relations. Rukeyser was able to use an insightful scientific method to define poetry, and she invited us to use it to solve the problems of our daily life.

Another resistance to poetry that Rukeyser lists in her book *The Life of Poetry* is the inability of the reader to grasp the poetic truth with all of his being as the poem is written with the whole being of the poet. Rukeyser contends that the production of art involves not only the mental capabilities of the artist but also the way his body participates in transmitting the message and form of the work of art. Likewise the reader or viewer of a work of art interacts with it not only through his mind, as he attempts to make sense of it, but also through his body. This is done with

the eye, as it processes the artistic piece, and the hand, as it unconsciously works to find a place in the appreciation and response process. In fact, the whole body is unconsciously involved in and affected by an inspiring, transformative experience of reading art, especially poetry. Here is how Rukeyser analyzes the poetic experience by explaining the body's involvement in the production of art in general:

For the fact is that painting is not a visual art. A painting is made by the hands of the painter, setting up the imaginative experience taken through his eyes. Music is written by the hand of the composer, giving us the imaginative experience through the ears. Poetry is made by the hand of the poet, and if we read the poem, we take the imaginative experience through the eyes with a *shadow* of sound; if we hear it, we take it through the ears with a *shadow* of sight. (*Life of Poetry* 29)

The full interaction with a work of art, whether in composing or appreciating it, is connected to our perception of the body and our relationship with it. Our understanding of the body and of how we are related to it, in our imagination, in our unconscious, and in our actions, can help us understand and have a full “imaginative experience,” both in terms of producing art and interacting with it. This is suggested by Rukeyser's idea of form, as she artistically explores it in many of her poems. Form for Rukeyser is what links artistic creativity, and the work of art, to the body, as they become a reflection of each other. Just as form in a body feeds and controls the relationships between all parts of the body as they work together for a dynamic whole, so is the case in a work of art, especially a poem. The different elements and aspects of a poem are involved in dynamic relationships that sustain the poem's life and maintain its continuous process of transformation and development throughout time. These dynamic relationships are the

ones that keep a poem whole and insure the poem's intimate, emotional relationship to its readers.

For Rukeyser, the form and content of a poem are part of each other, and they are bound by essential, organic relationships. Rukeyser does not regard the form or music of a poem as frames to it; she views them as elements that are essential to the life of a poem, just as all parts of a body, no matter how minor or ineffective they seem, are essential to it. Rukeyser believes that the constraint that technique in art might represent is actually a source of freedom an inspiration as it prods us toward the discovery of the role that form plays in a work of art: "In art we recognize that within this constraint is our discovery. Necessity is indeed the source of freedom. But many readers think of form in poetry as a framework. It is not that. The form and music of the fine poems are organic, they are not frames" (*Life of Poetry* 30). Rukeyser suggests that what maintains coherence in a poem is not only the logical linkages between its images and ideas, but also the emotional intensity that music and form provide to it and its integrity: "The statement of ideas in a poem may have to do with logic. More profoundly, it may be identified with the emotional progression of the poem, in terms of the music and images, so that the poem is alive throughout" (*Life of Poetry* 33).

An important resistance to poetry that Rukeyser discussed is the inability of the reader to confront the emotional intensity that the poem reflects. Emotional intensity is related to emotional truth, which is the truth of our deeper emotions, in our inner selves, away from the repressions and defenses that we build against our true feelings in our daily life. Rukeyser points to our fear of owning or revealing our deepest feelings, which she regards as "that neurotic coldness or embarrassment before disclosure, or intensity, which is one reason for so many jokes and so much tragedy in our lives" (*Life of Poetry* 45). Rukeyser suggests that this is the real

reason behind many readers' aversion to reading poetry. Poetry, with its content, form, and music, holds a mirror to our deeper drives and the truth of our reactions to the world; that is why it holds the opportunity, and the threat, of disclosing our inner reality to our understanding: "One of the invitations of poetry is to come to the emotional meanings at every moment. That is one reason for the high concentration of music, in poetry" (*Life of Poetry* 21).

Rukeyser believes that fear of emotional truth comes from the desire to maintain hypocritical behavior and fake relations with people at the expense of personal truthfulness. "The fear is a fear of disclosure, but, in this instance, of disclosure to oneself of areas within the individual, areas with which he is not trained to deal, and which will only bring him into hostile relationships with his complacent neighbor, whose approval he wants" (*Life of Poetry* 44). The problem here is not with the way we behave; the problem is that our behavior is not motivated by the way we truly feel and believe. We disown our embarrassing feelings to ourselves and hide them from the view of others. "This code strikes deep at our emotional life. Its action means that our emotions are supposed to be uniform. Since that is impossible, our weaknesses send us to meet any divergence from the expected with dread or conflict" (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 17). The fear of meeting the reality of one's deep feelings is a by-product of the type of education we receive since we are small children. The focus in this education is on affected, "proper" or typical conduct rather than spontaneous, heartfelt action:

Our education molds us toward conduct, the outward² and ethical are given lip-service, the outward and predatory are glorified by business society, and the young are brought up in conduct leading toward aggression surrounded by strict taboos. We know from the

² The word "outward" is used here in two different reprints of *The Life of Poetry*, though I believe that the word "inward" is a more logical choice to complete the sentence.

movies, the radio, and from every ad in the morning paper, what behavior is expected.

We know what approvals are required from us; every day that knowledge is borne in on a flood of words. (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 42)

Rukeyser is pointing to the contradiction between our real, deep feelings, and the way we act in society, hiding our emotions and following the socially and culturally acceptable behavior. This has serious effects on the psyche of the individual, and that of society as a group. It causes aggression as the individual is torn by his contradiction, and yearning to be able to know and express his true feelings. It also causes, conversely, lethargy in our ability to respond to human crises happening in our society or around the world.

In her emphasis on response, Rukeyser is trying to instigate change in how people view and respond to political events. The world's indifferent attitude as fascism was gaining its hold in Europe, and the atrocities that were perpetrated by fascists and Nazis, as the world was slow to respond to them, during World War II, were some of the events which affected Rukeyser deeply and induced her to present her philosophy of political witness and response. Rukeyser shows how world indifference caused Nazis to get away with a human tragedy in the magnitude of the Holocaust, and she believes that the only guarantee that this might not happen again is that people develop the ability to respond to injustice and oppression wherever it is happening in the world. "Hitler was able to announce his lies and offer them to us, like a bullfighter offering the cape. But we are not that furious beast of compulsive habit and compulsive thrust. We are a group of individuals; it was our own lies and wishes we were believing" (*Life of Poetry* 42). The reluctance to respond to world crises comes from the feeling that what is happening to people in one spot on earth will not have a direct impact on other places and other peoples:

Trigant Burrow cautions us, in his essay “The Social Neurosis,” not to “fall a prey to the common illusion that a disorder in social behavior is a disorder *outside* of man’s own organism.” The typical fallacy of normality, he believes, explains conflict “not as a condition of mind common to both contending parties, but as the ‘wrongness’ of the other fellow, the other group or the other nation.” (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 41-42)

Rukeyser affirms that the world is all one; whatever happens to one nation or people will gradually affect the whole world. That is the basis of the activism that Rukeyser passionately preaches in her poetry and that she conscientiously practiced in her life. She believed in the power of poetry to bring out the most human in our nature so that we can live in true unity with the world around us.

The same failure in the reader that affects his ability to respond openly to a poem applies to the artist who writes the poem. The artist may also suffer from inability to discover his own human core, and his writings will end up reflecting the superficiality of a culture based on repression and the state of depravity that some readers may suffer from. The artist may lose faith in his art’s mission and its potential to effect change. The type of poetry that this artist writes will reflect despair, escapism, and the belief that the world has been corrupted beyond repair:

A conspicuous form of impoverishment of imagination in the artist—and I should like to confine the definition again to the poet—is the denial of areas not only in himself but in his art. Here he is reflecting society with a vengeance. The primary responsibility of the poet is to the human consciousness. But he does respond; he responds to purity and to corruption. You may judge how far corruption has gone when you reflect that most of our poets accept it as a primary theme. Not only that: they tend to absorb its methods, as we in war absorbed some of the methods of the enemy. (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 52)

Rukeyser refers here to the type of poetry that was prevalent after World War II and during the fifties. That type of poetry was characterized by irony and pessimism. Rukeyser's language of hope and the potential for change was out of place at that time, and she was attacked for this lack of irony and this directness in meeting reality and working to change it. This optimism was seen as an unwarranted idealism at a time of war, when humanity had lost faith in itself. Randall Jarrell, in his book *Poetry and the Age*, describes Rukeyser's optimism in cynical terms: "Miss Rukeyser's worst and most commonplace lines—there aren't too many—are all rhetorical sublimations of the horrible advertising-agency idealism of Corwin or Fast or MacLeish or the National Association of Manufacturers, of sermons and radio programs and editorials and speeches: what our ignorant forbears called *cant*" (165). Rukeyser persisted in her vision of hope and possibility as she was not confined in the circumstances and the mood of her times. She consistently thought of future generations and offered them something that would fulfill their deepest needs to connect with their emotional truth and with the humanity in their fellow creatures on earth.

Despite the scarcity of attempts to genuinely understand and interact with Rukeyser's art, there have been attempts, by perceptive critics, to grasp Rukeyser's vision and illustrate our need, in our present times, for her poetry and the message embedded in it.³ A consistent effort by

³ One of those attempts is the 1999 anthology of articles and poems entitled "*How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?*" *The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser*. The book brings together analyses of Rukeyser's works and ideas, as well as details of her eventful life. It blends the personal aspect of Rukeyser's life with her career as a writer of different forms and subjects. In this sense it celebrates Rukeyser's ideas of the interrelationship between different genres and disciplines, especially that between science and art.

scholars of different fields to study and benefit from Rukeyser's ideas and forms holds the promise of development and change in these fields. Rukeyser's lifelong project was to vitalize knowledge in all its forms and fields, and revive the notion of interrelationship between the different disciplines so that they all benefit from each other and reach a higher level of development.

I have found from the different articles I have read on Rukeyser that the best way to understand Rukeyser is to approach her as a student searching for "usable truth" in her writings. The researcher or critic would have to assume Rukeyser's position when she declares in her book *Orgy*, "I'd like to use my ignorance" (30). The acknowledgement of ignorance can be used as an impetus driving the desire for knowledge and understanding. Rukeyser valued the spirit of learning, experimenting, and discovering. Rukeyser's writings can be thought of in terms of their merits or their flaws, resulting in positive or negative criticism, but the best way to study Rukeyser is in terms of the need we have for her ideas and the use to which we can put them in our life, as readers and as artists. Everything that Rukeyser wrote holds a great value for our thinking and study, even what were considered to be her flawed writings, as they are part of the history and process of the development of a great artist. "Rukeyser's devotion to process led her to publish gropings alongside achieved poems, because for her the search itself, as a means of resisting stasis, was as important as the result. In the biographies [Rukeyser wrote a number of biographies], she meditates frequently on her subjects' mistakes and associates defeat with renewal ..." (Schoerke 24). Experimentation and the spirit of learning are two of Rukeyser's highest principles. An important subject that can be studied with regards to Rukeyser is the sources of her creativity, the figures and principles that guide her perception of life and art. Rukeyser had always been searching during her life for viable theories for the ideas and forms of

her poetry, and she adopted the most useful ones in whatever discipline and whatever era of history she found them. That is why her writings emerge as a rich field of different theories and influences that all illustrate an inquisitive mind, vibrant imagination, and a conscientious search for truth.

2) Chapter II: Rukeyser's Philosophy of the Relationship between Science and Poetry

One of Rukeyser's great achievements in the fields of art and critical theory is her conception of the relationships linking the different disciplines of study, especially that linking science and art. From the latter relationship springs Rukeyser's view of the relationships between nature, technology, and poetry. In this chapter we explore how Rukeyser incorporated the relationship between science and art into her philosophy of writing and into her poetry. We start by studying how Rukeyser's interest in science developed and how it became part of her mission as a poet, responding to cultural crises throughout the different times in history by making use of all the available resources of wisdom and knowledge as they are related to each other. We observe Rukeyser's involvement with science in her childhood and in the writing of her first volume of poetry *Theory of Flight*. Then we discuss Rukeyser's undertaking of the biography of the American scientist Willard Gibbs, which illustrated Rukeyser's view of the links between science and art. Rukeyser's conception of the relationship between art and science was discussed by Rukeyser herself in much of her writings, especially *The Life of Poetry* and *Willard Gibbs*. In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser dedicated a whole section to discussing that relationship, entitled "The Rare Union: Poetry and Science." In that section of the book, Rukeyser thought of both science and poetry as two interlinked, experimental, and inspiring fields that seek a generalizing, cosmic view of the world, reaching back to the core of human consciousness and its rules of relationship. In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser also discussed democracy and peace, which are, for Rukeyser, rooted in the necessary, constructive conflict between multiplicities, in terms that reflected her preoccupation with Willard Gibbs's Phase Rule with its emphasis on the dynamic coexistence among different physical mixtures. Moreover, in her biography of Willard Gibbs, Rukeyser imaginatively analyzed what she thought of as the affinities that bring together a

scientist, Willard Gibbs, and two writers, Herman Melville and Walt Whitman, in their transcendentalist effort to find theories that explained cosmic relationships in our world. The three historical figures viewed tension between contraries as a natural process that fed the coexistence of different phenomena, in the world of nature for Gibbs, and in the realm of human consciousness for both Melville and Whitman.

I found few studies that discussed Rukeyser's view of the relationship between science and art despite the topic's importance in Rukeyser's writings. Louise Kertesz briefly studied the significance that Gibbs's scientific ideas, especially the Phase Rule, held for Rukeyser and her art in a section of her book, *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser*, on Rukeyser's biography of Willard Gibbs. Also, David S. Barber, in his article "'The Poet of Unity': Muriel Rukeyser's *Willard Gibbs*," studied Rukeyser's view of American history as she elucidated it in her biography of Willard Gibbs. In his article, Barber discussed the way George Sarton's relational philosophy influenced Rukeyser's idea of the relationship between poetry and science. Barber described in his article Gibbs's scientific method of comparing and combining until one discovered a general rule that reached to the core of a phenomenon; Barber showed how that method inspired Rukeyser to experiment with and explore different types of relationships in her poetry:

With this synthesizing power, essential also in poetry, in any discipline or mode of expression, Gibbs created a set of systems which mathematically describe important aspects of the physical world. His capacity to generalize so precisely as to include nearly all cases is Rukeyser's model for an imagination which allows one to live fully" (Barber, "'The Poet of Unity'"11).

Another Rukeyser scholar who studied Rukeyser's idea of the relationship between science and art is Anne Herzog. In her article "‘Anything Away from Anything’: Muriel Rukeyser's Relational Poetics," Herzog explored Rukeyser's relational philosophy in general, and she briefly talked about Rukeyser's view of the relationship between science and poetry. Herzog showed how Rukeyser's view of science as a relational system led to her formulation of a theory of the poem as a system of relations sustained by the continuous interaction between the different parts and images of a poem. Now, the above-mentioned studies are important attempts to understand Rukeyser's unique view of a creatively constructive relationship between science and the other disciplines, especially art. However, they don't show in detail how Rukeyser applied that idea to her aesthetic theory and to her poetic style. In this chapter I explore Rukeyser's poetics in this regard and how it found its way into her style. I also look specifically at the way that Gibbs's Phase Rule shaped Rukeyser's poetic style and her philosophy of dynamism in art and in culture. My research is based on Rukeyser's philosophy of the relationship between science and art as she expounded it in her book *The Life of Poetry*, and I hope to contribute, in this chapter and in this thesis, to a better understanding of Rukeyser's complex and capacious theory of art and her poetic ideas and style.

Part 2.1: Science and Rukeyser's Poetic Mission

The relationship between science and poetry has not been a very harmonious one. These two fields have tended to be kept in their separate spheres, each protected from the intrusion of the other. However, there have always been poets who discuss scientific and philosophical concepts in their poetry, like the Roman philosopher-poet Lucretius. There have also been scientists who were interested in literature and who wrote beautiful literary pieces, like Humphry Davy and, more recently, Lewis Thomas. The efforts by scientists and poets to bring these two fields

together were made on an individual basis. Moreover, the scientists or poets undertaking such efforts have rarely attempted to find a formula or construct a philosophy in which poetry and science could continuously enrich and improve each other. Muriel Rukeyser, with her capacious vision and ambition, has courageously attempted to do this, and the results of her efforts continue to be amazing and useful for the different fields of knowledge.

Rukeyser witnessed the scientific and technological advancements of the twentieth century as fruits of the human imagination that could not be separated from the manifestations of creativity in other fields, especially in literature and culture. She believed that all fields grow from each other and basically belong to each other. By bringing poetry and science together, Rukeyser did not attempt to marry two essentially separate fields; instead, she believed that they have always been part of each other. The problem is that their relationship to each other has not been studied seriously and in a detailed manner. In a 1974 interview with the *New York Quarterly*, Rukeyser said: “It isn’t that one brings life together—it’s that one will not allow it to be torn apart” (Packard 171). Rukeyser viewed both poetry and science as rooted in nature, and she considered human nature and material nature as reflections of each other in their dynamism.

For Rukeyser, the value of poetry lies in its revelation of the inherent relationships between all aspects of life and of the different human ideas that sometimes seem conflicting but are brought together in poetry in an equilibrated process. A poet can discover, through poetry, the world and history as one, with opposite ideas feeding and benefitting from their contrariness; a perceptive poet can derive and understand the common principles governing the interaction of these opposite ideas. Rukeyser comes up with the valuable image of poetry as a meeting-place, “where the false barriers go down. For they are false” (*Life of Poetry* 20). That is why Rukeyser regarded poetry as a national resource similar to, if not more important than, the natural

resources of a country. She believed that it should be used, and not wasted and neglected as it has been in much of our contemporary times: “Everywhere we are told that our human resources are *all to be used*, that our civilization itself means the uses of everything it has—the inventions, the histories, every scrap of fact. But there is one *kind* of knowledge—infinately precious, time-resistant more than monuments, here to be passed between the generations in any way it may be: never to be used. And that is poetry” (*Life of Poetry* 7).

Rukeyser’s interest in science originated during her childhood as she observed the way buildings were constructed in her birthplace, New York. She was interested in the operations and the techniques of building, such as using expansion joints. She applied this engineering method to the way she understood relations within her family. She thought that the atmosphere of rigidity in her family resulted from suppression of their feelings and desires instead of expressing them and sharing them with each other. The family needed something like expansion joints to allow emotions free circulation among the family members. Later on, as Rukeyser started writing poems in college and was able to publish a collection of poems, *Theory of Flight*, the book brought together her views of how art could be a reflection of the dynamic process that moves and sustains the study and development of science.

Rukeyser’s efforts to study the relationship between science and poetry culminated during WWII as she was writing a biography of the nineteenth-century American scientist Willard Gibbs. The writing of that book at that specific time was a brave gesture through which Rukeyser sought to prove the importance of the different types of knowledge at all times. Rukeyser was aware of the possible untimeliness of writing an encyclopedic biography of a theoretician who was little known outside his field of mathematical physics at a time of war. Another challenge to Rukeyser when she took up that huge project was that she was not a specialized scientist,

historian, or even biographer. She was known as only a young woman poet: “When one is a woman, when one is writing poems, when one is drawn through a passion to know people today and the web in which they, suffering, find themselves, to learn the people, to dissect the web, one deals with the processes themselves” (Rukeyser, *Willard Gibbs* 12). By writing *Willard Gibbs*, the biography of a scientist, Rukeyser sought to prove the interconnectedness between her field as a visionary poet and the field of theoretical science with its search for viable forms that could explain and describe life in all its variety.

Rukeyser’s timing of this biography of Willard Gibbs is significant. In time of war, all efforts are mobilized to serve the war cause and the military industry. Even research institutions are turned into instruments for the invention of the most sophisticated weaponry and other direct or indirect tools of war. The emphasis is on practical science and useful inventions, especially those which will contribute to the war effort. Rukeyser believed that in time of crisis, all our resources should be mobilized, excluding none: “In time of the crisis of the spirit, we are aware of all our need, our need for each other and our need for our selves. We call up, with all the strength of summoning we have, our fullness” (*Life of Poetry* 1). In the same way, Willard Gibbs was writing his great papers on scientific theories at the time of the American Civil War, when there was a greater need for practical science, and so he was not given due recognition during that part of his life, despite the great importance of his ideas, which was to be proven by the huge influence Gibbs had on future generations of scientists long after he died:

The story of Gibbs is that of the pure imagination in a wartime period. This is the adventure of the system-building spirit in a time of the breaking of systems, the daring “I Give You” to a future that must rise out of wounds. War and after-war are filled with hatred, and this hatred turns against the imagination, against poetry, against structure of

any kind. It wants detail, it wants the practical and concrete. The detail of invention can be understood. (Rukeyser, *Willard Gibbs* 7)

For Rukeyser, as a poet, writing about Willard Gibbs and his scientific ideas was a project that pointed the way toward true liberty and democracy. Rukeyser believed that Americans should be free to search for useful and revelatory knowledge anywhere they could find it. Qualified thinkers should get the resources to use knowledge in any field and any historical era to find out the relationships between disciplines, and the relations that link a usable past to the present: “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” (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 21). Despite the resistance and estrangement she suffered, Rukeyser persisted in her struggle to write and publish *Willard Gibbs* and went on, later in her life, to write original biographies for other buried and forgotten historical figures. Rukeyser spoke of the obstacles she encountered as she was working on *Willard Gibbs*: “Denied access to the material, insulted as a writer, attacked as the book appeared, my ancestry vilified, I know some of the effects of that hostility and rage which was, to me, deeply a part of Gibbs’ own story, part of the causes of the buried life of which I speak” (*Life of Poetry* 95). Not only was Rukeyser’s act of writing a biography of Willard Gibbs an affirmation of true democracy; Gibbs himself was a great symbol of democracy in the way he represented the ability of a then-young nation to explore and prove its full potential. Gibbs’s determination to pursue his theoretical research and make his great discoveries, despite the fact that many of his contemporaries could not comprehend his theories, and despite the fact that he could not find an audience as most Americans in his time were turning toward practical

inventions and applications rather than theoretical studies, made him a proper symbol of democracy for Rukeyser as she was struggling to write about him.

Rukeyser sensed most acutely the urgency of her message and mission as a poet with a comprehensive vision at the time of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, when she was, along with a group of fleeing refugees, exhorted by a speaker to bear the responsibility of telling the world about the truth of war. Later, when Rukeyser and the refugees were on a ship that would take them away from the war scene, Rukeyser witnessed an intense moment that would impact her and her art for the rest of her life: “Suddenly, throwing his question into talk not at all leading up to it—not seeming to—a man—a printer, several times a refugee—asked, ‘And poetry—among all this—where is there a place for poetry?’ Then I began to say what I believe” (*Life of Poetry* 3). Rukeyser thought that it was part of her mission to bring different fields together, commenting on their relationship with the cosmic vision of a poet. She believed that her mission was to repair the scission between disciplines, which modern Western culture had effected in its attempt for specialization. Rukeyser criticized the isolation of subjects from each other and warned us “Not to let our lives be shredded, sports away from politics, poetry away from anything. Anything away from anything” (Rukeyser, quoted by Herzog 33).

Part 2.2: Rukeyser’s Philosophy of Relationship

Rukeyser’s philosophy of relationship encompassed a wide range of subjects and aspects of experience. Rukeyser was a literary theorist in her own right and she boldly tackled theory questions to show her readers the best way to approach poetry in general and her own poetry in particular.⁴ Rukeyser thought that the reading experience is composed of three elements: the

⁴ In terms of her theory, Rukeyser is not easier to categorize than as a poet. Given the choices of literary theories today, she would be regarded as eclectic. Rukeyser did not believe in the

poet, the poem, and the reader. These are not separate, unrelated elements. They are elements that have to interact and complement each other so that the reading experience can be enriched and the poem itself can develop to a different reality and a higher stage of existence. Rukeyser's pioneering efforts to give the reader a wider role in the reading experience anticipated reader-response theories at a time when the main literary theory that was taught and debated in Western academic circles was the school of New Criticism, which made the literary text its principal reference point and the final arbiter of a correct analysis of a text. Rukeyser thought of the reading experience as a process whereby the above-mentioned elements continuously interact so that the poem will be liberated from its confined existence on the page. This method of viewing a literary text reveals its significance in its moment in history⁵ as well as the ways that future readers can keep interacting and connecting with it. So, Rukeyser's theory of criticism anticipated at least two of the more recent critical movements: Cultural Materialism and Reader-Response theories.

However, Rukeyser's idea of involving the reader in the process of commenting on and recreating the text is not identical to the recent reader-oriented theories. Rukeyser thought that the reading experience does not depend on the reader's effort alone. The reader's experience

exclusivity of different theories from each other, and she used them pragmatically so that they enforced and complemented each other.

⁵ Rukeyser illustrated her interest in exploring the history of inspiration and creativity in her biographies of Willard Gibbs, Wendell Willkie, and Thomas Hariot. In her biographies of these little-known personalities, Rukeyser innovatively studied the great thinkers' mentalities as well as the cultural atmosphere in which they lived and which they tried to change through their creative ideas.

works in combination and continuous interaction with two other dynamic elements: the text and the author. These three elements can never be severed from each other throughout the reading experience in all of its different stages. This is not to shackle the reader with constricting relations with elements that are exterior to his personal experience and wisdom, but to enrich the reading experience with connected, self-feeding resources of inspiration. Rukeyser believed that the poet, the poem, and the audience can all draw from a common, dynamic source of creativity that is vitalized by the combined effort, movement, and relations of all the elements. So, while reader-oriented theories give the reader a central role in the reading experience, Rukeyser viewed the reading experience as a set of relations bringing the reader, the text, and the author into creative contact with each other. In that way, the reading experience can be the basis for creating other webs of relations as the reader starts rewriting the text or creating his own text, which is inextricably linked to the original reading experience and its elements. For Rukeyser, the act of sharing is integral to the process of writing and reading a poem. The poem is a social act that brings different entities together. Rukeyser practiced her philosophy as she explicitly reached out to her readers by boldly addressing them directly to try to understand them and to get them to understand their deepest emotions to reach the intense moment of poetic perception: “My one reader, you reading this book, who are you? What is your face like, your hands holding the pages, the child forsaken in you, who now looks through your eyes at mine?” (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 189). Rukeyser frequently used the pronoun “we” in her poetry to show her readers that they can share in all the actions involved in the creative composition of a poem, and the consciousness from which a poem evolves and is born. A reader’s sharing is necessary so that the poem will develop with the reader’s interaction with it and so that it will have its place and life in the reader’s mind and heart.

Rukeyser's theory of criticism and her way of writing poetry are based on providing the reader a wider space in the reading experience through her use of expansion joints, or interaction blanks, in poetry. Expansion joints in Rukeyser's poetry are the blanks that act as points of mystery and witness at which the reader starts looking inwardly, questioning himself, and using his personal experience to try to understand the poem in a different way and rewrite it, drawing from his own sources of creativity. Rukeyser's idea of expansion joints corresponds in part with Wolfgang Iser's idea of the "blanks" in a literary text, which can be filled only by the reader. Iser's idea of text blanks refers to the multiple ways a reader can put together a coherent picture of the meaning that a text reflects. While these ways of understanding the text's coherence represent gaps in the literary text, they also represent an opportunity for the reader to participate in the process of rewriting the text by reading it. Rukeyser's view of a text's gaps or blanks does not stop with the reader's experience of understanding the text; Rukeyser believed that these gaps are necessary for the internal, dynamic life of a poem and the relations between its different parts. She saw the gaps as breathing spaces where the parts of a text can move in continuous change and a reestablishment of relations that sustain its life as a biological being. Rukeyser perceived her use of punctuation as a tool for creating expansion joints in a poem and described it as "biological" (*Life of Poetry* 117). In another quote from *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser declared that "The poetic image is not a static thing. It lives in time, as does the poem" (33).

Moreover, Rukeyser believed firmly in the credibility and power of what she called "emotional truth" and the subjective aspect of the reading experience. The importance Rukeyser attached to a reader's subjectivity and ability to look deep into his nature for emotional wisdom anticipated David Bleich's idea that subjectivity is the basis of any creative experience that results in the accumulation and development of knowledge. For Bleich, "subjective criticism" is

based on the view that “each person’s most urgent motivations are to understand himself” (Bleich, quoted by Seldon, Widdowson, and Brooker 58). Rukeyser affirmed the deep roots and great value of subjectivity as a source of universal wisdom as she claimed that “all we can be sure of is that at our most subjective we are universal” (*Life of Poetry* 187).

Just as a poem cannot be disconnected from a reader’s experience in reading and interacting with it, the poem is related to time and actually lives in it, as Rukeyser frequently expressed it. There is the time in which the images of a poem live and supplement each other, as the reader reads and rereads the poem at different points in a limited span of time or during his life:

An image in a poem is not at all like an image in a painting. Even if the poem is so short that the time spent in reading it will hardly send the sweep-second hand around, it has moved through its sequences and exists in a time-relation; the images have each been set in motion, so that they carry throughout, reverberating backward and forward, influencing all the other images. (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 170)

There is also time as the long history that the poem goes through, living stages of experience with its readers of different generations, sometimes being lost and forgotten, at other times being rediscovered and revived. History, for Rukeyser, is made up of the intense, axiom-breaking moments when the truth of relationship is revealed through the rediscovery of a forgotten text, the revelation of a formula describing the system of prevalent relationship, or the reality of relationship as it is discovered in our deep consciousness, with its common roots in all people. In these moments is concentrated the past, the present, and the great potential that the future holds. “That is the multiple time-sense in poetry, that is the ever new, which is recognized as something already in ourselves, but not discovered” (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 31).

Rukeyser, in her relational philosophy, aligned herself with twentieth century's greatest innovators who were successful because of their perception of the relationships that hold our world together and maintain its existence:

When we talk about relationships in art, we can see at once how all kinds of activity have taken this direction. The work of Freud and Picasso and Einstein are familiar to us as the masterwork in relative values, in the search for individual maturity, in visual imagination, in physical science; Joyce we recognize as working in the relationships of language, Marx in social relationship from which the fact could be derived—and these are the key names alone, in a few fields. (*Life of Poetry* 12)

In Rukeyser's conception of the relationship between science and poetry, she believed that they both complement and foster each other. Scientists need poetry as much as poets need science, and both will be adversely affected by being cut off from the other's field. A scientist needs language as a way of creating communicable images and reaching the roots of consciousness of an audience. Used effectively, poetic language could be an inspiration for the scientist to ask questions, pursue an expressive mental image to a deeper level of complexity, discover the workings of the minds of his audience, and tap from the pool of knowledge that writers and philosophers of relationship have used throughout time. Rukeyser quotes Josiah Gibbs, Willard Gibbs's father, as having said, "Language is a cast of the human mind" (*Willard Gibbs* 52), and it is language in this sense that the scientist needs. Rukeyser describes the urgent need of the scientist for a dynamic and connective language in the following quote from *The Life of Poetry*:

The scientist has suffered before the general impoverishment of imagination in some of the same ways as the poet. The worker in applied science and the inventor might be

thought of as the town crackpots, but there was always the reservation of an audience, like children lined up before a holiday conjurer, waiting to be shown. The theoretical scientist, like the poet, could never “show” his audience: they lacked language, and in another way, so did he. Unless the law could be translated into an image, it kept the pure scientist in a position remote from his society. (160)

Rukeyser holds that there are many opportunities of mutual cooperation and inspiration that the relationship between scientists and poets could effect. A poet may provide the scientist with an idea that could complement the latter’s scientific theory or the way it can be applied. Likewise, a scientist may inspire the poet to view the world in a different way and use scientific methods, theories, and facts to conceive of the relationships that link poetry to science and to the other fields of knowledge:

Art and science have instigated each other from the beginning; sparsely when the conclusions, the answers, were translated from one form to the other; always more fruitfully when the questions were used. This is surely because the answers are distinct, and because both science and poetry are languages ready to be betrayed in translation; but their roots spread through our tissue, their deepest meanings fertilize us, and reaching our consciousness, they reach each other. (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 162)

Rukeyser here points to the attitude of some poets or scientists to mechanically reproduce the findings of the other’s field without a creative way of interaction and mutual addition so that one will not be a slave to the other but both will cooperate on an equal basis, based on each one’s awareness of his mission. The responsibility of both poet and scientist is for the underlying principles governing the flow of life, and that is not in a final, rigid form but a dynamic one that allows for evolution and transformation. In her book *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser cites an

interesting episode concerning the visit that the artist Charles Biederman once paid to the operating site of the cyclotron in Chicago. During this visit, Biederman was asked by a scientist friend what he thought of the “structural design” of the cyclotron. Biederman replied in what was considered by the scientist to be an inconsiderate manner, “It would be very good, according to my standards, except for one thing: that joint—if you put a sphere in, just there, it could really be called perfect.” That reply elicited a rude response from the scientist. After a period of time, the scientist came to visit the artist, and he told him: “Do you remember what I called you, last time? Well, you’d better know what’s happened. Things kept going wrong, and the trouble was traced to just that joint. They put a sphere in; everything’s smooth now” (164). We can conclude from this enlightening episode that science and art (Biederman was an abstract artist who produced artistic pieces in metal, concrete, and plastics) had met in Biederman’s mind so that he saw scientific contrivances as artistic pieces, and vice versa; hence the assurance he expressed when he made his useful suggestion to his friend.

There seems to be a mysterious historical rapport between inspired scientists and poets, which starts with tentative suggestions or barely-proven revelations but ends in a fully-realized formula that brings both poets and scientists into a binding relationship of mutual inspiration. In many instances, the same truth has been revealed to various minds centuries apart and applied to different concepts. Facts concerning the harmony of opposites, for example, were suggested by William Blake before they were discovered and applied by physicists like Neils Bohr and Lord Rutherford to the structure of the atom. As quoted by Grace Schulman in her review “Song of Our Cells,” Blake wrote, “Without Contraries is no Progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human Existence” (Schulman 135). In her review of both Rukeyser’s *The Life of Poetry* and Lewis Thomas’s book *The Lives of a Cell*,

Grace Schulman compares both methods of scientists and poets as they attempt to reach the truth of relationship in their corresponding fields:

Nor do the poet and the scientist differ in their methods of arriving at truth, despite the assertions of generations of Western educators who have urged dividing the arts from the sciences. The revelations of Blake and of the physicists depend, each in its own way, on an experience of knowledge as well as on an intellectual apprehension of a formula. Each supposes a moving process of realization. Each incorporates a dance of images, a wheel of connected contrasts. The reality of each truth is reciprocal, rather than dependent upon isolated facts. (Schulman 135)

Part 2.3: Lewis Thomas's Ideas of Relationship in the Universe

Scientific experiments inspired Rukeyser to contemplate the principle of relationship as it sustained life in all its forms, whether positive or negative. In her explanation of the principle of relationship, Rukeyser described a scientific demonstration she witnessed at the Rockefeller Institute in which a rabbit was displayed under florescent lights. The florescent lights, with their various colors, showed the spots where the rabbit was afflicted with cancer, and how cancer was living a close relationship of dependency with its host, the rabbit. So, cancer here is not a foreign body distantly and independently damaging the rabbit's body; it has actually built a symbiotic relationship with the rabbit's body. To discuss this experiment,

A research doctor had come up from Johns Hopkins to talk to a biophysicist working in ways resembling his own ... They were taking another approach: they were dealing with cancer and the body on which it fed as one thing—an equilibrium which had been set up, in which the cancer fed on the host. One could not exist in this state without the other in that state. It was the relationship which was the illness. (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 12)

This statement by Rukeyser is echoed by scientist Lewis Thomas in his book *The Lives of a Cell* as he probes into the way we are synergistically related to the other forms of life on earth and the way our body is independently controlled by relationships that we cannot understand, let alone interfere with:

Most of the associations between the living things we know about are essentially cooperative ones, symbiotic in one degree or another; when they have the look of adversaries, it is usually a standoff relation, with one party issuing signals, warnings, flagging the other off. It takes long intimacy, long and familiar interliving, before one kind of creature can cause illness in another ... We do not have solitary beings. Every creature is, in some sense, connected to and dependent on the rest. (Thomas 7)

Thomas shatters the common and historical notion that the human being is superior to and independent from the other creatures on earth. He shows that our bodies are possessed by different types of relationships joining different, tiny creatures that live outside our jurisdiction and are unaware of our grand notions of ascendancy. He cites mitochondria and centrioles as examples of those hidden, permanent guests residing in our bodies and sharing it:

Mitochondria are stable and responsible lodgers, and I choose to trust them. But what of the other little animals, similarly established in my cells, sorting and balancing me, clustering me together? My centrioles, basal bodies, and probably a good many other more obscure tiny beings at work inside my cells, each with its own special genome, are as foreign, and as essential, as aphids in anthills. My cells are no longer the pure line entities I was raised with; they are ecosystems more complex than Jamaica Bay. (Thomas 4)

In a section of his book entitled “The Music of *This Sphere*,” Thomas enumerates the ways that animals create and respond to different types of sound and combinations of notes emitted as ways of communication between animals and of interacting with nature. He comes to the conclusion that the planet earth is one huge organism where creatures are like cells continuously communicating and acting in sync with the other creatures and forces surrounding them. He uses the ideas of an original writer and a pioneer scientist to express that conclusion:

Jorge Borges, in his recent bestiary of mythical creatures, notes that the idea of round beasts was imagined by many speculative minds, and Johannes Kepler once argued that the earth itself is such a being. In this immense organism, chemical signals might serve the function of global hormones, keeping balance and symmetry in the operation of various interrelated working parts, informing tissues in the vegetation of the Alps about the state of eels in the Sargasso Sea, by long, interminable relays of interconnected messages between all kinds of other creatures. (Thomas 41)

By reviewing Rukeyser’s relational philosophy we see that Thomas’s ecological views are consistent with the former’s idea of relationship in fields of knowledge and in our life. Rukeyser’s relational philosophy did not stop with the links between science and poetry; it represented the principle of relationship as it vibrated in all aspects of life in our world. Here is how Rukeyser, in her book *The Life of Poetry*, quoted American philosopher Charles Peirce’s statement on the process that moves and sustains our world as it is represented by the principle of relationship: “All dynamical action, or action of brute force, physical or psychical, either takes place between two subjects ... or at any rate is a resultant of such actions between pairs” (Peirce, quoted by Rukeyser 174).

Rukeyser believed in using science and other fields of knowledge to study and establish the relationships between them. Studying these relationships will help us find systems that reflect the creative origin of knowledge and the way we can interact dynamically with our world. Rukeyser believed in the careful and rational use of scientific principles inasmuch as they reflect relationship, the ultimate goal of creative thought and action. Rukeyser's focus was also on useful scientific methods that could illuminate literary minds so that the writing of literature may reflect the spirit and the process of experimentation that distinguishes the scientific method. Rukeyser's faith in viable systems did not stem from the belief that the whole world is simply one huge machine of order, which works according to rigid rules, leading to a determinism that could affect even people's actions. Rukeyser believed in the human potential for creating change, and that is why the factor of human choice figures prominently in her poetry. She did not believe that the whole world is governed by nothing but order. She thought that even chaos is part of the process sustaining the world in its movement toward the establishment of meaningful relationships. For Rukeyser, a culture does not die when it reaches the state of chaos; it can be renewed and rejuvenated by chaos as it leads to a state of illumination and transformation. Rukeyser's ideas here are not contrary to the recent views of order and chaos in the world but are consistent with them. David Whyte, in his book *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*, talks about the ideas of order and chaos as they have been discussed by scientists and thinkers now:

Much of our view of the world is formed from our ideas of order. We hope, look for, and *pray* for order and make the sign of the evil eye at any possibility of encroaching chaos, yet the poetic tradition, and those scientists studying complexity, see both qualities as

interwoven and interdependent. We are schooled to see chaos as being the mirror-opposite of order and an enemy of life, but scientists investigating complexity in nature see order and wildness dancing cheek to cheek in a vital and necessary dance, informing everything from the way the land branches and splits in an earthquake to the distribution of incomes in a modern economy. (218)

By looking at the recent, developing ideas of science and philosophy, we see that Rukeyser was well ahead of her time in viewing chaos as a necessary stage of development and an asset that we can benefit from to understand the way that equilibrated relationships between chaos and order could be ascertained and established. An article that sheds light on some of the recent ideas on natural processes and how they can inform the new aesthetic theories is Jason Boas Simus's article "Aesthetic Implications of the New Paradigm in Ecology." In this article Simus investigates a "new paradigm" in the science of ecology developed by ecologists like S. T. A. Pickett and Richard Ostfeld. This new paradigm is based on the assumption that the old way of viewing the natural world as characterized by order and sustained balance should give way to the scientific idea that the natural world is driven by chaos and imbalance as relations between the systems in nature keep changing, making the idea of balance a highly relative and limited one. The new paradigm views flux as the central principle governing the processes of life. For Pickett and Ostfeld, "the term *flux* highlights variation, fluidity, and change in natural systems, rather than stasis, which is implied by the word *balance*. Although this metaphor does not deny the existence of stable points in nature, it focuses our attention on the fact that natural systems, which certainly do persist, do so as a result of a variety of fluxes" (Pickett and Ostfeld, qtd. by Simus 68). Simus suggests that the new paradigm in ecology shatters the old, Romantic aesthetics, which is founded on the idea that natural beauty is represented by order in nature and

the sustained harmony between its parts, reflected in the ultimate, general balance to which the world is naturally and consistently moving. The new paradigm emphasizes process and a world in flux, tending toward either chaos or order, though not favoring one over the other and not reaching a final point of total equilibrium. Simus argues in his article that an aesthetic theory can be derived from Picket's and Ostfield's proposed new paradigm. This theory will appreciate the aesthetic qualities of a world in a constant state of change and shifting relations.

Although Rukeyser did not support the direct application of the developing scientific data to aesthetic theories in general and poetry in specific, she was in favor of experimenting with the ways in which the methodology of research in science can enlighten aesthetic theories. Rukeyser sought common principles that could unify all the fields of knowledge and art, reaching a common source of wisdom, truth, and creativity. So, although Rukeyser would agree with some of the premises of the new paradigm in ecology, she would not support taking the whole theory and molding an aesthetics based on it. She would rather benefit from scientific research as much as it explains and inspires her poetic themes and the truths and convictions they ultimately point to. One of Rukeyser's themes that she reiterated in her poetry is dynamic process as the basis of life on earth and the creative force that keeps it in a state of movement and renewal at all times. Rukeyser believed that chaos, as part of the process of life, is not a hurdle to development or change; it is a step toward regeneration and new relationships in the world, leading to a new state of equilibrium. Rukeyser believed that equilibrium is not a condition of stasis; it is based on interaction and natural, productive conflict between the various parts of any system, including the poem. So, the state of equilibrium in systems, for Rukeyser, is a dynamic condition which is full of movement and change. Although chaos forms an integral part of any process as relations in any system keep being changed and reshuffled, this state of chaos is necessary for a new state

of dynamic balance with new relations between the parts of a system. The world for Rukeyser is characterized by both process and equilibrium, but the two states are continuously functioning together and feeding each other. Reflecting on the view that the state of cultural confusion is a negative and diseased condition that results in ultimate dissolution, Rukeyser commented that historical points that seem to be represented by chaos are actually opportunities for regeneration. Rukeyser declared:

Those who speak of our culture as dead or dying have a quarrel with life, and I think they cannot understand its terms, but must endlessly repeat the projection of their own despair [...] The way is before us, and culture is the future as well as the past [...] There is no particular question of death, since we are in a life where imaginative experience is given and taken. (*Life of Poetry* 30-31)

Rukeyser's aesthetics was based on process and change as the principles that sustain the vitality of art and culture. For Rukeyser, art and culture would have to be open to a process of change and development throughout different stages of history and generations of artists and readers so that they could be renewed and enriched. Rukeyser looked on chaos and silence as laden with meaning and as stages that would lead to a new level of development, sustaining the process of change. In her poem "The Body of Waking," Rukeyser optimistically and prophetically affirmed that darkness and silence are portents of future change:

Flashing of meaning as the light we breathe,
 And through the whole night moving, coming as music.
 Music that grows in silence, along dark a single voice
 On its long stair of sound going up darkness
 Moving toward form, moving becoming meaning

That makes our sleeping.

Silent

Until the river under the voice discovers

Its own currents, a flowing in a stream.

While air follows its own music. (*Collected Poems* 393)

Part 2.4: Specialization as an Obstacle to Relational Knowledge

Rukeyser believed that our inability to perceive relationships in our life and between the different fields of knowledge stems from the methods that the Western educational system applies in teaching students. This system is based on separation between disciplines, and specialization. The system was established to encourage professionalism and create opportunities for the full development of each single field of knowledge. However, Rukeyser believed, this system narrowed the perspective of students and deprived the various disciplines of their natural interaction with each other, which would have created a higher level of development in all fields. Rukeyser recommended the cosmic study of different fields as they influence and feed from each other. That way of learning knowledge will finally lead us to a better understanding of the world and of our deeper selves and the relationships that move and sustain life in all its forms. “Our education is one of specialization. We become experts in some narrow ‘field.’ That expertness allows us to deal with the limited problems presented to us; it allows us to face emotional reality, symbolic reality, very little” (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 17-18). Emotional reality for Rukeyser is a word laden with meaning. It basically means the purely human in each of us. It means the humanity in us that brings us into contact with all the other aspects of life rather than separating us from them and isolating us. Rukeyser thought of specialization as an obstacle to understanding the principle of relationship, which reflects life in its reality and which will lead to

our knowledge of our true potential as human beings. “We are cut off from large areas in ourselves, and we make the specialized skills and expressions our goals. We suffer from this, since the human process is only partly accomplished ... We make a criterion of adjustment, which glorifies the status quo, and denies the dynamic character of our lives, denies time, possibility, and the human spirit” (*Life of Poetry* 43). Rukeyser’s principle of relationship, which includes that between science and art, is based on the way that any two or more elements are equilibrated in their interaction with each other. The important fact of equilibrium or disequilibrium cannot be known if facts are studied independently from each other:

One way to look at scientific material, or the data of human life, is fact by fact, deriving the connections. Another way, more fruitful I believe, is to look at the relationships themselves, learning the facts as they feed or destroy each other. When we see that, we will see whether they tend toward an equilibrium, or strain spent on war away, or be poised at the rare moment of balance. (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 11)

Rukeyser had been on a continuous search for a viable, dynamic form for her art throughout her life. She kept sifting through American history for possible role models, and she kept reading in other fields in addition to literature, in order to find theories that reflect and express life in its dynamic forms, maintained by the principle of relationship. One of the historical figures she researched for that purpose is the nineteenth-century American scientist Willard Gibbs. In Rukeyser’s interview with the *New York Quarterly*, she explained the motivation behind her study of Willard Gibbs, and that motivation had served her in her experimentation with style during her active life: “The reason I think that I came to do Gibbs was that I needed a language of transformation. I needed a language of a changing phase for the poem. And I needed a

language that was not static, that did not see life as a series of points, but more as a language of water, and the things are in all these lives that I try to see in poems” (Packard 170).⁶

Rukeyser was deeply interested in systems that are held together by mutual relationships that maintain their life, and the life of the system they hold together, by exchanging and conserving energy, as well as continuously allowing and holding the potential for change. Rukeyser’s interest in systems is the impetus behind her theory of the relationship between science and poetry. She viewed a poem as a system based on the principle of feedback: “Now a poem, like anything separable and existing in time, may be considered as a system, and the changes taking place in the system may be investigated. The notion of feedback, as it is used in calculating machines and such linked structures as the locks of Panama Canal, is set forth” (*Life of Poetry* 186-187). For Rukeyser, something that lives in and feeds on time gains significance as a system with internal and external relationships that maintain its life. This is true of Rukeyser’s conception of the triadic scheme that governs the relationships within and outside a poem; the relationship between the internal parts of a poem, and the relations that link the poet and the reader to each other and to the poem. The life of Rukeyser’s triadic system is based on the exchange or sharing of energy between its various members. Once there is a failure of exchange on one side, the whole system is affected, and the performance of its parts is changed.

“Exchange is creation. In poetry, the exchange is one of energy. Human energy is transferred, and from the poem it reaches the reader. Human energy, which is consciousness, the capacity to produce change in existing conditions” (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 173). So a poem seems obscure

⁶ The “lives” Rukeyser refers to here is the group of poems, included in her 1939 volume of poetry *A Turning Wind*, which she wrote on a select group of visionary figures from American history.

to readers because they are not capable of sharing and exchanging its truth with their internal wisdom. This is not merely a deficiency in the poem, as is commonly believed. “We know that poetry is not isolated here, any more than any phenomena can be isolated” (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 187). The relations in and with poetry are deep, and they require a great effort by the reader to understand herself and interact with the principle of relationship, as far as a poem is concerned: “If we do not go deep, if we live and write half-way, there are obscurity, vulgarity, the slang of fashion [which Rukeyser was accused of following at some stage of her life], and several kinds of death” (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 187).

Despite Rukeyser’s lifelong interest in viable forms and systems for her art, she acknowledged the risks and problems associated with the application of scientific systems in other fields. Rukeyser knew that using working systems carries with it responsibilities and dangers, which should be realized by anybody attempting to benefit from systems. Using scientific findings in public institutions had been a common practice, especially in the realms of politics, business, and management, but not all of those daring experiments were successful. In her biography of Willard Gibbs, Rukeyser cited the policy of the American president Woodrow Wilson as an example of the wrong application and use of scientific discoveries. President Wilson proposed, in his time, the shift in politics from using a Newtonian model of management, where human factors are treated like calculable quantities and the public entities are managed using scientific mechanisms, like checks and balances, where the whole system is kept in harmonious symmetry similar to the solar system, which is maintained by different powers and mechanisms, like gravity. Wilson sought to transform the political system so that it simulated Darwin’s theory of individual struggle as a way of development instead of Newton’s theory of tight organizational control. The problem was that Wilson, according to Rukeyser, did not

understand Darwin's theory as a dynamic principle subject to change but as a rigid form to be applied mechanically. He did not regard the theory as a way of thinking and establishing relationships, but as a way of enforcing a particular, practical plan of action. In *Willard Gibbs*, Rukeyser explained the type of error that Wilson made:

It is the error of a rigid analogy, of using the *discoveries* of science instead of the *methods* themselves in dealing with other material. Because Newtonian mechanics would not do, Wilson cast about, and found Darwin, who certainly occupied a similar place in relation to his century, but who would also not do, not because he has been disproved, but because the whole framework of one kind of thought cannot be brought over into another kind of thought without a terrible distortion and loss. (81)

Part 2.5: Willard Gibbs's Phase Rule and its Significance to Rukeyser

Rukeyser's idea of the poem as a system sustained by relationships was inspired by and consistent with Willard Gibbs's theory of the Phase Rule.⁷ In this theory, Gibbs proposed the

⁷ My application of Gibbs's Phase Rule to Rukeyser's poetics is mainly my own understanding of the influence Gibbs's rule had on Rukeyser's philosophy and writings. Rukeyser was not specifically in favor of the direct and random application of scientific theories on art, as those theories can be revised or refuted in time. However, I have used Gibbs's Phase Rule in my analysis of Rukeyser's views and poetry because, first of all, Gibbs's rule is so general and inclusive as to flexibly encompass different types of phenomena. Actually, the rule was already applied to the subject of history and its tendencies, by one of Gibbs's contemporaries, Henry Adams, in his book *The Rule of Phase Applied to History*, as Rukeyser mentioned and elucidated it in her biography of Willard Gibbs. Second, based on my readings of Rukeyser's poetry and philosophy, I think that Gibbs's Phase Rule resonates with Rukeyser's view of a system of

idea that a mixture of different materials will tend toward equilibrium as its parts exchange energy, and even entropy, among themselves until they reach that state of equilibrium; and although they will still be distinct from each other, their life in the combined and shared system will be determined by their equilibrated relationships within it. Rukeyser, in her biography of Willard Gibbs, cited the example of ice water as an illustration of the Phase Rule. Ice water contains three different elements: ice, water, and vapor. These three states of water are linked together as a mixture by the relationships that bind them so that they seem part of one another. They consistently maintain a condition of equilibrium through their relationships. The relationships are kept in place by the process of exchange and balance between the two essential elements of energy and entropy: “The concern of the science of thermodynamics is in these two forms of the same thing: energy and entropy. It is concerned with these, regardless of the system under discussion [...] Gibbs, moving ahead, was concerned [...] with internal relations, in ‘the private lives of systems’”(Rukeyser, *Willard Gibbs* 234). What Rukeyser means by “the private lives of systems” are the general principles that underlie the practical applications of science and the specific operating rules that organize them. Here Rukeyser compares Willard Gibbs to some other scientists and inventors, who were interested in the “public life” of systems—that is, the way they are specified and put in practice, for public use. Gibbs, on the contrary, was interested in general principles that find their applications in various fields, at the same time that they reach out to the very basis, the deepest core, of any system. This is the secret of Rukeyser’s fascination with Gibbs’s idea of the Phase Rule. What is most important in this rule are the relationships that

interactive, self-feeding relations in politics, as seen in her idea of dynamic democracy, and in poetry, as is apparent in her view of a triadic system of relations between the poem, the author, and the reader of the poem.

consistently include and incorporate various elements so that they depend on each other despite their contrariness.⁸ An important statement that Gibbs made in this regard is: “The whole is simpler than the sum of all its parts” (Rukeyser, *Willard Gibbs* 303). Here the relationships gain priority and determine the general quality of the mixture of elements. Moreover, Gibbs’s theory of the internal system of relationship corresponds with German physician and scientist Robert Mayer’s theory of the conservation of energy, which states that regardless of how matter changes form, it can never be destroyed. It keeps establishing new relationships and it maintains its potential for change. Rukeyser quotes Mayer as saying, “Motion, heat, and electricity and phenomena which can be converted into one force, can measure each other, and can be changed into one another under definite laws.... The fundamental principle that given forces, like matter, are quantitatively unchangeable, assures us conceivably of the permanence of differences and therefore of the permanence of the material world” (*Willard Gibbs* 147).

The most important aspect of the Phase Rule is the relationship that organizes the life of exchange between the various elements in a mixture. For Willard Gibbs, this is what will ultimately characterize a mixture and forever sustain its life. Every other transformation works to maintain the dynamic state of equilibrium by setting up different relationships that will continue

⁸ Rukeyser’s interest in the private life of the systems that sustain relationships within a work of art brings her closer to a structuralist way of understanding a text. Like structuralists, Rukeyser believed in the existence of rules governing relationships within the literary text. However, she believed that these rules are not fixed or static. They are constantly changing and evolving, and they are continuously affected by the relationships external to the text, i.e. those linking the author, the text, and the reader together in an interactive process.

to feed the system and bind the elements together. Gibbs does not even focus on the processes whereby the state of balanced relationship is reached, as if the elements do not exist until they fulfill their lives by coming into a productive, self-fed relationship with other elements; as if an element has existed to achieve the creative act and higher goal of transcending itself and establishing a productive, positive relationship with other elements on earth. Rukeyser points to Gibbs's main focus in his analysis of the Phase Rule: "The rule that follows gives no indication of anything except the conditions once equilibrium has been reached. It does not speak of the processes by which equilibrium is created, but of the state itself, and the relationships within it. It is an instrument whose parts are relationships" (*Willard Gibbs* 238). However, the state of balanced relationship does not nullify the individuality of each element. Through its individuality, each element contributes in a unique manner to a dynamic, inclusive web of relationships. So, just as an element will tend toward combining and blending with other elements to create a balanced mixture and establish dynamic relationships with other elements, the element will tend toward maintaining its individual character in order to be able to keep establishing new relationships as the balance in a mixture shifts according to environmental and chemical changes. Rukeyser affirms this double process, which is the secret to the vitality of any being, in the first lines of the title poem in her first collection of poems, *Theory of Flight*: "Flight is intolerable contradiction. / We bear the bursting seeds of our return / we will not retreat ; never be moved" (*Collected Poems* 47). In these powerful lines, Rukeyser deals with the situation where humans have the closest contact with technology. It is a contradiction where the body meets and embraces technology in a life-or-death relationship; both depend on the proper functioning of the other, and the functioning depends on the type of balanced relationship maintained in the moving system. Both the pilot and the airplane, despite their contradictory

natures and entities, face the possibility of each losing his or her identity in the other. The pilot controls the airplane by keeping hold of its different operations, subsequently blending with its processes, to achieve union with the plane. Likewise the plane seems almost like part of a human being as it acts like the controlled hands and feet of its human pilot.⁹ However, Rukeyser affirms, we should not lose our individual soul and consciousness as we naturally interact with the dynamic processes of technology, upon which our life depends for its functioning. Technology should not deaden us to our core of individual, spontaneous creativity. We should hold the

⁹ Rukeyser's idea of the relationship between the body and the machine anticipated Donna Haraway's idea of the cyborg as a view of our contemporary age and culture. The cyborg, for Haraway, represents the way that technology has invaded all aspects of our life so that the boundaries separating the human body from technology are gradually vanishing. Developments in technology have transformed our view of life and have caused a revolution in the studies of logic and philosophy. In her groundbreaking article "Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway discusses the ways in which the difference between the body and the machine has become thoroughly blurred. She describes our kinship and identification with the machine in the following terms: "The machine is not an *it* to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; *they* do not dominate or threaten us" (Haraway 240). Haraway is interested in the way that boundaries between previously differentiated concepts are consistently questioned and rethought. Haraway shows that the invasion of technology into all aspects of life has dissolved the boundaries between the public and the private, animals and humans, organisms and technology, and nature and culture.

possibility of reaching out to the intuitive side of consciousness, which we tend to ignore in our efforts to establish mechanized uniformity in all aspects of our life.

Rukeyser's triad of the relationships between the poet, the poem, and the audience is consistent with Willard Gibbs's Phase Rule in its breadth and the potential to hold different possibilities, which all tend toward unity under an organizing, dynamic law. Though Rukeyser's triad seems to simplify the complex processes of poetic composition and the responsive reception of a poem, which might allow for many interpretations of the triad and the relationships that sustain it, the triad continuously moves toward a unified, organized experience and source of consciousness. If and when the process of composing and receiving the poem is established on the principle of relationship, it will be consistently enriched by the relations between its various parts, and the parts will all find their way to a common fountain of creativity.

The subjective experience of creating and appreciating poetry is composed of a complex process of many trials and experiments where different combinations are tried and tested before they find their form on paper or in the poet's and reader's imagination and memory. It is a process that works like the laws of mathematics in its organization and ultimate accuracy. Rukeyser speaks of how the fascinating world of mathematics shaped her philosophy of poetry, and the way that poetry forms the basis of a web of relations between different factors:

I rely for my information about mathematical creation on such sources as Poincaré, who speaks of the mind seeming to act only of itself and on itself, selecting, making only the useful combinations, choosing, and finally being struck, as by strong light, with certainty. The poet chooses and selects and has that sense of arrival as the poem ends; he is expressing what it feels to arrive at his meanings. If he has expressed that well, his reader will arrive at his meanings. (*Life of Poetry* 169)

Poetic creativity, for Rukeyser, is not something that flows from a source and reaches its final destination as the reader receives it. Creativity, and poetic truth, is a relationship between different elements as they meet and combine to achieve an enlightened and candidly expressive moment in both the poet's and the reader's life. Relationship is the force that brings the poem home to the reader's imaginative memory and translates a poem into "useable truth." Rukeyser learns from Gibbs one of the most important observations he made in his life: "Truth is, according to him, not a stream that flows from a source, but an agreement of components, an accord that actually makes the whole 'simpler than its parts,' as he was so fond of saying. It is truth flowing through the world, depending on an accord in great complexity" (*Willard Gibbs* 339).

Another of Gibbs's statements that represent one of the cornerstones of Rukeyser's philosophy of the relationship between the poet and the reader is the one in which he says, speaking of his important findings and achievements, "Anyone with the same desires could have made the same researches" (Rukeyser, *Willard Gibbs* 381). In this quote, Gibbs asserts the importance of ambition and determination as the factors behind the achievement of great goals. He democratically provides hope to any qualified scientist who wishes to reach the heights of accomplishment that Gibbs was able to reach. Gibbs is pointing to the fact that we all hold the potential to tap from the sources of creativity that great scientists and thinkers were able to find, provided that we have the desire to explore our deeper selves and accept change as the basis for development. Choice is the most important determinant of success here, as it is in Rukeyser's philosophy of relationship. Responsible, daring choice is the factor that can bring the reader to the poet's liberated vision of reality and bind them together in one creative experience. Gibbs's statement is not, as some readers might assume, simply an expression of his modesty and

diffidence. It is not a form of “self-effacement, a cutting down of the value of the work, until it fell loosely into anybody’s capacity” (Rukeyser, *Willard Gibbs* 381). It is his way of instigating change and opening the doors of inspiration to his audience and the American people at large. “Gibbs is here speaking of the fiery impulse which brought him to his choices. He is laying the stress on desire itself, clearly pointing out the criterion for all effort [...] The principle of understanding your own desires, so that you may know how best to feed them that they may be fertile, is a fortunate guide; it seems to have been Gibbs’s” (Rukeyser, *Willard Gibbs* 381).

The Phase Rule resonates with Rukeyser’s ideas of the equilibrium that can only be achieved as opposite elements struggle and interact, both within a human being and in the life of human society. Rukeyser’s idea of equilibrium within the individual and in society represents an ideal form of democracy in which different, contrary elements accept the existence of each other and believe in the essentiality and usefulness of multiple and opposite views and positions for the dynamic life of society. That is because in the interaction of opposites lies the possibility of change and development. What goes for society here also applies to the individual. At our deepest core, we are a mixture of opposite elements that maintain their life by virtue of their contrariness. Dogmatic notions of purity (pure good or pure evil, for example) are foreign to human nature. We have to believe in all of our nature with all its contrary elements because they are simply part of us, the pleasant and the unpleasant, the religious and the skeptic, the tame and the wild in our nature. We do not succumb to the worst in our nature, but we let all elements interact, not suppressing one at the expense of the other, but knowing how to benefit from all elements and from their relationship to each other:

We need a background that will let us find ourselves and our poems, let us move in discovery. The tension between the parts of such a society is health; the tension here

between the individual and the whole society is health. This state arrives when freedom is a moving goal, when we go beyond the forms to an organic structure which we can in conscience claim and use. Then the multiplicities sing, each in his own voice. Then we understand that there is not meaning, but meanings; not liberty, but liberties. And multiplicity is available to all. Possibility joins the categorical imperative. Suffering and joy are fused in growth; and growth is the universal. (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 211)

Part 2.6: Rukeyser's Poem "Gibbs"

Rukeyser's poem on Willard Gibbs (in the volume of poems entitled *A Turning Wind*) is one of the poems where Rukeyser brilliantly brings together science and poetry to make an organic whole of the poem, with its ideas and its form. In this poem, entitled "Gibbs," Rukeyser applies the technique of creating surprise and revelation as a form that simulates the sense of foreboding and excitement that accompanies scientific discovery. Also, Rukeyser uses an objective language, which seems a bit too impersonal when talking about the biographical details about Gibbs's life at the beginning of the poem, but it fits the subject of the poem as Rukeyser deals with the scientific principles that Gibbs proposed and discussed. However, even when talking about Gibbs's personal life, it would be difficult to use an intimate and emotional language since, as Rukeyser points out in her biography, evidence on the subject of Gibbs's personal and emotional life is somewhat lacking. Rukeyser begins the poem "Gibbs" with a statement that Gibbs made after his great discoveries. Rukeyser admires the way that the discoveries emerged from learning, struggle, frustration, and ambiguity. These are the first lines of the poem:

It was much later in his life he rose
in the professors' room, the frail bones rising
among that fume of mathematical meaning,

symbols, the language of symbols, literature ... threw
 air, simple life, in the dead lungs of their meeting,
 said, "Mathematics *is* a language." (*Collected Poems* 182)

Rukeyser places Gibbs's quote about mathematics at the beginning of the poem to assert the importance of science as a language and form of expression for Gibbs and show that his lifelong search had not been only for specific practical laws and systems; he was preeminently interested in a dynamic form and language that can describe and explain the processes of life in different fields. Gibbs's desire to find a general, all-encompassing principle led him to distill and crystallize the data and results on which he was working so that he could reach a transcendent principle. Likewise, as Rukeyser shows, Whitman preached the self-reflective experience that would lead to self-discovery and the ability to identify with the world and with nature. Both Whitman and Gibbs were looking for transcendent and connective theoretical clues to the human experience as the American Civil War was raging and reducing knowledge to the most practical and expedient for the cause of war:

Condense, he is thinking. Concentrate, restrict.

This is the state permits the whole to stand,
 the whole which is simpler than any of its parts.

And the mortars fired, the tent-lines, lines of trains,
 earthworks, breastworks of war, field-hospitals,

Whitman forever saying, "Identify."

Gibbs saying

"I wish to know systems." (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 183)

The poem reaches a climax as it directly deals with Gibbs's Phase Rule. Here Rukeyser explains Gibbs's rule in spiritual terms, different from the scientific terms that are supposed to describe it. Rukeyser identifies the Phase Rule with the direction in which our life moves in an atmosphere of freedom. So just as substances, no matter how different in nature they are, are able to balance each other when given the freedom to mix and interact, the human spirit can have amazing powers of connection if given the freedom to spontaneously feel and responsibly act:

He knew the composite

many-dimensioned spirit, the phases of its face,
found the tremendous level of the world,
Energy : Constant, but entropy, the spending,
tends toward a maximum – a “mixed-up-ness,”
and in this end of levels to which we drive
in isolation, to which all systems tend,

Withdraw, he said clearly. (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 185)

Rukeyser's use of the word “withdraw,” as Gibbs employed it, is significant. The word connotes intentional action and a responsible movement toward change. It stands for transcending the general norm by going deeper into the self to discover truth, just as substances will withdraw towards an equilibrium that emerges from the natural composition of each substance and the latter's tendency to create bonds with other substances. In the next lines, Rukeyser presents a dialogue in which the soul invites the self to make an adventurous balance-seeking journey into the roots of dream-like spontaneous consciousness and creativity:

The soul says to the self : I will withdraw,
the self saying to the soul : I will withdraw,

and soon they are asleep together

spiraling through one dream. (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 185)

The poem reflects the minimalist style of scientific, especially mathematical language. The language is precise and stripped to the essential elements for the construction of images in the poem. The poem is like a kaleidoscope with images that keep shifting into other overlapping images, all revolving around Gibbs's Phase Rule and the way it was developed. Gibbs's whole life is composed of stages leading to and moving toward his great discovery. His life, as reflected in the poem, is like the concept of poetry according to Rukeyser. Poetry, for Rukeyser, represented an organic system where its different parts feed from each other (through their relationship to each other) and move toward an organizing idea that preserves balance and unity within the poem. This dynamic system of relationships is what guarantees a successful and productive link between the poem and its audience throughout history.

Willard Gibbs's Phase Rule represented for Rukeyser a much-needed language of transformation that sustained her in her struggle for artistic expression. Rukeyser used the Phase Rule just as she used some other images (like water in a dam in her poem "The Dam") and some historical and mythical characters (like Orpheus in Rukeyser's long poem "Orpheus"),¹⁰ as forms of expressing her philosophy of relationship in its different aspects and manifestations. In the following quote from her book *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser*, Louise Kertesz draws

¹⁰ Both of the poems "The Dam" and "Orpheus" are analyzed in this thesis, in Chapters II and

attention to the significance and value that Gibbs's Phase rule held for Rukeyser and her poetics¹¹:

Gibbs's work on the changing phases of matter gave the poet "a language of transformation," which she [Rukeyser] translated into poetic language and apprehended as humanly significant [...] Thus in writing the biography of Gibbs that she needed to read, she created a source of power. She was also able to convincingly display for readers her imagination's apprehension of this source of power: this is what *Willard Gibbs* is—a manifestation of the poet's imagination successfully combining and contemplating those elements in the image of Gibbs which were most inspiring to her. (185)

The two skills of combining and contemplating indicated in the quote above correspond to Gibbs's method of experimenting with theories and materials in order to arrive at generalizing truths that explain the systems which sustain life in all its forms, whether mechanical or natural. This method of Gibbs inspired Rukeyser's method of continuous experimentation and transformation in order to reach an artistic form that best reflected the general relationships that link art to the other aspects of life and knowledge. Also Rukeyser kept experimenting to find a language and a form that would link the poet as well as her readers to a pure, creative core of the self, which is connected to the spontaneous life of the body, to nature, and to technology as an integral part of nature. Romantic writers had traditionally been hostile to technology and

¹¹ Kertesz does not go into specifics with regards to the way Gibbs's Phase Rule influenced Rukeyser's poetry and poetics and her search for "a language of transformation." In this thesis I discuss the way that Gibbs's rule influenced Rukeyser's poetics and style by analyzing some of her poems as well as her philosophy as elucidated in her books, especially *The Life of Poetry* and *Willard Gibbs*.

industrialization as factors that corrupted people's connection to the spiritual aspect of the personality. Romantics viewed technology and nature as two oppositional elements that could never meet or work together, let alone reflect each other, as Rukeyser saw them. In this sense Rukeyser was more of a deconstructionist than a Romantic as she did not conceive of technology and nature as exclusively separate realms. Rukeyser believed that both elements inspire and flow from a historical human creativity. Rukeyser also believed that science and its methodology could offer us, in our modern age, a new language for art and for spirituality, as we saw in Willard Gibbs's Phase Rule, which inspired Rukeyser's idea of transformation in her life and in her art. Rukeyser brought technology and nature together through her idea of the dynamism of both. For Rukeyser, both technology and nature are sustained and kept whole by the tension between the contrary forces within them, and it is this philosophy of dynamic relationship that informed Rukeyser's view of the body and of democracy.

Part 2.7: S. T. Coleridge's Idea of Dynamic Process

In addition to Willard Gibbs, another historical figure who influenced Rukeyser's idea of form and the philosophy of art is S. T. Coleridge. Coleridge expounded many of his views on the dynamism of creativity and art production in his book *Biographia Literaria*. One of the views Coleridge held is consistent with Gibbs's theory of the Phase Rule, which allows contrary elements to coexist and relate to each other. Coleridge believed that artistic production could only be genuine and realistic if it managed to bring together the two conflicting elements of sameness and difference; each of the two elements depends on its counterpart for a living and continuously moving process that derives its life from its movement. Here Coleridge describes the complementariness of both sameness and difference to achieve the unity of effect in form and to produce the pleasure typical of a work of art:

This pleasure consists in the identity of two opposite elements, that is to say—sameness and variety. If in the midst of the variety there be not some fixed object for the attention, the unceasing succession of the variety will prevent the mind from observing the difference of the individual objects; and the only thing remaining will be the succession, which will then produce precisely the same effect as sameness. (*Biographia Literaria* II, 262)

Rukeyser's attempts at the innovative blending of forms can be observed in her combination of configurations of traditional and experimental forms, side by side, in her poems. This technique of blending is consistent with Coleridge's idea of "the interfusion of the SAME throughout the radically DIFFERENT, or of the different throughout a base radically the same" (*Biographia Literaria* II, 56). Rukeyser intersperses in her poems traditional elements within the experimental ones and vice versa, proving the idea that forms, no matter how irreconcilable they seem, can co-exist and balance each other to create a unified effect. Rukeyser uses this technique especially with the music in a poem, which Rukeyser perceives as an organic part of it, just like the ideas, the images, and the punctuation in a poem. In her article "Forever Broken and Made': Muriel Rukeyser's Theory of Form," Meg Schoerke cites an interesting example of Rukeyser's innovation with music in her poetry. In her poem "Käthe Kollwitz," as Rukeyser describes the way music is conducted to a great effect by the placement of similar notes among different ones, she does the same by presenting lines of free verse on a base that is essentially made of traditional rhyme:

"The process is after all like music,

30

like the development of a piece of music.

The fugues come back and

again and again

interweave.

A theme may seem to have been put aside,

35

but it keeps returning—

the same thing modulated,

somewhat changed in form.

Usually richer.

And it is very good that this is so.” (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 461)

40

This passage is anchored with two lines of traditional iambic pentameter (lines 35 and 40) while the other lines seem, to the casual reader, to belong to free verse. On close inspection, however, the reader can see that the other lines, which seem like free verse, are actually configurations of anapestic pentameter. If we try to join the fragments of lines together, as it is done below by Meg Schoerke in the above-mentioned article, we will see that the lines very easily fall within the anapestic type of rhyme:

The process is after all like music,

like the development of a piece of music.

The fugues come back and again and again interweave.

A theme may seem to have been put aside,

but it keeps returning – the same thing modulated,

somewhat changed in form. Usually richer.

And it is very good that this is so. (26)

Here Rukeyser artistically creates a hybrid of two forms where a traditional form makes up the base of an experimental form. Both forms exist in the poem, but they are creatively

reconfigured so that what remains in the poem is their intricate relationship to each other.

Rukeyser usually maintains configurations of traditional forms even within her most innovative forms. She does this to prove that all forms can co-exist in new relationships, where each form needs, supplements, and tests the validity of the other. Rukeyser uses different forms to see how they would work together, in new combinations. By combining different forms, Rukeyser is able to reach the different types of audience who would read and react to her poems; she solves the dilemma of the social poet as suggested by John Malcolm Brinnin, in his discussion of Rukeyser's poem "A Flashing Cliff." The problem, according to Malcolm Brinnin, is "... whether to insist on first premises, even though that means a static repetition of familiar ideology, or to exercise full imagination and the resources of language in an endeavor to contribute a new dimension to poetry, though that attempt, in its inevitable intellectual concentration, must deny the social audience" (Brinnin, quoted by Meg Schoerke 24). There are usually residual elements of traditional forms in Rukeyser's poetry, so that no matter how difficult or obscure her poetry seems, it always retains the familiarity and power of genuine art, with its universal and historical appeal.

Rukeyser experimented with different forms and genres, and she produced books that are, by virtue of their mixture of genres and experimental forms, difficult to categorize. Traditional modes of categorization did not exclusively dictate the way Rukeyser wrote or organized her books or her poems. One of her most daring books, entitled *The Orgy*, is a memoir of Rukeyser's trip to Ireland to witness the pagan celebration called Puck Fair. However, Rukeyser uses forms in the book that are typical of novels, and the book's language is powerfully and beautifully poetic. Despite the difficulty in categorizing the book, the reader has no choice but to succumb to the great effect that Rukeyser builds by exploring vast, liberating realms of her sensual wisdom.

Another of Rukeyser's experimental projects is her biography of the visionary American politician Wendell Willkie, entitled *One Life*. In this book, Rukeyser combines a variety of genres, like biography, poetry, drama, reportage, and story-telling. All of these genres describe different stages of the development of a personality in a constant state of change. The main protagonist of the story maintains a unity of purpose throughout his life of upheavals and transformations, and that is the belief in the human potential for change and the continuous striving to achieve it. Willkie believed, like Rukeyser, in the principle of relationship as the ideal way of reaching the state of genuine democracy. He says in one of his speeches: "Freedom is not just a set of laws. It is the ability of men to make these infinite combinations between one another, and between the communities in which they live. ... And so we say to you: Bring us together" (Rukeyser, *One Life* 136).

The title of Rukeyser's book on Willkie comes from a statement by Coleridge, which is used as an epigraph to the book; the statement says, "Everything has a life of its own ... we are all one life." Coleridge asserts in this quote that while everything maintains an independent life that distinguishes it from other things, it derives its vitality and movement from its connection to a unified and unifying source. In another of Coleridge's statements he calls this source God. Rukeyser views this source as dynamic, historical creativity. Movement for Rukeyser is the power that sustains the intellect and helps it imagine and experiment with new combinations. Movement implies the continuous striving for change. Coleridge understands the vital movement of the intellect in its breaking and re-building of new, different forms. This is the way Coleridge describes what he calls "secondary imagination," a term for human imagination, as opposed to divine intelligence: "It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify" (*Biographia*

Literaria I, 202). D. H. Lawrence found the image of the phoenix, with its ability to keep its vitality by annihilating and re-creating itself, an appropriate image for the type of revolutionary imagination he preached and applied in his writings. Here is his short, but impressive poem, entitled “Phoenix”:

Are you willing to be sponged out, erased, cancelled,
made nothing?

Are you willing to be made nothing?
dipped into oblivion?

If not, you will never really change.

The phoenix renews her youth
only when she is burnt, burnt alive, burnt down
to hot and flocculent ash.

Then the small stirring of a new small bub in the nest
with strands of down like floating ash

Shows that she is renewing her youth like the eagle,

Immortal bird. (Lawrence, *The Complete Poems*, III 176)

The phoenix achieves its immortal life and power through its process of complete transformation. Lawrence affirms the necessity of a process of transformative demolition, a spiritual one, and the subsequent experience of renewal, as the condition for the eternal ability to live a full, creative life. Rukeyser, in her poem “Hero Speech,” asserts the important factor of choice in our ability to re-imagine and re-make our life, making it a continuous cycle of dynamic

change: “But the seeds of all things are the ways of choice, of the forms / Declaring the energy we breathe and man, / Breaking. Changing. Forever broken and made” (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 347).

Although Rukeyser derived her ideas of human creativity and transformation from such writers as S. T. Coleridge and D. H. Lawrence, she added another aspect to their ideas of creativity, which were based on inspired and intuitive intelligence. Coleridge and Lawrence celebrated artistic creativity, which is rooted in a pure core of humanity, as opposed to what they saw as rigid, mechanical creativity, which is rather than being transcendental and sublime, limited people’s contact to machines and material objects. Though both artists saw art and creativity as dynamic and liberating, they could not incorporate industrialization or technology into their philosophy of art. Rukeyser, by contrast, was able to conceive of technology not only as a form of human creativity, but also as part of a dynamic and creative nature (nature in its widest sense, in its human and material aspects).

Part 2.8: The Place of Dynamic Science in Rukeyser’s Poetry

Now, let us turn to a brief discussion of portions of Rukeyser’s poems to see how they reflect the main principles of her philosophy of art as it is based on process. Let us begin with the poem entitled “The Dam,” from Rukeyser’s collection of poems *US 1*. This poem starts with a re-statement of the law of the conservation of energy:

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

and the lost. (*Collected Poems* 99)

These first lines of the poem show how water, a moving force, is able to maintain its movement and existence throughout different times and in different circumstances. The life of water provides a blueprint of what Rukeyser called “usable truth,” which is the central message of her long poem, “The Book of the Dead,” in which the poem we are discussing is included. Power, water, and truth are dynamic forces that keep living throughout time, despite resistances and obstacles. They can appear to be lost for a while but they continue living in one form or another until they find a proper outlet. The word “rises” in the first line is separated from the previous sentence with a triple space to differentiate between the implication of control on the one hand, as the first sentence refers to the law of conservation, and the idea of free movement implied in the word “rises,” on the other hand. Though both states of water are closely related to each other, each one has a different function in sustaining the life of water. The fourth line above is separated from the rest of the stanza to emphasize it and to intimate that Rukeyser is here dealing with something other than water, which is memory. Rukeyser uses water as a metaphor for historical “usable truth.” Although historical truth seems static as it is confined in its historical time, it actually moves and lives in time throughout its stages and eras.

The next lines show how water is able, by virtue of its flexibility and ability to change form, to circumvent obstacles and keep moving:

Water celebrates, yielding continually
 sheeted and fast in its overfull
 slips down the rock, evades the pillars
 building its colonnades, repairs
 in stream and standing wave
 retains its seaward green

broken by obstacle rock; falling, the water sheet
spouts, and the mind dances, excess of white. (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 99)

In the lines above there are alternating images of water as a controlled force in a dam and as a naturally free-moving force. It is “sheeted,” as it is bound and covered by its surface, and it is continuously pushing against limitations. Rocks do not stop its movement and it can even bypass pillars. Despite its continuous movement and the change of form it suffers as it is “broken by obstacle rock,” water is able to preserve its original color of “seaward green.” In this part of the poem, Rukeyser points to the principle of determination and the desire for change, which motivated her to keep writing during the most difficult circumstances in her life and which she explains in her 1974 interview with the *New York Quarterly*: “Moving past one phase of one’s own life—transformation, and moving past impossibilities. Things seen as impossibilities at the moment ...” (Packard 170). Perseverance and the continuous search for viable forms are the two things that sustained Rukeyser in her artistic career as she encountered many difficulties in her life.

At the end of the poem, one of the eternal powers is shown to be the power of common people as they struggle to prove themselves and transform their life despite difficulties and exploitation:

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

.....

Nothing is lost, even among the wars,

imperfect flow, confusion of force.

It will rise. These are the phases of its face.

It knows its seasons, the waiting, the sudden.

It changes. It does not die. (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 102)

Rukeyser believes that no resource in the world can be lost or suppressed for long. People’s ability to transform themselves, and the inherited and accumulated sources of truth, are examples of these resources. They can be dormant for some time, but they can always resume their life, in one form or another, with the existence of the right catalyst, like poetry.

Process in art, for Rukeyser, is the ability to reach and draw from the human history of consciousness in all its different stages; to get to the primitive source of knowledge which is instinctively shared in a collective memory. For Rukeyser, some secrets of existence lie with the lost and wasted sources of knowledge. Here are some lines from Rukeyser’s poem “The Place at Alert Bay,” where she illustrates this notion:

We build our gifts: language of process offers

Life above life moving, a ladder of lives

Reaching to time that is resumed in God.

.....

For here, all energy is form: the dead, the unborn,

All supported on the shoulders of us all,

And all forever reaching from the source of all things.

Pillars of process, the growing of the soul,

Form that is energy from these seas risen,

Identified. Resumed in God. (*Collected Poems* 357)

What insures the growth and development of the soul is its ability to transcend its time and its culture and move toward the accumulated sources of wisdom, which all reach to a power that organizes relationships throughout all fields and aspects of life. That is why we find Rukeyser in most of her books, especially in her biographies, burrowing through neglected history to find resources for her philosophy of relationship and the interaction of contraries. Rukeyser's use of the colon in the first line of the passage quoted above is significant. The colon is sometimes used by Rukeyser to represent a barrier (sometimes a barrier with gaps in it), and sometimes it represents, as used here, a linking bridge. The building of "gifts," or cultural accomplishments, in the first part of the line, is linked to, and supplemented by, a process of creating connections with the neglected resources of past lives.

Another poem that explores the principle of process as the moving force of life is Rukeyser's poem "Body of Waking." In the following lines from this poem Rukeyser describes the elements that constitute the meaning of process in art:

But the young, talking together of growth and form,
 Arrived once more at the terms. In praise of process,
 Our songs were, of the seed; we took the joy
 Of the eye dancing unborn, its precise fore-lighting
 Moving in unborn dark toward the achieved gaze, 5
 Seeking continually developing light.
 Seeking as we began to grow, and resting without distrust,
 We moved toward a requirement still unknown.

We spoke of the heroes, the generous ones, who gave their meanings,

Knowing again meaning as music, 10

Meaning in all its moving, as process, as song,

As the enlightened seed transformed in dark and light. (*Collected Poems* 393)

Rukeyser uses music in the passage above in an amazing and effective way. She places sound patterns together to create harmony, emphasis, tension, and equilibrium. For example, Rukeyser uses the two words, “dancing” and “unborn,” in line 4, with different stress patterns to show how a paradox is reconciled as the two opposite words belong together. This expression, “dancing unborn,” implies the idea of primitiveness, which is balanced with the expression at the end of the line, “precise fore-lighting,” as the stress patterns support each other with the back to back stresses in “precise” and “fore-lighting.” Rukeyser uses a train of words with rumbling, long sounds to create a sense of a moving process as she does with these words in the sixth line, whose movement is akin to a spiral: “Seeking continually developing light.” Readers do not rest from this movement of sounds until they reach the word “light.” A final example of Rukeyser’s expressive use of music is the way she balances two words with conflicting stress patterns, in the seventh line, “resting” and “distrust,” with a word that keeps the balance and represents a bridge between them, the word “without,” in which both syllables are stressed, if not equally. The two words reinforce each other by this balance despite their different stress patterns.

The creation of meaning in art is, for Rukeyser, a process that is similar, even identical, to music. The creation of meaning is based on the tension, or friction, produced when contraries meet and interact; it is based on the artistic technique of incorporating similarity in difference or difference in similarity. The meaning of a poem is a set of relationships that sustain the life and coherence of a poem as all parts contribute organically to a unity of effect. Process in art also involves experimenting and having the desire to explore and open roads of discovery. Process

involves dealing with the seeds or origins of knowledge and trying new combinations from there, to create daring, new beginnings. Rukeyser extolled the spirit and process of experimentation, with all the stages involved in it, including the failures and frustrations. The sense of foreboding and the desire for exploration is what incited the pioneer American scientists to try new combinations and come up with great discoveries. The sense of elation the scientist feels at the discovery of a new, important principle of science is comparable to the sense of achievement and joy the poet feels when she goes through the poetic experience and is able to compose an original, revelatory poem:

When the poem arrives with the impact of crucial experience, when it becomes one of the turnings which we living may at any moment approach and enter, then we become more of our age and more primitive. Not primitive as the aesthetes have used the term, but complicated, fresh, full of dark meaning, insisting on discovery, as the experience of a woman giving birth to a child is primitive. (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry* 172)

3) Chapter III: The Relationship between Technology and the Body in Rukeyser's Poetry

Muriel Rukeyser was one of the few poets who were able to bring technology and the body together in their poetry. She thought they need not be in conflict or in a struggle for dominance. Rukeyser's view of a dynamic, inclusive form makes the body and technology, as well as art, a reflection of each other. In this chapter we focus on Rukeyser's conception of the body as it relates to technology, and how an imaginative understanding of technology can lead to a deeper knowledge of ourselves and our body. The chapter opens with an overview of three historical movements, Naturalism, Futurism, and Fascism, in which conceptions of both technology and the body played a central role. After we discuss the views of these movements we see how Rukeyser's philosophy and literature responded to them as Rukeyser presented her bold views of a complementary relationship between nature, the body, and technology. Rukeyser challenged the above-mentioned movements and offered a feminist alternative to the patriarchal, at times misogynist, views of those movements, which were based, as we shall see below, on the deification of technology and mechanization on the one side, and the marginalization of the female element in society and culture, on the other. I think that this is the first study to tackle in detail Rukeyser's critique of the above-mentioned movements, and it is based on my readings and understanding of Rukeyser's poetry and philosophy, especially where she presented her views on technology, on feminist art, and on Fascism, which was the movement most contemporary to her. My aim of presenting Rukeyser's critique of those movements is to clarify Rukeyser's groundbreaking and comprehensive view of the relationship between the body and technology, which dealt creatively and responsibly with the limitations of the previous movements. In the third part of this chapter we conduct a close study of how Rukeyser expressed her ideas on the relationship between the body and technology in her early volume of poetry

Theory of Flight, focusing on the poem of the same name. This long poem contains the seeds of the ideas that would represent Rukeyser's philosophy throughout her career. In this poem Rukeyser used a style that reflected sensual qualities as well as her interest in, and use of, scientific concepts and methodology. The poem also contained the foundations of Rukeyser's theory of a feminist writing as well as her idea of dynamic democracy and positive change. The fourth part of the chapter deals with some of Rukeyser's ideas on feminist writing. Though Rukeyser was not strictly a feminist, she advanced views on liberating and empowering women to have a literature of their own, based on the body. Rukeyser defied and questioned the binaries that a patriarchal logic historically created against women, and she had a vision of a dynamic and inclusive woman's writing. Rukeyser's views influenced the philosophy of some contemporary feminist writers like Adrienne Rich and Alicia Ostriker. The fifth part of the chapter is a meeting-place of the ideas of Rukeyser, D. H. Lawrence, and Julia Kristeva as they complement and add to each other concerning the area in the psyche which they called by different names—the inner self, the unconscious, and the *chora*, respectively. We shall talk about Kristeva's idea of the *chora* and Lawrence's view of the unconscious as they are both based on their authors' conception of the central role of the body in engendering and sustaining dynamic and spontaneous creativity. We also study Rukeyser's contribution to a theory of the unconscious as she linked it to her view of technology and its relationship to nature. Finally, we conclude the chapter with an analysis of parts of Rukeyser's poem "Orpheus" to see how her style reflects her idea of the inner self, based in the body, as it represents a factor of transformation and regeneration of creativity.

Part 3.1: Rukeyser and the Naturalist View of Bodies and Machines

The relationship between bodies and machines in American society and culture began to attract the attention of writers and thinkers with the development of industrialization in America, especially after the American Civil War and toward the end of the nineteenth century. The emergence of a market economy had a great impact in complicating and transforming the notions of society, the individual, and the relationship between humans and machines. The transformations that the American society underwent as its economy was changing were recorded and reflected by different literary movements, most prominently by American Naturalism. Naturalism's main concern was with human agency as it faced the challenges of a fast-changing and developing society and economy. Naturalism dealt with the way that many long-held concepts and convictions began to be questioned and reshaped by the different forces controlling and directing culture and the economy. An economy that needed all its resources to facilitate mobility and dynamism found the Darwinist theory a suitable one, both to encourage individual competition and to overcome the obstacles of the different types of economic activity. Darwinism, or the way it was understood and applied in different fields, demystified many human concepts, paving the way for new fields of knowledge such as psychology to emerge and become recognized disciplines. Moreover, Darwinism contributed to the development of modern philosophy and economic and cultural studies.

With the development of the American industry and economy, the idea of what constitutes a human was debated and manipulated with new urgency. The Romantic notion that an individual is a mysterious combination of elements bound together and controlled by the individual's autonomous will and the ability to instigate change in his life gave way to the notion that a human being is conditioned by factors that can be studied, understood, and managed by other

humans, or controlled by outside factors in the environment. The latter notion opened great opportunities for the development of the economy and political management as it made it easier for economists and politicians to deal with and manage human entities. Industrialism and its development into mass production blurred the difference between the copy and the original. A fetishism for the copy developed in American culture as it represented and provided a sense of available, standardized wealth.¹² Mark Seltzer, in his book *Bodies and Machines*, quotes this statement from Henry James's 1877 novel *The American*: "... if the truth must be told, he had often admired the copy much more than the original" (James, qtd. by Seltzer 55). The passion for creating copies of most things produced a culture that glorified a human character formed and continuously influenced by market conceptions of typicality:

¹² Walter Benjamin, in his article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," discussed how the work of art lost the aura that was attached to its original form as copies of it were being reproduced in our mechanical age. Benjamin talked about the way that the work of art had lost its ritualistic and cult function, and its value had become connected with the way it is presented and exhibited: "We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function" (Benjamin 223-224). Benjamin suggests that with the rapid technological developments in our age, even the work's artistic function might be replaced by other aesthetic standards: "... by the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value the work of art becomes a creation with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental" (Benjamin 225).

The character of the typical American, of the American as typical, thus stands in a certain tension with the character of his particularity or individuality. More precisely, the difference between the typical and the particular is mapped onto a certain tension between the American's natural body and what he embodies. (Seltzer 55)

The great cultural transformations that resulted from the development of the market economy called for theories that could explain and organize social and individual behavior in ways that would help people cope with the new economic situation. This situation created tension between the individual, competitive freedom that the market was based on, and the need for organized modes of behavior that would guarantee efficiency and consistency in all aspects of a productive economy. "It is this difference, and tension, between *laissez-faire* or *possessive individualism and market culture*, on the one side, and what might be called *disciplinary individualism and machine culture*, on the other, that is perpetually reenacted in the paradoxical economy of consumption" (Seltzer 58). American culture entered a stage where some aspects of the human experience would have to be, on the one hand, abstracted, like the difference between what is natural and what is cultural, inviting market forces to create new interpretations of these two concepts to benefit from them, and on the other hand, embodied and made tangible, like the focus on the "natural" body, the ways it could be kept healthy and in shape so that it could take on the responsibilities of a machine age. "Opposed on part of their surface but communicating on another level, the privilege of abstraction and the requirement of embodiment are linked together in the consumer *body-in-the-abstract*: in the fashioning of the generic *model-body* of the consumer, abstracted and individualized at once" (Seltzer 63).

The naturalist view of the body as a reflection of nature can be witnessed in much of Jack London's naturalist fiction, which reflected America's transition toward the technological age.

London focused in his writings on the attempt by humans to train and repress the dangerously wild tendencies of nature and the body. As London expresses in one of his novels, “Life is movement; and the Wild aims always to destroy movement . . . It freezes the water to prevent it from running to the sea . . . and most ferociously and terribly of all does the Wild harry and crush into submission man—man, who is the most restless of life, ever in revolt against the dictum that all movement must in the end come to the cessation of movement” (London, qtd. by Seltzer 166). Nature and its forces of reproduction were viewed as the forces of waste, leading finally to loss and death. A dynamic nature, according to naturalist thought, is one that is sustained by the mechanisms of production and conservation, and these are the only qualities of nature that should be cultivated and protected.

Naturalism, in its enthusiastic debate of technology and the possibilities it opened for production, created binaries between various concepts in the service of a continuous, self-mobilized process of production that would extend over generations and cater to an expanding nation. One of the binaries Naturalism created is between a powerful, consistent mechanized force of production, symbolized by the male body, and a crudely natural, irregular force of reproduction, symbolized by the female body. The naturalist philosophy conceived of the machine as the ideal alternative to a mode of production governed by the female body, which is a mysterious realm not directly controllable by the processes of industrialism and the market economy. “The colossal mother is thus rewritten as a machine of force that brings men into the world, ‘the symphony of reproduction’ as ‘the colossal pendulum of an almighty machine.’ And crucially, if the mother is merely a ‘carrier’ of force, the mother herself is merely a medium—midwife and middleman—of the force of generation” (Seltzer 29). In a culture where the machine is fetishized, human force becomes merely the medium through which the machine

continues to function in an uninterrupted flow. Real and productive birth is the creation or development of mechanical energy necessary to reinforce the process of industrialization. The naturalist ideology does not allow for a dialectic relationship between the two complementary aspects of nature, the mechanical and the wild; it is based on a force that sustains itself by the exclusion of the powers that it perceives to be unproductive. The naturalist machine is a force that is able to live by the continuous conservation of its energy. Commenting on Frank Norris's portrayal of mechanical force in his novel *The Octopus*, Mark Seltzer observes: "One might say that creation, in Norris's final explanation, is the work of an inexhaustible masturbator, spilling his seed on the ground, the product of a mechanistic and miraculous onanism" (Seltzer 31). Seed becomes the process of making convertible power. However, natural or human seed is associated with accidentality, unpredictability, and ultimate death and decay. The machine offers the possibility of resurrection by transcending human weakness and emotionality into the objective reality of scientific and technological laws and processes. Seltzer, in *Bodies and Machines* quotes from Norris's *The Octopus*: "Life out of death, eternity rising from out of dissolution ... the seed dying, rotting, and corrupting in the earth; rising again in life ... *that which thou sowest is not quickened except it die*" (Norris, qtd. by Seltzer 38-39).

Despite Rukeyser's emphasis on the role of the machine in the great changes taking place in our technological age, she did not view the machine in the light of the naturalist philosophy—that is, as a factor of determinism in our life. Rukeyser saw the machine as a dynamic web of constantly changing relationships between contrary forces, suggesting that change is an integral quality of the processes of life as well as technology. Rukeyser affirmed the human factors of desire, choice, and responsibility as the determining factors of change and development. In the

following lines from *Theory of Flight*, Rukeyser described desire as a power that rivals the machine in its ability to initiate change and sustain it:

But this is our desire, and of its worth. . . .
 Power electric-clean, gravitating outward at all points,
 moving in savage fire, fusing all durable stuff
 but never itself being fused with any force . . . (*Collected Poems* 24)

Desire here is so firm and consistent that it can achieve any difficult goal. Though it can create change everywhere, nothing can change or bend it in its determination.

At a crucial moment of decision in *Theory of Flight*, Rukeyser exhorted readers to assume responsibility for a process of positive change and regeneration as people reach out to each other and as they embrace contrariness, which is part of a democratic society:

Master in the plane shouts “Contact” :
 master on the ground : “Contact!”
 he looks up : “Now?” whispering : “Now.”
 “Yes,” she says. “Do.”
 Say yes, people.
 Say yes.
 YES (*Collected Poems* 48)

Rukeyser viewed dynamism differently from the way Naturalism saw it. Naturalism saw dynamism as the quality in life that maintains growth and resists or eliminates death or loss. By contrast, Rukeyser regarded loss and death not as exterior or negative forces in life; she viewed them as part of the process of regeneration and change. Here is how she described people who were despondent that the American culture was dying at one stage of American history: “Those

who speak of our culture as dead or dying have a quarrel with life, and I think they cannot understand its terms, but must endlessly repeat the projection of their own despair” (*Life of Poetry* 30). For Rukeyser, a dynamic culture is not one that resists or does away with waste or loss, but one that regards them as part of a process and cycle of transformation.

Part 3.2: Rukeyser and the Body-Machine Question in Futurism and Fascism

Another early twentieth-century school of thought in which technology held a prominent place is that of Futurism. The Futurist school of art and thought was established by a group of revolutionary artists, most prominently the Italian writer F. T. Marinetti (1876-1944), in the early part of the twentieth century. Artists from different parts of the world, like Russia and England, were influenced by the movement and created art that represented Futurist thought in their countries. Futurist art sought to reflect and comment on an age of rapid technological developments. Futurism celebrated the potential of technology in shaping the human character and maintaining control over it.

Futurists rejected the past and the other representations of a weak humanity shackled by the biological limitations of the species. Flight, and the things that it symbolized for them, was the best refuge from a constricting past and from an age that could not match their passion for a total transformation of culture. For Futurists, cultural liberty was symbolized by being weaned from the maternal influences that humans have to succumb to in the early stage of their life. Here we can sense the Futurists’ misogyny as they sought to establish a purely masculine aesthetics in their artistic works. Marinetti, when he had a car accident in 1908, used the occasion to describe his dream of Futurist resurrection when he emerged from the accident as determined as ever to continue his efforts for change. Here is how he described his liberating experience at the site of the accident: “Oh! Maternal ditch, almost full of muddy water! Fair factory drain! I gulped down

your nourishing sludge; and I remembered the blessed black breast of my Sudanese nurse ...

When I came up—torn, filthy, and stinking—from under the capsized car, I felt the white-hot iron of joy deliciously pass through my heart!”¹³ (Marinetti, qtd. by Poggi 157). Here, Marinetti is describing a second birth, not from the maternal body but from a technological accident and the possibilities it held for his psychic development. The maternal womb and the reality it reflects represented for Marinetti the human and natural traits that limited his ability to reach the state of being identified with the machine and its defiance of death and weakness. “Precisely because nature is understood as the locus of the feminine and the maternal, it must be opposed and displaced by both the machine and its symbolic ally, matter” (Poggi 156). Moreover, woman posed for Marinetti the danger of sentimentality and a desire that would distract the Futurist individual away from his vision of a new technological culture and age. To replace woman, desire was displaced onto the tools of technology and war that Futurists fetishized in their attempt to transcend the demands of sexual desire. Marinetti speaks in endearing terms to his weapon in the following quote: “Ah yes! you, little machine gun, are a fascinating woman, and sinister, and divine, at the driving wheel of an invisible hundred horsepower, roaring and exploding with impatience” (Marinetti, qtd. by Poggi 158). And this is how he talks of the way mechanics handle locomotives: “Have you never seen mechanics lovingly washing the great powerful body of their locomotive? This is the minute, knowing tenderness of a lover caressing his adored mistress” (Marinetti, qtd. by Poggi 158).

¹³ Marinetti was born of Italian parents in Alexandria, Egypt. He spent his early years there, before he moved to Europe. By “Sudanese nurse” he is probably referring to a woman who took care of him in his babyhood.

Futurist artists promoted the type of personality that would ultimately identify with the machine in its ability to build and maintain a world of advanced technology, and an internal will of steel that would withstand any amount of pressure in life. The Futurist personality is characterized by courage that borders on recklessness; a Futurist would embrace war as a way of strengthening the soul to meet the challenge of dominating other cultures and establishing a developed, Futurist world. War, for the Futurist soldier, is a way of intensifying his relationship to a metalized and mechanized body that he has built and developed for the time of war. “Only in war could they be the source of, or somehow connected to, every explosion, without risking the disintegration of their fragile egos ... By disciplining the body, rendering it hard and nearly metallic, they create a kind of protective armor, designed to shield them from their fear of dissolution” (Poggi 161). This idea of a psychic “protective armor” corresponds to Sigmund Freud’s notion of the stimulus shield. Freud believed that the stimulus shield is a protective psychic surface or layer that the individual develops in his consciousness to protect himself from unpleasant emotional shocks and problems. “His [Freud’s] hypothesis is grounded in an economic model of psychic equilibrium, in which pleasure derives from a reduction in the quantity of excitation present in the mental apparatus, or at least in maintaining a stable, constant state” (Poggi 31). The stimulus shield turns into a steel-like, inorganic layer, providing protection from shock or fright, but robbing an individual of the fulfilling experience of emotional intensity or the sense of compassion toward fellow beings that a vigilant conscience gives to a human being. The Futurist psyche was supposed to be one that, through its obsession with mechanical process, blends with the machine in its consistent properties of dynamism and resistance to outside factors or conditions. Futurist art explores the possibilities of creating and maintaining such a type of psyche and the way that the stable and uniform logic of the machine can penetrate

into people's way of thinking and behaving. The Futurist philosophy was based on the body as the site of will-power, desire for change, and the means to transcend a human world mired in weakness and primitive ideology. Their image of the body is not a dreamy one that fosters the mind's illusions and ties it to the fatal tentacles of romantic sexual love; it is one that renders the soul impervious to any intensity or conflict under a consciousness made of iron:

The Futurists regarded the traditional humanist body, and the psychological self it housed, as an anachronism in an age dominated by machines, a dynamic notion of matter, the 'religion-morality of speed,' and war. Rather than affirm a classically beautiful body, in harmony with nature and the stable, rational order of the universe, the Futurists sought to reconfigure the male body to resist shocks and omnipresent speed, in preparation for a nonhuman, mechanical, and combative destiny. (Poggi 150)

With the establishment of fascist movements and the coming into power of fascist leaders in Europe prior to WWII, the Futurists' dream of a new type of man for the future seemed within sight. Some Futurists in Italy joined and collaborated with fascism though the latter was not wholly identical to Futurism in its principles and tendencies. While fascism advocated a cult of the leader so that the general populace are almost dissolved into the will of their leader, Futurist artists believed in the absolute individualism of the Futurist thinker. Futurists, especially in the first stage of Futurism's existence, rejected religion as part of the crippling, backward ideology of the past; fascists, on the other hand, exploited religious symbols and slogans to establish ties with the masses and present fascism as a movement that held both traditional and modernist elements in its value system. The common denominator between Futurism and fascism, however, is a fetishizing focus on the body, especially the male one, as the site and symbol of cultural transformation.

Fascism adopted the image of the strong, symmetrical male body as a racist symbol of the ascendancy of the White man and his potential for leading and reforming the world. The fascist idea of the male body was not new. It is a classicist notion revived in the eighteenth century that fascists adopted and exploited for their political purposes. “The beautiful male body as the eighteenth-century Greek paradigm had it, projected both self-control in its posture and virility in the play of its muscles; it symbolized both the dynamic and the discipline which society wanted and needed” (Mosse 248). Fascism promoted the image of a male body that represented the great individual potential of its owner at the same time that the body was prostrated at the service of the state and its leader. Susan Sontag, in her essay “Fascinating Fascism,” talks about these two conflicting aspects of fascist thought as the basis of a fascist aesthetics:

More generally, they [fascist aesthetics] flow from (and justify) a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, extravagant effort, and the endurance of pain; they endorse two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude. The relations of domination and enslavement take the form of a characteristic pageantry: the massing of groups of people; the turning of people into things; the multiplication or replication of things; and the grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader-figure or force. (Sontag 91)

Fascism was based on the view that there are two types of nature: one that should be nurtured and cultivated, and another that should be resisted and subjugated. Nature that reflected the fascist aesthetics of the beautiful, malleable, and useful is the one that epitomized the power and indomitability of the leader and the state. As for the type of nature that did not seem to serve the above purposes, it was excluded and had no place in the fascist mind or philosophy. That is why the male body seemed to fascists a perfect symbol as it represented control and exploitation of

nature, while a female body seemed useless as it succumbed to the forces of nature. “Fascist aesthetics is based on the containment of vital forces; movements are confined, held tight, held in” (Sontag 93). In fascist thought, the female body can be developed and incorporated according to fascist aesthetic principles, but it is basically relegated to a position secondary and inferior to the male body. The most important function it serves is providing the fascist state with useful male bodies that can serve and strengthen the regime. Sontag describes the fascist idea of society as one in which “women are merely breeders and helpers, excluded from all ceremonial functions, and represent a threat to the integrity and strength of men” (Sontag 90).¹⁴

Rukeyser spent her artistic career constructing a philosophy that countered the idea of dynamism as suggested by Futurism; she had her own democratic view of dynamism. As we shall see in the next section, Rukeyser used the symbol of flight, a traditional motif of Futurist art, to subvert the Futurist ideology. While flight in Futurism was a symbol of liberation from the constraining factors of history, nature, and the body, for Rukeyser flight represented the brave, introspective effort to re-explore the ignored aspects of our life as we progress in the age of technology. This is how Rukeyser described our relationship to the past as it is linked to the technological future, in her long poem *Theory of Flight*: “Stretch us onward include in us the past / sow in us history, make us remember triumph” (*Collected Poems* 47). Rukeyser suggested that flight means going deep into ourselves to discover a vast, underground world that we cannot recognize in our busy daily life with its fast rhythm:

Roads are cut into the earth leading away from our place
at the inevitable hub. All directions are *out*,

¹⁴ This is in the context of Sontag’s description of the fascist influences in Leni Riefenstahl’s book of photographs *The Last of the Nuba*.

all desire turns outward : we, introspective,
 continuing to find in ourselves the microcosm
 imaging continents, powers, relations, reflecting
 all history in a bifurcated Engine. (*Collected Poems* 24)

In her poetry, Rukeyser sought to discover the emotional core of the human character that had been hidden and shielded in a culture (the modern Western culture) that could not face up to its emotional truth. Rukeyser tried actively in her poetry to lift the masks that protect us from our spontaneous, inner self and control its flow into our comfortable, daily life. So her philosophy directly opposed the Futurist dream of building a psychic “protective armor” to shield the human character against shocks or sentimentality. Rukeyser believed that a human character gains vitality inasmuch as it responds to and interacts with its emotional, spontaneous core. For Rukeyser, failure to respond to that core is the result of repression of our deeper self, and it results in aggression toward nature and toward other people, as happens in war, which was celebrated as a purging act by some Futurist artists: “The thinning-out of our response is the weakness that leads to mechanical aggression. It is the weakness turning us inward to devour our own humanity, and outward only to sell and kill nature and each other” (*Life of Poetry* 41). Rukeyser explicitly denounced war as a corrupt form of using technology. In the following two lines from *Theory of Flight* Rukeyser shows how the great technological achievement of flight is used as a tool of destruction: “Icarus’ passion, Da Vinci’s skill, corrupt, / all rotted into war ...” (*Collected Poems* 46).

Rukeyser’s view of technology, though essentially a positive one, advances an alternative to the naturalist and the Futurist one. Rukeyser criticized the way movements like Futurism and Fascism thought of nature, the body, and technology in terms of binaries that are exclusive from

and opposed to each other. Rukeyser used the machine as a metaphor for the continuous effort at transformation as energy keeps changing form throughout the process in a machine. For Rukeyser, the machine reflects dynamic nature as it is able to hold and process different forms of energy, even as these forms are in opposed tension, turning them into a meaningful whole, in the form of the ultimate use to which the transformed energy is put. So the machine is part of nature in all of its aspects, including the body, and is not necessarily opposed to nature. The Futurist movement, on the other hand, viewed the machine as the symbol of overcoming the natural qualities of the human character, in order to turn the latter into a rigid, mechanized system devoid of emotional intensity. The machine, for Futurists, symbolized efficiently mechanized action as part of a dogmatic belief in the absolute power of technology. However, Rukeyser, with her belief in the necessity of contrariness as a complementary factor in life, rejected the idea of rigid dogma. For Rukeyser, contradiction is not a threat to logic; it *is* logic itself.

One of Rukeyser's poems where nature meets technology is "The Dam," which is part of the long poem *The Book of the Dead*. In "The Dam," Rukeyser described the movement of water in a dam, which is a technological monument, in terms of the spontaneous movement of the body in nature. In the following lines water, which is a natural force, is able to move freely and in different, changing forms within a technological medium, the dam:

Water celebrates, yielding continually
 sheeted and fast in its overfall
 slips down the rock, evades the pillars
 building its colonnades, repairs
 in stream and standing wave
 retains its seaward green

broken by obstacle rock; falling, the water sheet
 spouts, and the mind dances, excess of white.¹⁵ (*Collected Poems* 99)

In the piece above, water is able to maintain its vitality and dynamism despite existing in a mechanical environment and despite the obstacles and controlling factors it meets. The movement of water, illustrated by verbs of dynamic action, like “slips,” “evades,” “repairs,” and “retains,” simulates a body freely interacting with nature. In the last line of this piece, Rukeyser links the spontaneous movement of water to a mind’s creative way of thinking and imagining, bringing together the mind, the body, technology, and nature in one powerful, vivid image.

While the fascist aesthetics privileged the male body as the standard of harmonized beauty, Rukeyser adopted and embraced the despised body, whether it is the female, the Jewish or the black one, as well as the despised parts, or aspects, of the body or the consciousness. Rukeyser rejected the fascist logic of privileging certain images of the body (like the mechanical, masculine, Teutonic body as opposed to the natural, ‘feminized,’ ‘foreign’ one), and she believed that prejudice against different people, races, or a part of a city is connected to how we view the body and its various parts and functions. In a poem entitled “Despises,” Rukeyser linked discrimination against a city’s ghetto with prejudice against certain parts of the body:

In the human cities, never again to
 despise the backside of the city, the ghetto,
 or build it again as we build the despised
 backsides of houses. Look at your own building.
 You are the city.

¹⁵ This poem is discussed more elaborately in another chapter of this thesis, entitled “Rukeyser’s Philosophy of the Relationship between Science and Poetry.”

.....

In the body's ghetto

never to go despising the asshole

nor the useful shit that is our clean clue

to what we need.... (*Collected Poems* 471-472)

Rukeyser viewed life as the theater of a necessary, interactive experience between all parts of the body and all bodies in society, even the ones that seem redundant or conflicted. Rukeyser fulminated against prejudice in all its forms, especially the ones that affect our outlook on life, our understanding of our inner reality, and our view of other people. In "Despivals," Rukeyser affirmed her confident and generous embracing of the "despivals" in herself and in society:

Never to despise in myself what I have been taught

to despise. Not to despise the other.

Not to despise the *it*. To make this relation

with the it : to know that I am it. (*Collected Poems* 472)

For Rukeyser, true democracy and real peace can be realized through a rediscovery of the body. As we understand the process that sustains the life of the body, a process based on the complementariness and tension of all the parts, functions, and aspects of the body as they work together to reflect a solid, dynamic entity (that of the human being), we can have a cosmic view of comprehensive peace and democracy based on all the groups in society freely interacting with each other. Rukeyser projected the private experience of understanding the body and the inner self as the basis of the public experience of understanding other people in society and establishing social ties. By making art the reflection of inner truth and the instigator of positive political change, Rukeyser countered a fascist logic that viewed art in the lens of dictatorial

public policies and war. Rukeyser opposed Marinetti's Futurist outlook, which aestheticized war, with a philosophy in the lines of Walter Benjamin's Marxist theory of "politicizing art" (Benjamin 242).

Part 3.3: The Relationship between the Body and Technology in Rukeyser's *Theory of Flight*

Now, let us study portions of Rukeyser's poetry to see how she conceived of the relationship between the body and technology. We will study how Rukeyser commented on and critiqued the previous theories of the body's relationship to the machine to create a theory of her own. We will discuss the way in which her view of the body informed her understanding of a new place for woman in literature and of the theories of feminism in her time. Our study will be in the context of a number of Rukeyser's poems in her two volumes of poetry *Theory of Flight* and *Body of Waking*. Let us start with some poems from *Theory of Flight*.

The long title poem of the collection *Theory of Flight* starts with a poem entitled "The Preamble," which establishes in broad strokes the main themes that Rukeyser will discuss in the next poems. The poem begins with the invocation, "Earth, bind us close, and time ; nor, sky, deride / how violate we experiment again" (*Collected Poems* 21). The poem does not start with a departure from and revolution against the earth and the natural forces representing it, as implied in the title *Theory of Flight*. The poem starts by affirming the speaker's ties to earth and expresses the wish to maintain these ties, not only with earth, but also with another natural force, which is time in all its dimensions. This first statement seems in defiance of the Futurist rhetoric, which represented the predominant idea of a possible relationship between humans and machines at the time. While the Futurist view of a marriage between humans and technology, through the idea of flight, springs from resistance to the crippling laws of nature, Rukeyser takes the opposite position by seeking a binding relationship to earth and the past, before she embarks on her

journey to explore the ways we can connect to the machine. Rukeyser's view of the machine is inspired by a Romantic vision of nature as a reflection of the natural powers and possibilities humans have and will continue to have as they enter the age of technology. Rukeyser's view of time, especially the neglected areas in it, as a source of useful, accumulated experience that can enlighten our age, stands contrary to the Futurist view that modern art and thought should be free from the influences of a backward past. After this invocation to the earth and to time, Rukeyser expresses humility toward the sky, showing how humble our technological achievements are, compared to the great possibilities of progress we still have to explore, and despite the human feeling of arrogance and self-satisfaction for having achieved the highest levels of technological development. Rukeyser's type of transcendence is achieved by the acceptance and embracing of nature and earthly existence rather than by rebelling against them. The word "violate" expresses a feeling of self-consciousness and responsibility as the speaker is aware of the possible violations to the natural order perpetrated by human hands with their technology.

In the next lines of the poem we sense a coherent voice gathering force. The speaker is attempting to break away from being associated with "the waning flesh." The speaker is exhorting a "fountain" that recalls the Futurist image of a machine driven by dynamic force, to "spout" and start a natural cycle beginning with child-bearing. By adopting a new outlook on love relations, the speaker will gain "mastery," having the confidence necessary for flying in uncharted territories and against so many powers that naturally resist that flight. It is not until we reach the next stanza that we begin to discern the sex of the vehement speaker. The female speaker mentions that women have been blessed with the gift of being lonely and "fallen in waste places" by a history governed by paternal rules. The speaker exhorts her readers to start the process of liberation by rejecting the feeling of pity that society charitably offers to them, and

being daring enough not to succumb to a form of thinking dictated to them by social expectations: “remain unpitied now, never descend / to that soft howling of the prostrate mind” (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 22). Rukeyser empowers members of the female sex by offering them the best way of reversing unjust social and historical trends: expressing themselves using the liberating exercise of writing. Writing, for a woman who seeks liberation from stereotypical notions, is like flight in our technological age. While a pilot resists the forces of gravity and invades the realm of space to prove the supremacy and great achievements of technology, a liberated female writer represents a defiant voice reasserting the unique visions that women can add to history and literature. Andrea Rohlf Wright, in her article “Masks Uncovered: (Fe)male Language in the Poetry of Muriel Rukeyser,” quotes H el ene Cixous as saying: “(W)riting is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (Cixous, qtd. by Wright 34). The speaker affirms that only an assertive language and a coherent vision will gain women a place in a world where the self-justifying, time-honored masculine logic dominates as it “divides wind” with its “learned aggression” and creates binaries:

Frail mouthings will fall diminished on old ears

in dusty whispers, light from extinctest stars

will let us sleep, nor may we replica

ourselves in hieroglyphics and broken things

but there is reproduction for this act

linking the flight’s escape with strict contact. (Rukeyser, *Collected poems* 22)

In the above portion of the poem, Rukeyser seeks to transform the way women writers had traditionally expressed themselves—that is, in “hieroglyphics and broken things.” Rukeyser is

here talking about the fragmentary language that women used to describe their outlawed experience throughout much of the history of women's writing. Women writers had been in the habit of using masks constructed by the male guardians of language for their use. They could not honestly express a purely female experience, and using patriarchic masks was the only way to enter the mainstream of publishing and readership for many centuries. Rukeyser described this act of masked feminine writing in a poem entitled "The Poem as Mask," which is included in Rukeyser's 1968 volume of poetry *The Speed of Darkness*. In this poem Rukeyser described her, and the historical woman's, previous experience of writing as:

fragmented, exiled from himself ["himself" being the mask], his life, the love gone
 down with song,
 it was myself, split open, unable to speak, in exile from
 myself. (*Collected Poems* 413)

In the above lines Rukeyser is talking about her own experience of writing as a woman in what was regarded as normal (actually patriarchal) language with its androcentric images, as Rukeyser did in her poem "Orpheus," in which she used the mythical male figure of Orpheus to describe her experience as a woman writing poetry. Rukeyser declared that in her development as a female poet she was able to finally find her voice, and that is through the uniquely female experience and image of reproduction. Rukeyser was able to perceptively translate biological reproduction into cultural production and regeneration. Woman can assume a central and prominent place in visionary writing just as she occupies an integral position with regard to reproduction and the life-renewing cycles of nature. That is why, in "Preamble," Rukeyser affirms that finally "... there is reproduction for this act / linking the flight's escape with strict contact" (*Collected Poems* 22). Rukeyser appropriated the theme of flight, which had been

linked to a revolutionary Futurist logic, for a transformative attempt to find a female voice to counter a dominating male one. The technology of flight is here taken out from its traditional context of getting free from contact with nature so that the “flight’s escape” can be associated now with “strict contact” with nature; in other words, with a female poetics that reconciles all aspects of life with the life of vital nature and its regenerative processes. The experience and metaphor of birth (the magical creation of human life) supplied Rukeyser with a language of the body that can represent the aesthetics of women’s writing. She sought and received “rescue from the great eyes” (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 413) of the baby she gave birth to and would be able later to nurture and raise. However, by writing through the body, women risk being stigmatized as shallow and sensual, while male writers rarely get the same treatment when they write through their body. Jane Gallop points to this unfair situation in her book *Thinking Through the Body*: “Men who do find themselves in some way thinking through the body are more likely to be recognized as serious thinkers and heard. Women have first to prove that we are thinkers, which is easier when we conform to the protocol that deems serious thought separate from an embodied subject in history” (7).

Just as she appropriated the theme of flight to “escape” into a revolutionary female poetics, Rukeyser used the Futurist exhortative, gospel-like rhetoric to subvert the Futurist, male-constructed logic. What Rukeyser attempted to do here is what Cixous suggests women do in order to create a new, counteractive feminine language for writing. Cixous contends that woman can subvert what is basically a patriarchal language by making “it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of” (Cixous, qtd. by Wright 34). Rukeyser subverted the Futurist logic by using an explicitly resonant masculine language of poetry to rebel against the patriarchal logic. She

questioned its credibility and vitiated it of meaning, to create a generously inclusive female aesthetics. However, before embarking on such a daring experience, Rukeyser called upon women writers to know themselves and what they really stand for, away from socially-tailored stereotypes. She urged women in these terms: “Look! Be : leap ; / ... know your color : be ...” (*Collected Poems* 22). Then Rukeyser set out to describe the type of language and colors that women’s writing can be identified with:

produce that the widenesses
 be full and burst their wombs
 riot in redness, delirious with light,
 swim bluey through the mind
 shout green as the day breaks
 put up your face to the wind
 FLY... (*Collected Poems* 22)

Writing, as an act of reproduction, can reflect nature with all its variety of colors and moods. Nature does not function in the inflexible, dogmatic, one-dimensional way in which some human minds work, and women writers should learn to embrace variety and open-mindedness from nature. Throughout her long poem *Theory of Flight* Rukeyser frequently used sexual and body images to illustrate the way that a feminist language could reflect the vital processes of raw, earthly nature:

reek with vigor sweat pour your life
 in a libation to itself
 drink from the ripe ground
 make children over the world

lust in a heat of tropic orange

stamp and writhe ; stamp on a wet floor ... (*Collected Poems 23*)

In the last part of “Preamble,” Rukeyser defined her project of writing as a reconciliation of seemingly contrasting aspects of life. Her outlook on life and nature is an inclusive rather than an exclusive one; her flight does not exclude no-flight, the sky does not exclude the earth, and the present does not exclude the past. All aspects of experience owe their sustenance to their continuously interactive relationship with their opposites:

Sky being meeting of sky and no sky

Including our sources the earth water air

Fire to wield them : unity in knowing

All space in one unpunctuated flowing.

Flight, thus, is meeting of flight and no flight. (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems 23*)

Rukeyser goes on to redefine meaningful technological and cultural progress as the ability to hold on to the resources of a vital, connective nature which keeps linking us to the original, spiritual and material, sources of the human experience even as it projects us forward: “We bear the seeds of our return forever, / the flowers of our leaving, fruit of flight ...” (*Collected Poems 23*).

In the next part of *Theory of Flight*, entitled “Gyroscope,” the language picks up speed so that the speaker seems to be trying to match the dynamism of a gyroscope with her own language, and with a logic that consistently counters and complements that of the machine. The speaker glorifies the human attempt to go out to the world, driven by the passion to explore and learn from nature and technology in their different aspects. However, the speaker warns against the danger of being narrow-mindedly and exclusively identified with any specific dogma or way of

thinking. The essential human open-mindedness and open-heartedness should be preserved throughout our search for truth. Rukeyser speaks of the desire to transcend a selfish, limited existence by continuously seeking connections with the different forces in our world. At the same time Rukeyser emphasizes the introspective discovery of a pure, inner human core that inspires the effort of connecting to the world: “Power electric-clean, gravitating outward at all points, / moving in savage fire, fusing all durable stuff / but never itself being fused with any force ...” (*Collected Poems* 24). Rukeyser then implicitly directs a critical question to her audience: Has there been an attempt to study inner truth parallel to man’s victories in the fields of science and technology? What about the deep human emotions that we automatically repress in order to fall in with a dominant culture that sanctifies appearances and uniform behavior? Rukeyser draws attention to the “silences” and unanswered questions inside us and behind the representations of nature and the body that dominant culture has constructed for us:

Centrifugal power, expanding universe
 within expanding universe, what stillnesses
 lie at your center resting among motion?
 Study communications, looking inward, find what traffic
 you may have with your silences ... (*Collected Poems* 24)

Rukeyser’s choice of the image of the gyroscope is very appropriate here as that apparatus can flexibly move in different directions, all the time adjusting itself to maintain equilibrium. It is sensitive to all the changes taking place around and inside its frame, yet it is able to remain in a state of balance that keeps order and harmony. Rukeyser points to the type of mentality that accepts complementary contradiction in all aspects of life and thought, so that a balanced whole can be perceived and constructed. Rukeyser also affirms the importance of re-exploring the

neglected and ignored creations of past generations and times, the experiences that were outlawed as taboo-breakers banished to oblivion in their times, though their efforts were essential to the creation of knowledge in our time:

Flaming origins were our fathers in the heat of the earth,
 pushing to the crust, water and sea-flesh,
 undulant tentacles ingrown on the ocean's floor,
 frondy anemones and scales' armor gave us birth. (*Collected Poems* 25)

In the section of the long poem entitled "The Tunnel," Rukeyser takes up the question of the severance of the body from the soul or mind and the dire consequences of that act. The second part of "The Tunnel" is a passionate and lyrical plea for the body to rejoin the soul so that the speaker would have a fulfilling, meaningful life experience in the age of technological developments. The speaker is bleeding as she feels drained of the vital stuff of her life, the means to connect to her own body and the nature it reflects: "Body, return : I love you : soul, come home! / I am gone down to death in a great bleeding" (*Collected Poems* 34). Then the speaker tries to reach out to her lover through the barriers of modern technology, ultimately using the barriers as means to develop new ways of truthful and genuine communication:

Open me a refuge where I may be renewed. Speak to me
 world hissing over cables, shining among steel strands,
 plucking speech out on a wire, linking voices,
 reach me now in my fierceness, or I am drowned ... (*Collected Poems* 34)

Rukeyser did not have the skepticism of most poets in the Romantic tradition toward technology as a barrier against spirituality and self-recognition. She believed that technology offered a great opportunity to develop our understanding of ourselves and our relationship to other people. In

her book, *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser refuted the claim that there was no place for poetry in the age of technology by saying that the tools of technology can be used to develop our means of connecting to our inner core through a new realization of the power of poetry:

And we have, for the first time in history, among all the longing for communication which we can see everywhere: communication with the secret life of the individual, communication through machines, communication between peoples—we have the sense of the world—a real and spiritual unity which offers greater newness than America, greater explorations, and wealth of human meanings and resources that has never before been reached.

We have, in the opening of such a time, a sense of an age disclosing undefined possibilities, new meanings for multiplicity, and new meanings for unity. (25)

Rukeyser was able to learn great lessons from her knowledge of science and technology, and these lessons enlightened her vision of the possibilities of poetry and the wealth of wisdom that a deeper knowledge of nature, in its broad sense, could offer. Science taught her how multiplicity is incorporated as an integral part of any process. Technology for Rukeyser is a way of transcendence, not in the sense of escaping from reality but meeting it head-on and dealing with it in a responsible and comprehensive way.

In the third part of “The Tunnel,” Rukeyser moves to the scene of a pregnant wife with her husband, waking up early in the morning. The husband, who is a pilot, prepares to go to the airport while his wife will stay at home, waiting for him. Despite the time and duty constraints, the husband makes tentative attempts to understand his wife’s body through her pregnancy: “... ‘How I love to see you when I wake,’ he says, / ‘How the child’s meaning in you is my life’s growing’” (*Collected Poems* 35). The wife complains that her husband’s job as a pilot takes him

away from her so that he becomes like an indecipherable puzzle to her. His intimate, fateful proximity and contact with the machine makes him distant and almost non-existent to his wife and her body:

‘Flying is what makes you strange to me, dark as Asia,
almost removed from my world even in your closeness :
that you should be familiar with those intricacies
and a hero in mysteries which all the world has wanted.’ (*Collected Poems* 36)

The wife turns the historical male-constructed myth that woman is a perpetual mystery that cannot be fathomed, and so is dangerous and problematic, on its head. She indicates that the husband’s attachment to the machine and its logic makes him difficult to understand and orientalizes him to her. The husband asserts to his wife that the time of “personal” heroes is all past. Lives have been shattered and decimated by the war machine. The wife wonders how the coming child will be able to find and establish an American identity while his father’s country is “air,” or chaos and despair, which were the feelings that Rukeyser’s generation of poets, the generation of World Wars and the rise of fascism, felt and reflected in their poetry, the poetry of irony. The father does not believe in human possibility or the indomitability of an optimistic soul. He “believes there are no heroes to withstand / wind, or a loose bolt, or a tank empty of gas” (*Collected Poems* 36). The story of the pilot ends in his airplane engine failing, which results in his sudden and uneventful death. The pilot lacks the ability of connecting with the machine in a creative, responsible, and genuinely human way, and so faces the prospect of being beaten and crushed by the machine. The pilot was not able, through his connection with the machine, to figure out and come to terms with the contradictions in his life and within his nature; that is the failing that causes his sad doom.

Rukeyser's idea of heroism in our age, Romantic in its optimism, is an intriguing and visionary one. She describes her ideal hero in her poem "Hero speech," which is included in her collection of poems *Body of Waking*. A real hero for Rukeyser is one who is able to acknowledge and reconcile all the contradictions in his character and accept the essentiality of tension between opposites as a process of development in nature: "... Himself the man, himself the animal, / Himself the moment makes new the forms, makes our song / and our prayers" (*Collected Poems* 346). A hero is someone who is able to meet emotional truth, regardless of the consequences. Rukeyser compares this type of hero to the politicians of our modern age, who, at time of war, urge the people to "Take the act and postpone the meanings" (*Collected Poems* 346). Rukeyser believed that emotional truth should be the stimulus for action and not the lesson that can be worked out *after* the action: "During the war, we felt the silence in the policy of the governments of English-speaking countries. That policy was to win the war first, and work out the meanings afterward. The result was, of course, that the meanings were lost. You cannot put these things off" (*Life of Poetry* 20). Heroism, for Rukeyser, is linked to an embracing of and open-mindedness to change as there are no absolute ideas in this world:

We think of flying, the flying of all dreams,
 The ancient reaching for the chance to return changed.
 In deepest power the changing and opening, the seed obeying
 its own law. (*Collected Poems* 347)

Rukeyser's ideas reach the stage of concretization in the last part, which has the same title as that of the collection, *Theory of Flight*. This part starts with a challenge to people who do not accept multiplicity and who keep creating divisive binaries. These people are challenged to accept and include difference as a complementary factor instead of shunning and persecuting it:

You dynamiting the structure of our loves
 embrace your lovers solving antithesis
 open your flesh, people, to opposites
 conclude the bold configuration, finish
 the counterpoint : sky, include earth now. (*Collected Poems* 47)

Rukeyser describes the opposite elements we may find in our lovers as solutions to the problems that stem from deification of rigid principles. She uses a sensual image, “open your flesh,” to emphasize the idea that many cultural problems originate in our representations of the body and the way we deal with the body as a citadel of meaning. Flight for Rukeyser stands for being able to confront and deal with our contradictions rather than repressing them or escaping from them. Flight is the ability to understand that we need to return to earth, to our inner reality, as much as we need to meet the outside world and our daily life, and that is why true flight is extremely difficult: “Flight is intolerable contradiction” (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 47). At the end of the poem, as a pilot prepares to fly, she exhorts the people who witness the act, especially the readers, to take the revolutionary step of making contact with their opposites:

“Yes,” she says. “Do.”

Say yes, people.

Say yes.

YES. (*Collected Poems* 48)

The message has the urgency and solemn air of a wedding ceremony, and, as Lexi Rudnitsky observes in her article “Planes, Politics, and Protofeminist Poetics: Muriel Rukeyser’s ‘Theory of Flight’ and *The Middle of the Air*,” “the traditional vow ‘I do’ becomes the command ‘Do,’ the ostensible subject of which is ‘people.’ Significantly, it is the woman who issues this

command—calling others to action rather than avowing her own wifely duties—and it is also she who is airborne, while the man ‘looks up,’ awaiting her arrival” (Rudnitsky 246).

Part 3.4: Rukeyser’s Idea of Body-Inspired Women’s Writing

Rukeyser’s poem *Theory of Flight* is an attempt to empower women writers and tell them of their potential for envisioning and instigating change within themselves and in society. Rukeyser does this by questioning and reversing traditional male myths that are based on long-held binaries that had been legitimized by the passage of time. She knows that chaos will ensue when these binaries, which are all based on “the couple man/woman” (Ayres 150), as Cixous claims, are rejected and overthrown, but the subversive effort is a necessary one, and its responsibility lies with free writers and poets. In her poem “The Birth of Venus,” Rukeyser portrays the birth of Venus not as man imagined it, a tranquil, happy event and a beautiful scene. She imagines the scene to be that of the destruction and annihilation of the patriarchic rule and its logic:

Risen in a
welter of waters.

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

But born in a
tidal wave of the father’s overthrow,
the old rule killed and its mutilated sex. (*Collected Poems* 356)

For Rukeyser, the factor that is going to end the patriarchic rule on logic and literature is the same one that cemented and legitimized it, which is time with its transformative effect: “The testicles of the father-god, father of fathers, / sickled off by his son, the next god Time” (*Collected Poems* 356).

Besides her emphasis on change, Rukeyser concentrates on the effort of self-knowledge, and the ability to realize “usable truth” with its comprehensive image. The speaker in “The Birth of Venus” is finally able to include and capitalize on her writing experience in its different stages, even those which represent a criticized identification with patriarchic modes of writing:

However, possibly,
 on the long worldward voyage flowing,
 horror gone down in birth, the curse, being changed,
 being used, is translated far at the margin into
 our rose and saving image, curling toward a shore
 early and April, with certainly shells, certainly blossoms. (*Collected Poems* 356)

Rukeyser, as a female poet, did not envision a feminist form of writing that did away with other forms of writing, even the patriarchic ones; she believed in a form that included other forms while maintaining its integrity and distinctive character: “Though Rukeyser realizes the fictionality of totally liberated women, she does insist that women can begin to speak when they construct a new, distinctly female language *within* the dominant masculine language but also, and paradoxically, *separate from* it” (Wright 35). That is why Rukeyser does not discard or demolish all binaries in her writing; rather she problematizes them by continuously reshuffling the conflicted relationship between them. “The effect of such problematizing—a deconstructive move—is not to negate or do away with the usefulness of the term ... rather, it is to free it from

its metaphysical lodgings in order to understand what political interests were secured in and by the metaphysical placing, and thereby to permit the term to occupy and to serve very different political aims” (Butler, qtd. by Ayres 151). Rukeyser illustrates this artistic strategy in her poem “Ballad of Orange and Grape,” where the speaker witnesses a scene that makes her imagine a world where binaries are dangerously reshuffled. In this poem, a man selling hot dogs keeps filling a receptacle marked “GRAPE” with an orange drink, and pours a grape drink into a receptacle marked “ORANGE,” which confuses and disturbs the speaker, who asks the hot dog man:

... How can we go on reading
and make sense out of what we read?—

How can they write and believe what they’re writing,
the young ones across the street,
while you go on pouring grape into ORANGE
and orange into the one marked GRAPE—? (*Collected Poems* 493)

The man simply smiles and continues with his unconsciously subversive act. Though befuddled by the man’s act, the speaker does not strictly identify with either the binary perspective, or with the seller’s opposing one. She is thrilled that the situation offers her the chance to envision the possibilities of reshuffling binaries and breaking taboos. This is Rukeyser’s way of viewing binaries; she re-explores and interrogates their validity, but she is realistic about how firmly rooted they are in Western culture.

Rukeyser’s skepticism toward binaries comes from the fact that woman has historically been the victim of binaries instituted by the paternal law. Woman, by virtue of the supposed contradictions in her nature, is the site of male horror and fascination at the same time: “We are

all of woman born, and the mother's body as the threshold of existence is both sacred and soiled, holy and hellish; it is attractive and repulsive, all-powerful and therefore impossible to live with. Kristeva speaks of it in terms of 'abjection'; the abject arises in that gray, in between area of the mixed, the ambiguous" (Braidotti 65). The female body represents nature with its vital contradictions, which are actually in a constant state of tension tending toward equilibrium. This is the quality in woman that makes her the object of male wonder, suspicion, hatred, and envy. However, because of women's position as outsiders, from the perspective of the paternal law, they can watch, judge, and transform conditions from outside without being implicated in them. This quality of in-betweenness, outsidership, and inclusiveness all at the same time qualifies them for visionary and creative leadership for writing and cultural reform; it also qualifies them to be the ultimate taboo-breakers. That is why Rukeyser puts the great responsibility of using the airplane with its terrible power in the hands of woman. Rudnitsky, in the above-mentioned article, talks about the way that Ann, one of the principal characters in Rukeyser's play *The Middle of the Air*, and a representative of Rukeyser's idea of liberated womanhood, is better at flying than Laramie, her male friend: "From early on, Rukeyser sets the stage for the idea that the enterprise of flying is particularly well-suited to women [...] Rukeyser thereby establishes that women not only have the ability to fly but that they may even have the ability to do it better—more 'purely'—than men" (Rudnitsky 252). Flight in this play, *The Middle of the Air*, as in *Theory of Flight*, stands for women's ability to lead the movements of reform and initiate the culture of multiplicity.

Another writer who used the metaphor of flight in her writings is Hélène Cixous. In her article entitled "The Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous urges women to make an effort like that of flying in

order to break away from a history that has been unfair to them. However, to do this in a realistic and effective way they need to use the history of writing itself in order to subvert it:

Flying is woman's gesture—flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we've been able to possess anything only by flying; we've lived in flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers. It's no accident that *voler* has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. It's no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. They (*illes*) go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down. (Cixous 887)

For Cixous, flight stands for a liberated and creative effort to establish a truly feminist art. Cixous proposed a woman's writing that takes the body as its inspiration and focal question. The body here does not limit woman's writing to a specific style or subject matter; on the contrary, this subject opens up woman's writing to great vistas of wisdom. The body inspires an art that is inclusive as it is able to embrace the contrary views of the Other instead of rejecting and marginalizing them:

Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours, daring to make these vertiginous crossings of the other(s) ephemeral and passionate sojourns in him, her, them, whom she inhabits long enough to look at from the point closest to their unconscious from the moment they awaken, to love them at the point closest to their drives; and then further,

impregnated through and through with these brief, identificatory embraces, she goes and passes into infinity. (Cixous 889)

Cixous's ideas here were anticipated by Rukeyser's philosophy of a feminist art that can incorporate, reconcile, and benefit from contrary elements in the body, in nature, and in the history of writing.

Rukeyser sought to create a woman's writing that reflected the human connection to the cosmos and its dynamism, and that is through a genuine understanding of the female body and connecting with it. The body, for Rukeyser, is the center of energy that lives by connecting to all her forms of dynamic life on earth, natural or technological. One of the stages in Rukeyser's life where she sensed an acute understanding and connection with her body was the stage of her pregnancy. Through the theme of pregnancy and giving birth, Rukeyser was able to construct a poetics based on rediscovery of the body as the site of regeneration, transformation, and creativity. Here is how Rukeyser described giving birth with all the significance it held for her: "Lit by a birth, I defend dark beginnings, / Waste that is never waste, most-human giving, / Declared and clear as the mortal body of grace" (*Collected Poems* 335). Giving birth represented for Rukeyser the search for a creative, innovative way of viewing the world and creating art. It is a concrete and firm way of creativity because it is connected to the motherly body. The pain involved in it is not really a waste of effort because it results in transformation and the birth of a new form, as Rukeyser declares in the following lines: "Pain strips us to the source, infants of further life / Waiting for childhood as we wait for form" (*Collected Poems* 335).

Rukeyser's philosophy is based on the body and the spiritual significance it can ultimately inspire. That is why the type of transcendence Rukeyser sought was introspective, directed toward the body rather than being free from and superior to it. Rukeyser regarded the body as the

springboard of interacting with a cosmic existence that included both material entities and lofty concepts. By emphasizing the theme of childbearing in much of her poetry, Rukeyser transcends the limits of logical philosophy to reach a dynamic philosophy of nature and the body:

In choosing to bear a child, in accepting the immense vulnerability of that condition, she accepted the world in a way that transcends the merely philosophical. From the beginning, in *Theory of Flight*, she had accepted the world intellectually and emotionally; she had not rebelled against the given of mortal existence, as Eliot rebelled, turning to an unearthly justification for daily life. But in giving birth she accepted the process of the world in her own flesh. (Kertesz 266)

Hélène Cixous, too, was interested in the possibilities of inspiration and liberation that the body held for women writers. In her article, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Cixous suggested a form of feminist writing inspired by a rediscovery of the potential of the female body. She believed that the process of childbearing is one of the opportunities of having a genuine female experience, away from the patriarchic representations and stereotyping that historically dominated and distorted the portrayal of that process. In the following quote Cixous considered pregnancy, along with the other bodily functions of the female body, as sources of creativity and truth:

Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive—all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive—just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood. We are not going to refuse, if it should happen to strike our fancy, the unsurpassed pleasures of pregnancy which have actually been always exaggerated or conjured away—or cursed—in the classic texts. For if there’s one thing that’s been repressed here’s just the place to find it; in the taboo of the pregnant woman. (Cixous 891)

Rukeyser used the image of pregnancy and childbirth to express her embracing of the body and nature in all their aspects. Gestation, as a natural process, inspired Rukeyser to conceive of all aspects of the body and nature as complementing and enriching each other, even with their contrary tension. Rukeyser's writing in turn became a reflection of her philosophy as it was able to embrace and celebrate the different types of physical and natural experience. Her writing reflected spontaneous nature as the source of creativity and a comprehensive vision of life.

Part 3.5: Rukeyser, Lawrence, and Julia Kristeva's Idea of the *Chora*

Though they can be viewed as comments or critiques of some of the movements or philosophies of her time, Rukeyser's ideas are not outmoded or restricted to her time. Her ideas, which deal with problematic areas in the human psyche, society, and politics, can echo and carry their message throughout generations. In many ways she was ahead of her time. Rukeyser's revolutionary feminist views, at a time when feminists were still struggling to define their identity, represent a significant and responsible effort, which should be cherished and seriously studied. Rukeyser continuously searched for sources of woman's potential that would empower woman and cause her liberation from an oppressive paternal culture. She saw stereotyping as a "curse" that women would have to be free from. Rukeyser believed that women can emerge from the state of a fragmented self through the principle of possibility:

We have promises to make:

We saw that in each other's eyes.

Not to accept the curse, but wake,

Never to act in formal innocence.

It was not the maze of the time

But possibility we felt

In full gaze as we began to wake. (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 352)

Rukeyser locates this core of possibility as the inner self, where emotional truth resides and where the conflict in character becomes a source of power and regeneration. Rukeyser exhorts women to go beyond the silence of years and the unanswered questions to explore a different reality, one that is based on how the body feels, thinks, and makes connections with the outside world and with other people:

Not the lock of these years of silence,

We knew lack, we knew withholding, but there was more,

the body of love said so—

Deep it was buried, but it lay there, in all eyes, in the meaning

of sex

Waiting for more life, for it was more, and lively,

More a child running in the fields for his joy of running,

A running like creation, beginning now to make

Day and idea, his acts, his dreams, his waking,

His live ideas of innocence. (*Collected Poems* 353)

The source of creativity that Rukeyser urges women to explore corresponds to Julia Kristeva's idea of an essential and dynamic relationship that binds us to the *chora* stage, which is rooted in the realm of early childhood. The *chora* is the pre-verbal stage that humans go through before they are initiated into the Symbolic Order and the learning of language or representations. *Chora* is the stage in childhood that "precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality" (Kristeva, *Revolution* 26). This stage antedates the web of relations that humans create between images and things according to the law of logic and language systems:

The *chora* is not yet a position that represents something for someone (i.e., it is not a sign); nor is it a position that represents someone for another position (i.e., it is not yet a signifier either); it is, however, generated in order to attain to this signifying position. Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm. (Kristeva, *Revolution* 26)

In the *chora* stage, the child learns things and makes judgments independently from the narrow and strict laws of thinking and behaving that society enforces on the individual. This stage is characterized by continuous movement and transformation. It is the site where drives are continuously in flux, destroyed and regenerated, while a state of equilibrium emerges and results from that movement: "... the semiotic *chora* is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that *produce* him" (Kristeva, *Revolution* 28, emphasis added). This state of continuous change is what brings stability into the character and sustains its existence and growth. The *chora* is based on the dominance of the early, spontaneous consciousness and the instinctual wisdom of the body, which controls and regulates a person's relationship to his surroundings. However, although we cut off our links to this stage and its laws as we grow up and use language, traces of it remain flickering somewhere in our psyche so that it seems to emerge to the surface in dreams and in the composition, and reading, of a literary text, as Kristeva suggests in her book *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

Kristeva's idea of the *chora* resembles D. H. Lawrence's idea of the unconscious, which is the basis of pure, spontaneous creativity. The person's relationship to the unconscious is established as the baby is conceived, and the unconscious gradually gains control as the baby

grows, before the life of the unconscious is disturbed by the mechanical, mental tools of perception and by the laws of logic. “It [the unconscious] is that active spontaneity which rouses in each individual organism at the moment of fusion of the parent nuclei, and which, in polarized connection with the external universe, gradually evolves or elaborates its own individual psyche and corpus, bringing both mind and body forth from itself” (Lawrence, *Psychoanalysis* 42).

Lawrence believed in the unconscious’s, or the soul’s, creative ability to organize an individual’s relationship with the basic elements of his existence, the mind and the body, and also to govern how the individual interacts with his surroundings. Lawrence went further to confirm that the unconscious is the force that arranges body functions and the processes that sustain the vitality of the body: “Thus it is that the unconscious brings forth not only consciousness, but tissue and organs also. And all the time the working of each organ depends on the primary spontaneous-conscious centre of which it is the issue—if you like, the soul-centre” (Lawrence, *Psychoanalysis* 42). Lawrence believed that the body has a soul of its own. This soul of the body, which is the unconscious, is more perceptive and creative than the brain, as the former is unencumbered by the mechanical rules of logic or by social conventions. This soul, which is different from the traditional, religious sense of the soul, organizes a person’s physical relationship with the world in a creative way so that a person’s life is enriched by his physical contact with people and things. However, its voice is repressed and ignored as it consistently clashes with a mentality and culture based on a rigid, mechanical way of thinking that lacks the dynamism that the unconscious offers to change and rebuild our relationship with the world.

Lawrence contrasted the unconscious, which stays hidden or dormant in the individual as he grows up, with the mechanical ways of thinking that we acquire as we grow up. He believed that the mechanical processes of thinking are necessary and functional but they should not dominate a

person's way of thinking and feeling. We should make the revolutionary step of attempting to explore and understand the way the body perceives and relates to things, and this would unveil to us a long-ignored source of creative life and thought. Lawrence trusted body instinct more than the mental rules that humans devise to establish an easier, possibly shallower, way of communication: "True, we must all develop into mental consciousness. But mental consciousness is not a goal; it is a cul-de-sac. It provides us only with endless *appliances* which we can use for the all-too-difficult business of coming to our spontaneous-creative fullness of being [...] This is the use of the mind—a great indicator and instrument. The mind as author and director of life is anathema (Lawrence, *Psychoanalysis* 48-49). Rukeyser, in her book *The Life of Poetry*, asserted that logic is only the symbol of reality, which is actually located in a source inside us. That source helps us see things with a fresh, unprejudiced perspective, away from the binaries we have created to exclude elements that are really essential to our vital life. Rukeyser used the term "primitive" to describe the pure, truly open-minded way of thinking and believing, and expressed the view that we are far behind that advanced form of character despite the great technological developments of our time:

The century [the twentieth century] has only half-prepared us to be primitives. The time requires our full consciousness, humble, audacious, clear; but we have nightmares of contradiction [...] Behind us overhang the projections of giantism, the inflated powers over all things, according to which nature became some colony of imperial and scientific man, and Fact and Logic his throne and scepter. He forgot that that scepter and that throne were signs. Fact is a symbol, Logic is a symbol: they are symbols of the real. (177)

Rukeyser sought in her writings to reach, along with her reader, a place in the imagination that transcends the limited operations of the mind and rules of logic. She looked for a source of

creativity inside herself and inside her reader that accommodated the principle of process and the possibility of continuous regeneration, which ultimately leads to a feeling of fulfillment and equilibrium. In this source, concepts are continuously questioned, revised and recreated in a process that matches and reflects a nature that is in continuous flux and transformation, which maintains balance and sustains existence in it. When we reach that source of creativity, we will be able to view things in a different way; we will not be shackled anymore by conventional binaries or historical stereotypes. We can make our own fresh, perceptive judgments that are based on a comprehensive, inclusive vision. In a poem entitled “Untitled,” Rukeyser described the journey that will finally take a person to the mysterious yet essential source of creativity:

All I can promise if you go your journey
 Is that you will come to a place of fire
 And a place of night and then another place
 Nobody now alive has ever predicted.

The gate of that place is water. It is called Process. (*Collected Poems* 397)

What Rukeyser points to above is a place where we are simultaneously destroyed and regenerated. It is a place where we can risk transforming ourselves and reviewing our notions of ourselves and the world around us. It is also a place of music, where all types of different and conflicting notes struggle and interact with each other so that a beautiful, balanced, firmly established whole can finally be achieved through that process. That place transcends our conventional notions of time and links us to resources of the past that have always been inside us, in our present. In the following piece, Rukeyser coins the expression “clearoscore” to show that though the idea of a deep psychic core is obscure and hidden from view, it is also clear as it touches every aspect of our life and as it is an integral part of each of us:

Voice diving deep.
 Deep in the lights of silence.
 When night no longer imagines sunlight,
 And we going darker come to all music,
 Deep in the clearoscure, where we alone
 And all alone go through the texture of time
 To the flowing present that becomes all things,
 The energy of myth and star and bone. (*Collected Poems* 394)

One of the great possibilities of finding and tapping from the source of creativity that Rukeyser points to is through the poetic text and the poetic experience. The poetic experience—that is, the composition, reading, and sharing of poetic truth—enlightens us to the dynamic web of relations inside us and in the outside world. Through the arrangement of parts in a poem we can see that truth as a balanced entity is nothing but the continuously rearranged relationship between different elements. Poetry holds the potential to take us to the *chora* stage by briefly cutting our links to the thetic stage, which corresponds, according to Kristeva, to the Symbolic Order. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva compares art in its ability to question and subvert social and linguistic rules, to sacrifice as a social and ritual construct. Although sacrifice is first established as a break of the thetic law, it soon turns into part of the religious system of a group, supporting and bolstering it. However, art, throughout its history, continues to break and question the credibility of the thetic rules. So, while sacrifice is a literal death that loses its significance as it enters the system of belief, art continues a process of destruction and resurrection that causes renewal, and maintains the life and place of art in our life: “Art—this

semiotization¹⁶ of the symbolic—thus represents the flow of jouissance into language. Whereas sacrifice assigns jouissance its productive limit in the social and symbolic order, art specifies the means—the only means—that jouissance harbors for infiltrating that order” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 79).

Art does not only subvert the Symbolic Order and interrogate the predominant notions of language and communication; it transforms the audience witnessing it as it opens them to the possibility of questioning their long-held views and makes them view the world in a different way. Through the text, the reader as a fixed entity turns into a subject in process, who is able to review his belief system and to flexibly experiment with ideas so that he has a continuously fresh perspective of things:

“Literary” and generally “artistic” practice transforms the dependence of the subject on the signifier into a test of its freedom in relation to the signifier and reality. It is a trial where the subject reaches both its limits (the laws of the signifier) and the objective possibilities (linguistic and historic) of their displacement, by including the tensions of the “ego” within historical contradictions, and by gradually breaking away from these tensions as the subject includes them in such contradictions and reconciles them to their struggles. (Kristeva, *Desire* 97)

Finally, Rukeyser’s view of our relationship to both the body and technology is based on her philosophy of the essential relationships that hold the world together and sustain its growth and creative processes. For Rukeyser, technology reflects dynamic process, as does the body, with its deeper consciousness; we should learn, by understanding how they reflect each other, the life of

¹⁶ The semiotic, according to Kristeva, is the stage of consciousness that precedes the Symbolic, or thetic, one. It corresponds to the *chora* stage.

process and continuous change, and how tension between opposites leads to equilibrium and genuine peace. In Rukeyser's philosophy, opposition is not a source of division and enmity. Difference is a source of power as opposites interact to create balance. Rukeyser's idea is based on the human potential for change, which links humans' spiritual power to a nature that is based on cycles of necessary destruction and subsequent rebirth and renewal:

Child of the possible, who rides the hour
 Of dream and process, lit by every fire.
 Glittering blood of song, a man who changed
 And hardly changed, only flickered, letting pass
 A glint of time, showers of human meanings
 Flashing upon us all: his story and his song. (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 399)

We have seen in our discussion of some of Rukeyser's poems how she consistently seeks to transcend a superficial relationship with the body and the world around us to reach a different, deeper level of existence. That level of consciousness is inside us and can be reached through the body, but it needs a continuous search to reach the moment of discovery. This moment of discovery can be experienced at some of its levels in the process of reading creative and truthful poetry. When Rukeyser speaks of our inner systems of life and feeling, she points to what seems like Julia Kristeva's idea of the *chora* stage of life. For Rukeyser, this stage is the inner spontaneous self, which has been hidden and repressed by our modern way of life and its rules of behavior and judgment. By perceiving and acknowledging this stage in ourselves, a new relationship can be established with ourselves and the world around us. This relationship is based on an immediate way of perception, by viewing things not through the mediation of the superficial, uniform, modern modes of logicity but through the lens of a creative, subjective,

independent relationship with everything in our life. This subjectivity is not based on an individuality that cancels the other; to the contrary, it establishes a new standard of judgment and relationship based on emotional truth and spontaneity. In one of Rukeyser's poems, "Desdichada," she describes this inner space as an unacknowledged source of truth and a different way of relating to the self and the world:

While this my day and my people are a country not yet born
 it has become an earth I can
 acknowledge. I must. I know what the
 disacknowledgment does. Then I do take you,
 but far under consciousness, knowing
 that under under flows a river wanting
 the other : to go open-handed in Asia,
 to cleanse the tributaries and the air, to make for making,
 to stop selling death and its trash, pour plastic down
 men's throats,
 to let this child find, to let men and women find,
 knowing the seeds in us all. They do say Find.
 I cannot acknowledge it entire. But I will.
 A beginning, this moment, perhaps, and you. (*Collected Poems* 474)

In this part of "Desdichada," the speaker is out of place in an age and a culture of pretensions, repressions, and artificialities. Despite the speaker's feelings of alienation, she does not fail to acknowledge the source of her spiritual power. Her way of genuine communication is through a deeper human fountain of knowledge and feeling, under a consciousness trapped by delusions.

She asserts the importance of acknowledging that source in ourselves and in other people so that our emotions and behavior will reflect our true selves. Our emotions will become the raw material for healthy communication and for heartfelt, creative poetry. Finding this expansive and mysterious source requires continuous searching. But the search has to begin; and a new life, both mental and cultural, will begin with it. This *chora*-like level of consciousness is basically within the innocent child inside each of us, but it can be re-explored by daring men and women who attempt to start that search for a pure, innocent, and inclusive core.

What can be understood as the *chora* stage, or way of perception, is reflected in Rukeyser's poetry not only on the level of themes and ideas, but also on the level of her style and poetic technique. Many images in Rukeyser's poetry are presented in their direct, pure form, without the mediation or organizing factor of rhetorical devices. At times there is no mechanism organizing the signifier's relationship with a possible signified. The images are approached and encountered head-on with the shocking immediacy of a sudden film scene. For Rukeyser, the true impact of an image is achieved when the image is experienced directly, without rhetorical devices or linkages. These devices lend a logical framework to a series of images, but they also control and represent a barrier to a reader's creative way of understanding and engaging emotionally with an image. A poem that illustrates Rukeyser's way of using imagery is her long poem "Orpheus." In this poem, Rukeyser tells the myth of Orpheus in an original way. She starts by describing the murder of Orpheus, witnessed by the natural world as a moment charged with mystery and premonition. Then Rukeyser goes, with the reader, through a process of transformation, in which Orpheus's mutilated parts start to come together by the powerful force of his desire for life, for change, and for art. In this process, Orpheus is able to transcend the moment of murder and dismemberment, and turn it into a moment of rebirth and renewal.

An example of Rukeyser's use of direct imagery is when the reader encounters an image of Orpheus's condition after his murder in the following lines, in the second part of Rukeyser's long poem: "Scattered. The fool of things. For here is Orpheus, / without his origin : the body, mother of self, / the earliest self, the mother of permanence" (*Collected Poems* 288). Rukeyser presents us with the image of something scattered before she indicates that she is speaking of Orpheus, who has been robbed of the source of his creativity, which is his body. She portrays the body here not merely as an aspect of the self or the personality but as the originator and factor that shapes and inspires the self. In the next sub-sections of Part II of the poem, Rukeyser keeps repeating the prayer-like words "The wounds : Touch me! Love me! Speak to me!" We do not know who is invoking whom here. Is it Orpheus or is it his wounds calling for a genuinely loving entity whose body and whose communication is desperately needed? Or is it the speaker, or the poet, attempting to provide her suggested solution or philosophy to a collective cultural dilemma or an individual one? There is no way of knowing for sure the answer to any of these questions since the poet does not provide quotation marks that can point to a specific persona. So it could be Orpheus, his wounds, his body, the poet, or they could all be speaking, to one another or to the reader of the poem.

The element of mystery in Rukeyser's poetry is based on the fact that there are many levels to Rukeyser's poetry. Rukeyser created poetry that is multi-layered; it tackled cultural and philosophical questions and it contained autobiographical details. Rukeyser managed to bring the public, the individual, and the reader together in one crucible. The above image of Orpheus's wounds is an example of Rukeyser's use of direct or bare imagery, in which the image is not defined in terms of a strict relationship to a specific signified. A question emerges from this discussion: How does this aspect of Rukeyser's poetic style relate to the qualities of the *chora*

stage? I think that Rukeyser, through the style of her imagery, attempted to reflect a level of consciousness different from the superficial one with which we recognize the world and communicate in the social sphere. She sought to approach and portray the world of imagery with her deeper self, free from the conventionalities or artificialities of literature or speech.

Rukeyser's vision is deep as much as it is inclusive and comprehensive. At times she even transgressed the rules of syntax in order to express the raw power of the message she was trying to communicate. An example of Rukeyser's free treatment of syntax are the following lines from "Orpheus": "The arm that living held the lyre / understands touch me, the thrill of string on hand / saying to fingers Who am I?" (*Collected Poems* 290). Rukeyser uses a verb after the verb "understands" in the second line though she is supposed to use a noun for an object. She does this to express the urgency of the invocation of the lyre for a way of touching that understands it. Rukeyser's poetic style is consistent with Julia Kristeva's view of the subversive effect of art on the social and symbolic order, as she discusses it in her book *Revolution in Poetic Language*: "In cracking the socio-symbolic order, splitting it open, changing vocabulary, syntax, the word itself, and releasing from beneath them the drives borne by vocalic or kinetic differences, jouissance works its way into the social and symbolic" (Kristeva 79-80). Art here is the best means of reaching a state of spontaneity in viewing the world and reacting to its events, away from the regulated, formal ways of thinking and behaving that we learn through the social and symbolic order.

A quality that distinguishes Rukeyser's poetic style is the way certain key motifs and expressions keep recurring throughout a poem and in her poetry in general. One of these motifs is Rukeyser's Romantic theory of dynamic change and the potential, spiritual power of the body in shaping our relationship with our own selves and with the world. Another motif that recurs in

Rukeyser's poetry is form as the guide and inspiration for creativity. Form for Rukeyser is the web of dialectic relationships feeding and supporting each other in an integrated work of art. We can find these ideas throughout Rukeyser's poem "Orpheus." At one stage in the poem Orpheus regains his voice despite, or because of, his wounds as he discovers and develops a form that enables him to channel his creativity in a coherent, dynamic whole:

A mist of blood and fire shines over the body,
shining upon the mountain, a rose of form.

And now the wounds losing self-pity change,
they are mouths, they are the many mouths of music.

And now they, disappear. He is made whole.

The mist dissolves into the body of song. (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 293)

Rukeyser's emphasis on the body stems from her interest on form, which acts as the various parts of a body make up a whole by interacting with and feeding each other in different types of relationships. Rukeyser uses the expression "body of song" to show that the form the body reaches here is that of relational process. The form is like music in that it is sustained by the continuous creation and re-creation of different types of relationships. The body, for Rukeyser, reflects the fact that biologic vitality as well as the energy that sustains life in all its forms is based on the interactive relations between elements, which, through these relationships, make up a whole. This is the quality that runs through both the body and technology, and it is the one that can ultimately reconcile them together. Both the body and technology derive their vitality from the interaction of contrary elements, and this is the process whereby Orpheus is able to be reborn. He is resurrected by reconciling and embracing all the elements of a vital existence, even the inconsequential and the inimical ones:

And all the weapons meld into his song.
 The weapons, the wounds, the women his murderers.
 He sings the leaves of the trees, the music of immense forests,
 the young arriving, the leaf of time and their selves
 their crying for their needs and their successes,
 developing through these to make their gifts. In flower.
 All who through crises of the body pass
 to the human life and the music of the source. (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 294)

Orpheus discovers his vital, inclusive form as his art incorporates the weapons used in his murder, his wounds, and his murderers. He artistically capitalizes on these contrary elements, which are supposed to hurt and nullify him, to supplement and enrich his art. Orpheus's song brings together the delicate "leaves of the trees," and the indomitable force of vast forests.

Rukeyser's idea that energy and life is based on the different relationships sustaining it recurs throughout her works. Rukeyser drew the inspiration for this idea from Willard Gibbs's theory that "the whole [meaning the relationships that organize its life] is simpler than the sum of all its parts" (Rukeyser, *Willard Gibbs* 303). Rukeyser kept incorporating and reiterating Gibbs's theory in her poetry, as she did in "Orpheus" when she talked about the life of the body that Orpheus comes to discover and appreciate: "His life is simpler than the sum of its parts. / The arrangement is the life. It is the song" (*Collected Poems* 294). Rukeyser's style of reiterating images and ideas, which verges on incantation, is a way of supplying her poetry with form that complements it and holds it together. Also, by repeating certain words and expressions in her poems, Rukeyser experimented with the religious style of prayer to produce the greatest effect on

the reader. Rukeyser believed in poetry as an instrument of inner change through an emotional search for truth and she took up the incantatory style as a means of achieving this.

Rukeyser's use of repeated, cyclic images and poetic expressions is, in its emotional intensity, akin to the simple yet deep, pagan way of thinking and appreciating the world, as D. H.

Lawrence brilliantly described it in his book *Apocalypse*:

To appreciate the pagan manner of thought we have to drop our manner of on-and-on-and-on, from a start to a finish, and allow the mind to move in cycles, or to flit here and there over a cluster of images. Our idea of time as a continuity in an eternal straight line has crippled our consciousness cruelly. The pagan conception of time as moving in cycles is much freer, it allows movement upwards and downwards, and allows for a complete change of the state of mind, at any moment. One cycle finished, we can drop or rise to another level, and be in a new world at once. (96-97)

Much of Rukeyser's imagery functions like the technique Lawrence describes above. She presents the reader with emotionally charged clusters of images that might not be logically linked but that emotionally enforce each other and support the final idea or position that Rukeyser aims for in a poem. We can clearly see this in "Orpheus." The poem is divided into three sections: The first one describes the scene of Orpheus's murder as witnessed and shared by the natural world, which used to interact with Orpheus's music in his life. The second section deals with the state of Orpheus's body after the murder, which is one of being shattered and in chaos, thus not able to imagine or create art. However, during this stage Orpheus starts to discover the means toward artistic creativity, which is by understanding his body as the cradle of an inner, spontaneous self, and the way that that knowledge can inspire creativity. In the third section Orpheus is reborn as he discovers the power of his body, which lies in its form. The form of the body organizes the

relationship between its parts and allows for the free interaction of all the parts of the body.

Rukeyser does not show how each of the sections of the poem leads to the next one in a logical manner. There is no logical link, for example, between a body in fragments and a body that has assumed a form and is able to live and create. The only way that the first state of the body can lead to the next is, for Rukeyser, an intense belief in and desire for change. Orpheus's wounds speak for his wish and need to express himself and his art: "Only there is a wound that cries all night. / We have not yet come through. It cries Speak, it cries Turn" (Rukeyser, *Collected Poems* 291). For Rukeyser, desire is the greatest factor for change. Desire here is not a transitory state of feeling; it is a firm belief that sustains one in his attempt for positive change. Rukeyser affirmed the importance of having the desire for change throughout her career, since the publication of her first volume of poetry *Theory of Flight*. In the central poem of that volume, she suggested that desire is the power that can propel us to fly: "Cut with your certain wings; engrave space now / to your ambition : stake off sky's dimensions" (*Collected Poems* 22). Rukeyser described desire and ambition in sensual and concrete images as she did in these lines: "... Orbit of thought / what axis do you lean on, what strictnesses evade / impelled to the long curves of the will's ambition?" (*Collected Poems* 24). We can see from her use of what Lawrence described as a primitive style of imagery that Rukeyser experimented with ancient forms to reflect a deeper level of experience and source of wisdom. Her ideas as well as her style reflect a search for identity that took her and can take the reader to the deeper recesses of human nature and human consciousness. Rukeyser's attempt to discover a deeper truth and the inner self was motivated by her search for a cosmic source of creative energy that included the body, nature, and technology in one dynamic whole sustained by the tension and relationship between all forms of life no matter how contrary they are to each other.

As we have seen in her poem “Orpheus,” Rukeyser attaches a great importance to form as a factor of transformation and creativity. Form for Rukeyser is the process whereby the contrary elements of an entity sustain their life and their wholeness by making and remaking relationships among themselves. Through these relationships they enrich and complement their existence as these relations foster the entity’s creativity. This is especially the case when talking about the body as a creative entity. However, Rukeyser’s philosophy does not stop with the body. Dynamic, relational form exists in a work of art as well. This philosophy enlightens our relationship to the body, to art, and to technology, as all are part of dynamic, connective nature. Form in the body is rooted in the area of the psyche that Rukeyser calls the inner self, but the inner self has cosmic connections with all aspects of life. The machine is not an exception here as the relationships that sustain energy in it are similar to the ones sustaining life in dynamic nature. The principle of dynamic relationship, for Rukeyser, is the one that can enable us to build constructive, interactive, and responsible ties with all the factors in our existence no matter how contrary or limiting they seem or they actually are.

In her inspired and innovative technique, Rukeyser empowered and enriched poetry and philosophy so that they could both play a greater, more important role in our modern life. She showed that poetry can help us understand ourselves, the world around us, and even deal with technology in a different, more creative and more responsible way. She was a true prophet of our age who believed in her message of poetry and she worked all her life to communicate and represent that message.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I think that the central idea in Muriel Rukeyser's philosophy and poetry and the one that brings together nature, the body, and technology, is that of relational form as it is reflected in all these entities. Relational form means the dynamic interaction and tension between all elements, including contrary and minor ones, making a system whole and sustaining it. This form is part of nature, part of the body, and it represents the mechanism upon which the process in a machine is based. We can observe Rukeyser's interest and belief in relational form in most of her poetry since her early volume of poetry *Theory of Flight*, when she declared that "Flight is intolerable contradiction" (*Collected Poems* 47). Rukeyser drew inspiration for her idea of form from different sources, like Willard Gibbs's scientific theory called the Phase Rule, as well as liberal ideas of politics and democracy. However, the most important source for Rukeyser's interest in relational form is the body with its great hidden potential and all the mysterious realms it represents. The body in our modern times has gained the lion's share in all types of cultural stereotyping, representations, distortions, and exploitation. Rukeyser worked on the body since it represented to her the locus of cultural repressions, complexes, and myths. Rukeyser focused on the female body as it has mainly been the victim of those representations.

A question emerges here: What has the body, or the female body for that matter, to do with Rukeyser's idea of relational form, in its philosophical or aesthetic aspects? For Rukeyser, the body is the best reflection of the idea of relational form. The body's life is sustained by the total, dynamic interaction of all its parts and the natural tension between them. Moreover, all parts of the body, through their interaction, are necessary to the life of the body. There should not be prejudice or shame against any part or function of the body as they are all essential to it. There is also another aspect of the body that should not be ignored, which is its unconscious, apparent in

the different instinctual drives and desires reflecting its vitality. As cited in this thesis, D. H. Lawrence believed that it is the creative force of the unconscious that organizes the functions and the movement of the body as well as the body's relationship to the world. The mind is supposed to be one of the functions and instruments of the unconscious. Rukeyser's idea of the body as a reflection of relational form is also the basis of her rejection of logocentric binaries, which are all rooted, as Cixous affirmed, in "the' couple man/woman" (Cixous, quoted by Ayres 150), which in its turn is related to historical representations of the male and female body. For Rukeyser, the terms in a binary do not, in fact, exclude each other but are related and continuously interact with each other. Rukeyser's view of the body as sustained by dynamic relations also informs her idea of history and democracy. Rukeyser believed that all events and facts in history, even the shameful, ignored, or forgotten ones, hold useful lessons and are part of the present. Democracy, for Rukeyser, means that we are free to explore our history even with its painful or repressed episodes. Also, real peace and democracy in a society are realized if the latter is dynamic enough to accommodate the healthy, constructive tension and interaction between its contrary forces as it leads to permanent peace and democracy.

As for the aesthetic aspect of Rukeyser's relational philosophy, it can be observed in her view of the poem as a dynamic system. The poem, for Rukeyser, is an organic system whose parts are involved in a process of continuous interaction. The parts and images of a poem keep exchanging energy and creating new relationships with each other throughout time and as the poem is read by different generations of readers. Rukeyser even thinks of the system of a poem in terms of feedback and its rules, as we can see in the following quote:

The notion of feedback, as it is used in calculating machines and such linked structures as the locks of the Panama Canal, is set forth. The relations of information and feedback in

computing machines and the nervous system, as stated here, raise other problems. What are imaginative information and imaginative feedback in poetry? What are the emotional equivalents for these relationships? How far do these truths of control and communication apply to art? (*Life of Poetry* 186-187)

In this quote, Rukeyser attempted to experimentally apply what she observed in technology and the body, to art, poetry, and the emotional aspect of the psyche, thus bringing all these elements together in one general, relational system of growth and creativity.

Relational form is the underlying principle that unites nature and the body on one side, with science and technology on the other. For Rukeyser, the system that sustains life in all its forms and brings all fields of knowledge together is that of dynamic relationship. It is also the system that holds a work of art together and governs the latter's relationship to its audience. All stages and processes in a relationship contribute to its growth and development; even failure and chaos are part of its creative process as they are exploited for the process of regeneration and transformation. Just as it represents an essential aspect of growth in the world of nature, chaos for Rukeyser is an integral and natural part of the process of cultural change and rebirth. Rukeyser believed that just like energy, entropy is shared for the dynamic life and development of a poem. Rukeyser's type of optimism is not simply Whitmanesque or Romantic in its nature; she is realistic as she wisely applies the principles of history and science to her conception of art and culture. Rukeyser saw that part of her mission as a poet and a prophet was to bring estranged fields, including science, art, and the body, together, and conceive of principles that unite all aspects of our life in one source of creativity and dynamism.

Despite the clarity and simplicity of her poetics, Rukeyser is difficult to categorize in terms of her art, whether it is prose or poetry. This is not because of the presumed obscurity of Rukeyser's

art or style but because of the comprehensiveness and eclecticism of her art and philosophy.

Rukeyser drew inspiration from such varied historical figures as S. T. Coleridge, J. G. Percival, J. H. Poincaré, and Willard Gibbs. She embraced aspects from different philosophies. Rukeyser's poetry combined elements and qualities that can be described as proletarian, feminist, Romantic, and even realistic, but it is difficult to categorize her as solely belonging to any of those movements. Rukeyser refused to be bound by any specific dogma or literary movement, though she contributed to them all. Comprehensiveness and experimentalism are the two qualities that best characterize Rukeyser's art and style. Also, what characterizes her art and her personality is her activism and her belief in human responsibility and potential for change. Rukeyser was truly larger than life. She was larger than her present, and she is especially essential to us in our time as her perceptive insights represent a source of tender but forceful spirituality in a materialistic age. Rukeyser sorted out dilemmas that we are still grappling with in our time, like our relationship to the body and our relationship to technology. Studying Rukeyser yields the greatest rewards and discoveries and makes us revise our preconceived notions of many concepts that we daily use in our life. That is why I believe that Rukeyser was not merely a great poet or writer of the twentieth century but was one of the few prophets of our modern times.

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