

Muriel Rukeyser
Selected Poems
Edited by Adrienne Rich
Bloodaxe Books
£12, 214 pages

‘Accords Of Components Whose End Is Truth.’

Muriel Rukeyser: Selected Poems, the long-awaited UK issue of the 2004 Library of America publication, is edited by the late Adrienne Rich with the intention of providing ‘an indispensable introduction to the adventurous and prolific work of one of the most significant and influential American poets of the 20th century’ (jacket blurb). As such, it contributes to the current reclamation of Rukeyser (1913-1980) as a key poetic and cultural figure of our times, addressing an overdue need not only to revive the deeply ethical, pluralistic and pragmatic poetics that Rukeyser’s work embodies, but to understand more fully the aesthetic and political climate of twentieth-century America; its restrictions, its exigencies, and its transnational complexities. Rukeyser was indeed prolific: her published oeuvre includes fifteen books of poetry (not including the *Collected Poems*, the definitive edition of which was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press in 2005), an extended critical treatise on contemporary culture and the role and life of poetry within it, three prose biographies, a play, several documentary films and magazine photo-essays, a hybrid written documentary-memoir, five children’s books, translations of Navaho and Eskimo poetry, as well as that of Octavio Paz, and an autobiographically-infused novel, published recently by the Feminist Press at CUNY. That Rukeyser died at the relatively young age of sixty-six, and that by the time she was thirty-five, she had already published five books of poems and one biography (not to mention learnt to fly, contracted typhoid in an Alabama jail, lived in Mexico, trained as a film editor, witnessed and written about several social crises, including the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and World War II, and become a single mother) makes this achievement even more impressive.

A social activist, a defender of the vulnerable, and a devoted friend, mother and lover, Rukeyser infused her poetry with a belief in the strength and beauty of humanity despite humanity’s propensity for self-destruction. Rukeyser’s writing, like the indebted Rich’s after her, was shaped out of the social upheavals and injustices to which she was witness; her most known work, *The Book of the Dead (U.S.A., 1938)*, is the result of her trip to Gauley Bridge in West Virginia to report on the industrial mining disaster that had claimed hundreds of lives. The poem series, drawn from generously in this publication, is Rukeyser’s masterpiece: a perfect balance of documentary

realism, subjective lyricism and mystical dramatism, finding harmony in the blending of Whitmanian, ancient Egyptian, Jungian and Marxian strains to articulate the silenced voices of history. By fusing the voice of a bereaved mother and her terminally ill, silicotic son with the text of the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead in 'Absalom', for example, Rukeyser injects the narratives of the dispossessed with a mythic agency that elevates her own poetic voice to advance a revisionary, feminist mythology:

*I have gained mastery over my heart
I have gained mastery over my two hands
...*

They called it pneumonia at first.
They would pronounce it fever.
Shirley asked that we try to find out.
That's how they learned what the trouble was.

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

He shall not be diminished, never;
I shall give a mouth to my son.

(38-9)

Speaking out of silence was key to Rukeyser's aesthetics, and speaking across divides—whether historical, social, political or psychological—was paramount to her poetics of connection. Concerned with relation and multiplicity, and fuelled by an insatiable intellectual appetite, Rukeyser should be considered in the tradition of Walt Whitman, whose encompassing vision and delight in internal contradiction she evidently shared. Her vision also finds a correlative in the phenomenological, quasi-mystical acuity of Hart Crane, and of the documentary, social awareness and modernist intermediality of John Dos Passos and James Agee. That Rukeyser's literary ancestors and influences were mainly male partly indicates the reason why she was often marginalised by the cultural establishment and even by members of the literary Left during her lifetime. As Louise Kertesz wrote in 1980 (during the first move toward a Rukeyser revival), 'No woman made the successful fusion of personal and social themes in a modern prosody before Rukeyser.' Adrienne Rich too, in her introduction to the selection, indicates her old mentor's refusal to be compartmentalised, acknowledging her as 'one of the great integrators, seeing the fragmentary world of modernity not as irretrievably broken, but in need of societal and emotional repair'. Rich and

several other female poets, including Denise Levertov, Anne Sexton, Sharon Olds, Marilyn Hacker and Alice Walker, have noted how Rukeyser's insistence on the reconstruction of societal values and the breaking of embedded axioms constituted a strong feminist influence to their work. However, this aspect of Rukeyser's poetics, as well as her resistance to a 'feminine' lyricism, comprises only part of Rukeyser's contribution to the life of poetry.

What is most remarkable about Rukeyser's work—and this collection affords a glimpse at it that is both pleasing and tantalising—is its enormous capacity for combination. Her writing extends an openness to knowledge and experience that hinges the political on the private and the personal on the public, wielding poetry not as a weapon to combat the various closures both of the mind and the world it encounters, but as a means to clear open ground for discursive contact between the two. In 1949, Rukeyser published *The Life of Poetry*, an extraordinary prose explication of poetry's vitality and democratic necessity, in which she astutely notes that 'American poetry has been part of a culture in conflict.' Recognising that 'we are a people tending toward democracy at the level of hope', Rukeyser saw also that 'it is the history of the idea of war that is beneath our other histories' (61). This ideology, embedded deep in the rock of our age, and extending to most of the world, works at ground level in the desires that drive the unconscious self, and the fears that manifest so often in our conscious inability to achieve meaningful and trusting contact with others. Yet Rukeyser fiercely rejected the ossification of history, and with it, the reification of poetry. 'Around and under and above it is another reality', she continues, 'the history of possibility.'

Not vaguer than the other principle [an entropic sliding towards 'war' and 'death'], it leads to definite things; but since these are future things, they cannot be described under the present daylight, the present poems are not their songs but will be their old ballads, anonymous, and their traditional tunes. All we can do is believe in the seed, living in that belief. (62)

For Rukeyser, then, poetry is and must be understood as a 'usable' resource—a lesson in living ethically in the world. The individual's fear of the future is due to a refusal to believe in it, in turn the result of a rootedness in a univocal historical narrative. The individual's fear of poetry is similarly located in a tradition of compartmentalisation, wherein poetry is strangled in classrooms and herded into specialised 'fields', when it should be brought 'into the real and active life' (14). The following lines from the exemplary 'Breaking Open' (1973), puzzlingly omitted from Rich's selection, embody this ethical urgency, resonating with a living responsibility that finds articulation in French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas' phenomenological ethics of the 'face to face':

The movement of life : to live more fully in the present. This movement includes the work of bringing this history to “light” and understanding. 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.

Rukeyser yokes the historical and the personal together throughout her entire oeuvre, adamant that the systems of the social can be addressed at root in the workings of the individual; that the failures of democracy can be located in the fears of the unconscious self. ‘In our culture’, she writes in *The Life of Poetry*, ‘with its demand for permanent patterns, we see a complicated danger, not caused by the flaws of any one method, but by the balance which has been attained, a balance of a perpetuated conflict, in which everything and every quality is set *against* another thing or another quality’ (64).

If arguing for the pragmatics of poetry is an essentially American stance, Rukeyser’s position as a patriot cannot be denied. Indeed, while urging a turn away from a culture of separatism and suppression, Rukeyser celebrated what she saw as a particularly American tradition of ‘axiom-breaking’ (63). Among her somewhat Emersonian pantheon of inspiring ‘lives’ (a series of eight biographical poems that spanned four poetry collections), Rukeyser placed five New-Englanders: the author and essayist John Chapman (1862-1933), the modernist and classical composer Charles E. Ives (1874-1954), the visionary painter Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847-1917), the working-class labour leader and union organiser Ann Burlak (1911-2002), and the physicist and mathematician Willard Gibbs (1839-1903), the latter two of which are included in the *Selected Poems*. In both ‘lives’, the ethical imperative to challenge received wisdom in order to speak a new truth drives the poetic line forward. In ‘Ann Burlak’, one recognises the poet’s voice in the rallies of the unionist, who must ‘be seen, a voice on a platform’ (98):

...her words live, they issue from this life.
She scatters clues. She speaks from all these faces
and from the centre of a system of lives
who speak the desire of worlds moving unmade
saying, “Who owns the world?” and waiting for the cry.

(103)

In ‘Gibbs’, the voice is quieter, yet the words are still addressed to, and received from, ‘the composite face of the world’:

Austerity, continence, veracity, the full truth flowing
not out from the beginning and the base,
but from accords of components whose end is truth.
Thought resting on these laws enough becomes
an image of the world, restraint among
breaks manacles, breaks the known life before
Gibbs' pale and steady eyes.

He knew the composite
many-dimensional spirit, the phases of its face,
found the tremendous level of the world,
Energy...

(97)

These poems, and several others in the selection, point to Rukeyser's insistence throughout her life on the value of interdisciplinarity, her constant quest to uncover the interconnectedness of things, and her belief that poetry is, in her words, a 'meeting-place'. As Rich asserts in her introduction, 'the range and daring of [Rukeyser's] work, its generosity of vision, its formal innovations, and its level of energy are unequalled among twentieth-century poets'. This meeting is figured persistently throughout the book in terms of the human encounter of the 'face to face', an ethical relation rooted in a dynamic of witness and responsibility between the self and the other that Levinas saw as extending to 'the whole of humanity' (*Totality and Infinity*, 213).

Poetry's capacity to facilitate and dramatise ethical connection is made explicit in the poem 'Reading Time : 1 minute 26 seconds' from *A Turning Wind* (1939), where the fear of intersubjectivity is figured by Rukeyser as the familiar fear of poetry itself. The poem's first lines prepare the reader for the equivalencies of this debilitation, and in the following stanzas relations are imagined between people, their creations, and the environments into which their creations are released, each element a participant in an enduring 'climax' of cognitive perceptivity. The poem is worth quoting in full:

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

That round waiting moment in the
theatre : curtain rises, dies into the ceiling
and here is played the scene with the mother
bandaging a revealed son's head. The bandage is torn off.
Curtain goes down. And here is the moment of proof.

That climax when the brain acknowledges the world,
all values extended into the blood awake.
Moment of proof. And as they say Brancusi did,
building his bird to extend the soaring air,
as Kafka planned stories that draw to eternity
through time extended. And the climax strikes.

Love touches so, that months after the look of
blue stare of love, the footbeat on the heart
is translated into the pure cry of birds
following air-cries, or poems, the new scene.
Moment of proof. That strikes long after act.

They fear it. They turn away, hand up palm out
fending off moment of proof, the straight look, poem.
The prolonged wound-consciousness after the bullet's shot.
The prolonged love after the look is dead,
the yellow joy after the song of the sun.

(85-6)

A deceptively complex poem, 'Reading Time : 1 minute 26 seconds' is alive with the richness of the present moment. However, it also unspools this 'moment of proof' in a manner similar to Henri Bergson's metaphor of duration, unwinding it from a precise point of personal narrative to its wider, worldly coil that spirals round all things (the spiral was, for Rukeyser, the ultimate symbol of natural power and progress, a 'sacred circuit' in which can be traced the 'human passion for a relationship... between growth and form' (*LP*, 37, 38)). Instants of trauma and of love are dual pricks to human consciousness that extend far beyond their moment of action or reception. In so doing, they form and inform the poem, which in turn goes much further than representing the connection between the act of reading and its duration (thus, the admonishing irony of the poem's title), but constitutes the 'meeting-place' of experience, form and time, and demonstrates the 'prolonged' effect of such a meeting beyond the apparently simple reading of the poem. The poem, then, the embodiment of the 'moment of proof', is figured as an encounter between the personal and the historical, between the broadly social and the interpersonally sexual (it is, after all, a double 'climax'), performing its own act of dual perforation in the awakening 'brain': it is the preparatory, punctuating mark of the colon of the title and stanzas one and two. It is also a coming together of what Rukeyser called elsewhere the 'document' and the 'unverifiable fact', the latter 'based in dreams, in sex, in everything that can be given to other people only through the skill and strength by which it is given' ('Education', 226). The poem, working on the level of the sensual and the cognitive, of historical reality and personal myth, is a lesson in ethical witness.

At its best, Rukeyser's poetry is peerless in its capacity to connect assumedly conflicting discourses, disciplines and modalities. The lines of 'Reading time' bear the weight of the social realities of the time in which they were written; Rukeyser had been evacuated from Barcelona at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, had witnessed first-hand the devastating effects of the ongoing Great Depression, had lived through the First World War and was writing at the eve of the Second. The poem comes directly after the exquisite long poem 'Fifth Elegy: A Turning Wind', the last in the first instalment of a series of ten elegies that Rukeyser would complete in 1948 with *The Green Wave*. In 'Fifth Elegy', history speaks louder, with the voice of the poet. It begins:

Knowing the shape of the country. Knowing the midway travels of
migrant fanatics, living that life, up with the dawn and
moving as long as the light lasts, and when the sun is falling
to wait, still standing;

and when the black has come, at last lie down, too tired to
turn to each other, feeling only the land's demand under them.
Shape that exists not as permanent quality, but varies with
even the movement of bone.

(79)¹

Rukeyser, having 'lived in the first century of world wars' ('Poem', 149), knew of the shifting demands and contingencies of one's homeland, and the strain exerted by social crises on the human soul. Yet 'in time of crisis, we summon up our strength', she wrote in *The Life of Poetry* (1), and as 'Fifth Elegy' begins by following the Great Depression's dispossessed across the American landscape, 'too tired to / turn to each other' at the end of the day, so it ends by imagining their journey in mythical, inclusive terms, leading to a prophesied America in which a Levinasian ethical relation once more hints at erotic connection:

May permit knowledge of self, a lover's wish of conversion
until the time when the dead lake rises in light,
the shape is organised in travelling space,
this hope of travel, to find place again,
rest in the triumph of the reconceived,
lie down again together face to face.

(85)

This poem, like so many of Rukeyser's, reaches for social and personal change via the act of witness—a word Rukeyser chose over 'reader' or 'audience' for

its 'overtone of responsibility', its 'climate of excitement and revelation' that announces 'that we are about to change, that work is being done on the self' (*LP*, 175). As Kertesz has pointed out, Rukeyser was ahead of Charles Olson and Robert Duncan in their proposals of the poem as a field of energy exchange. Rukeyser lectured throughout the 1940s across America on poetry and communication; the driving wheel of her poetics was invariably the interactive dynamism of the poem itself:

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.

(*LP*, 173)

The inter-subjective dialogues engendered by Rukeyser's poems are often, therefore, analogies of the act of reading poetry. In the second poem in the selection, the much-anthologised 'Effort at Speech between Two People' (*Theory of Flight*, 1935), written by Rukeyser when she was just 22 years old, the express need for openness is articulated with touchingly stilted effort:

: Speak to me. Take my hand. What are you now?
I will tell you all. I will conceal nothing.

...

: Oh, grow to know me. I am not happy. I will be open:
Now I am thinking of white sails against a sky like music,
like glad horns blowing, and birds tilting, and an arm about me.

(5)

The colons that we see later in 'Reading Time' representing both the ironic separation that people impose on poetry and consciousness, and the dual ethical workings of open revelation and giving, here communicate the difficulty in communication. The wish and the need are present—'If we could touch one another, / if these our separate entities could come to grips'—and the erotic tension that underlies so much of Rukeyser's writing occupies the silences in the poem's lines. Yet the fear that Rukeyser later underscores as the central obstacle of our times imposes insistently in 'Effort at Speech'; 'There has been fear in my life,' the narrator admits. This fear, boldly battled in much of Rukeyser's work, found its way into some of her later poems by assuming the inflections of mortality when her health was weak, and her vitality, it seemed, was challenged. In 'Resurrection of the Right Side'

(*The Gates*, 1973), Rukeyser contemplates the physical and ontological effects of the stroke she had suffered:

When the half-body dies its frightful death
forked pain, infection of snakes, lightning, pull down the
voice. ...

...

I go running in sleep,
but waking stumble down corridors of self, all rhythms gone.

(181-182)

However, the poem stands as testament to the fact that Rukeyser's 'voice' remained strong in moments of personal as well as social crisis—consistent with her understanding that effective social change necessarily involves an affective change to the self. The poem was written after she travelled to South Korea to stand in protest outside the prison in which the poet Kim Chi-Ha had been incarcerated. Rukeyser was used to putting her body on the line. She concludes:

A whisper attempts me, I whisper without stammer
I walk the long hall to the time of a metronome
set by a child's gun-target left-right
the power of eyesight is very slowly arriving
in this late impossible daybreak
all the blue flowers open

(182)

A good deal of Rukeyser's later poems are infused with this type of centred energy, reminiscent of the early image of flight (*Theory of Flight* was Rukeyser's first poetry collection), that incorporates both struggle and freedom; 'no bird soars in a calm', Rukeyser quotes Wilbur Wright in her delicately balanced long poem 'The Outer Banks' (*The Speed of Darkness*, 1968, 156). However, it is fair to say that Rukeyser's expansive reach led to unevenness. Rukeyser can become lost in her own voice, her writing oddly singular in its lack of nuance or precision, her expression slipping into the clumsy verbosity of the impassioned. At its best, her poetry evinces the depth and breadth of her life-affirming connection with the world; at its weakest, it lacks this dimensionality, and, as Rich observes, 'seems to run on automatic pilot.' Yet few writers attempt or are capable of the artistic, intellectual and ethical amplitude of Rukeyser's work (closer to home, John Berger comes to mind in his gift for offering new ways of looking at the world, and of communicating the understanding that in order to survive, we must at once elicit drastic change and hold everything dear), and not all readers understand

that Rukeyser was not concerned with creating beautiful poetry. She was certainly capable of it, as several poems in this volume attest, but from the very beginning of her career, she emphasised the need for reconfiguration of the stultifying and gendered social and poetic paradigms that cloak truth. To return to her beginning:

We were ready to go the long descent with Virgil
the bough's gold shade advancing forever with us,
entering the populated cold of drawing-rooms;
Sappho, with her drowned hair trailing along Greek waters,
weed binding it, a fillet of kelp enclosing
the temples' ardent fruit :

Not Sappho, Sacco.

Rebellion pioneered among our lives,
viewing from far-off many-branching deltas,
innumerable seas.

(2)

The first poem of her first collection, 'Poem Out of Childhood' answers Eliot's Prufrock with a call for a different type of lovesong. The colon here closes the door of 'cold drawing-rooms' and functions as a portal to the far-reaching multiplicity of 'rebellion' that replaces the ancient trope of the passive feminine poet with a new and necessary muse. The fact that the poem is so often quoted in a three-word fragment—'Not Sappho, Sacco'—has led to Rukeyser being both misrepresented and overlooked; the line from 'Käthe Kollwitz', adapted for the title of Louise Bernikow's 1974 anthology of women's verse, is another example of Rukeyser's poetry being reduced to aphorism: 'What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? / The world would split open' (166). Rich's inclusion of these poems thankfully allows new readers to encounter these striking lines in their full context. Indeed, Rich has done a fair job of selecting an indicative array of Rukeyser's talent, vision and scope. There are some disappointing omissions—'Breaking Open', more of the elegies, particularly 'Fourth Elegy', 'Searching/Not Searching', 'Akiba', for example—but there are some strategic ones too, often from Rukeyser's less productive, less *energetic* middle period (through the fifties into the late sixties).

Selected Poems, offering 186 pages of poetry, opens a gate, in the UK, to the rhizomatic works of Muriel Rukeyser. In trying to assess the importance of the publication—it is *very* important—and in trying to articulate that for all its pragmatic inclusivity it is but a beginning to what there is still to discover about Rukeyser's writing, I am reminded of the words of James Agee, whose long documentary photobook, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* Rukeyser

admired greatly, and wished to include in an anthology she was still assembling at the time of her death, entitled *In the Beginning*. Recognising that his writing had barely scratched the surface of the reality he wished to represent, Agee conceded: ‘This is all one colon:’. If Rich’s selection had been twice as big, we would still be presented with a beginning. But in our own era of wars and upheavals, when ethical relations are increasingly challenged, and when digital technologies erect new obstacles to physical acts of reaching out to others, *Selected Poems*, as a beginning to a stronger transatlantic relationship with Muriel Rukeyser, is very welcome indeed.

Catherine Gander

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Note:

1. The first lines of ‘Fifth Elegy’ are misquoted in the Bloodaxe edition as ‘...Knowing the midway to / migrant fanatics...’

