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To cite this article: Catherine Gander (2018) Rereading Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry*: a *Textual Practice* special issue, *Textual Practice*, 32:7, 1097-1102, DOI: [10.1080/0950236X.2018.1477107](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2018.1477107)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2018.1477107>



Published online: 30 Oct 2018.



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INTRODUCTION



## Rereading Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry*: a *Textual Practice* special issue

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Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry* is a difficult text to define. Written first as a series of lectures between 1940 and 1948, and published in 1949, the book is partly a defence of poetry as a vital means of truthful communication; partly a clear-eyed commentary on American culture and social realities in the mid-twentieth century; partly a wide-ranging exposition of the relationality of all forms of human knowledge; partly a memoir of the most open and useful kind; partly a careful critique of the forms, images, meanings, effects, and implications of poetry – of the pacts poetry makes with its readers (and vice versa) – in aesthetic, personal, and ethical terms. I write 'partly' with the acknowledgement that the word does not suffice. *The Life of Poetry* is an extraordinary book not least because it is *wholly* all of these things, while encompassing and embodying many more – stretching, as it does, across topics that include politics, music, visual art, physics, philosophy, history, advertising, film, literature, religion, childhood, narratives of the marginalised and disenfranchised. As Rukeyser was fond of saying, quoting the physicist Willard Gibbs (whose biography she wrote), 'the whole is simpler than the sum of its parts'. Perhaps above all, *The Life of Poetry* is an education. Framed as a response to a fellow refugee, who was sharing Rukeyser's boat as it sailed away from the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, *The Life of Poetry* answers the man's question as to the importance of poetry to such historical moments. As the essays in this special issue demonstrate, Rukeyser's response affords a variety of perspectives on a myriad of connected issues pertaining to being in the world, with others. As such, it is a rousing call to put poetry to use, an activation of our shared 'capacity to make change in existing conditions'.<sup>1</sup>

This special issue of *Textual Practice* contributes to what can now be called the reclamation of Muriel Rukeyser as a crucial figure in American and transnational poetry and culture. It builds on the invaluable work of scholars, poets, and publishers on both sides of the Atlantic, including Clive Bush in the UK, to whom this editor is especially grateful for his teaching, scholarship,

and galvanisation of a British 'Rukeyser revival', and Anne Herzog, Janet Kaufman, Louise Kertesz, Jan Heller Levi, Kate Daniels, and Jan Freeman in the US; Freeman's decision to found Paris Press in 1995 in order to bring *The Life of Poetry* back into print (a decision that constituted what poet Eileen Myles called 'a genuine cultural event'<sup>2</sup>) has made the scholarship in this collection possible. Despite much of Rukeyser's poetry now receiving the critical attention it deserves, *The Life of Poetry*, a text to which numerous scholars, critics and poets refer when discussing not only Rukeyser's work, but twentieth century radical poetics and political aesthetics more broadly, has remained significantly under-examined; indeed, there has been no sustained analysis of the book published – until now.<sup>3</sup> An oversight, certainly, but not, as Rowena Kennedy-Epstein notes, altogether surprising, considering the 'uneven critical reception' that Rukeyser endured while alive: 'at times highly lauded and praised as the "best" of her generation, at others denigrated and marginalised'.<sup>4</sup>

Famous for the pluralism of her perspectives, both aesthetic and political, Rukeyser and her work could not, and cannot, be categorised. Leftist, but refusing to be a card-carrying Communist; modernist, but eschewing any notions of defamiliarisation and obscurity, and reaching instead for hybrid forms that joined documentary with jazz, scientific biography with poetry; against violence, but understanding the needs and contingencies of conflict; feminist, but not according to the patterns that female poets and thinkers of her generation were expected to follow, Rukeyser not only crossed disciplinary barriers but revealed them to be 'false'. She spoke often of her desire for poetry to break 'the false and artificial separations, not only between person and person, but between "field and field" and specifically between the document and the subjective'.<sup>5</sup> Her understanding of poetry as a 'meeting-place' worked on social, ontological and epistemological levels; *The Life of Poetry* is her credo in praxis.

The range of essays collected here attests to the capaciousness of Rukeyser's thinking, each contribution examining the ways in which Rukeyser illuminates and populates the dynamic space between ostensible opposites, such as the 'document' ('scenes, questions and answers, pieces of evidence used in linkage and collision, as film is cut, to offer testimony of the world'<sup>6</sup>) and the 'subjective' ('the unverifiable fact ... sex, dreams, the inner life'<sup>7</sup>), war and the 'feminine', art and science, body and mind, word and image, singular and plural, self and other. The essays present new perspectives on *The Life of Poetry* while situating it, according to its own principle, in conversation with other texts, authors, and contexts, for as Bush notes, constructing a 'specific genealogy' for Rukeyser would be unhelpful: 'a too-exclusive focus, whether socialist, feminist, lesbian or Jewish (and she acknowledged and positively celebrated all of these) will do less than justice to her achievement'.<sup>8</sup>

We therefore read from Eric Keenaghan of the compositional history of *The Life of Poetry* as he traces its dialogue with the cultural and political movements of 1940s America. Keenaghan offers a rigorously archival bibliography for the text, suggesting it as an optic for the development of Rukeyser's political poetics as well as her growing interest in psychology and emotion, and demonstrating that the advanced thinking distilled in *The Life of Poetry* constructs a bridge between the Old and New Lefts. Stefania Heim reads *The Life of Poetry* as 'an experimental feminine poetics of war', aligning Rukeyser with Alice Notley and Joan Retallack in her invocation of a 'feminine' principle that eschews dualistic perspectives. She situates the text as 'a radical and still urgently relevant' lesson in the interweaving of public, personal, and political fact, exploring the shift Rukeyser posits from perceiving war as a poetic subject or genre to understanding it as a component of all our lives – and thus an intrinsic element of poetry. Rowena Kennedy-Epstein also discusses *The Life of Poetry* in the context of gender, offering a compelling, detailed exposition of how Rukeyser uncovers and confronts 'the gender norms of Cold-War containment culture', wherein the female body was positioned as antagonistic to the male, and queer and communist bodies were considered threats to the American status-quo. In the tradition of what Sara Ahmed has called 'Willful Subjects', Rukeyser's railing against the fear of poetry is connected to her era's fear of the 'foreign'; Kennedy-Epstein examines Rukeyser's interdisciplinary project to challenge the prevailing notion that both were 'suspect'.

Offering a comparative reading of *The Life of Poetry* with Virginia Woolf's 1938 pacifist polemic, *Three Guineas*, Anne Fernald highlights the importance to both writers of the Spanish Civil War – the outbreak of which Rukeyser witnessed first-hand, and which she used to establish the narrative frame for *The Life of Poetry*. Tracing the ways in which Rukeyser posits poetry as an active confrontation to the culture of war, Fernald reads *The Life of Poetry* as a vital, hybrid form of political response and resistance, one that nevertheless calls on poetry's essential characteristics to approach conflict in radical, not wholly oppositional, ways. Elisabeth Däumer also reads Rukeyser alongside another writer: T. S. Eliot. Carefully delineating the points of connection and departure between Eliot and Rukeyser's poetics (and, by extension, politics), Däumer draws particularly on the social uses of the arts to both writers, most often manifested in their respective relationships with the gestural, emotive qualities and embodiments of the theatre.

The last two critical essays in the collection cast *The Life of Poetry* in the light of practical theory that anticipates by decades our current preoccupations with the material, situated conditions of being in the world. Catherine Gander's essay offers a pragmatist aesthetic reading of *The Life of Poetry* in the manner of John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934). In its pluralist forays into a naturalist, embodied poetics, Gander argues, *The Life of Poetry* also

anticipates new researches into the visceral origins of meaning. These researches draw on developments in neuroscience and cognitive poetics that are rooted in pragmatism to promote an embodied 'aesthetics of human understanding', dissolving the very disciplinary and philosophical boundaries that Rukeyser always maintained were false. Cecily Parks examines the 'eco-ethical prescience' of Rukeyser's writing, arguing that *The Life of Poetry* deserves a foundational place in the ecopoetics canon. Attending carefully to Rukeyser's treatment of poetry as a crucial but squandered natural 'resource', Parks discusses Rukeyser's 'rhetorical use of natural world imagery to illuminate poetry's ability to effect social and political change', revealing how *The Life of Poetry* 'reinforces an environmental context for poetic responsibility'.

The collection is bracketed by a foreword and a postscript, both written by American poets. Bernadette Mayer's brief overture collects and connects the forces by which this issue has been driven in a characteristically potent and irreverent manner: the need to resist the elements of fear and dis-ease that keep us separated from poetry, from each other, and from ourselves; the need to recognise the social, as well as the individual benefits that poetry can bring; the need, emotionally, aesthetically, critically, and politically to reread Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry*. Jan Freeman's more personal and lyrical postscript outlines the many ways *The Life of Poetry* has already been put to social and educative use, as well as some of the poets whose work – including her own – has been shaped by Rukeyser's book.

What all of the essays in this special issue attest to is that, despite being a text very much in tune with the concerns of its age, *The Life of Poetry* is strikingly ahead of its time.<sup>9</sup> Mayer is not the first poet – or person – to reach for Rukeyser in reaction to the divisive politics of the new American President; *The Life of Poetry*'s messages of 'resistance' to the walls erected by a stultifying fear of the foreign (under which appellation poetry too often, if erroneously, falls) has become a renewed chant of the marginalised and dispossessed in the second decade of the twenty-first century. This collection of essays, then, is a timely intervention in Rukeyser studies, in poetry studies, and in the study of radical, interdisciplinary literature more broadly. When read alongside a text such as Ben Lerner's recent *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016) – which seems to borrow, but does not acknowledge, a number of elements from *The Life of Poetry*, including the discussion of 'possibility', and of Walt Whitman as a poet of such; the discussion of childhood; the discussion of the personal and social uses of poetry; the description of poetry as a 'meeting place'; the occasional use of the intimate second person – *The Life of Poetry* persists in offering a convincingly inclusive and wide-ranging argument for the vitality and vitalness of poetry in everyday living. This may be because although Rukeyser, like Lerner, acknowledges the connection between poetry and the notion of human possibility, and the idealism

in their relation, for Rukeyser, poetry exists not in the ideal, but in the striving for it – in the active resistance to the fear that the ideal cannot be reached. Poetry *is* the striving. ‘To accept poetry in these meanings’, writes Rukeyser at the start of *The Life of Poetry*, ‘would make it possible for people to use it as an “exercise”, an enjoyment of the possibility of dealing with the meanings in the world and in their lives.’<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

1. Muriel Rukeyser, ‘note from the author’, *The Life of Poetry* (Ashfield, MS: Paris Press, 1996), p. xi.
2. Eileen Myles, ‘*The Life of Poetry* review’, *The Nation*, April 14, 1997, <http://www.eileenmyles.net/rukeyser.htm> [Date accessed: 10 September 2016].
3. In 2015, at the annual meeting of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), a panel of five poets discussed the lasting legacy of Rukeyser’s *The Life of Poetry*. They were: Renee Ollander, Tim Seibles, Jen Benka, Jan Freeman, and Dennis Nurkse. A podcast is available here: <https://www.awpwriter.org/application/public/uploads/podcasts/mp3/AWPPodcastEp101.mp3>
4. Kennedy-Epstein is referring to Kenneth Rexroth’s description of Rukeyser as ‘by far the best poet of her exact generation’ (used as publicity for Rukeyser’s 1968 collection *The Speed of Darkness*). Instances of the celebration and the denigration that Rukeyser experienced throughout her career are mentioned variously throughout this collection. Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, ‘Re/Considering Muriel Rukeyser’s *The Life of Poetry*’, MLA special panel, MLA Connection, 7 January 2016, Austin, Texas, <http://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org/welcome/reconsidering-muriel-rukeysers-life-poetry/>.
5. Muriel Rukeyser, note, Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Box II:10, folder 5, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
6. Muriel Rukeyser, draft preface for *The Speed of Darkness*, 18 June 1967, Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Box 1:23, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. See Catherine Gander, *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary: The Poetics of Connection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 107.
7. Ibid.
8. Clive Bush, *The Century’s Midnight: Dissenting European and American Writers in the Era of the Second World War* (Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd, 2010), p. 380.
9. Indeed, its relevance is born out not simply by the mushrooming scholarship on Rukeyser over the last 15 years or so, in the US, the UK, and in Europe, but by the appearance of books by Rukeyser in more publically accessible lists, such as Lithub’s ‘50 Books for the Next Four Years’, published soon after Donald Trump’s November 2016 inauguration. <http://lithub.com/50-books-for-the-next-four-years/>.
10. *The Life of Poetry*, p. xi.

## Acknowledgements

One of the gratifying things about working with a community of Rukeyser scholars is their kindness and collegiality. There are so many people to thank, but special

appreciation goes to William Rukeyser, for allowing the editor and contributors permission to quote from Muriel Rukeyser's published and unpublished material. I would also like to extend warm thanks to Jan Freeman, for her boundless encouragement, and for bringing *The Life of Poetry* back to life, to Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, for organising and chairing the MLA roundtable in January 2016, which made this issue possible, and for her support during the later editorial phase of the issue, to Stefania Heim, for her kindness in lending a keen critical eye, and to Elisabeth Däumer for her continuing enthusiasm, and her work towards creating a thriving hub for Rukeyser scholarship in Muriel Rukeyser: A Living Archive (<http://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org/>). Final thanks go to Peter Boxall, and of course to all the contributors to this special issue, whose individual brilliance is rendered even brighter here in constellation.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.