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Poetry as embodied experience: the pragmatist aesthetics of Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry*

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ABSTRACT

This essay reads Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry* (1949) as a vital account of pragmatist aesthetics in the vein of John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934). It argues that Rukeyser's treatise is an exercise in embodied cultural experience that draws upon the key pragmatic aesthetic tenets of pluralism and naturalism – i.e. the understanding that knowledge is derived from a living organism's mind–body interaction with its environment. Further, it explores Rukeyser's understanding that 'aesthetics', as contemporary philosopher Mark Johnson has argued, must move beyond the compartmentalised study of art and its a/effects to 'become the basis of any profound understanding of meaning and thought... to explore how meaning is possible for creatures with our types of bodies, environments, and cultural institutions and practices'. Highlighting recent studies in neuroscience, cognitive linguistics, and philosophy of embodied mind that are grounded in pragmatism, this essay demonstrates Rukeyser's foresight in constructing a cross-disciplinary, multivalent aesthetics of human meaning-making that anticipated such advances by decades. *The Life of Poetry* suggests a practical philosophy of the art of living that breaks down the traditional binaries of mind/body, science/art, self/other by positioning poetry pluralistically to encompass the social and personal potentialities of embodied human experience.

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When Muriel Rukeyser was writing the lectures that would eventually become *The Life of Poetry* (1949), her thinking was deeply influenced by, among other areas of thought, classical pragmatism. While some scholarly attention has been paid to the debt Rukeyser's work of the forties and fifties owes to the philosophical and political positions of pragmatists William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, and John Dewey in the realms of cultural pluralism, war, and democracy,¹ this scholarship has not attended specifically to *The Life of Poetry*, nor considered the profound connections between this unclassifiable text and the first published treatise in what is now referred to as pragmatist

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aesthetics, Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934).² This essay seeks to redress this oversight, arguing for a reappraisal of *The Life of Poetry* as a crucial and complex exercise in cultural aesthetics that draws from, and moves beyond, the naturalistic, experiential philosophies of James and Dewey to anticipate by decades the radial growth of pragmatism's core tenets into studies that reimagine aesthetics in everyday, embodied terms.

What remains most striking – and perhaps most relevant – about Rukeyser's endeavour is its combination of insight and foresight in the fruitful conjunction of seemingly discrete pragmatist positions in the philosophy of mind, neuroscience, literary studies, and theory of art. Underlying and connecting each of these areas is a philosophy of embodiment. Thus, this essay breaks new ground, not by offering a pragmatist reading of Rukeyser's poetry and poetics in the way that pragmatism has been used as a lens to understand other American poets of the twentieth century,³ but by examining how her prose work, *The Life of Poetry*, constitutes a grossly overlooked but richly multivalent, and increasingly relevant, aesthetics of human meaning, derived from the key principles of pragmatist aesthetics. It explores how Rukeyser creates a philosophy of the art of living by positioning poetry as a pluralistic term to encompass the potentialities of embodied human experience.

John Dewey's naturalist aesthetics

Contemporary philosopher Richard Shusterman has led a recent resurgence of interest in the cross-disciplinary applications of pragmatist aesthetics. Along with the scholar Thomas Alexander,⁴ Shusterman has lamented that by the time of Dewey's death in 1952, his aesthetics had been 'totally eclipsed by analytic philosophy of art', which largely ignored 'art's socio-political dimensions and its practical, ethical, and ideological functions'.⁵ Acknowledging the presence of these factors in Dewey's thought, Shusterman notes that 'one of the most central features of Dewey's aesthetics is its naturalism'.⁶ This naturalism, derived from Darwinism via William James's psychological phenomenology, situates aesthetics in 'the natural needs, constitution, and activities of the embodied human organism'.⁷ In the first chapter of *Art as Experience*, 'The Live Creature', Dewey proposes 'recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living'.⁸ Arguing that our understandings of beauty and truth are embedded in the 'vital functions' and 'vital needs' we share with 'bird and beast',⁹ Dewey suggests that if 'man derives the means by which he breathes, moves, looks, and listens, the very brain with which he coordinates his senses and his movements, from his animal forbears', then 'the esthetic in experience ... starts with experience in its elemental form', because 'life goes on in an environment; not merely *in* it but because of it, through interaction with it'.¹⁰

From this proposition, Dewey argues for ‘a new mode of approach’ to aesthetics: the dismantling of the false social and capitalist structures of ‘compartmentalization’ that have monetised and ‘spiritualized’ art ‘out of connection with the objects of concrete experience’, and confined it to institutions and museums.¹¹ ‘Art’ and ‘artistic objects’, Dewey contends, have been ‘cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement’; ‘a wall [has been] built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance’.¹² To ‘restore continuity between ... works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognised to constitute experience’, Dewey calls for an aesthetic ‘theorist’ who would think across disciplines to understand human–environment interaction in terms of fundamental connection:

Mountain peaks do not float unsupported; they do not even just rest upon the earth. They *are* the earth in one of its manifest operations. It is the business of those who are concerned with the theory of the earth ... to make this fact evident in its various implications. The theorist who would deal philosophically with fine art has a like task to accomplish.¹³

For Dewey, ‘fine art’ is a special instance of the expression of embodied human meaning because it provides the perceiver and maker with an experience of ‘heightened vitality’. Isolating it from everyday life is ‘a pathetic, even a tragic, commentary on life as it is ordinarily lived’.¹⁴ Dewey’s understanding of aesthetic experience, then, requires a breakdown of false distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, and between art and life.

If, according to pragmatist aesthetics, separation and isolation are vitally against nature, it is because nature is characterised by ‘adaptation through expansion’; its order is ‘not imposed from without but is made out of the relations of harmonious interactions that energies bear to one another’.¹⁵ Positing that ‘biological commonplaces ... reach to the roots of the esthetic in experience’, Dewey sees natural life as a ‘process’ of energy exchange, brought about by necessary ‘tension’ in changes of phase or state to create ‘order’.¹⁶ In natural rhythms and forms such as ‘the waves of the sea’, ‘the beating of a bird’s wing, the whorl of sepals and petals’,¹⁷ Dewey finds this ‘tension of energies’, whereby the living organism is both receptive to and generative of an active process of growth and change. He connects this growth of form, which he sees as ‘wholly a matter of relations’¹⁸ to the work of art, which is similarly shaped by the dynamic organisation and integration of parts. More than this, Dewey connects these processes to the aesthetic experience itself, because ‘art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past reinforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is’.¹⁹

For Dewey, ‘an esthetic experience, [which is] the work of art is its actuality, is *perception*’.²⁰ Figuring perception as a cumulative experience of ‘doing and undergoing, outgoing and incoming energy’,²¹ Dewey defines it an ‘act of expression’ that is ‘a construction in time, not an instantaneous emission’.²² As such, it constitutes a communicative process that connects both the artist and the perceiver to their shared environment through memory and emotion (‘emotion is the moving and cementing force’²³): ‘What is evoked is not just quantitative, or just more energy, but is qualitative, a transformation of energy into thoughtful action, through assimilation of meanings from the background of past experiences’.²⁴ The key for Dewey is in art’s ability to communicate and impart growth, which can, in turn, be directed into social life, not least in order to dismantle the false barriers Dewey sees between aesthetic and ordinary experience.

Dewey thus understands democracy as intrinsically connected to the aesthetic. A society’s creative culture is a manifestation of its effort to give value to the intersubjective, to continually probe the human situation as something unfinished and problematic. Democratic society, then, is ‘community dedicated to life as art’, seeking ways to infuse life with meaning and value.²⁵ Shaping its inquiries and communication towards the art of conduct, the democratic community recognises the paramount importance of education in the pursuit of a shared, psychically and physically enriching life.

Pragmatist aesthetics thus defines art as experience and also as function. As Shusterman explains, ‘part of Dewey’s naturalism is to insist that art’s aim “is to serve the whole creature in his unified vitality”, ... which stands in sharp contrast to the extreme emphasis on disinterestedness’ of Kantian, analytical aesthetics, and modernist concepts of artistic value.²⁶ Dewey’s goal throughout *Art as Experience* is to demonstrate that ‘theories which isolate art and its appreciation by placing them in a realm of their own, disconnected from other modes of experiencing, are not inherent in the subject-matter but arise because of specifiable extraneous conditions’.²⁷ He specifies these conditions, which insist on ‘oppositions of mind and body, soul and matter, spirit and flesh’, as rooted ‘fundamentally, in *fear* of what life may – bring forth. They are marks of contraction and withdrawal’.²⁸ A naturalist, embodied approach would render art usable in the service of heightening humankind’s vitality and interaction with the world, so that the ‘unity of sense and impulse, of brain and eye and ear, that is exemplified in animal life’ might be saturated ‘with the conscious meanings derived from communication and deliberate expression’.²⁹ ‘Art,’ according to Dewey, ‘is thus prefigured in the very processes of living’.³⁰

Muriel Rukeyser’s naturalist aesthetics

Suffering from a similar, albeit more pronounced, disappearance to Dewey’s *Art as Experience*, Rukeyser’s *The Life of Poetry* was likewise eclipsed from

the 1950s onwards by theories of poetics more akin to the formalism of analytical aesthetics. An intergeneric fusion of ideas, memories, poetry, creative and philosophical prose spanning a number of subjects including the visual, written, musical and performing arts, biological, physical, and theoretical sciences, nature, war, and the media, *The Life of Poetry* cannot be classified, opening it to such criticisms as were levelled at Dewey's aesthetic treatise: 'a hodge-podge of conflicting methods and undisciplined speculations'.³¹

Although absent from the index and acknowledgements, the imprint of *Art as Experience* is often starkly discernible across the pages *The Life of Poetry*, whose very title connotes the naturalistic vein of Deweyan pragmatist aesthetics.³² Rukeyser defines poetry herein as a holistic experience – an embodied, 'total response'³³ to the world in which imagination, perception, and cognition come together to evince and invoke personal growth and social cohesion. Where Dewey draws the simile that 'experiencing like breathing is a rhythm of intakings and outgivings',³⁴ Rukeyser likewise emphasises the aesthetic nature of the corporeal rhythms of interactive commerce with one's environment. She describes aesthetic experience as something 'taken into the body, breathed in, so that reality is the completion of experience, and poetry is what is produced. And life is what is produced'.³⁵

The embodied connection between poetry and experience in Rukeyser's aesthetics rests on an understanding of both as 'organic'.³⁶ Rukeyser analogises the dynamics of a poem with the relational forms and rhythms of nature. Drawing on the work of Donald Mackenzie and D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, she discusses the spiral – we remember Dewey's example of the 'whorl' – as a natural emblem of 'the relationship of movement with life ... growth and form',³⁷ and links its pattern to the push and pull work that images perform in a poem. Rukeyser proposes that a poem's imagistic, rhythmic, and sonic 'interdependences' are what allow us to feel its energy; 'the tensions and attractions between the poem's meanings may mark its growth, as they must if the poem is to achieve its form'.³⁸ From here, Rukeyser extends her analysis to the work the poem does both on the poet and on the reader in order 'to recognize the energies that are transferred between people when a poem is given and taken'.³⁹ Like Dewey, she imagines this as an empathetic exchange that relies in part on cumulative experience.

For Rukeyser, the 'multiple time-sense in poetry' means that it is unfixed, shared, and associative; it incorporates both 'the ever new' and that which is 'recognized as something already in ourselves'.⁴⁰ In the giving and taking of a poem, there exists a recognition of the shared continuity of human experience that Dewey sees in art. Rukeyser states:

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*. ... 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. The poet, by the same token, is the man (is the woman) with all the poet's past life, at the moment the poem is finished; that is, at the moment of reaching a conclusion, of understanding further what it means to feel these relationships.⁴¹

These relationships are felt imaginatively and viscerally in what Rukeyser terms 'exchanges' of 'human energy', which, like Dewey's 'organization of energies', 'sum up and carry forward' aesthetic experience.⁴² Rukeyser likewise views the aesthetic or poetic as an unfinished democratic project: a mode of relational living that acknowledges the sociality in human life, a continuous process of interaction, challenge, and development. This democratic impulse is, according to Rukeyser, 'the deep life of poetry', 'reflecting [our] lives' – so that 'the truth of the poem is the truth of the poet and the reader'.⁴³

It is only in the creative exchange engendered by aesthetic experience that space is made for what Rukeyser famously calls 'a poetry of meeting places, where the false barriers go down'.⁴⁴ One such barrier is between the functions of the mind and the body: 'We have used the term "mind"', Rukeyser asserts, 'and allowed ourselves to be trapped into believing there was such a *thing*, such a *place*, such a locus of forces'. She continues, 'we have used the word "poem" and now the people who live by division quarrel about "the poem as object" ... It is not an object; the poem is a process'.⁴⁵ As such, the poem, and its correlative, the aesthetic experience, must be lived in fully embodied encounter in order 'to produce change from the existing conditions'.⁴⁶ The social and democratic potentialities of the aesthetic become clearer when we recognise the 'art in life'.⁴⁷

In her 'note from the author', Rukeyser signals her intention for the book, and for poetry, to constitute an 'exercise' for 'people to use ... in dealing with the meanings in the world and in their lives'.⁴⁸ She sets such aesthetic functionality against the ways in which poetry, she argues throughout, has been isolated from practical, everyday life in America; it is the 'one kind of knowledge – infinitely precious, time-resistant more than monuments, here to be passed between generations in any way it may be: never to be used'.⁴⁹ As Dewey sees 'art' (a term which develops throughout his book to include an experience garnered through the production and reception of an aesthetic object, including a written one), so Rukeyser sees 'poetry' (which she occasionally calls 'art')⁵⁰: a crucial 'resource we are not using' due to the fact that 'our education is one of specialisation. We become experts in some narrow "field" ... [which] allows us to face emotional reality, symbolic reality, very little'.⁵¹

Rukeyser cites the isolating practices of the contemporary New Criticism as exemplary of this anti-pragmatic stance. Such self-contained formalism, she notes, which addresses poetry primarily in terms of its 'words' rather than its images, is an exercise in 'dissecting poetry', thereby 'letting the life escape'.⁵² The 'static mechanics' of such criticism counts in discrete units,

rather than appreciates in fluidity, the elements of poetry, denying its status as 'a process, in which motion and relationship are always present'.⁵³ Rukeyser's frustration with this separatist stance continued throughout her life. In the 1976 collection *The Gates* (named after her experience protesting the death sentence of the poet Kim Chi-Ha at the gates of his prison in South Korea – which she calls 'also the gates of perception, the gates of the body'⁵⁴), Rukeyser published the poem, 'Islands', which imagines a group of bathers in a 'glittering sea' between two geological promontories, and begins, 'O for God's sake/they are connected/underneath', and ends, 'The bathers think/islands are separate like them'.⁵⁵ Like Dewey's 'mountain peaks' that 'do not float unsupported' but 'are the earth', Rukeyser's 'islands' must be considered as constitutive of the interconnectedness that runs through and is the foundation of all natural things, despite appearance otherwise.

Therefore, for Rukeyser, as for Dewey, poetry constitutes a vital, and vitalising, aspect of human experience that perforce renders it aesthetic – one that conjoins the biological and the psychological in an embodied dynamic of transactional exchange that arrives primarily as 'emotion', or 'feeling' ('A fine poem will seize your imagination intellectually... but the way is through emotion, through what we call feeling'⁵⁶). The mark of literary critic I. A. Richards on Rukeyser's thinking is clear here; her notes for *The Life of Poetry* contain numerous quotations from his 1926 *Science and Poetry*, including the lines that 'poetry is the recording of phases during which conciliations have been effected, showing conflict', and that poetry engenders the 'emotive state, making us remember how we felt'.⁵⁷ Yet her understanding of the connections between the imagination and the emotions, between art and science, moves beyond Richards's espousal of a type of Gibb'sian change of phase to an embodied aesthetics of meaning. Her approach is more aligned with that of Dewey, who also draws from Richards's work in *Art as Experience*. Dewey agrees with Richards's proposition that the 'value' of the aesthetic object resides not in its materiality, but in the 'experience' it generates in the perceiver, but suggests Richards overlooks the fact that the aesthetic 'total effect' is only 'brought about by interaction of external and organic causes'. For Dewey, one must understand that the 'atoms, electrons, protons' that create the effect of the visual image interact with 'the mind through the organism' to create the total aesthetic experience.⁵⁸

For Rukeyser, 'over-specialization' is profoundly connected with 'the ruling-out of emotion', which is in turn a manifestation of 'the aversion to the disclosure of oneself to oneself'.⁵⁹ Again in words strikingly similar to Dewey's, Rukeyser classifies this aversion throughout her book as 'fear' – 'a fear of poetry', which she variously delineates as a fear of 'feeling', of 'communication', of 'the imagination', and, connecting all of these, of the 'foreign'.⁶⁰ While for both writers, such fear signals a withdrawal from the potential interactive, aesthetic totality of human experience, Rukeyser

recognises the effects and implications for society on a scale more attuned not only to her current moment, but to the ‘repressive codes’ that seek to engender this aversion.⁶¹

Foreign bodies

Writing during the McCarthy era (the FBI file on Rukeyser is a long one), in the wake of two world wars, Rukeyser points to her country’s commitment, despite being a nation of immigrants, ‘to rule out any foreignness, any color, at all’.⁶² In the section of *The Life of Poetry* called ‘The Resistances’, Rukeyser states that because we are taught that ‘poetry is foreign to us, we do not let it enter our daily lives’.⁶³ She examines in detail the conditions of ‘the fear of poetry’, contending that America suffers from a ‘hunger for uniformity’, and connecting this misplaced need to the censorship and lack of experimentation in the arts, post-war. ‘This code’, she asserts, ‘strikes deep at our emotional life’, leading us ‘to meet any divergence from the expected with dread or conflict’.⁶⁴ The dread extends to the bodies, and embodied practices, of those deemed nonconformist or irregular, who, like poetry, have ‘no acknowledged place in American society today’.⁶⁵ ‘The barriers that have been set up are strong’, Rukeyser asserts, and generate in social life fearful resistance to ‘targets’ such as ‘the Negroes, the Reds, the Jews, the “place” of science, the “place” of labor, the “place” of women, and poetry’.⁶⁶ As a queer woman, a Leftist, a Jew, an advocate of labour activism, of the voices and cultures of people of colour, of the disenfranchised, of the life of poetry, Rukeyser’s ‘place’ is firmly established as one – indeed, many – of such ‘targets’. Little wonder that, in an environment of such stifling white patriarchal control and political paternalism, she notes poetry’s established position as ‘sexually suspect’.⁶⁷

The universalising naturalist aesthetics of Dewey’s *Art as Experience*, then, are reshaped in Rukeyser’s *The Life of Poetry* to acknowledge that the ‘fear’ seen by both writers as obstructive to aesthetic experience is lodged not only in an aversion to self-realisation and the ‘biological commonplaces’ of the ‘live creature’, but in an anxious withdrawal from all forms of what has been socially constructed as ‘the foreign’. The resistance to poetry is inextricable from the resistance to allowing interaction with the embodied existence of the ‘other’; yet without it, a ‘total response’ to the world cannot be achieved.⁶⁸

Rukeyser felt first-hand the frustration at the systems of suppression, isolation, and compartmentalisation that both she and Dewey highlight. Other writers and editors, particularly those affiliated with the New Criticism Rukeyser spoke out against, attempted time and again to silence, pigeon-hole, or pillory her due to the pluralistic nature of her politics and aesthetics, her refusal to tread established ‘feminine’ writerly lines or toe entirely partisan

ones.⁶⁹ In a particularly misogynistic attack in 1943, for example, the editors of *Partisan Review* not only ridiculed Rukeyser for ‘bandwagon’ jumping and patriotic ‘neo-Americanism’ in her work for the Office of War Information designing avant-garde posters for the war effort, but, as Alan Wald notes, ‘poke[d] fun at her weight and sexual appetites’.⁷⁰ Rukeyser wrote privately that she was left ‘too low to answer’, finding the piece ‘startlingly crude and savage, [but] in its way, an example of the classical attack’.⁷¹ If Rukeyser’s body and embodied poetics were deemed ‘sexually suspect’ throughout the forties, *The Life of Poetry*, in its sheer thematic breadth, its generic unclassifiability, its daring to call out such criticisms as ‘projection propped up with lies’ and such compartmentalisations as ‘false barriers’, constitutes a rare materialisation of the type of total aesthetic experience Rukeyser and Dewey aim towards.⁷² It both stands for Rukeyser, and as Eileen Myles notes, is her ‘podium’. It is a document of ‘a woman taking space and refusing to sit down’.⁷³ And in its cumulative presentation of the poet’s ‘long preparation of the self to be used’,⁷⁴ it is, Myles asserts, ‘pure American pragmatism’.⁷⁵

In the section called ‘The “Uses” of Poetry’, Rukeyser delineates how the self might be used. She imagines the intimacy and anticipation of a darkened theatre before curtain-up. Writing in direct address, she notes the closeness of her body to her addressee (‘we almost touch’), their shared biological processes (‘we breathe this air’), and a proprioceptive sense of herself in relation to the foreign bodies that surround her, whose corporeally expressed emotions afford her an interpersonal connection that establishes equality through difference:

When you laugh, I feel it, and I feel the man in front of me throw himself back in his seat and stiffen his back when the dangers make themselves apparent. ... We sit here, very different from each other, until the passion arrives to give us our equality, and to make us part of the play, to make the play part of us. An exchange is being effected.⁷⁶

In this brief description of a shared, embodied aesthetics, Rukeyser imagines a pluralistic act of perception to evince several meanings. The human body is here ‘used’ and perceived simultaneously as a biological organism, and as an ecological, social, cultural, and phenomenological body. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *The Phenomenology of Perception* asserts, ‘my body appears to me as an *attitude* directed towards a certain existing or possible task.’ As such, it occupies not ‘a spatiality of position, but a spatiality of situation’.⁷⁷ When Rukeyser writes of ‘the attitude of poetry’ as containing the potential to ‘equip our imaginations to deal with our lives’, she intends a similar combination of mental and physical approach. ‘How do we use feeling? How do we use truth?’ she asks.⁷⁸ One answer is to open ourselves to the type of ‘exchange effected’ in the above example, which for Rukeyser, holds the key to the socially equalising possibilities poetic experience allows.

Embedded in this experience is a type of testimonial awareness. Unhappy with the terms ‘audience’, ‘reader’, or ‘listener’ to describe the receiver of the poem, Rukeyser searches for a term that will better communicate the Deweyan twin concepts of doing and undergoing. She alights on ‘witness’, which, she contests, ‘includes the act of seeing or knowing by personal experience, as well as the act of giving evidence.’ It contains overtones of ‘responsibility’, ‘tension’, ‘excitement and revelation’ which give ‘air to the work of art, announcing with the poem that we are about to change, that work is being done on the self.’⁷⁹ The word indicates what Rukeyser elsewhere calls ‘a transfer of human energy ... defined as consciousness, the capacity to make change in existing conditions’.⁸⁰ More than this, it recalls the ostensible reason for *The Life of Poetry*’s very existence as ‘index’ and ‘exercise’ – its accumulation of recalled memory, imagination, belief, and hope: Perched in an overcrowded boat fleeing the onset of the Spanish Civil War, Rukeyser and her fellow refugees are told of their ‘responsibility’: “go home: tell your peoples what you have seen”.⁸¹ She is soon posed the question by the man next to her: “And poetry – among all this – where is there a place for poetry?”⁸² Rukeyser’s response/responsibility is the book that follows: testimony and testimonial to an ethical aesthetics of human meaning.

An embodied kind of knowledge: the insight and enduring relevance of *The Life of Poetry*

Rukeyser’s appeal, at the start of *The Life of Poetry*, to the reclamation of poetry as ‘a kind of knowledge’, is perhaps even more relevant today than when it was originally made, despite her warning in 1949 that ‘we face horizons and conflicts wider than ever before’.⁸³ In this final section of the essay, I wish to signpost some of the ways in which Rukeyser’s *The Life of Poetry* advanced a pragmatist aesthetics to anticipate contemporary philosophies of embodied meaning-making. Such philosophies, their advocates and practitioners contend, allow us to construct a more integrated aesthetics of human use and significance than traditional Western philosophies – and several institutional literary approaches⁸⁴ – have permitted, retaining a Deweyan dedication to art and aesthetics as ‘the quest for concretely embodied meaning and value in human existence’.⁸⁵

A key philosopher drawing on the connections between cognitive science, phenomenology, and linguistics to investigate ‘bodily sources of meaning, imagination, and reasoning’ today is Mark Johnson.⁸⁶ In his 2007 book, *The Meaning of the Body*, Johnson puts forward his case for a new ‘aesthetics of human understanding’.⁸⁷ Positing that ‘we need a Dewey for the twenty-first century’, Johnson grounds what he calls his ‘embodied theory of meaning’ in classical American pragmatism, arguing for a renewed approach to ‘the bodily depths of human meaning-making through our visceral

connection to the world'.⁸⁸ According to Johnson, an 'exploration into the qualities, feelings, emotions, and bodily processes that make meaning possible' requires the understanding that 'aesthetics must not be narrowly construed as the study of art and so-called aesthetic experience ... [but] the study of everything that goes into the human capacity to make and experience meaning'.⁸⁹

Following Dewey, Johnson thus develops an aesthetics that explores 'how meaning is possible for creatures with our types of bodies, environments, and cultural institutions and practices'; a theory that 'start[s] deep down in the bodily processes where meaning emerges, lives and grows'.⁹⁰ 'An embodied view', argues Johnson, 'is naturalistic, insofar as it situates meaning within a flow of experience that cannot exist without a biological organism engaging its environment'.⁹¹ Hence, Johnson's first position, like that of the pragmatists, is to eschew the Cartesian dualism that has led to embedded Western assumptions about the disembodiment of the 'higher', rational faculties, and instead embrace Dewey's 'principle of continuity', which until the late twentieth century was largely ignored, but which stated that "'mind" and "body" are merely abstracted aspects of the flow of organism-environment interactions that constitutes what we call experience'.⁹² From this position, Johnson embarks on his aesthetics of human meaning, drawing on recent advances in what he notes as new pragmatist sciences and philosophies of mind to unfold a multi-layered thesis exploring embodied experience in movement, childhood, emotions, conceptualisations, images, communication and language, and the written, visual and performative arts. Remarkably, each of these subjects was addressed by Rukeyser 60 years prior, in her own aesthetic treatise on human meaning, *The Life of Poetry*. Some of these subjects I will address below.

Movement: whole-body processes

As Johnson asserts, 'life and movement are inextricably connected'.⁹³ A significant amount of our perceptual knowledge derives from our phenomenological orientation in the world, as well as the more hidden rhythms of our bodily processes. Philosopher of mind Shaun Gallagher has called these non-conscious processes *body schema*: 'a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring',⁹⁴ and include, according to Johnson, 'visceral processes performed by the respiratory, digestive, cardiovascular, urogenital, and endocrine systems', all of which, to varying degrees, impact on our perceptions and feelings.⁹⁵ Johnson appeals to the work of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, an ex-dancer-choreographer and professor of phenomenology and the embodied mind, in order to discuss researches into conscious and nonconscious mind-body-world interactions. Sheets-Johnstone's contributions to 'pragmatist

neurophilosophy⁹⁶ are especially relevant here, as she employs William James's views on the relation between mind and body to demonstrate the importance of the pragmatist legacy to contemporary neuroscience. In particular, she draws on James's analogy between breathing, thinking, and emoting to highlight recent studies in 'coordination dynamics', which negate either/or categories and pinpoint 'neurological and behavioural complementarities such as stability~instability, convergence~divergence ... inspiration and expiration'.⁹⁷

Agreeing with James's hypothesis that 'the stream of thinking' is a 'dynamic phenomenon', another 'name for what, when scrutinised, reveals itself to consist chiefly of the stream of my breathing', Sheets-Johnstone reflects that the commonalities between inspiration and expiration move beyond linguistic coincidence.⁹⁸ Inspirations bring fresh ideas as well as fresh air; exhalations communicate valence, releasing tension as well as carbon dioxide. She quotes from James's *The Principles of Psychology* to indicate breathing's emotional qualities:

We 'catch our breath' at every sudden sound. We 'hold our breath' whenever our attention and expectation are strongly engaged, and we sigh when the tension of the situation is relieved. When a fearful object is before us we pant and cannot deeply inspire; when the object makes us angry it is, on the contrary, the act of expiration which is hard.⁹⁹

However, Sheets-Johnstone points out that James neglects 'something foundational to animate life' in his discussion on breathing-thinking: 'kinesthesia, the phenomenon of movement itself'.¹⁰⁰ Drawing on examples of how 'reaching, walking and embracing' are 'kinetic themes tied intimately with the flow of our breath', Sheets-Johnstone notes that in terms of *body schema*, the respiratory centre – 'sequestered in the lowly brain stem' – is 'powerfully interconnected with all that lies above and below, from frontal lobes to toes'.¹⁰¹ Again, the stress is on visceral cooperative interaction, whereby apparently opposing dualisms are shown to work in complementarity.

As I have already mentioned, a keynote of *The Life of Poetry* is movement. Much like the pragmatist, whole-body dynamics that Sheets-Johnstone highlights, Rukeyser's relational poetics insist on a 'dynamics of poetry' in which 'poetry depends on the moving relations within itself', in turn 'expressing and evoking the moving relation between individual consciousness and the world'.¹⁰² Breathing and thinking, emotion and motion are inextricable for Rukeyser, part of the same dynamic system of consciousness. The first line of the first poem of Rukeyser's first book reads 'Breathe-in experience, breathe-out poetry':¹⁰³ it heralds the lasting theme throughout her work of the physical intake and output of embodied experience, entailing an energy exchange both within, and, as her theatrical example demonstrates, between bodies. Connected to what she terms 'the fear of poetry', then, is, in Jamesian

terms, the denial or repression of one's emotive responses to the world and to others: inspiration and expiration are affected; a complementary energy exchange is compromised. Likewise, the psychologically inflected anger that Rukeyser notes so many feel towards poetry in its apparent 'obscurity' renders difficult the positive release of built-up tensions; it stifles the 'breathing-out' of poetry.¹⁰⁴

Rukeyser's commitment to the necessity of dynamic relation in an aesthetics of human meaning-making connects to Johnson and Sheets-Johnstone's neuroscience-supported comprehension of movement as a basis for embodied meaning. To take three examples from the 'visceral processes' listed by Johnson above, Rukeyser explores the relevance of respiratory, cardiovascular, and endocrine systems to aesthetic experience, particularly in relation to Walt Whitman. In Whitman, whose body and whose body of work, like Rukeyser's, were deemed 'sexually suspect', Rukeyser finds an example of a poet whose verse is instructively kinaesthetic – he understood that 'the imaginative function includes the senses'.¹⁰⁵ Rukeyser presents Whitman as a 'poet of possibility' who 'made his music signify' 'not out of English prosody but the fluids of organism ... the rhythms of pulse and lung', who 'out of his own body, and its relation to itself and to the sea, drew his basic rhythms'.¹⁰⁶ These are rhythms, Rukeyser recognises, 'of the relation of our breathing to our heartbeat ... measured against an ideal of water at the shore, not beginning nor ending, but endlessly drawing in ... always making a meeting place'.¹⁰⁷

The impressiveness of Rukeyser's analysis resides not in recognising Whitman's luxuriating both in his own corporeality and in the liberated poetic line that such sensate attention permits; it is in her insistence on the meaningful connection between Whitman's art and his whole-body relation with his environment – natural, social, and political. In one of the most daring and sustained passages of *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser posits that Whitman's own self-conflict and struggle for internal complementarity – derived from the fluidity of his sexual orientation, from his attempts to identify with the myriad faces of diverse Americans, from his wish to encompass the good and the bad aspects of his country, 'with its power, war, Congress, weapons, testimony, and endless gestation' – was interconnectedly psychological and biological.¹⁰⁸ Referring in detail to Whitman's autopsy report, and noting in it 'remarks which no writer – medical or lay – seems to have analyzed', Rukeyser draws attention to a hitherto overlooked abnormality in Whitman's *body schema*: a large cyst on the suprarenal capsule of his left kidney.¹⁰⁹ Considering recent researches into 'glandular equilibrium' and 'the suprarenal-pituitary-sex hormone relation', Rukeyser 'venture[s] to suggest that the inclusive personality which Whitman created from his own conflict is heroic proof of a life in which apparent antagonisms have been reconciled and purified into art'.¹¹⁰ Her suggestion is nothing short of

extraordinary, not only because she breaks disciplinary barriers to make it, and not least for the confidence with which she – a woman, a poet, a bisexual – offers the diagnosis, but also for the trailblazing nature of its viscerally biological, embodied aesthetics, its collapsing of distinctions between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ faculties, and its foregrounding of sexuality as a key element in Whitman’s inclusive poetics. It anticipates Johnson’s claim that ‘imagination is tied to our bodily processes and can also be creative and transformative of experience’.¹¹¹

Movement: childhood and the ‘primitive’

Johnson understands the ‘visceral’ to mean both the specific, hidden biological processes noted above, and the more general phenomena of human feelings. He quotes Sheets-Johnstone on how both meanings are inseparable, formed in infancy as a ‘primal animateness’, an ‘original kinetic spontaneity that infuses our being and defines our aliveness ... our point of departure for living in the world and making sense of it’.¹¹² Johnson devotes a significant portion of his study to parsing contemporary researches into ‘the many bodily ways by which infants and children find and make meaning’, and how these methods are ‘carried forward into, and thus underlie and make possible, our mature acts of understanding, conceptualization, and reasoning’.¹¹³ He uses these to make the case that, ‘as Dewey argued’:

Philosophy needs to help us re-establish our visceral connections to ourselves, to other people, and to the world. It should help us rediscover the experiential depth of the situations we find ourselves in, so that we can base our inquiry and decisions on an appropriately complex understanding of the meaning of what we are encountering.¹¹⁴

Rukeyser, in *The Life of Poetry*, similarly suggests an aesthetics of human meaning that draws in part from a deeper understanding of such ‘visceral connections’:

If we lived in full response to the earth, to each other, and to ourselves, we would not breathe a supernatural climate; we would be more human. The tendency of art and religion, and the tendency of poetic meaning, is toward the most human. It is a further humanity we are trying to achieve ... and to communicate.¹¹⁵

Rukeyser aligns this ideal ‘full response’ to the ‘primal animateness’ of childhood. Children, Rukeyser argues, do not view poetry as ‘foreign’ or as fearful, because children ‘trust their emotions’.¹¹⁶ Following the psychoanalytic tradition, Rukeyser links childhood to the idea of the ‘primitive’, but retrieves from this not a set of basic urges and burgeoning complexes, but a growing matrix of embodied impulses that centralise what modern society increasingly denies: ‘the dynamic character of our lives’.¹¹⁷ She refers to the ethnographic

work of John Collier among North American ‘Indians’ to emphasise how those judged as ‘primitive’ peoples evidence an ‘imaginative maturity’ that is lacking in ostensibly ‘civilized’ society.¹¹⁸

Citing Collier’s findings that in ‘primitive society’, the group does not shape itself toward conduct, but ‘molds its members toward emotion, toward ... experience’,¹¹⁹ Rukeyser celebrates the group’s concentration ‘upon education – upon personality development’:

Every experience is *used* to that end ... *There results an integration of body-mind and of individual-group* which is not automatic, not at the level of conformity or habit, but spontaneous, essentially spiritual, and at the level of freedom.¹²⁰

In contrast, ‘our’ society suffers from an ‘impoverishment of imagination’ that is connected to our self-inflicted emotional amputation.¹²¹ By witnessing this now foreign way of living, Rukeyser contests that we are brought nearer to our childhood receptivity and emotional openness, to the buried strangeness in ourselves. The moment is akin to the impact the poem makes on our cumulative experience, joining our past and present so that ‘we become more of our age and more primitive. Not primitive as the aesthetes have used the term’, Rukeyser qualifies, ‘but complicated, fresh, full of dark meaning, insisting on discovery, as the experience of a woman giving birth to a child is primitive’.¹²²

The child and the ‘primitive’ are both what Rukeyser terms ‘indexes’ for poetry because they constitute what is ‘socially unacceptable’ in America’s ‘adult’ power culture.¹²³ Not bound by the repressive social codes that ‘cut [us] off from large areas in ourselves’,¹²⁴ they are connected in *The Life of Poetry* via their innate capacity to construct meaning out of corporeal rhythm, embodied most obviously in song and dance. While Rukeyser indicates that we might learn a visceral aesthetics of humanity from the chants and dance rituals of the Navajo, who ‘excel’ in ‘rhythm ... in joy of life ... in art propensities, and in truthfulness’,¹²⁵ she devotes significant discussion to the similar qualities of children, whose ‘rhythm-songs’, she asserts, remind us of poetry.¹²⁶

Drawing on recent studies in child development,¹²⁷ Rukeyser notes that children tend not to separate ‘work’ from ‘play’ in song, rhythm, and music-making; their methods of engaging with their environment often entail experiments in imitation, language, and movement wherein all three merge in a ‘fluid’ learning experience, resulting in a type of musical ‘speech’.¹²⁸ She suggests the example of a little boy driving a toy car up a chair-back, making a ‘babble of syllables’ that signify the car, its direction, and ‘his pleasure most of all’. ‘To anyone listening who is willing to put away the grown-up distinctions and impatiences’, Rukeyser states, it is ‘primarily an expression: the sound and the act both “meaning” car-and-up;

or, something like up-sounds-car'.¹²⁹ The unadulterated, embodied experience of the child here is what Rukeyser recognises as the 'tendency of poetic meaning' and the root of emotional truth. Whereas adults 'long to impose a program' on their songs and speech patterns, the child's 'consciousness of rhythm, and in fact his concepts, cannot be satisfied or judged by adult standards. He is interested in things as themselves, he ... is not concerned with what he should feel'.¹³⁰

Johnson's appeal to the practices of meaning-making in childhood reveals the same understanding of the necessity for adults to learn from the embodied aesthetics of infant learning. He acknowledges that 'our experience of meaning is based, first, on our sensorimotor experience, our feelings, and our visceral connections to the world; and second, on various imaginative capacities for using sensorimotor processes to understand abstract concepts'.¹³¹ Johnson discusses advances in cognitive linguistics and neuroscience (driven by himself, Mark Turner, and George Lakoff) that have cemented the embodied origin of image schemas – the 'dynamic, recurring pattern[s] of organism-environment interactions' that become conceptual abstractions in human thought and underlie what we conceive of as true.¹³² These include the ways in which we conceptualise time (because of our corporeal makeup, we consider the future in front of us), and spatial movement (a well-known image schema is SOURCE-PATH-GOAL). Image schemas demonstrate that 'cognition is an organic, embodied process of enaction in which the organism is dynamically engaged with its surroundings'.¹³³ They connect with conceptual metaphors, by which we construct and navigate meaning, such as UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING, and UNDERSTANDING IS GRASPING.¹³⁴ Johnson highlights that, in contradistinction to 'large parts of traditional Western philosophical theories of meaning and truth', the anti-Cartesian nature of conceptual metaphors locates abstract thought and reasoning in 'our bodily, sensorimotor experience',¹³⁵ inextricable from feeling, and originating in childhood physical development and language acquisition.¹³⁶

That Rukeyser's child is 'not concerned with what he should feel', only caught up in the embodied expression of feeling, is also core to contemporary understandings of pre-linguistic meaning-making. Quoting Colwyn Trevarthen's work on infant-caregiver coordination, Johnson highlights the importance of 'an infant's making "a statement of feeling" in the form of a movement of the body, a change in hand gesture', etc.¹³⁷ Thanks to the discovery of mirror neurons in the human brain, we can now better comprehend empathetic intersubjectivity: the same neurons activate in the brain of a person performing a physical gesture as activate in the brain of a person merely observing that gesture being performed.¹³⁸ Johnson connects these understandings to what Daniel Stern, in *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* (1985), calls 'vitality affects', which arise out of our 'emergent sense of self' in early infancy, and are 'captured by dynamic, kinetic terms,

such as “surging”, “fading away”, “fleeting”, and so on.¹³⁹ Combined with words or sounds (a mother soothingly patting a baby’s back and uttering ‘there, there, there’, for example), these affects create ‘contours’ and ‘patterns’ of cross-modal perception.

Johnson notes that it ‘is important to recognise that what Stern identifies as being at the heart of an infant’s sense of itself and the meaning of its experience also lies at the heart of meaning in an adult’s experience’,¹⁴⁰ and bemoans that Western philosophies of mind and language have historically ignored this fact. Urging repeatedly for a reappraisal of the necessity of aesthetic, embodied experience, Johnson cites Stern’s use of

dance and music as exemplars of the way meaning can be tied to patterns of feeling: ‘Dance reveals to the viewer-listener multiple vitality affects and their variations, without resorting to plot or categorical affect signals from which the vitality affects can be derived’.

Indeed, music theory has long associated music and dance’s power to their ‘imaginative presentation of patterns of feeling’.¹⁴¹

At various intervals in *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser reaches the same conclusions. In her extended discussion of what we might call the cross-modal vitality affects in Whitman’s poetry, Rukeyser argues that such contours arise because of Whitman’s whole-body acceptance of his relation to his environment, so that he was able to write ‘Be not afraid of my body, I am a dance’.¹⁴² She avers (via R. G. Collingwood’s 1938 *Principles of Art*,¹⁴³ and with a nod to Spinoza) that true statements of feeling are made within the context of experiential association with the world (‘the statement *this is how I feel*, implies a rejection of its opposite’) – a condition that also takes shape in ‘the realization of a poem’.¹⁴⁴ Combatting what she sees as her era’s pervasive ‘literature of aversion’, Rukeyser foregrounds poetry as a literature of redirection, because ‘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’.¹⁴⁵ Describing the embodied expression of Blues music, or the patterns of feeling in the rhythmic behavioural contours of the pre-socialised child or the Navajo, whose ‘dance rhythms are brought into poetry’,¹⁴⁶ Rukeyser turns frequently to dance as exemplary of the whole-body emotional truth that poetry communicates, but notes, like Johnson, how Western traditions of disembodied thought have largely denied such relational aesthetics.

While she lists a few exceptions from her own era – ‘Martha Graham, essaying Emily Dickinson’, ‘Anna Sokolow, Jane Dudley’, even ‘Fred Astaire’¹⁴⁷ – Rukeyser finds a wordless poetry in a particular example of Eastern art: the frescoes of the life of Buddha on the walls of the Ajanta caves in India.¹⁴⁸ In the caves, one’s corporeal phenomenology is emphasised because the painter-monks ‘felt that the sensation of space within ourselves is

the analogy by which the world is known'.¹⁴⁹ The cave, a space where philosophical spirituality is encouraged through organic physicality, works according to Rukeyser as a sort of projected internal panorama, surrounding the viewer with the 'figures of [their] consciousness', 'strung together by their rhythm'.¹⁵⁰ Rukeyser's description of her (imaginary) experience in the caves is reminiscent of the pre-linguistic, embodied experiences she earlier relates to childhood and the poetics of meaning-making: 'all the forms wait for their full language. The poems of the next moment are at hand'.¹⁵¹ The paintings thus demonstrate to Rukeyser a 'web of movement'; a human 'dance ... to be acknowledged in art': Here, 'the Western idea of still life is unknown. There is no still life, there is life, and all life shares the movement of the mind. In living reality, all is movement'.¹⁵²

There is no still life

Rukeyser's vivid and 'total response' to the Ajanta caves espouses a deeply Deweyan pragmatist aesthetics, echoed in Johnson's simple avowal that 'movement is life ... one of the conditions for our sense of what our world is like and who we are'.¹⁵³ The caves' images are akin to the images brought forth by poetry, the language of which reaches far beyond the linguistic to conjoin memory and imagination in dynamic, somatic experience. In the same section that she espouses 'witness' as a key term for the person undergoing an aesthetic experience, Rukeyser refers to a recent scientific study, in which test subjects were shown images of their own bodies in stasis (their hands, their face in profile, their body from behind), and then in motion ('face blanked out'). The vast majority of the subjects could only recognise their own bodies in motion, because Rukeyser surmises, 'our rhythms are more recognisably our selves than any of our forms'.¹⁵⁴ She proposes, without knowing about the existence of mirror neurons, that watching such corporeal rhythms triggers a sense of 'empathy' in the viewer, and goes further, suggesting that these rhythms and empathetic recognitions are also triggered by poetic images.

For Rukeyser, the dynamism of the poetic image joins form and rhythm organically, so that we come to understand not only the life of poetry, but the poetry of life. Thus, she ventures poetry as a naturalistic aesthetics not only of human, but of universal meaning. Citing Einstein's proposition that events in nature are bound by an as yet unknown connective law that we mistakenly understand as *cause and effect*, Rukeyser states her belief 'that one suggestion of such a law is to be found in the process of poetry'.¹⁵⁵ Her insistence on the synaesthetic and emotive qualities of images as aesthetic dimensions to embodied meaning pre-empt what neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has theorised as a combinative flow of sensual and cognitive processes:

By the term images I mean mental patterns with a structure built with the tokens of each of the sensory modalities – visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and somatosensory. ... The word image does not refer to ‘visual’ image alone, and there is nothing static about images either. ... In short, the process we come to know as mind when mental images become ours ... is a continuous flow of images, many of which turn out to be logically interrelated. ... *Thought* is an acceptable word to denote such a flow of images.¹⁵⁶

Unsurprisingly, Damasio cites the felt meaning of music as a prime example of what he intends by this description of interwoven images. For Rukeyser, and the theorists of embodied mind that came after her, the aesthetic image is somatically holistic and unfixed; not a representation of life, but the form of life itself. It follows, then, that opening ourselves to poetry is not only a life-affirming act, but one that is potentially life-saving. Rukeyser contends: ‘Our lives may rest on this, and our lives are our images.’¹⁵⁷

Coda

This essay has gone some way to situating *The Life of Poetry* as a crucial and prescient text of multivalent, pragmatist aesthetics, in which the embodied dimensions of everyday experience are key to human understanding and meaning-making. Deweyan at core, *The Life of Poetry* predicts in part what Shusterman, working in the tradition of Dewey and Merleau-Ponty, has coined ‘somaesthetics’: ‘the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation and self-fashioning’.¹⁵⁸ Combining analytical, pragmatic, and practical perspectives¹⁵⁹ on the study of art, beauty, and the body, Shusterman proposes a cross-disciplinary, embodied aesthetics in order to promote the interconnectedness of the aesthetic and socio-political realms of human life. I have hopefully begun to demonstrate the ways in which Rukeyser’s project seeks to make similar ‘meeting places’ between the realms of human experience traditionally understood to exist in dualistic opposition. Indeed, in several cases, the ‘meeting place’ of such oppositions is the human body itself – often, Rukeyser’s own. Many of her poems, as well as large portions of *The Life of Poetry*, stem from Rukeyser’s embodied and testimonial experience of social realities. As Jane Cooper has noted, ‘she wanted to be there. One way of witnessing was to write. Another was to put her body on the line, literally’.¹⁶⁰

The embodied aesthetics of Rukeyser’s treatise teaches us to each, in some way, put our own body ‘on the line’ by recognising the visceral interconnections of ourselves with others, and with our shared world. From such recognition, which Rukeyser argues is both the generative force and cumulative effect of poetry, comes an understanding of everyday, human experience as somatically integrated and socially dependent. It also, as recent scientific and philosophical studies have argued, locates our faculties of expression,

feeling, reasoning, and conceptualisation in a dynamic matrix of somatic, visceral existence. For Dewey as for Rukeyser, the most pressing task of aesthetic experience is to grasp the present, 'not as an immediate, isolated bare occurrence', but as 'the dynamically insistent occasion for establishing continuity or growth of meaning'.¹⁶¹ This is the real democratic project; 'the problematic which calls forth reflective thinking, not just for now and again, but continuously'.¹⁶² 'In times of crisis', Rukeyser states, 'we summon up our strength'.

Then, if we are lucky, we are able to call every resource, every forgotten image ... And this luck is more than it seems to be: it depends on the long preparation of the self to be used.¹⁶³

To be meaningfully present involves an awareness of 'our need for each other and our need for ourselves'.¹⁶⁴ It requires acting on this need in full comprehension that such action is pragmatically aesthetic, exercising both the imagination and reflection towards the present moment's possibilities. Johnson has argued that 'the art of our lives is the art of the meaning of the body'.¹⁶⁵ In her work of pragmatist aesthetics six decades earlier, Rukeyser demonstrated that both exist in the life of poetry.

Notes

1. Rukeyser read the major works of William James during the 1940s, in preparation for her biography of the physicist Willard Gibbs, in which she positioned James, Gibbs, and Herman Melville as American progenitors of an existential philosophy of dynamic process. References to the works of James, Peirce, and Dewey are scattered across decades of notebooks and teaching materials in Rukeyser's papers in the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library. The only sustained scholarship addressing Rukeyser and pragmatism includes Raphael Allison's 'Muriel Rukeyser Goes to War: Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Politics of Ekphrasis', *College Literature*, 33.2 (Spring 2006), pp. 1–29, and Stefania Heim's *Dark Matter: Susan Howe, Muriel Rukeyser, and the Scholar's Art* (PhD thesis, CUNY, 2015). Allison's essay establishes a strong ground on which my essay is built; he makes a convincing case that Rukeyser 'seized upon the pragmatists as a way to rethink her writing, which required revision during a wartime experience that challenged her earlier leftism and helped provoke a more complicated form of political and aesthetic pluralism' (pp. 23–4).
2. Richard Shusterman has been enormously instrumental in reclaiming Dewey as a progenitor of pragmatist aesthetics, from whose naturalist, experiential stance he builds his own aesthetic theory. See: Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (2nd edition, Lanham, MD and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000).
3. There has been some excellent scholarship on the relations between pragmatism and American poetry. Notable studies include Richard Poirier's groundbreaking *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) as well as his *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987) and 'Why do Pragmatists Want to be

- Like Poets?', in Morris Dickstein (ed.), *The Revival of Pragmatism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 347–61; Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism* (Cambridge University Press, 2007); Kristen Case, *American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice: Crosscurrents from Emerson to Susan Howe* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011); Lisi Schoenbach, *Pragmatic Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2012). None of them discusses Rukeyser.
4. Alexander's work in the 1980s built upon the work of Richard Rorty to help reposition Dewey as one of Western society's most crucial thinkers. See: Thomas M. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).
 5. Richard Shusterman, 'Pragmatism: Dewey', in Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 97–107, p. 97.
 6. Ibid.
 7. Ibid.
 8. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934) (New York: Perigree, 2005), p. 9. Hereafter *AE*.
 9. Ibid., p. 12.
 10. Ibid.
 11. Ibid., p. 10.
 12. Ibid., p. 2
 13. Ibid.
 14. Ibid., p. 28
 15. Ibid., p. 13.
 16. Ibid.
 17. Ibid., pp. 15, 161.
 18. Ibid., p. 106.
 19. Ibid., p. 17.
 20. Ibid., p. 169, original emphasis.
 21. Ibid., p. 50.
 22. Ibid., p. 67.
 23. Ibid., p. 44.
 24. *AE*, p. 63.
 25. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature*, p. xx
 26. Shusterman, 'Pragmatism', p. 98. Shusterman quotes from *AE*.
 27. *AE*, p. 9.
 28. Ibid., p. 23, my emphasis.
 29. Ibid.
 30. Ibid., p. 25.
 31. A. Isenberg, 'Analytical Philosophy and the Study of Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 46 (1987), pp. 125–36, p. 128. Quoted in Shusterman, 'Pragmatism', p. 97.
 32. John Dewey's name appears in the notes Rukeyser made while drafting *The Life of Poetry*, under the section 'Out of Childhood'. The Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Library of Congress, Box 1:43. Hereafter MR Papers.
 33. Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry (1949)* (Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1996), p. 11. Hereafter *LoP*.
 34. *AE*, p. 58.
 35. *LoP*, pp. 205–6.

36. Ibid., p. 171.
37. Ibid., p. 38.
38. Ibid., p. 169.
39. Ibid., p. 171–2.
40. Ibid., p. 31.
41. Ibid., pp. 177–8. Original emphasis.
42. Ibid., p. 172; *AE*, p. 172.
43. *LoP*, pp. 31, 32.
44. Ibid., p. 20.
45. Ibid., pp. 173–4.
46. Ibid., p. 172.
47. Ibid., p. 25.
48. Ibid., p. xi.
49. Ibid., p. 7.
50. For example, in *LoP*, pp. 50–4.
51. *LoP*, pp. 17–8.
52. Ibid., p. 166.
53. Ibid., pp. 166–7.
54. Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, eds. Janet Kaufman and Anne Herzog (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), p. 561. Hereafter *CP*.
55. Ibid., p. 538.
56. *LoP*, p. 11.
57. Handwritten notes from the Norton 1926 edition of I. A. Richards' *Science and Poetry*, MR Papers, 1:33.
58. *AE*, p. 261.
59. *LoP*, p. 48.
60. Ibid., pp. 7, 8, 44, 15 and pp. 21, 9.
61. Ibid., p. 17.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., p. 9.
64. Ibid., p. 17.
65. Ibid., p. 8.
66. Ibid., p. 9.
67. Ibid., p. 11. For a more detailed discussion on Rukeyser's position here, see Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, "Bad Influence" and "Willful subjects": The Gender Politics of *The Life of Poetry*' in this issue.
68. *LoP*, p. 11, 212.
69. This fact is mentioned or elaborated upon in numerous examples of scholarship on Rukeyser, including my own *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary: The Poetics of Connection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), Clive Bush's *The Century's Midnight: Dissenting European and American Writers in the Era of the Second World War* (Oxford: Peter Lang Ltd, 2010), Allison's 'Muriel Rukeyser Goes to War', Alan M. Wald's *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), and Kennedy-Epstein's "Bad Influence" and "Willful subjects", this issue.
70. Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time*, p. 389, n. 11.
71. Handwritten note in notebook, MR Papers, 1.21.
72. *LoP*, pp. 20, 48.

73. Eileen Myles, 'The Life of Poetry review', *The Nation* April 14, 1997. <http://www.eileenmyles.net/rukeyser.htm> [Date accessed: 15 December 2017].
74. *LoP*, p. 1.
75. Myles, 'The Life of Poetry Review'.
76. *LoP*, p. 120.
77. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Translated by Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), p. 100, emphasis mine.
78. *LoP*, p. 8.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
80. *Ibid.*, p. xi.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
83. See Bernadette Mayer's foreword to this special issue.
84. I refer here to New Criticism, as well as to the disembodiment characteristic of postmodern approaches.
85. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature*, p. 269.
86. Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. ix.
87. *Ibid.*, p. xii
88. *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 212, xi.
89. *Ibid.*, p. x
90. *Ibid.*, pp. xi, xii.
91. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
92. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
93. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
94. Gallagher, quoted in Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, p. 5.
95. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
96. As the editors of *Pragmatist Neurophilosophy: American Philosophy and the Brain* point out, George Mead, Peirce, James, and Dewey were 'America's first cognitive scientists'. John R. Shook and Tibor Solymosi, 'Introduction' (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 1.
97. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone quoting William James in 'The Legacy of William James: Lessons for Today's Twenty-first Century Neuroscience', in Shook and Solymosi (eds.), *Pragmatist Neurophilosophy*, pp. 29–49, 34–5.
I might add here that Rukeyser's insistence on the 'false barriers' between poetry and science – including neuroscience – extend to her students. Laura Manuelidis, the esteemed Yale neuropathologist and physician, for example, studied under Rukeyser in 1960 at Sarah Lawrence and became her good friend. Manuelidis is also a highly accomplished, published poet.
98. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
99. William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), Vol. 2 (New York: Dover Publications, 1950), p. 376. Quoted by Sheets-Johnstone, 'The Legacy of William James', p. 36. There are numerous references to this text, which Rukeyser taught from, across the Rukeyser papers, especially in the Gibbs files.
100. Sheets-Johnstone, 'The Legacy of William James', p. 32.
101. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
102. *LoP*, p. xi.
103. 'Poem out of Childhood', in *Theory of Flight* (1935), reprinted in *CP*, p. 3.

104. *LoP*, p. 54. See also Cecily Parks, 'The Anticipation of Ecopoetics in Muriel Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry*', in this issue, for further discussion of the theme of breathing.
105. *LoP*, p. 80.
106. *LoP*, pp. 77, 78, 83.
107. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
108. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
109. *Ibid.*, pp. 75–6
110. *LoP*, pp. 75, 76.
111. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, p. 13.
112. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
113. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
114. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
115. *LoP*, p. 41.
116. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
117. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
118. For a more extensive discussion on Rukeyser's employment of the 'primitive' trope, as well as its connection to childhood, see my *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary*.
119. *LoP*, p. 43.
120. John Collier, *Indians of the Americas* (New American Library of World Literature and W. W. Norton and Co., 1947), quoted in *The Life of Poetry*, p. 43, emphasis mine.
121. *Ibid.*
122. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
123. *LoP*, p. 44.
124. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
125. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
126. *Ibid.*, pp. 105–6.
127. Rukeyser appeals to the work of Gladys Evelyn Moorhead and Donald Pond, as well as to the psychoanalytical studies of Karen Horney.
128. *LoP*, p. 105.
129. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
130. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
131. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
132. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, p. 136.
133. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
134. See chapter 8 of Johnson's *The Meaning of the Body*, as well as George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (Basic Books, 1999), and Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, Rev. edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
135. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, p. 195.
136. *Ibid.*, p. 185.
137. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
138. *Ibid.*
139. Johnson quotes Stern, *ibid.*, p. 43.
140. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
141. *Ibid.*, pp. 44–5.
142. *LoP*, p. 77.

143. Rukeyser's indebtedness to Collingwood is evident throughout *The Life of Poetry*, and she credits his *Principles of Art* in the acknowledgements and the text. For Collingwood, Dewey, and Spinoza, the mind and body are inseparable in everyday and aesthetic experience and expression. Each called for an understanding of experience as the mind-body's 'total' response to the world. For a detailed examination of the influence of Collingwood's text on *The Life of Poetry*, see Eric Keenaghan, 'The Life of Politics: The Compositional History of *The Life of Poetry* and Muriel Rukeyser's Changing Appraisal of Emotion and Belief', this issue.
144. *LoP*, p. 49.
145. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
146. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
147. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
148. For an excellent discussion on Rukeyser's 'Ajanta' poem, see Elisabeth Däumer, "'Ajanta": An Introduction', online at <http://murielrukeyser.emuenglish.org/essay/elisabeth-daumer-ajanta/> [Date accessed: 15 December 2017. See also Allison's 'Rukeyser Goes to War', and David Bergman, 'Ajanta and the Rukeyser Imbroglia', *American Literary History*, 22.3 (2010), pp. 553–83.
149. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
150. *Ibid.*
151. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
152. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
153. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, p. 19.
154. *LoP*, p. 175.
155. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
156. Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), p. 318. Quoted in Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, p. 243.
157. *LoP*, p. 40.
158. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, p. 267.
159. These are Shusterman's three categories.
160. Jane Cooper, 'And Everything a Witness of the Buried Life', in Anne Herzog and Janet Kaufman (eds.), *How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1999), pp. 3–16, p. 7.
161. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature*, p. 269.
162. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
163. *LoP*, p. 1.
164. *Ibid.*
165. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body*, p. 283.

Disclosure statement

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