

MURIEL RUKEYSER

1913-1980

SHE HAD COME BY TRAILWAYS BUS '10 WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS, in May 1974, where she was to give a poetry reading at the public library that very evening. In New York, the night before, she had attended a performance of *Ulysses in Nighttown*, a dramatization of the last section of Joyce's novel. Shortly after the bus pulled up to the curb, Muriel Rukeyser moved haltingly down the steps of the bus, looking as if she had been jostled by a crowd of shoppers. Her hair, thin and graying, was in disarray; she wore dark fabric slippers, resembling ballet shoes, and her stockings sagged a bit below the black dress that hung unevenly just below the knees. Although she looked rather confused, she spoke the moment she recognized me, saying, "I haven't quite recovered yet from the play. The Molly Bloom soliloquy was so powerful—her story is every woman's story."

Two years later a friend of mine met her on a similar occasion. She told him she had heard a woman (while pointing to her on the bus) say to her daughter, "Isn't that the worst looking woman you ever saw?"

Such memories remain, in part, because they conflict so decidedly with Muriel Rukeyser's appearance on stage, where she was a commanding, a noble presence. She read her remarkable poems in a clear, deep voice, in the grand manner, and the times I heard her she maintained complete command of the audience. There, as in private conversation, one was reminded of the young woman whose early photographs showed her to be strikingly beautiful, with large dark eyes, black hair styled in the 19th century manner, above a full, olive-colored face. She was conscious of her beauty, and the illnesses in later life and the increased weight troubled her and shook her confidence.

I think of her, also, as she was photographed in 1975, in Seoul, Korea; she stood in the rain outside a prison, reading a statement on behalf of the poet Kim Chi Ha, a political prisoner under the military government there. Threatened with execution for his courageous defense of others, Kim Chi Ha is alive today partly as a result of Rukeyser's efforts, the support of Amnesty International and PEN. She had been involved in similar struggles ever since her journey to Alabama as a college sophomore in 1933 to cover the Scottsboro Boys Trial, when it was "illegal" to do so. And she spent time in jail in Manhattan and in Washington D.C., later, in support of draft resisters and in civil disobedience against the nuclear arms race. Even after two strokes in her mid-60s, prior to her death in February 1980, Rukeyser traveled and worked for social justice, particularly during her tenure as president of PEN, the international organization of poets, essayists, and novelists.

A member of a wealthy Philadelphia family, she was born in New York City on December 15, 1913, educated at experimental schools there and at Vassar College (with Mary McCarthy, Elizabeth Bishop, and Eleanor Clark). Shortly after leaving college she learned to fly a plane, and then turned to film editing, photography, traveling, and wrote for various periodicals. In 1935, she received the Yale Younger Poets Award for her first collection, *Theory of Flight*. Among her well-known early poems are "Boy with His Hair Cut Short," about a young man looking for work during the Depression, and "The Lynchings of Jesus" in which she said of the young black men, in the famous Scottsboro Boys Trial: "Dred Scott wrestles for freedom there in the corner/ All our celebrated troubles are repeated here."

In 1936 she went to England and, eventually, to Spain to cover the People's Olympiad, an alternative to the Olympic Games being held in Berlin. The beginning of the Spanish Civil War gave her, as it gave George Orwell, a positive view of social change: "Even the gypsies on the docks in Barcelona were with this. It was a curious vision of a 20th century world which would

not take place," she said later.

An assignment in the graphics division of the Office of War Information during World War II ended after only six months when, along with Ben Shahn and others, Rukeyser began to portray the deeper implications of the war. From there she moved to San Francisco, where she taught at the California Labor School, married, and gave birth to her only child, a son. At that time, she helped to initiate public poetry readings that contributed to the San Francisco Renaissance. Returning to New York in 1954, she taught at Sarah Lawrence College and was subsequently elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

During the 1960s, Rukeyser gave benefit readings for the antiwar movement, and in 1972, she traveled on a peace mission to Hanoi with Denise Levertov and Jane Hart. The women's movement and two excellent films about her life and work gradually enlarged the audience for her poetry, even as failing health caused a curtailment of a busy schedule of readings, teaching, and writing in her last years and until her death in 1980.

Rukeyser's poetry reflects her strong sense of the common lot of ordinary people—their suffering, their work, their confusion in the midst of a sometimes cruel and awkward century. It is that consciousness of pain and her powerful rendering of that awareness that give her poetry its prophetic quality. Though written in some cases almost half a century ago, what she wrote seems especially current. The later poems, especially *The Speed of Darkness* (1968), about people out of work, about failures of communication between lovers, are among the truly memorable lyrics of the period.

In her life and in her thirty books of fiction, poetry, and translations, Rukeyser was constantly striking out toward new territories. She did so not merely to rebel against convention, but in order to alert others to the peculiar tensions of the moment. This penchant for the unexpected kept her readers alert

and critics perpetually confused, so it will be some years before literary history and criticism attend to her achievements. In the meantime, the common reader, the one responsible for her present audience, keeps her work visible. I have never called her poems to the attention of readers and students without them responding with extraordinary enthusiasm.

Rukeyser was not a "thinker," and her writings sometimes sound rhetorical rather than analytical. Her language is the language of song. She seems not to speak to the immediate hurt or social concern, the way a more conventional writer would, but provides, one might say, something more essential: a psychological grounding for a private or political truth. One can only guess at the depth of suffering on her part that is at the base of such understanding. The strength at the heart of these insights is the reason, no doubt, that her poetry is both sustaining and lasting. Here is one example:

Poem

I lived in the first century of world wars.
Most mornings I would be more or less insane,
The newspapers would arrive with their careless stories,
The news would pour out of various devices
Interrupted by attempts to sell products to the unseen.
I would call my friends on other devices;
They would be more or less mad for similar reasons.
Slowly I would get to pen and paper,
Make my poems for others unseen and unborn.
In the day I would be reminded of those men and women
Brave, setting up signals across the vast distances,
Considering a nameless way of living, of almost un-
imagined values.
As the lights darkened, as the lights of night bright-
ened,
We would try to imagine them, try to find each other.
To construct peace, to make love, to reconcile
Waking with sleeping, ourselves with each other.

Ourselves with ourselves. We would try by any means
To reach the limits of ourselves, to reach beyond
ourselves,
To let go the means, to wake.
I lived in the first century of these wars.

BY MURIEL RUKEYSER

The Collected Poems. New York: McGraw Hill Co., 1978.

The Life of Poetry. New York: William Morrow and Co., (1949), 1974.

"Craft Interview with Muriel Rukeyser." In *The Craft of Poetry*. Edited by William Packard. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1974.

And others.

ABOUT MURIEL RUKEYSER

Kertesz, Louise. *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980.