



“American out of Conflict”: World War II and the *Elegies* of Muriel Rukeyser

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Abstract

This essay offers a contextualized reading of Muriel Rukeyser’s *Elegies*, ten important World-War-II era poems that have received very little critical attention yet provide significant insight into Rukeyser’s politics and poetics during the war. Pointing out the consistency with which she addresses politics in her pre-war and wartime poetry, this reading of the *Elegies* challenges the prevailing critical consensus that describes Rukeyser’s “shift” from leftist activist to pro-war propagandist as the war progressed. At the same time, this essay’s close reading of the *Elegies* within the context of the heated policy debates taking place in the United States during these years reinforces Rukeyser’s reputation as a poet who champions movement, process, and change. This reading of Rukeyser’s *Elegies* foregrounds the recurring symbols and motifs that illustrate the regenerative power of movement, thus strengthening our understanding of her anti-fascist politics and poetics.

Keywords

Rukeyser, Muriel, *Elegies*, World War II, war in literature

This essay offers a reading of Muriel Rukeyser's *Elegies*, ten poems that she published at various times before, during, and after the United States' participation in World War II. Critics have given very little attention to the *Elegies*, perhaps because they are, as Louise Kertesz grudgingly admits even as she praises the poems, "difficult" and even "obscure" (139-41). Although one must acknowledge some faults in the poems, a careful and contextualized analysis of the *Elegies* nevertheless brings to light a number of important points regarding Rukeyser's poetry and political philosophy. For starters, an understanding of the *Elegies* will encourage readers to reconsider several recent articles that trace Rukeyser's alleged wartime "shift" from leftist activist to pro-war propagandist; my reading of the *Elegies* suggests that this shift does not in fact take place and that, instead, these poems reveal a remarkable *continuity* between her pre-war and wartime writing. Also, this reading of the *Elegies* will highlight Rukeyser's anti-fascist social and political goals as well as her feelings about the United States and its role in the world; and by reading Rukeyser's pre-war and wartime poetry within the context of American political debate over the country's decision to participate in the war, one discovers in Rukeyser's writing a consistent belief that America will continue to be a great nation only as long as it remains committed to the physical movement of people and the intellectual movement of ideas. During a period when American political discourse often seemed mired in lengthy debates over isolation, intervention, and the proper conduct of the war, Rukeyser's *Elegies* advanced a bluntly interventionist, anti-fascist, and democratic agenda intended to revitalize the country via the regenerative power of movement—especially the movements of immigrants and pioneers as well as the dialectical movement that results from various kinds of conflict.

Rukeyser, World War II, and the Critics

Not long ago, when critical discussion focused mostly on her protest poetry (especially her Depression-era masterpiece "The Book of the Dead"), Rukeyser was viewed primarily as "a proletarian, leftist, Marxist, or 1930s political poet" (Allison 1). In part because she dedicated much of her career to writing poetry that addressed racial, class, and gender inequality, and perhaps also because she was the subject of a decades-long investigation by the House of Representatives' Committee on Un-American activities, a significant strain of Rukeyser criticism from the 1990s fixates on poems that can be read—and *have* been read, by Michael Thurston and John Lowney, among others—as *de facto* attacks on an American political and legal system that allows for the mistreatment of weak, underprivileged, or working-class individuals (Thurston 178). More recently, however, several critics—including Jeannie Perrault, James Brock, Raphael Allison, Artemis Michailidou, and Alice Templeton—have begun to focus on Rukeyser's work during World War II, when she not only wrote poetry that seemingly undercut some of her leftist political views, but also found employment as an "Information Specialist" writing propaganda for the United States' Office of War Information (OWI). As a result, the critical narrative describing Rukeyser's relationship with America's political establishment now goes something like this: Sometime around the start of World War II, Rukeyser disavows many of her left-leaning (and seemingly "un-American") political and social convictions in order to support the United States in

the fight against the fascists. This story is compellingly told by Perreault, who contrasts Rukeyser's well-known work as "a leftist poet, a feminist, [and] an activist" with her OWI work, wherein Rukeyser lends her creative imagination to support the United States government's World War II "propaganda machine" (143), and by Allison, who suggests that Rukeyser's move to the OWI signaled her "distinct shift from a poet of the literary left to an American pragmatist who aligned herself with the United States war effort and the political ideals of democratic pluralism" (1). These accounts provide a valuable background for Rukeyser's wartime poetry and offer a welcome challenge to a prevailing critical wisdom that once characterized her poetry as somehow un- or anti-American.

However, these reassessments exaggerate the significance of the "shift" in her attitude toward both leftist politics and toward America itself. For one thing, nothing in her poetry—not even in her most strident protest poetry from the 1930s—substantiates the idea that she held a contemptuous view of America. Instead, as Suzanne Gardiner convincingly argues, Rukeyser belongs to an American "poetic tradition that insists on including within its scope the workings of power and history, that does not accept the given world as it is, injustices intact, but insists on transformation" (90). Rukeyser often praised the United States and held the country to high standards; but she also insisted, in her poetry and in her acts of protest, that it live up to its democratic ideals. These reassessments also overlook the fact that an interventionist position in the late 1930s would not have been inherently antithetical to leftist politics. Like many of her fellow American leftists, Rukeyser advocated intervention in the war primarily because she wanted to stop the spread of fascism and to fight against the agenda of National Socialism wherever it might appear. The fallout from the so-called "Rukeyser Imbroglio" is instructive on this point. As David Bergman points out, even when the editors of *The Partisan Review* attacked Rukeyser for her refusal to "follow [leftist] political orthodoxy," the controversy likely had more to do with her non-conformist poetics or even her gender than it did with her supposedly objectionable politics (Bergman 554). In short, there is very little to indicate a significant wartime change in Rukeyser's political and poetic objectives. So, although it is intriguing to picture the activist-poet Rukeyser rejecting her leftist political views in order to adopt what Michailidou calls a "pro-war position" in her World War II writing, characterizing her position as "shifting" misrepresents her vision of the United States and distorts the significance of her wartime writing.

The following pages will concentrate on Rukeyser's *Elegies* in order to emphasize the significant role of *movement* in her political and artistic philosophy. By reading the *Elegies* within the ever-changing context of World War II and the United States' role in it, we will come to understand that Rukeyser's poetic vision and political objectives overlap in several important ways. The *Elegies* suggest that intervention in the war would promote movement, progress, process, and the anticipation of a more democratic future, while isolationism merely encourages stagnation, regression, discrimination, and an overdependence on retrograde traditions. In these poems, movement is revealed to be an indispensable element of Rukeyser's vision of what the war would mean to her country. For Rukeyser, the two most characteristically "American" forms of movement are dialectical (by which I mean, following Hegel rather than Marx, a process by which

conflicting or even destructive “moments” lead to negations that foster movement or “progress”) and exploratory (which I define as the actual physical movement of people—especially “immigrants” and “pioneers”—across land and sea), and these kinds of movement appear again and again in the context of her wartime *Elegies*. By equating “intervention” with “movement” and linking “isolationism” to “stasis”—and by pointing out places where American isolationist rhetoric appealed to a form of nationalism tinged with xenophobia—the *Elegies* simultaneously express an interventionist political agenda and display a poetic vision of “racial, social, political, and spiritual integration” (Brock 256). As the following analysis of the *Elegies* will show, it is no overstatement to suggest that, for Rukeyser, the very idea of “America” could survive the war only if the United States and its citizens accomplished a difficult task: they must join the fight against the fascists without adopting a win-at-all-costs mentality that would compromise America’s democratic ideals. Rukeyser desperately wanted the United States to enter—and to win—the war; but her faith in America’s future depended not only on a military victory, but also on the country’s ongoing commitment to progress through movement.

Intervention and Anti-Fascism: The *Elegies* from *A Turning Wind*

For Rukeyser, World War II began not with the bombing of Pearl Harbor or with Germany’s invasion of Poland, but at an earlier moment: September 1936 and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Coincidentally, the fighting in Spain started the very day Rukeyser arrived as a journalist to cover the Anti-Fascist Olympics, which were being held in Barcelona to protest the games of the XI Olympiad held in Berlin earlier that summer (Kertesz 121). Not surprisingly, witnessing this event made a deep impression on Rukeyser, and she began to refer to this conflict as “the war this age must win” (*Collected Poems* 139). As she and the other foreign participants were evacuated from Spain in the early days of the war, she made up her mind to obey the command they received from Spanish republicans before departing: “go home: tell your peoples what you have seen” (*Life of Poetry* 2). Rukeyser *did* return to the United States to tell her people about the plight of the Spanish anti-fascists; however, she would quickly discover that not all Americans were ready to join the fight against fascism.

In fact, it would be many years before American public opinion moved very far toward intervention. Even after Hitler’s army invaded Poland in September of 1939, causing France and England to declare war on Germany, the American response to war remained ambivalent. Even so, there were some globally-thinking and often left-leaning “interventionists”—a group with which Rukeyser would have identified—who insisted that the United States had a moral responsibility to support the Spanish republicans against Franco’s fascist forces. According to historian David M. Kennedy, these interventionists viewed Spain as “the arena in which the great moral confrontation between fascism and democracy was being fought” (399). Rukeyser, who shared many of the political ideals held by those on the left, openly called for American support for and (eventually) participation in what would presently become a world-wide fight against the fascists. In a note attached to the 1937 pamphlet edition of the poem “Mediterranean,” Rukeyser solicits donations to aid “Spanish Democracy” by supporting volunteer surgeons and ambulance drivers. Also, in a poem titled “Correspondences,”

published in 1939, she attempts to provoke the United States into supporting the British and French by suggesting that Americans, with “our backs to the bricks” as “war closes in,” must soon act or be forced “to make accounting [for] how our time was spent” (167). Rukeyser believed that the war that began in Spain in July of 1936 *was* America’s war, and she promoted intervention in the conflict; by joining those who were fighting against the fascists, she felt, the United States would be fighting for its own democratic ideals.

For the most part, however, popular opinion in the United States of the late 1930s remained isolationist. Opposition to American involvement in European fighting has often been described as a unified movement and given the name “isolationism,” but historians have identified several sources of isolationist thinking. John A. Wiltz points out that many anti-interventionists recalled the overselling of America’s need to participate in the first World War and felt as if they had been misled into becoming involved in what was billed as “a crusade for democracy” but had turned out to be “a European affair, fought over European problems, for European ends” (7). Other isolationists maintained their opposition to American involvement in the war because of national and/or ethnic prejudices. David S. Wyman notes that isolationism was sometimes linked to an attitude of “nativistic nationalism,” which encouraged pride in “100 percent Americanism” as a means to forestall the influx of immigrants the war in Europe was likely to generate (10-11). Wiltz also observes that, in between the world wars, many Americans developed strong pro-German and anti-British feelings, which created political opposition to intervention on England’s behalf (4-5). Finally, isolationist thinking sometimes derived from thinly-veiled anti-Semitism. In a bibliographical essay about “The Anti-Interventionist Tradition,” Justus Doenecke explains that the isolationism of other leading public figures, like the publisher Robert R. McCormack and journalist Westbrook Pegler, has been linked to anti-British or anti-Semitic sentiments; and while Doenecke downplays the extent of their influence, he acknowledges that some isolationists were motivated by “a form of ethnocentrism, with an insecure and xenophobic ‘in-group’ projecting its fears and self-hatreds upon all ‘outsiders’” (para. 7).

Against all of these arguments for isolationism, Rukeyser and other interventionists promoted the need for the United States to take up arms in the “war the age must win.” Given her sense of the profound significance of what she experienced first-hand in Spain, and considering the degree to which much of the world—especially the United States—seemed to be ignoring the danger inherent in the spread of fascism, it is no surprise that the *Elegies* that appear in *A Turning Wind* (1939) express an interventionist agenda. These poems make the case that America—the land where “movement” has always been a fundamental aspect of the nation’s claim to greatness—must take an active role in the fight against the fascists and their backward-looking and xenophobic view of the world. Drawing a distinction between “fascistic” stasis and “democratic” movement, these first five *Elegies* juxtapose the threats associated with a lack of movement to the hope that exists wherever movement is allowed and encouraged.

At this point, it is worth noting the degree to which Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of “flow” illuminates Rukeyser’s concept of movement. In much the same way that Deleuze and Guattari, in *Anti-Oedipus*, correlate desire with productive forms of movement—which occurs as a result of a “desiring-production” that unblocks liberating

“flows”—Rukeyser’s *Elegies* encourage desire and movement while demonstrating the dangerous personal and political consequences of stagnation. These poems present several instances where need, isolation, and fear cause individuals to stifle their desires; and, as a result, these individuals become vulnerable to the machinations of “Magicians,” the figures in the *Elegies* that represent the fascist enemies of the more democratic “Prophets.” Just as *Anti-Oedipus* attempts to explain why, “at a certain point, under a certain set of conditions, [the masses] wanted fascism” (29), Rukeyser’s *Elegies* illustrate the personal and political freedoms that people lose when they (“willingly”) forfeit their desire. In “Second Elegy: Age of Magicians,” for instance, the fascist-Magician’s primary goal is to find people who are needy, isolated, and afraid so he can use these weaknesses to consolidate power. As the poem explains, “The Magician lifts himself higher than the world” by entering the streets and shouting “Need! Bread! Blood! Death!” until individuals become so fearful that they submit to the will of the Magician. In the words of the “Second Elegy,” these timid individuals are “children [who] grow in authority” (302-3). When a person is induced to act out of fear or “need” instead of pure desire, productive flow ceases and she becomes vulnerable to the promises made by fascistic “authority.”

Rukeyser’s “First Elegy: Rotten Lake” further illustrates this point. In this poem, actions caused by anything other than pure desire are viewed as problematic and possibly even criminal. “Need” causes desperate people to surrender their desires—a situation that in turn leads to a further restriction of movement—and should be considered the main reason why individuals “voluntarily” submit to the power of the fascist-Magician. In the words of the “First Elegy,”

the one crime is need. The man lifting the loaf
with hunger as motive can offer no alibi, is
always condemned.
These are the lines at the unemployment bureau
and the tense students at their examinations;
needing makes clumsy and robs them of their wish,
in one fast gesture
plants on them failure of the imagination;
and lovers who lower their bodies into the chair
gently and sternly as if the flesh had been wounded
never can conquer. (300)

According to these lines, “need” causes people to abandon their “wishes” and, as a result, the “imagination” fails; and, once imagination fails, people become incapable of loving and find themselves isolated and afraid to act on their desires. Potentially (re)productive flow ceases when fear and isolation block desire.

And, once individuals or populations have become static through isolation and fear, the stage is set for the Magician to gain power by promising to fulfill the “needs” of these people. The *Elegies* frequently illustrate the dire consequences of this situation. As “Fourth Elegy: The Refugees,” explains, when the “age of the masked and the alone begins,” there will be no shortage of “new tyrants” ready to offer “help” to those whose isolation has left them without a connection to anyone or anything outside of themselves.

These lonely and submissive individuals—described in the poem as “bodies without souls”—are disposed to become followers of the Magician-tyrants, and their willingness to trust the Magician to address their needs will inevitably lead to newer and bigger problems. As the poem cautions, “help may be near, but remedy is far” (307). The “help” of the Magician promising to address the needs and fears of isolated individuals might be readily available, but it will not resolve the problem; instead, this kind of freedom-limiting “help” creates an excuse for the fascist-Magician to further limit movement in order to gain even more control over the individual. Being cut off from others—or, in the words of “The Refugees,” to live alone “in the countries of the mind”—is tantamount to an individual being “Cut off at the knee. Cut off at the armpit. Cut off at the throat” (310). When people are isolated from each other to this degree, they are vulnerable to Magicians seeking to “cut them off” completely from the natural flow of the desire that might otherwise help them overcome their needs and facilitate movement.

Traditions, too, can be used to limit movement and create stasis. In addition to portraying the vulnerability of lonely people with unmet needs and growing fears, Rukeyser’s *Elegies* suggest that people in the 1930s might be susceptible to misplaced faith in certain traditions—especially literary and aesthetic traditions—that support nationalist doctrines in which “clean” and “pure” are used as code words for racism and, in extreme cases, even genocide. It seems that, for Rukeyser, who disliked monuments because they attempted to reify a specific version of a nation’s history, tradition is to art what a monument is to history. Therefore, whenever possible, the free individual should break both traditions and monuments in order to ensure the forward movement of art and history. In “Third Elegy: Fear of Form,” magician-like art critics promote an “acceptable” art and enforce a “Tyranny of method” which, like other tyrannies, consolidates power by demanding compliance. In the poem, frowning critics look disapprovingly upon the work of abstract artists; the critics prefer a more traditional and politicized aesthetics, even if it leads to “stations of swastikas” and “geometries of wire / the barbed, starred / Heil” (304-6). These fascistic critics discourage “new combinations” and “new methods” in art because these would allow the free flow of ideas and the artistic achievement of “play of materials in balance / carrying the strain of a new process” (307). Tradition, not “playful” innovation, is the goal of the Magician.

As the *Elegies* often suggest, there are many problems and dangers in the world of the 1930s. However, wherever the poems describe movement, the tone of these early *Elegies* becomes optimistic. Encouraging American intervention and finding hope in the regenerative potential Rukeyser always associates with dialectical and exploratory movement, these poems predict deliverance from the threat of fascism and the triumph of democratic freedom. This optimism is rooted in the expectation that America will, in the words of the fourth elegy, “remember and avenge” the “epidemic of injuries” suffered by people at the hands of the fascists; Americans, especially those who are young, pioneering, immigrant, and willing to fight, will “reclaim the world and sow a legend” (310). Dialectical processes and exploratory movement are critical components of this deliverance, and the liberation of desire opens up flows that will ensure the defeat of fascistic stasis. In “Rotten Lake,” the speaker’s “amazing desire” helps her conquer “the black-haired beast” that represents her debilitating “need” (299). By issuing the

redemptive cry “I want! I want!” she opens up the life-giving flow of desire and thereby ensures her survival through a phoenix-like ascent from the “dead lakes” in which “need” had threatened to drown her (301). In “The Fear of Form,” the pioneering artist who offers new “combinations” and “methods” of art will, like “a phoenix of power,” rise to create a new, “anti-sentimental” art that looks forward, not backward, for inspiration (305). Images representing exploration (via immigration) and rebirth (via dialectical processes) inspire hope in “The Refugees” and “A Turning Wind,” two elegies in which refugee- and immigrant-Americans “hold the flaming apples of the spring” and remind America that its greatness as a nation depends on its embrace of these new arrivals (310). When Americans accept these “Masterpieces of happiness” from other countries, they will remember their “old dream” of progress through “process... [that] remains as promise, the embryo in the fire” (314). These images of movement and process symbolize, for Rukeyser, the American antidote for problems brought into the world by the fascist Magician.

Rukeyser’s optimistic portrayal of an interventionist and pro-immigration America does not reflect the reality of American political life in the late-1930s, however. In contrast to Rukeyser’s anti-fascist expectations, many Americans held tightly to anti-interventionist and even xenophobic sentiments. The *Elegies* often directly confront these factions. Addressing a lengthy reproach to the isolationists within the United States, “Age of Magicians” expresses Rukeyser’s sense of America’s responsibility to intervene in the war:

‘I came to you in the form of a line of men,
and when you threw down the paper, and when you sat at the play,
and when you...saw the shadow
of the fast plane skim over your lover’s face.
And when you saw the table of diplomats,
the newsreel of ministers, the paycut slip,
the crushed child’s head, clean steel, factories,
the chessmen on the marble of the floor,
each flag a country, each chessman a live man,
one side advancing southward to the pit,
one side advancing northward to the lake,
and when you saw the tree, half bright half burning.
You never inquired into these meanings.
If you had done this, you would have been restored.’ (303)

The accusation in these lines is that American isolationists, unmoved by the evidence of mounting tension overseas, have disregarded Europe’s diplomatic failures and the resulting buildup towards war. Although media coverage of these events made them witnesses to the war, the isolationists “threw down the paper” and ignored the “newsreel” coverage of events whose meanings, had they been discerned, would have led to action that would have “restored” America.

In the dramatic concluding lines of “Second Elegy: Age of Magicians,” the speaker’s optimism regarding her country’s possible restoration is connected to its willingness to *fight*:

The word is war.
And there is a prediction that you are the avenger.

And all this is because of you.
And all this is avenged by you.
Your index light, your voice the voice,
your tree half green and half burning,
half dead half bright,
your cairns, your beacons, your tree in green and flames,
unbending smoke in the sky, planes' noise, the darkness,
magic to fight. Much to restore, now know. Now be
Seer son of Sight, Hearer, of Ear, at last. (303-4)

There is “magic to fight,” and Rukeyser commands her (American) readers to see well and hear clearly the connection between fighting and the restoration of the world. The informal monument (represented by a “cairn”), the temporary guide (described as a “beacon”), and the cyclical nature of the natural world (represented by a “tree half green and half burning, / half dead half bright”) are important symbols of a dialectical process that will, she hopes, eventually result in the defeat of the magicians.

The *Elegies* also call particular attention to a factor that often fueled the American anti-interventionist movement: xenophobia. Given the importance of exploratory movement in the *Elegies*, it is worth repeating that the immigrant-American experience became the subject of much social and congressional debate in the late 1930s, as thousands of people from all over Europe fled the political, religious, and racial persecution that accompanied the rise of fascism in Europe. According to *Refugees in America*, a post-war report on the immigration of European peoples to the United States after 1933, “the deliberate and systematic denationalization and denaturalization of large masses of people [that] began with the rise of Fascism...marked the beginning of a new refugee movement which was destined to become the largest and most far-reaching in modern history” (Davie 4). As David S. Wyman points out, the resulting anti-immigrant hostility in the United States was often attributed to anti-interventionist feelings and was expressed in isolationist slogans like “America First” and “America for the Americans” (3). Rukeyser’s “Fourth Elogy: The Refugees” and “Fifth Elogy: A Turning Wind,” counter this anti-immigrant sentiment through a complex narrative that highlights the role of exploratory movement in the formation of American identity. In an effort to connect the fate of Europe and the United States, these two poems depict the experience of refugees making the transition from “immigrant” to “American” and expand an argument that was already circulating among anti-isolationists at that time: that the United States owes its greatness in part to a cultural pluralism engendered by the contributions of immigrants making their new homes within its borders. Indeed, Barbara Dianne Savage explains that this pluralistic message was the subject of *Americans All, Immigrants All*, a popular radio program produced by the U.S. Office of Education and broadcast for twenty-six weeks in 1938 and 1939 with the goal of “construct[ing] and populariz[ing] an expanded narrative of American history that acknowledged the contributions of immigrants, African Americans, and Jews” (22, 28). Rukeyser’s “Fourth Elogy” and

“Fifth Elegy” reinforce the sentiments of *Americans All, Immigrants All* and even suggest that, because of their commitment to movement, refugees have far *greater* power to renew America’s ideals than those citizens already living in relative safety within the United States. Furthermore, at the same time as the battle between the interventionists and the anti-interventionists intensified prejudice against “non-native Americans,” Rukeyser’s *Elegies* attempt to defuse some of the anti-immigrant tension by linking the experience of the refugee to the experience of the leading American symbol of exploratory movement: the pioneer. Using language that praises both the United States and the working-class immigrant-Americans who have helped strengthen their adopted nation, Rukeyser re-imagines America’s role in the world and insists that movement and process, not isolation, are necessary for America to continue to be regarded as the place where the promise of freedom will at last be fulfilled.

In the final section of “Fifth Elegy: A Turning Wind,” inspiration comes from the refugees, whose desire for a new life will revitalize America’s pioneer spirit. Although these refugees “remember pain,” they also “know growth” and therefore never lose faith in the “process” that links America’s past to its future. As long as there are pioneering individuals willing to suffer, grow, and risk having unfulfilled desires, the “old dreams” of America may be reborn, phoenix-like, from the fire of war. For Rukeyser, the survival of individual Americans as well as the “community” of the United States depends on America’s willingness to endure suffering in an attempt to nurture the qualities that make America great. The *Elegies* published in *A Turning Wind* thus portray process and movement as the keys to fighting against both the stagnant worldview of the fascist “magicians” and the xenophobic, isolationist sentiment of the anti-interventionists. Rukeyser believes that, by joining the fight against the fascists, America will facilitate the movement that will help “redeem” America and the anti-fascist world.

A Propaganda of Process: The *Elegies* from *Beast in View*

Rukeyser published *Beast in View*, which included the second series of her *Elegies*, in 1944. By this time, there was no longer any debate on the topic of American intervention. After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and Germany declared war on the United States, even the staunchest anti-interventionists tended to agree with Senator Burton Wheeler when he declared, “The only thing now is to do our best to lick hell out of them” (qtd. in *Battle against Intervention* 96). However, to ensure continued public support for what had the potential to be a long, expensive, and distant war, the Roosevelt administration felt compelled to initiate a propaganda campaign (euphemistically called a “strategy of truth”) designed to convince Americans of the need to sustain the war effort. The administration also wanted to garner international support for its efforts, especially in those countries where American soldiers were likely to be fighting, and therefore established the Office of War Information and charged it “to coordinate the dissemination of war information by all federal agencies and to formulate and carry out...programs designed to facilitate an understanding in the United States and abroad of the progress of the war effort and of the policies, activities, and aims of the Government” (qtd. in Blum 31). According to Ian Scott, the OWI had the important task of “selling” the war at home and defining, for the benefit of the denizens of foreign lands, the values for which the

United States was fighting (351). With these goals in mind, Rukeyser joined the OWI, hoping that she might help mold America's war propaganda to fit her image of the country as a place made great by movement.

However, sharp divisions soon opened up within the OWI over the proper means of promoting the war. On one side of the disagreement were Rukeyser and other supporters of Archibald MacLeish, a poet and former librarian who served as the office's first chief. MacLeish, a long-time anti-fascist who insisted that his fellow American writers owned a moral "responsibility" to advocate the United States' entry into the war, believed strongly in America's pluralistic ideals and recognized in fascism the antithesis of these ideals. John Morton Blum describes MacLeish's goals for the OWI as, among other things, promoting issues like "vigorous world organization and civil rights" while avoiding deliberately jingoistic portrayals of the Germans and Japanese as inherently evil or subhuman (22, 30). While MacLeish was in charge of the OWI, the office employed many like-minded writers—including Rukeyser—who believed that the American public, if adequately informed about the important ideological differences between fascism and democracy, would support the fight for American values and ideals without resorting to the further vilification of the enemy. For them, the war represented a clash of ideas. Staying true to her faith in dialectic processes and (im)migratory movement, Rukeyser wanted to strengthen American democracy by allowing antagonistic ideas and diverse peoples to coexist within the nation's borders.

Against the idealism of MacLeish, Rukeyser, and the writers working in the OWI there arose another faction, led by former CBS vice-president William B. Lewis and strengthened by the OWI's hiring of professional advertisers. This group hoped to fuel patriotic sentiment by taking advantage of the fact that, according to Blum, "Americans at home had little trouble hating their enemies" during the war (45). Rather than appealing to Americans' feelings of humanitarianism and the ideals of democratic pluralism, this faction portrayed the enemy as inherently wicked and barbaric. From their point of view, the most effective propaganda would make use of Americans' prejudice against the Japanese and their hatred of the Nazis. In the end, the OWI sided with Lewis and followed the "by-any-means-necessary" approach to propaganda.

Not surprisingly, the idealistic Rukeyser was "repelled" by the propaganda methods used by the "advertising men" and resigned from the OWI in the summer of 1943. In *The Life of Poetry*, she bluntly summarizes the result of the conflict between the two factions by explaining, "the advertising men won, with those who decided that this was not a war against fascism, that it was a war to be won, and the meaning worked out afterward" (145). Rukeyser clearly felt that any victory that failed to preserve America's "meaning" would prove counterproductive; as Perreault points out, Rukeyser believed that "the purpose of the war was not merely to win but also to affirm the best of American values and the worth of the human spirit" (151). Once it became clear that the OWI was willing to compromise these American values for the sake of victory, she submitted her resignation. By returning to work on her *Elegies*, however, Rukeyser was able to continue making the case that America's "meaning" could only be assured through faith in the dialectical process—which she associates with the idea of democratic pluralism—and the continual arrival of immigrant pioneers from other lands.

Rukeyser's *Elegies* from *Beast in View* therefore achieve one of the goals that she failed to accomplish in her work with the OWI. Reflecting the changes that had taken place in the world since the publication of her initial *Elegies* in 1939, Rukeyser turns her attention away from intervention to focus on promoting a vision of America in which democratic pluralism allows for the dialectically productive coexistence of multiple—even antagonistic—points of view. Through an ongoing conflict of ideas, she argues, America could become an even stronger and more democratic nation. This change in emphasis brings about a change in tone as well. Whereas the shadow of fascism looms over much of the first set of elegies, the elegies published in *Beast in View* generally anticipate a future filled with brightness and new life; where the first elegies emphasize fear and isolation, images inspiring hope and community contribute to a more optimistic mood in elegies six through nine; and while the key symbols of the early elegies include the march-stepping magicians and the frowning art critics, the later poems are filled with diverse peoples singing and dancing together as they prepare for spiritual and emotional rebirth. More importantly, much of the hopefulness in these poems once again derives from Rukeyser's persistent belief that America, by living up to its commitment to movement, will help the world awaken from the nightmare of fascism and enter a future where freedom is once again possible. Consistent with both her 1930s interventionist goals and her wartime work as a propagandist, Rukeyser's second group of *Elegies* affirms her belief that America is the place where immigration and (dialectically productive) antagonistic points of view create the kind of movement that will generate an even stronger democracy.

Of all the poetry Rukeyser wrote in the war years, "Seventh Elegy: Dream-Singing Elegy" and "Ninth Elegy: The Antagonists" best articulate her expectation that America will be a place where the emotional, social, and political evolution of human beings will take place under the dialectic conditions created by democratic pluralism. These poems describe a dialectical movement from conflict toward fulfillment, with American ideals providing hope for the future of humankind. For example, Rukeyser's "Seventh Elegy" begins with the speaker's bleak assessment of what happened at the start of the war when, in her opinion, the anti-fascists were ill prepared to resist the powerful forces ranged against them:

We were strong at the first.
 We resisted. We did not plan enough. We killed.
 But the enemy came like thunder in the wood,
 a storm over the treetops like a horse's head
 reared to a great galloping, and war
 trampled us down. We lost our young men in the fighting,
 we lost our homeland, our crops went under the frost,
 our children under the hunger. Now we stand
 around this fire, our black hills far behind,
 black water far before us... (319)

Presenting the war from the point of view of European anti-fascists, the speaker describes tremendous losses, including the apparent loss of hope. However, the "black water" that lies before them turns out to be an opening through which people will move toward a

better future: it is a sea that leads them “farther west” to America, “the striped country,” where they will sing “new songs” with their “brothers” in that distant land.

The poem’s remarkable concluding lines praise America as the place where hope lies not in the promises of a single “Magician,” but in the shared ideals of the dreamers living in the many-colored unity of a pluralistic society:

Brothers in dream, naked-standing friend
 rising over the night, crying aloud,
 beaten and beaten and rising from defeat,
 crying as we cry: We are the world together.
 Here is the place in hope, on time’s hillside,
 where hope, in one’s image, waivers for the last time
 and moves out of one’s body up the slope.

Who looks at the many colors of the world
 knowing the peace of the spaces and the eyes of love,
 who resists beyond suffering, travels beyond dream,
 knowing the promise of the night-flowering worlds
 sees in a clear day love and child and brother
 living, resisting, and the world one world
 dreaming together. (321)

Here, in the poem’s breathtaking final section, Rukeyser takes the reader into a future when the war is won, the fascist nightmare is ended, and free people everywhere are living and dreaming together as “brothers” in the “clear day.” Having fought their antagonists, these immigrant-“Americans” successfully traverse the Atlantic and achieve, through movement, knowledge of “peace” and “promise.”

A similar process takes place in “Ninth Elegy: The Antagonists,” where the speaker’s memories of “the faces drowned” in “this conflict” eventually give way to dreams of “freedom” and “deliverance.” Here, in lines that emphasize openness and “incompleteness” as the best weapons to use against fascism, one finds perhaps the most forceful poetic expression of what Perreault describes as Rukeyser’s goal in her work with the OWI: an affirmation of “an egalitarian and democratic America” in which pluralistic ideals have the power to fight fascism and promote “justice” in the world (144). Highlighting the country’s big, open spaces—the “Green / on shadows of Indiana, level yellow miles.../ The prairie emblems and the slopes of the sky / and desert stars enlarging in the frost”—the poem describes America’s landscape as the ideal place for a “changing spirit” to “make itself again” (325). This openness also ensures adequate room for the development of ideas and beliefs of all kinds. Indeed, as she looks back into her nation’s past, the speaker discovers that America has always been the “meeting-place” where various ideological “antagonists” have engaged in dialectically productive conflict. Taking stock of her “ancestors,” she identifies several figures—“dissenting ghosts”—whose contradictory means of advancing democracy attest to its strength: John Quincy Adams’ refined “eagle voice” contrasts with the “muscular democratic sense” of Andrew Jackson; and Lincoln’s “agon[izing]” decision to free the slaves is described as both “condemning and confirming” the actions of John Brown, a “mad old man” whose life is

defined by a “single broken gesture [that] freed many beliefs” (326). Americans, she insists, “are bound by the deepest feuds to unity”; because Americans believe in the (re)productive potential of dissent, they *become* American by way of their disagreements. In the words of “Ninth Elegy,” they are “American out of conflict” (326). Engendering movement and progress, antagonists ensure the affirmation of this crucial aspect of American identity. Americans may still need to fight, since “Those who most long for peace [must] now pour their lives on war” (327); but even as they fight, Americans should resist the impulse to hate their enemies, for “Love must imagine the world” (327).

In the concluding lines of “Ninth Elegy,” Rukeyser affirms her faith in movement and indicates her conviction that America in the future would become the place where a “great effort of growth” would finally deliver the world from hatred and war. But this growth and subsequent deliverance can only take place if America continues to embrace movement and conflict as a necessary means of fostering dialectical progress. In these final lines, America becomes “that far meeting-place” to which one must

call home the enemies—
 they keep their oppositions, for the strong
 ironic joy of old intensities
 still carries virile music.
 O, the young
 will come up
 after us
 and make the dream,
 the real world of our myth.
 .
 .
 .
 Today we are bound, for freedom binds us—we
 live out the conflict of our time, until
 Love, finding all the antagonists in the dance,
 moved by its moods and given to its grace,
 resolves the doom
 and the deliverance. (327-8)

This conclusion offers an approval of American values without expressing feelings of contempt for the “enemies” who, she argues, keep the nation “virile” by promoting dialectical growth. Praising various “oppositions”—including, it seems, those that exist between America and its foreign adversaries as well as those one finds within the country itself—Rukeyser’s “Ninth Elegy” achieves in part what her work with the OWI could not: the creation of “propaganda” that encourages Americans to distinguish themselves from the intolerant fascists by preserving oppositions, embracing “antagonists,” promoting progress, and making real the American ideal of democratic pluralism.

Afterword: An *Elegy* for Peace

As the above analysis of the first nine *Elegies* shows, Rukeyser consistently identifies movement as a key to America’s enduring claims to greatness as a nation. In these poems, Rukeyser presents an idealized vision of her country using images of

movement and progress; without a commitment to movement, her poetry seems to argue, America will not live up to its reputation as a beacon to freedom-loving people everywhere in the world. Rukeyser again makes this point in “Tenth Elegy: Elegy in Joy,” which appears in her 1948 collection *The Green Wave*. It is the only elegy that she published after the war, and it expresses the idea that, even following victory in the war, America must continue to embrace movement if it is to occupy a prominent place in the future of the world.

“Tenth Elegy: Elegy in Joy” begins with the kind of exuberance one would expect to read in a poem describing a world that is enjoying relative peace after nearly a decade of war: “Now green, now burning,” the poem begins, “I make my way for peace...all the wars [lead] to this peace” (328). Significantly, however, peace does not function as a final destination in the poem. As is so often the case with Rukeyser’s poems in general and her *Elegies* in particular, movement and process are valued much more highly than any endpoint; and, in “Elegy in Joy,” even this hard-won peace is described as an inevitably temporary state in a world where one must always be willing to fight in order to progress:

This peace is the face of the world,
a fierce angel who in one lifetime lives
fighting a lifetime, dying as we all die,
becoming forever, the continual god. (328)

In what seems like a paradox, the poem explains that living in a state of peace requires a lifetime of “fighting” and “becoming”; and, even under these conditions, the final outcome will always remain elusive: “The gift of our time,” the poem explains, is “the world to be discovered” (329). Even after the war has been fought and “won,” peace can be enjoyed and used only by those who remain willing to “discover” its meanings in the world.

For her part, Rukeyser espouses the idea, quite popular in the United States in the post-war period, that America would, through its relationships with other nations, provide the example for post-war cooperation. As she puts it in her final elegy: “In the cities of America I make my peace” (330). Yet this declaration serves as a mere starting point for further movement, and the concluding lines of “Elegy in Joy” affirm Rukeyser’s belief that America, the place where movement and process have always been the keys to national growth, will maintain its standing in the world only if it continues to embrace conflict and change. “I cannot say the end,” the speaker declares in the poem’s final section, which goes on to praise the beautiful impermanence of all things:

Nourish beginnings, let us nourish beginnings.
Not all things are blest, but the
seeds of all things are blest.
The blessing is in the seed.

This moment, this seed, this wave of the sea, this look, this instant of love.
Years over wars and an imagining of peace. Or the expiation journey
toward peace which is many wishes flaming together,
fierce pure life, the many-living home.

Love that gives us ourselves, in the world known to all
new techniques for the healing of a wound,
and the unknown world. One life, of the faring stars. (330)

There is in these lines an unmistakable emphasis on movement, process, and discovery. Kertesz rightly suggests that a full appreciation of these “immensely satisfying” final lines would require extensive reading of not just the *Elegies*, but of Rukeyser’s poetry as a whole (230). Even so, these lines can (and should) be read as an appropriate *non*-conclusion of her decade-long project of exploring the “meaning” of both World War II and America itself. For even if the final battle had been waged in “the war the age must win,” the “meaning” of this war was far from an established fact; it is up to those searching for “new techniques for the healing of a wound” to determine what, if anything, the fighting will have meant. Peace, too, exists only in “seed” form in Rukeyser’s final elegy. In this poem, as in the decades that would follow, peace appears not as an accomplished fact, but merely as a point somewhere further down a road that Americans would have to journey as they move ceaselessly into the “unknown world” of the future.

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