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ISSUE 3
MAR 2013

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THE JOURNAL OF
POETRY & POETICS

© TAB: The Journal of Poetry & Poetics. Volume 1. Issue 3. March 2013.

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One University Drive
Orange, CA 92866
www.chapman.edu/poetry

ISSN: 2169-3013

THE CENTER FOR POETRY AT CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY

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p o e t i c a

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MARY BIDDINGER



INVISIBLE CRANE

Too young to be in the trees
but tall enough to hold a rope
in one hand, like a milkmaid

conjures a vinyl suitcase from
miscellaneous handkerchiefs,
white ones grandmother slid

into the pockets of strangers.
Tiny embroidery of three tear-
shaped pears, or were they

grenades: please daub your
cheeks in church with the pin
ready to drop at will. One year

we kept the memory of a crane.
The teenage boy next door no
longer wandered our woods.

His parents became permanent
dark threads in the curtains.
Milk crates piled out back.

The first time you see a crane,
look away. Gaze at the grass
or stare into a damp bandana.

Better clouds hang elsewhere.
It's never the wings or eyes
but the legs that return to you.

VERSION OF MYSELF IN THE RUINS

We filled a paper balloon with corn syrup
then kerosene. The entryway smelled of shoes

and acquaintances. Somebody shoved her
hands into a damp burlap sack of barley.

Wind like a spigot at the edge of the yard.
Such weather made me violently wistful.

I looked like a widow, or an owl handler.
The birdseed bell had no clapper,

neither deer-proof nor silent. I left both
shoes at the party, armed my way down

a path of dead tracks. Rugged as molasses.
Friendly as a mineral lick. For hours

working elbows through mosquitoes
and those vibrating shadows that bicker

under city elms. I was awful violin music,
phone half swallowed by a phantom carp.

You found me between a box of wires
and a shrub the size of a claw-foot bathtub.

I believed the tracks were a harmonica
we could never hear above ground.

OLIVER DE LA PAZ



NOCTURNE WITH A WAX MODEL OF MADAME DIMANCHE

The grooves of the horn deepen in the evening.
Madame's face protrudes from a shelf.

Her countenance, mounted against two blocks of wood,
held there by fasteners, while a ten-inch protrusion

dangles from her forehead. The "cutaneous horn"
as the sciences call it, nearly covers her right eye.

In her widowhood, she must have kept her doors closed
as merchants filed away, closing their wagon trailers filled

with beets and sorghum. In the darkness of her apartment,
the wet pavers gleam under the narrow light of the oil lamps

and the vendors cart off into their separate orbits. The horn
above her eye constantly shadowing her sight, so that Paris

splits into partitions of dusk.

The light, for sure, is leased.

A little wine spills from a discarded glass, as a custodian sweeps

the tatters from a reception. The patrons are gone, though
their fragrances dangle above the rafters. A spray of flowers

here and there, falls from the ceiling of the exhibit hall.
And here is Madame Dimanche, patient above it all.

The echoes of the reception bend as the lights dim
and the doors close on this theater. Her face, bright as a wet jewel.

Hers is a ghost face. Her white throat and eyes, falsely
socketed. Their glass filled with secrets, some sweet

nothings with the pale museum incandescents reflected
in them. The peculiar horn leans out of her forehead,

extends down to her chin with the saddest of trajectories.
As though her brain voided its own water. A fountain

in winter frozen in mid-air as water valves close,
its narrow stream fixed. Or the horn, monumental

as grief for her lost husband, continued on as
a physical thought. A keratinized invocation of love.

NOCTURNE WITH NEEDLES PINNED IN BEAUTIFUL ROWS

*after "47 Needles," a photograph of an exhibit in the
Warren Museum at Harvard Medical School by
Rosamond Purcell*

Because the night is arrayed in linear teeth
and because the only great things we leave

to gods are the enormities of our suffering.
Therefore, row after row of needles

arranged in their stiff, celebratory lines. The sheen
of them, dizzy in the museum light. Their casings

streaked with bits of rust, as though the blood
from madness's veins hardened into a thin cake,

instantaneously. How they must have throttled her,
kept the river of her arteries edged with snow.

The rattletrap heart of her, beating into slower and slower
cycles as needle pricks skin and plunger dips

down into that thing, deeper than memory,
rimmed with ice as green as arctic depths.

Therefore the caesura—her breath lapses and jumps, cleaved
as one apocalypse into another. Then bewilderment

as the city lights bleed into its own intoxicated celebrity.
The skyline, sudden from this vantage point, having fallen

on her back in the park. The air's cold lassitude oozes thick
while autumn leaves tessellate the ground and tanagers

eclipse the trees with heartbeat after frantic heartbeat,
The little pins lost in the body cinch closer

to the core. Her blood pumps its frenzy, out of sheer boredom.
Because that is what gods do. They ease into the body

with flaming tongues and lips and blush. Their bluster,
their glory into the pure and glistening gutter. Out of collapse

comes the question. Or rather, the story about the body,
which is the story about the next chapter. The next glistening row

of needle. And the now.

Now they singe a sheet of paper,
indifferent militants saluting from the encasement glass.

Their attentions secret and distant, having been asleep
outside the body in this place that is cold and obscene.

JESSE LEE KERCHEVAL



MANZANA

¡Hoy, me niego a pensar!
Siempre filosofo. Siempre
estoy rumiando. Al infierno con eso.
Quiero ser un nabo,
un vegetal inconsciente
pensando en nada,
una ardilla que salta de árbol
en árbol de alegría o de miedo
al gato. No detenerme
en el aire a contemplar.
Hoy, no recuerdos tristes.
Los muertos se quedan muertos.
¡Óiganme, fantasmas! Miren:
estoy mordiendo una manzana.
Maduro mundo rojo,
sos suficiente.

translation

APPLE

Today, I refuse to think!
Always I philosophize. Always
I ruminate. To hell with that.
I want to be a turnip,
unconscious vegetable,
considering nothing,
a squirrel leaping from tree
to tree out of joy or fear
of the cat. No stopping
in midair to contemplate.
Today, no sad memories.
The dead stay dead.
Hear me, ghosts! Look:
I am biting an apple.
Red ripe world
you are enough.

BURBUJA

Me quedo acá
en una silla al costado de la casa

Leo, pienso—escribo estas líneas—

El aire tiene el olor del eucalipto
el sonido de las cotorras
El sol brilla sobre el pasto
y la parrilla

sobre todo, excepto en este rincón de sombra

Estoy feliz. Estoy contenta
Cada músculo de mi cuerpo está relajado
salvo los de la mano que escribe
estas palabras en español

Pienso en español
Sueño en español
Leo y hablo sólo en español
Es mi vida acá

En tres días volveré
a mi vida fría en el hemisferio norte

Pero acá en Uruguay por tres días más
toda mi vida es verano
es una felicidad para recordar siempre

es una burbuja

translation

BUBBLE

I sit here in a chair
by the side of the house

Read, think—write these lines—

The air carries the scent of eucalyptus
the cries of the parrots
The sun shines on the grass
and the barbecue grill

over everything except this corner of shade

I am happy. I am content
Every muscle in my body is relaxed
except for in the hand that writes
these words in Spanish

Here I think in Spanish
Dream in Spanish
Read and speak only Spanish.
This is my life here

In three days I return
to my cold life in the northern hemisphere

But here in Uruguay for three days more
all my life is summer
is a felicity to remember always

is a bubble

PATRICIA KING



“THE WORLD IS A FIELD OF THE SPANISH WAR”: TRAUMATIC MEMORY IN MURIEL RUKEYSER’S SPANISH CIVIL WAR POETRY

*...whether you lie fallen / Among those sunlight fields, or by miracle somewhere stand, / Your words of war and love,
death and another promise / Survive as a lifetime sound.*

—Muriel Rukeyser, “Long Past Moncada,” 1944

*Rites of initiation, if the whirlpool eye / see fire see buildings deformed and flowing to the ground / in a derangement
of explosion falling / see the distorted face run through an olive grove / the rattle of hens scream of a cliff-face and the
pylons filing / in an icing of sweat enter these tropics: war, / where initiation is a rite of passage [...].*

—Muriel Rukeyser, “Otherworld,” 1939

From the moment when, at age twenty-two, she was an eyewitness to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, until her death in 1980, American poet Muriel Rukeyser did not stop bearing witness for the lost and the fallen of the Spanish Republic. Indeed, we might go so far as to say that she *could* not stop. The five days that she spent in Spain at the end of July 1936 were also the first five days of the war; in that brief but intense span, Rukeyser bore witness to the opening of what would be the most violent and inhuman destruction that the modern world had yet seen. The Spanish war, as a direct precursor to World War II, introduced to the horrific concept of total war, wherein fighting is done not by armies but by populations, collapsing the former distinction between front line and civilian towns. The regular carpet-bombing of towns and cities within the Spanish Republic, as well as the daily tit for tat assassinations between civilians on both sides of the conflict, made the Spanish Civil War the first war in which virtually no one in the country remained outside the realm of violence.¹ Writing about international witnesses such as Rukeyser, John Muste notes, “The violence of the war proved a shock to almost all [...]. Few were old enough to have seen the first world war, and whatever education they had at home in the horrors of war could hardly have prepared them for a struggle in which tanks, bombing planes, and other ‘improved’ weapons [...] made their appearance” (27). Thus we may see the Spanish Civil War as an event without precedent, a concept fundamental to our understanding of the nature of trauma.

By the time she left Spain, Rukeyser had witnessed the fighting and experienced the bombing at close hand; she also had lost to the war the only man she ever publicly spoke of having loved, a young German exile named Otto Boch.² These two events constituted for Rukeyser the psychological trauma to which she would return repeatedly, in poem after poem throughout the remaining years of her life. As her writing attests, she was never able to forget Spain, nor to staunch the tide of poetic testimony that flowed out of that trauma like blood from a vital wound. In Rukeyser’s poems about the Spanish Civil War, we clearly see the link between the work of writing political poetry and the work of bearing traumatic witness. Both demand of the writer or speaker that she turn her most deeply personal and interior story outward, in a deliberately public stance, so that her readers may share with her the burden of the testimony and, along with her, be changed—be moved to further action—by it.

Rukeyser’s Spanish Civil War poetry is a poetry of witness. She clearly saw it that way herself: *In The Life of Poetry* she writes, “Confession to another person, to a priest or a psychiatrist, is full of revelation [...]. But there is another confession,

which is the confession to oneself made available to all. This is confession as a means to understanding, as testimony” (212). This, Rukeyser affirms, is “the poem, in which the poet [...] giv[es] form to [...] experience,” and “the witness receives the work, and offers a total response, in a most human communication” (212). When trauma theorists speak of “bearing witness,” they refer both to the double event of an individual’s having survived a trauma and, through that very survival, continuously acting on a compulsion—part psychological, part ethical—to remember that trauma and to re-incorporate it into language. Integration of the traumatic story—into language and then into the public sphere—is the primary goal of *telling* that story. “Testimony,” writes trauma scholar Judith Herman, “has both a private dimension, which is confessional and spiritual, and a public aspect, which is political and judicial” (181).

Evoking the Listener: Poetry as Testimonial Space

The traumatic event actually compels its own testimony; it penetrates every facet of the survivor’s life, so that the survivor must eventually find a way of releasing the story of that trauma. “Trauma survivors,” writes Dori Laub, “live not with memories of the past, but with an event that [...] had no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as the survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect” (69). The story of such an all-encompassing, unshakable event cannot be released arbitrarily, however; it demands a listening Other who will share the burden of the story with the speaker-survivor, who will help her to externalize the traumatic testimony. The listener to traumatic testimony “is a party to the creation of knowledge [...]. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is [...] the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed...” (57). For Muriel Rukeyser, poetry became the vehicle through which she found a listener for the story of what she had seen and heard in Spain.

As does all testimonial literature, Rukeyser’s poetry on Spain establishes complicity between the text and its readers, asking them to engage both their imaginations and their sense of justice in coming to know and care about political struggles taking place “somewhere else” (Beverly 99). Rukeyser’s testimonies of the Spanish Civil War ask her readers to enter into the experience and become ethically interested in it, and thus responsible for its outcome. In *The Life of Poetry*, she insists that reader and writer alike are implicated by the truths that poetic testimony reveals. The reader is asked to receive the poet’s testimony “with all his life, and whatever capacity he has to summon up his life appropriately to receive more life” (175). The creation of a poem, Rukeyser says, depends not only on the writer, but on the reader as well; the poem calls forth a radical listening empathy on the part of the reader. “The giving and taking of a poem,” Rukeyser writes, is “[...] a triadic relation” comprised of “poet, poem, and witness” (174). Thus the poem is a form of testimony.

In this sense, the relationship between poet and reader in a poem’s production mirrors the relationship formed by a trauma survivor and her listener in the giving of traumatic testimony. As Laub explains, “the listener to a trauma comes to be a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience the trauma himself,” and thus also partially experiences the creation of a testimony arising from that event (57). Testimonies by their very natures cannot be monologues, Laub affirms. “For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an Other—in the position of one who hears” (70). In psychoanalysis, the one who listens and enables the release of the testimony is the therapist. Rukeyser’s testimony to her own Spanish Civil War experience, mean-

while, happens in the act of addressing her readers; such witness is enabled by her faith in poetry's ability to include and implicate the reader in its meaning.

Imagining her readers, Rukeyser deliberately chooses the word *witness* rather than *reader* or *audience*: "I suggest the old word 'witness,' which includes the act of seeing or knowing by personal experience, as well as the act of giving evidence. The overtone of responsibility in this word is not present in the others" (175). The reader-witness's shared responsibility in what "revelation" the poem brings to light "announces with the poem that we are about to change [...]" (175). The poem becomes an instrument of transformation for both the poet and her reader, or witness—as the poet asks the reader-witness to stand with her in listening to her testimony and in sharing its weight.

Poet and Holocaust survivor Paul Celan also recognized and articulated poetry's ability to call out fellow witnesses. In a public speech concerning the nature of poetry, Celan claimed: "The poem intends an Other, needs this Other, needs an opposite. It goes towards it, bespeaks it" ("Meridian" 49). Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe remarks that, for Celan, "the possibility of poetry" was precisely the "possibility of going beyond oneself" (50). Muriel Rukeyser knew this, too. "Exchange is creation," she maintains in *The Life of Poetry*. "In poetry, the exchange is one of energy. Human energy is transferred, and from the poem it reaches the reader" (173). For Rukeyser, poetry constitutes a space of profound dialogue, where she is assured of the deep listening her testimony needed. In a craft interview with *The New York Quarterly*, she remarks that "[t]he poem seems to be a meeting place, just as a person's life is a meeting place" (Fortunato 35).

Various trauma scholars concur that this choosing of literature to do the work generally ascribed to psychoanalysis is in many ways fitting. As Felman indicates, both literature and psychoanalysis produce testimonies which operate as "a mode of truth's realization beyond what is available as statement" (15, emphasis mine). For Kalí Tal, trauma literature emerges from the "need to tell and retell a traumatic experience, to make it 'real' both to the victim and to the community" (21); such a literature is always marked by a tension between "the drive to testify" and "the impossibility of successfully conveying the experience" in its shattering entirety (78). A text emanating from trauma, according to Cathy Caruth, must "ask what it means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness. Such a question [...] can never be asked in a straightforward way, but must also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (5). Poetry, then, may be particularly well suited for the telling of traumatic stories, in that both writer and reader know that poetry never says all that it can and simultaneously says *more* than it can.

Or, as Lacoue-Labarthe puts it, the work of the poem is to "clear a way between silence and discourse, between mutism's saying nothing and the saying too much of eloquence. [This work] is the poem's narrow path" (141–42). The whole story of a trauma will never be captured in words; to believe that trauma can be articulated completely, in any form of language, is fallacious. The language of modern poetry, however—in which meaning is not directly stated but is rather hinted at, or offered in glimpses, or derived from the gaps, breaks, and repetitions in the language—may bring us closer to the truth of a traumatic story than any attempt at direct statement or so-called factual narrative. Traumatic testimony, whether spoken, as in psychoanalysis, or written, as in poetry, may thus be understood "not as a mode of statement of, but rather as a mode of *access to*" the story of the trauma (Felman 16).

The Journey In: Two Spanish Civil War Poems

Two of Rukeyser's earliest poems on Spain—"Long Past Moncada" (1944) and "Otherworld" (1939)—serve as signposts, markers of the poet's progression, along the path that she took into Spain in mid-July 1936. "Long Past Moncada" describes Rukeyser's passage into that country on the first day of war. "Otherworld" takes us more deeply into that site of war, situating us along with the poet in the very vortex of destruction and horror that Rukeyser witnessed in Barcelona, in the days immediately following her entry. Taken together, these two poems trace out Rukeyser's Spanish Civil War experience and her responses to that experience, operating as a complex testimony to her trauma.

Moncada, a small Catalan town between the French border and Barcelona, was the site of the railway station where Rukeyser's train from France stopped for good, as news of fighting in the city reached the outlying towns. Moncada was also the place where Rukeyser first made Otto Boch's acquaintance. In "We Came for the Games," Rukeyser remembers the "complex immediate closeness" which sprang up between her and this German athlete, headed, as she was, to Barcelona for the Anti-Fascist Olympics: he, to compete as a runner; she to report on the Games for *Life and Letters Today* (194). Sitting side-by-side in the permanently stalled train, Rukeyser and Boch struggled to communicate around their language barriers, passing a *Guide to Twenty-five Languages of Europe* back and forth between them. "I have never wanted language so much," Rukeyser recalls (194). Twenty-four hours later, the Anti-Fascist Games cancelled, a truck from Barcelona carried them both into the city. For more days, amidst the fighting, they lived there together. Rukeyser, who had experience in neither nursing or childcare, the two professions which would have made her useful to the Spanish Republic, was asked to leave, "to take the burden of thousands [...] of foreigners off the government at this crucial and bloody moment" (368–69). Boch, however, stayed in Spain to fight for the Republic. He eventually died there, in the Segre River battle, where the Republic lost six hundred of its nine hundred men fighting there that day (Rukeyser, "We Came" 370).

The poem "Long Past Moncada" tells little of this, however. What it does reveal—in fleeting glimpses, in fragments of sentences—are the barest realities: The poet is in love with the person to whom she speaks throughout the poem, her "darling"; together with this individual, she has witnessed a catastrophe, the beginning of war in Spain; this loved one has gone to the war and is dead; the events of the poet's having loved him and lost him in the chaos of war have transformed her and will not leave her. Spare as these details are about this phase of Rukeyser's Spanish Civil War experience, the poem holds true to the shape of traumatic testimony. Traumatic speech, Felman reminds us, as it tries to find a relationship between language and the traumatic event, is "composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference" (5). As such, poetry may be a first step towards articulating traumatic experience. In reading Rukeyser's poetic testimony, we must sift through line after line of broken syntax, jarring punctuation, and surprising vocabulary. Poetic form such as Rukeyser employs often takes us beyond our own frames of reference; it troubles and perplexes us, demanding a second and a third attentive reading. We wait for meaning to float up to us, partially, eventually.

The difficulty of Rukeyser's Spanish Civil War poetry notwithstanding, one dominant theme emerges from this body of work. Rukeyser's pain at having left Otto Boch, and her pain at having left Spain in the midst of this moment of extreme hope and extreme danger, seem almost inextricable. "Long Past Moncada" is a prime example. Addressed to Otto Boch, as

are approximately half of all Rukeyser's poems on Spain, "Long Past Moncada" expands from meditating on private concerns into larger, more public ones. Boch becomes a figure in whom Rukeyser is able to see both the personal and political ramifications of the war. Indeed, in her opening address to him, Rukeyser's gaze telescopes from the enormous and all-encompassing, to the infinitesimal and individual, and then back again: "Nothing was less than it seemed, my darling: / The danger was greater, the love greater, the suffering / Grows daily great" (lines 1–3). These first lines announce that everything in this poem—the themes and the emotions that it recalls—will be writ large. The poet writes from a retrospective standpoint, sure now that all which she experienced in Spain was actually even more portentous than she could have guessed at the time: "Nothing was less than it seemed." Even as Rukeyser makes this rather general declaration regarding the ongoing horrors of war, however, she almost simultaneously focuses her attentions on one unique individual, the one she names "my darling." Yet her vision cannot remain so minutely focused; once again she turns back to her sweeping, larger-than-life memories: "The danger was greater, the love was greater, the suffering / Grows daily great." In the first three lines of this opening stanza, Rukeyser has already melded the private and the public, the personal and the political. She does not specify whose suffering it is that daily increases. The implication, however, is that this suffering is both her own, as she mourns the loss of Boch, as well as the suffering of the multitudes in Spain who, as she wrote the poem, were starving, imprisoned, tortured, or exiled, under Franco's dictatorship—the bitter end result of the war whose opening she and Boch saw together.

Rukeyser more openly avows that her personal agony is only one small part of a far-reaching agony, both born of the war, in the following stanza:

And the fear we saw gathering into that Spanish valley
Is rank in all countries, a garden of growing death;
Your death, my darling, the threat to our lifetime
And to all we love. (4–7)

Reflecting on Spain's civil war from the vantage point of 1944, Rukeyser is all too well aware of how that war led directly into World War II, with its mind-numbing atrocities that would forever change the way that humanity understood its own nature. The gathering tension and the gearing for battle that she and Boch witnessed, in "that Spanish valley" outside Barcelona on the first day of the war, was only the earliest and faintest inkling of the horror that was to come, that would spread to "all countries" in World War II's "garden of growing death." Linking the Spanish Civil War to the Second World War, Rukeyser also sees the deep connections between Boch's single, individual death at the hands of the Spanish Fascists and the threat or potential death "to all we love" embodied in the powers of fascism in the world at large.

Perhaps nowhere else in the poem are the personal and the political so fused as in Rukeyser's acknowledgement: "I know how you recognized our war, and ran / To it as a runner to his eager wedding / Or our immediate love" (12–14). Rukeyser affirms Boch's choice, and even the fact of his death, knowing that his enlistment in the International Brigades was the culmination of his political dreams. As Rukeyser later writes of Boch, "He had found his chance to fight fascism, and a profound quiet, amounting to joy, was there; it was the human chance, in or out of Germany" ("We Came" 369). Coming as it does on the heels of her painful speculation on how and where Boch has died, "at Huesca, during the lack of guns, / Or later, at Barcelona, as the city fell," the poet's affirmation of Boch is especially powerful, strikingly selfless.³ In a particularly radical gesture, Rukeyser equates Boch's participation in the Spanish Republic with the joyful importance of their own—

apparently hoped-for—wedding, their own “immediate love.” Boch’s entry into war, and Rukeyser’s concomitant entry into her role of witness for that war, unite them as powerfully as a marriage. Rukeyser is able to embrace Boch’s decision, and his death, because she sees the cause he died for as “our war,” a cause in which she joined him, in spirit and in her lifelong poetic testimony.

In the concluding stanza of “Long Past Moncada,” Rukeyser reflects on her own present moment and on the ways in which the trauma of the war, and of having lost Boch to it, continue to penetrate even this present.

Other loves, other children, other gifts, as you said,

“Of the revolution,” arrive—but, darling, where

You entered, life

Entered my hours

[...]

Your words of war and love, death and another promise

Survive as a lifetime sound. (24–30)

These lines, along with Rukeyser’s assertion, several stanzas earlier, that “You reach my days,” even among “the heckling of clocks, the incessant failures,” insist on the permanence of the poet’s memories of Boch, and of his influence on her (lines 10–11). Rukeyser makes clear that Moncada and the memories emanating from that site will never truly be “past” her; the “long past” of her poem’s title is merely chronological. Trauma, on the other hand, exceeds and spills past the boundaries of chronological time. Even as Rukeyser acknowledges the flow of time, moving her forever forward and continuously further away from her experiences in Spain, she admits that Spain and Boch are never far from her thoughts. Tellingly, she is unable to list the “other” people and events that have filled her days since leaving Spain without returning again, momentarily, to a specific memory of the war. The gifts “[o]f the revolution” are a direct reference to Boch, who once used this phrase to name the five days he and Rukeyser spent together in Barcelona (“We Came” 370). Boch’s political commitments, which took him out of Rukeyser’s life but implanted him powerfully in her memory and in her own politics, do “survive as a lifetime sound,” ringing throughout Rukeyser’s Spanish Civil War poetry.

“Otherworld” begins by retracing some of the moments alluded to in “Long Past Moncada”; the first several stanzas track the poet’s progression in the summer of 1936 from England through France and into Spain. These stanzas create a gradually mounting tension, as the cities Rukeyser mentions along her path southward—Dover, Calais, Paris—mark her growing proximity to Spain, the destination and culmination of the journey. While these English and French cities are lightly, fleetingly sketched, it is Spain which explodes into the poem, momentous and all-consuming from the first; the instant of the poet’s entry into this country is marked by her breathing in “new air” (19), by her “wake[ning]” in a land of “cave-drawn mutilated hands / of water painted with the color of light” (24–25). This wild and mysterious country is also the place “where the world ends as the wheels stop turning” and “people begin to live by their beliefs” (26–27). The wheels that stop turning, of course, are those of the train that Rukeyser rode into Spain; that moment when they stop—in Moncada, with the arrival of news of war in the nearby city—marks the ultimate moment of transformation in Rukeyser’s life, in the lives of all the young idealists of her generation. The world as they have known it disappears in the outburst of war; from now on, their beliefs will become a matter of life and death.

The long central stanza of “Otherworld” performs this transformation, compelling us, through terrifying “rites of initiation,” into this new and violent world:

Rites of initiation, if the whirlpool eye
see fire see buildings deformed and flowing to the ground
in a derangement of explosion falling
see the distorted face through an olive grove
the rattle of hens scream of a cliff-face and the pylons filing
where initiation is a rite of passage,
[...]
see in this end of voyage love like that fabulous bird's
lit breast, the light of the black-crowned night heron
whose static soaring over the central world
identifies armies, takes the initiate
 into a room where all the chairs fall down
 and all the walls decay and all the world stands bar
 until the world is a field of the Spanish War [...]. (28-44)

The poet is suddenly lost in the nightmare of war; the calm, orderly chronology of the first stanza vanishes from the poem. In this central stanza, Rukeyser's repeated emphasis on the act of seeing—“see fire, see buildings deformed [...] see the distorted face”—marks the poet's feverish desire to communicate the trauma to which she has been an eyewitness. The broken and impressionistic images she records here, trying to make her reader see what she has already seen, convey a deep chaos inherent in this act of seeing. Reading these lines, in which both nature and manmade edifices collapse and melt and in which the eye itself has become a whirlpool—overstimulated, its vision swirling out of control—is to enter a world gone mad. This is a world where the witness is forced to see too much, too soon, and is thus unable to comprehend or articulate completely the experience.

Testimony as Both Personal and Public

In giving testimony, a trauma survivor takes up a position profoundly singular and inward-focused, yet also inherently, necessarily communal and outward-looking. On one hand, trauma is the event without precedent; it is an event that, for its survivor, is absolutely singular: isolated, unsymbolized, unintegrated. Thus the story of trauma that a survivor bears is, as Felman insists, “a radically unique, noninterchangeable and solitary burden” (3). Felman cites Celan, who famously wrote that “No one bears witness for the witness.” In this statement, Felman locates “the *solitude* of a responsibility” thrust upon the survivor of—and witness to—a trauma (3). In this sense, bearing traumatic testimony is the most personal of all forms of communication. As we have seen, however, the story of trauma is one that cannot be told in isolation. While the content of the testimony itself—the experience of the trauma survivor—is absolutely individual and personal, the actual process of *articulating* that testimony, of bearing witness to a trauma, demands the presence of a compassionate, listening Other. Testimony, then, is a communal action which emanates from the individual experience; although it is initially an extremely

private experience, it is transformed into an openly, necessarily public one.

There are distinctively political and ethical dimensions to this act of publicly bearing witness to a traumatic event. Robert Jay Lifton speaks of a sense of “debt to the dead” or “anxiety of responsibility” that trauma survivors often feel about those who did not live through the event with them; it is “the feeling that one must, should, and can act against the wrong and toward an alternative” (139). Part of Rukeyser’s work in her testimonial poetry of the Spanish Civil War is to ask that her readers remember it with her and refuse to let such a loss happen again.

Rukeyser had, indeed, directly experienced the trauma of “total war” for five days. She later recalled that, upon entering Barcelona the day civil war broke out, “[t]he road ha[d] fortifications, thrown-up bales of hay, later [...] barricades of paving stones flying the red flag for unity” (“We Came” 368). As Stanley Weintraub asserts, “the bloodiest” of all the battles fought on that first day of war was in Barcelona: “[A]rmed workers [...] advanced on rebel-led troops with such disregard for personal safety that many of the panicky soldiers turned on their officers and surrendered” (7). Throughout her life, Rukeyser recalled this Spanish sojourn as catastrophic: “We had seen [...] the sniper whose gun would speak, as the bullet broke the wall beside you [...] . [T]he cars burned and the blood streamed over the walls of houses and the horses shrieked [...]” (*Life* 1).

As I have shown, the testifying stance that the trauma survivor takes up is a dual one. The survivor turns inward, entering into her own story of trauma, even as she turns outward, bringing that story out into the public light. This dual stance is one which Muriel Rukeyser assumed in all of her Spanish Civil War poetry. For her, Spain was both “the core of all our lives” (Bernikow 18), the dark and potent center of herself that she would plumb again and again in poetry, and the reason for which she engaged in political activity throughout her life. Her poetry about Spain, at once intensely personal and openly public, mirrors the simultaneous inward–outward movement of the traumatic testimony.

We have already observed this interplay in two of Rukeyser’s Spanish Civil War poems. In “Long Past Moncada” and “Otherworld,” we see the poet’s movement between the interior, personal dimensions of her Spanish Civil War experience and the exterior, political ones. “Long Past Moncada,” essentially an elegy to Otto Boch, invokes the war via the poet’s addressing of her dead lover. The impassioned commitment that marks Rukeyser’s poetry on Spain springs in part from her love and her loss in this very private, individual sense. A harsh counterpoint to the privately themed, romantically nuanced “Long Past Moncada,” “Otherworld” explodes in a flurry of horrific images from the war itself and asserts that witnessing the Spanish Civil War was the single greatest epiphany of the poet’s life, her “rite of initiation” into the world of political witnessing. In 1979, a year before her death, Rukeyser reflected on the mandate she received in Spain: “We were told, ‘Your responsibility is to go home and tell your people what you’ve seen in Spain’” (Bernikow 18). Amazingly, despite Rukeyser’s significant body of poetry on that theme, she concluded, “I think I’ve never done that adequately” (18). She would, she vowed, “go on all my life trying” (18).

This unquenchable drive to tell what she had witnessed in Spain arose both of personal need—the need to uncover and work through Rukeyser’s own experience of trauma—and of her ethical convictions. Like many politically conscious survivors of trauma, Muriel Rukeyser believed that publicizing of her own traumatic experience of war would raise concern and horror in others and thus prevent the re-enactment of such trauma. Her testimonial poems about Spain are both a path inward, sounding the chasms of her own personal loss and pain, and a path outward: out of herself, toward her readers. In

this way she sought to awaken and implicate the political consciousness of her readers, as she herself had been awakened and implicated in Spain.⁴

Breaking the Verse

Putting such an experience into language, however, is necessarily a fraught and delicate work. Traumatic testimony must not to betray the singularity—even, at a certain level, the untellableness—of the experience, but at the same time it must in some way be communicable to the listener. The difficulty of framing a testimonial experience in language often results in the rupturing or reshaping of language itself. Poetry, because it does provide a space in which the writer may fragment and restructure language, is perhaps the one kind of language through which the witness may most closely approach her testimony. “[T]he breaking of the verse,” Felman suggests, “becomes itself a symptom and an emblem of the historical breaking of political and cultural grounds” in the upheaval of war (20). In poetry of witness such as “Otherworld,” we see the poet’s struggle to put into language that experience which by its very nature defies language. The disjointed, unassociated shards of description, the tatters of wounded memory and shocked senses, all point us toward the poet’s experience of massive trauma.

In the poetic testimony, however, we also see the witness’s grasping reach outward, out of herself, in an attempt to push out of the paralyzing singularity of her traumatic experience. Testimony reinserts and settles the traumatic event within the larger historical record. Testimony through poetry—the language of metaphor and suggestion—in particular helps to put the traumatic event into a frame of reference, into a language, that will not entirely betray its nonreferential, unrepresentable nature. In “Otherworld,” Rukeyser seems already quietly, intuitively aware of the healing power latent in her testimonial efforts. Her allusion to the self-regenerating phoenix, “that fabulous bird” (38) whose burning breast illuminates and “identifies armies” moving across the earth below it, hints at the hope for transformation, for new life, which comes after and out of the agonizing act of traumatic testimony (41).⁵

Rukeyser equates the burning phoenix with the “love” that sprang from the “end of [her] voyage” through Spain (38); in Rukeyser’s Spanish experience, “love” encompasses both her personal love for Otto Boch and her broader, politically compelled love for the Spanish Republic and its cause. Both these loves were immolated on the pyre of civil war, yet Rukeyser attests that in their very immolation lies the possibility of new life born out of ashes. It is this love that throws its light across the marching armies, which guides “the initiate” into the realization that all “the world is a field of the Spanish Civil War” (44). Driven by her passion both for the Republic at large and for one particular soldier who died in its defense, the Rukeyser of “Otherworld” is herself the initiate, roughly awakened to the world’s potential both for heroism and for horror. Seeing Spain in every other war of her lifetime, Rukeyser would go on asking, through her poetry and her deeds, that the world choose heroism over horror, peace over destruction. Her poetic activism was a lifelong act of resurrecting that love which died in Spain.

“Otherworld” does not end with such a hopeful speculation, however. This is a poem that offers only the barest sliver of hope; 1939, the year in which Rukeyser wrote “Otherworld,” was also the year in which Spain fell to Franco and Hitler invaded Poland. In this context of utter despair, the phoenix in Rukeyser’s poem is seen only in mid-burning, the most tragic and hopeless moment of its story. In this moment, life as the bird has known it is vanishing; there is yet no sign of new life beginning. It is only from our later perspective that we are able to divine the acts of regeneration that would evolve, slowly

and painfully, out of Rukeyser's efforts at testimony to the Spanish Civil War.

The closing lines of "Otherworld" evoke a historical moment of transition as pure and terrifying as that moment of the phoenix's destruction. Rukeyser recalls those days at the beginning of the war, when the bricks of the last street are

up in a tall wave breaking
when cartwheels are targets are words are eyes
the bullring wheels in flame
the circles fire at the bleeding trees. (51–55)

This is a fantastically horrific scene, where inanimate objects become animate; streets rear up in rolling waves, the bullrings spin, and trees bleed. The phrase that most clearly tells us that we are in the presence of traumatic testimony, however, is Rukeyser's insistence that "words are eyes." The horror that she has taken into herself through her eyes can only be released through language. Here again, with her emphasis on the power of the human eye to record and be part of the testimonial act, Rukeyser emphasizes the primacy of seeing, of having been an eyewitness. Her words, in turn, become the eyes through which her readers, too, are forced to see the war—at a remove, through the vehicle of the poem.

As an eyewitness to trauma, Rukeyser is captive to that trauma's story; the story for her is still present, still open-ended, still on-going. The two final lines of "Otherworld" leave us no doubt as to this. "[T]he world slips away under the footbeat of the living / everybody knows who lost the war," the poet writes (56–57). She does not give either line a closing punctuation mark; thus the poem opens out into the present, incomplete and unending. The story of Spain's trauma is fully present, penetrating the poem and disturbing every subsequent reading of the poem. By deliberately refusing to close the poem, Rukeyser implies that no one knows where all this will end: the powers of violence which the Spanish Civil War has unleashed, the trauma which she herself must bear and testify to ceaselessly. "The world slips under the footbeat of the living," disappearing even as we watch it slide away. The knowledge of the Republic's loss—and of Spain's slipping away, into the darkness and silence of a military dictatorship—permeates the knowledge of those who still live and watch. "Otherworld" leaves us with little hope that these events will ever reach their closure.

The Journey Out Again

"Mediterranean," one of Rukeyser's better known poems and certainly her most widely recognized work on Spain, accentuates the ongoing, open-ended nature of the poet's Spanish Civil War memories and her lifelong compulsion to bear testimony to them. While "Long Past Moncada" and "Otherworld" track Rukeyser's arrival in Spain, "Mediterranean" narrates Rukeyser's experience of leaving Barcelona five days later and her growing awareness of the testimonial burden that Spain would now be for her. Rukeyser opens "Mediterranean" with a spare, factual paragraph of prose, meant to ground the reader in this poem's historical moment:

On the evening of July 25, 1936, five days after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, Americans with the Anti-Fascist Olympic Games were evacuated from Barcelona at the order of the Catalonian government. In a small Spanish boat, the *Ciudad de Ibiza* [...] they and a group of five hundred, including the Hungarian and Belgian

teams as well as the American, sailed overnight to Sète, the first port in France. The only men who remained were those who had volunteered in the Loyalist forces: the core of the future International Column. (135)

This allusion to the men who stayed behind, the international athletes who remained to fight, is not to be taken lightly. Because Otto Boch stayed in Spain while she was forced to go, Rukeyser's sense of exile was especially potent. Indeed, she made repeated attempts, while still in Barcelona and then for months afterward, to return to the Spanish Republic and to Boch.⁶ None of these efforts bore fruit, however, and Rukeyser realized that she might be consigned to the role of exile from Spain. This realization must have been doubly painful, given that her exile barred her not only from the site of her most profound political awakening, but also from the man whom she would always credit with her most profound romantic awakening. In this moment of her life more than in any other, the overtly political and the deeply personal were fused.

Exile from Spain was a theme to which Rukeyser returned repeatedly, like a person obsessed—or, like one almost unable to forgive herself, unable to explain to herself why she had not returned to that land where she most wanted to be. When the Catalanian government asked all those foreigners who, like Rukeyser, had come to Barcelona for the Anti-Fascist Olympics, to leave, Rukeyser did so with the greatest reluctance, hoping desperately—and, as it turned out, futilely—to return as a war journalist. Thus “Mediterranean,” her best-known work on Spain, is as much a poem about exile as it is about war itself. This poem begins not with the eruption of war but rather by plunging us into the moment in which she was bidden to leave. This forced departure—coupled with a simultaneous separation from her fellow anti-fascists who stayed to fight (especially, of course, Boch)—constitutes the kernel of Rukeyser's distress. She opens her poem with this description:

At the end of July, exile. We watched the gangplank go
cutting the boat away, indicating: sea.
Barcelona, the sun, the fire-bright harbor, war.
Five days. (1.1-4)

Immediately, the reader is situated in that precise context of crisis to which Rukeyser returned again and again in her poetry. These first lines take us directly into the harbor of the besieged city of Barcelona, and into the first stage of Rukeyser's journey out of Spain.

“Mediterranean” is actually a poetic sequence comprised of six shorter, numbered poems; arranged chronologically, each of the poems depicts a different phase of Rukeyser's exodus from Spain and into refuge in France. These six poems link into each other not only by narrative, but also by Rukeyser's continued use of the metonymic voice throughout this sequence. From the very beginning, Rukeyser speaks not as “I” but as “we,” implying a collective way of seeing. Five days after the outburst of war, the poet finds herself, along with the other foreigners sent into refuge, in a voluntarily passive position, forced out of Spain and its war. She includes them all in the category of “exile.” The finality of the gangplank's drop, “cutting” the boat from the shoreline, emphasizes this sense of being cast out.

The first lines of this poem, then, constitute a single, painful backward glance. All of the poet's emphasis here is on what lies behind her, on what she is leaving. In the midst of these stark, unadorned phrases, the only noun that Rukeyser lingers over, gracing it with a compound adjective, is the “fire-bright harbor”: the place where she most wants to be, the place where Boch stands waving farewell. Enclosed at either end by the words “sun” and “war,” the harbor may be bright with the fire of the setting sun or with the fire of burning buildings, or both. Juxtaposing “sun” against “war” allows Rukeyser to play the

idea of constancy, signified by the sun, against the suddenness and unexpectedness of the war's eruption. Both ideas are reflected and conjoined in the harbor, where Otto Boch stands and which Rukeyser watches retreat as her ship pulls away.

What are we to make of this joining of two such jarring concepts? Rukeyser's relationship with Boch, founded upon so brief a period as "five days"—a fragment of time that Rukeyser emphasizes early in the poem, as if in awe that so much could happen in so brief a period—is surely such a cataclysmic moment in the midst of a far longer, calmer life. More abstractly but of equal importance, this juxtaposition of the quotidian or the expected against a moment of extreme transformation and surprise parallels the shock of traumatic repetition—the return of the traumatic memory—within the ongoing constant of life.⁷ As the body of Rukeyser's poetry bears out, all of her life after Spain's war was marked by this repeated return to the site of her original trauma. The poem "Mediterranean," as are all of Rukeyser's Spanish Civil War poems, is a fragment of voice emerging from the point of trauma; it is a voice that must go on speaking indefinitely of what it once experienced and never quite recovered from.

As a way of opening her readers' eyes to the experience of civil war, Rukeyser takes us on a fast, bumping ride through the landscape of those five days of turbulence, elation, and fear, which she and her fellow passengers on the *Ciudad de Ibiza* have just lived:

[...] Here at the rail, foreign and refugee,
we saw the city, remembered that zero of attack,
alarm in the groves, snares through the olive hills,
rebel defeat [...].
The truckride to the city, barricades,
bricks pried at corners, rifle-shot in the street,
car-burning, bombs, blank warnings, fists up, guns [...]. (1.5-12)

With her identification of herself and all those who stand at the ship rail with her as "foreign, refugee," we hear Rukeyser's sense of being forced into a role she does not want. She would rather turn to the raw, bright immediacy of the war, the emergency-inflected responses to the rebellion which she witnessed: the "bricks pried at corners" from buildings, to be used as weapons in an abrupt battle. Looking at the city as she departs, she recalls the numbing dangers she has just experienced there: being at Ground Zero of the bombing raids on Barcelona and, beforehand, seeing those earliest manifestations of war in the country, as she came into Catalonia by train and saw the armed men running through the "groves" and "olive hills."

Despite these recent and very real scrapes with death, Rukeyser remains focused on her desire to continue to live in that violent yet passionately charged milieu. In the next stanza of "Mediterranean," she reels in her vision, which has just ranged across the warring Spanish countryside, and trains it again upon the Barcelona harbor, still receding from her as she speaks. Narrating again from the vantage point of the ship's railing, Rukeyser gives the first clear hint of what it is about this departure that most deeply distresses her.

I saw the city [...] the personal lighting found
eyes on the dock, sunset-lit faces of singers,
eyes, goodbyes into exile [...].

[...]

I saw the first of the faces going home into war
the brave man Otto Boch, the German exile, knowing
he quieted tourists during the machine-gun battle,
he kept his life straight as a single issue—
left at that dock we left, his gazing Brueghel face,
square forehead and eyes, strong square breast fading,
the narrow runner's hips diminishing dark.

I see this man, dock, war, a latent image. (1.24-31)

Not only does Muriel Rukeyser grieve being thrust from this scene of action before she has had time to assimilate it completely, but she also struggles with a desire to stay and complete this action: to stay and to fight, as do some of the international athletes.

We hear her mingled admiration and envy for “the brave man Otto Boch, the German exile [...] left at that dock” as the *Ciudad de Ibiza* recedes from him, out into the open water. Her depiction of Boch, albeit brief, lends us insight into several significant factors in Rukeyser's relationship to this man. She has been with him as they dodged the fire of “machine-gun battle,” and she has seen him “quiet... [the] tourists”: those who came to Barcelona expecting to watch the Anti-Fascist Olympics but who instead were swept into the city-wide violence. In the line “going *home* into war” (emphasis mine), Rukeyser acknowledges that participation in defense of the Republic is Boch's rightful place, politically and intellectually. On a far more personal level, we see evidence of her intimate knowledge not only of this athlete's politics and intellect, but also of his body, in Rukeyser's careful, appreciative descriptions of his face, chest, and hips. Finally, as Rukeyser repeats the word “left” in a line recalling her final view of Boch—and as she describes his figure as “fading” and “diminishing” from her view—she emphasizes the tragedy of having left not only Barcelona, but also and in particular of having left Otto Boch.

“I see this man,” Rukeyser insists, “dock, war, a latent image.” She drives home the line's import by giving it twice in its entirety, once in Poem I from this sequence and again in Poem V. For Rukeyser, it is this “latent image” which compels her writing, which demands the poem. A latent image is one that is not yet manifest but is nonetheless present, a potential force. The image of Otto Boch, risking and eventually losing his life in the war Rukeyser had partly experienced with him, is latent in that Rukeyser can never externalize it so completely as to rid herself of it; rather, this image is imprinted on her psyche. Rukeyser also makes us aware of the potential force “latent” in this image, for it is precisely this image that compels her to write the poem. “Whenever we think of these,” she asserts, meaning Boch and the other lost soldiers like him, “*the poem is*” (2.53, emphasis mine).

Woven into these early stanzas of “Mediterranean,” especially in Poem II from this sequence, is the question that Rukeyser would be answering all the rest of her life: “Where's its place now, where is poetry?” (2.39)⁸ The beginning of that answer is here, too; Rukeyser recalls a Spaniard she met on the Barcelona streets who told her simply, “Your job is: / go tell your countries what you saw in Spain” (2.69-70). How seriously Rukeyser took this mandate is manifest in her declaration, “If we had lived in our cities / sixty years might not prove / the power this week / the overthrown past [...]” (3.27-30). To have not been

in Spain at the outbreak of war, to have not witnessed the Republic's dramatic ideological and political counterrevolution, Rukeyser asserts, would have meant missing her own powerful calling as poet-activist.

Beyond Memory: The Poem as Testimony

Yet even here, in this statement of serious vocational undertaking, Rukeyser's commitments are a blend of the political and the personal; she closes Poem II in this sequence with a respectful, longing look over her shoulder at Otto Boch: "The face on the dock that turned to find the war" (2.73). Rukeyser insists on how such images from the war haunt her eyes:

That week, the beginning, exile,
remembered in continual poetry. . . .

[...]

The poem is the fact, memory fails
under and seething lifts and will not pass. (2.55-65)

The phrase "will not pass" echoes the early Republican battle cry from Madrid—La Pasionara's slogan, "*¡No pasarán!*" ("They will not pass!") It demonstrates Rukeyser's political sympathies and her familiarity with not only the images but also the rhetoric of this particular war. What is most fascinating about these lines, however, is Rukeyser's acknowledgement that it is not memory on which she depends for holding onto these stories, but rather poetry. Ordinary memory, Rukeyser perceives, cannot pass through the barricade of trauma. In her description, memory tries to assert itself, to be a sufficient container for the story of this terrible moment, but ultimately fails and "will not pass." Because the human mind is fundamentally unable to comprehend fully the traumatic event as it happens, that event continuously returns, in the form of flashbacks and dreams, insisting that trauma survivor see that experience repeatedly. "Continual poetry" for Rukeyser, then, means continual testimony to her trauma. Her poetry, which she understood as a meeting place—as a site of exchange between herself and others—constitutes the recalling and re-externalizing of her trauma, always in the complex, densely metaphorical language that such a telling demands. In "Mediterranean," as in most of her poems on Spain, Rukeyser stands in the role of trauma survivor, the one who must go on "remembering" even though, paradoxically, "memory fails."

Yet it is not her trauma alone to which Rukeyser testifies. In Poem V of this sequence, Rukeyser issues a command both to herself and to her also-traumatized companions on their ship of refuge:

Cover away the fighting cities
but still your death-afflicted eyes
must hold the print of flowering guns,
bombs whose insanity craves size,
the lethal breath, the iron prize. (5.23-27)

These lines comprise the poet's warning to her fellow witnesses and to her own self. Rukeyser forbids them to repress those memories or to deny the horrors they have just seen. She speaks this warning, fittingly, just as the refugees enter their harbor of safety in France—the place where, for these recent refugees, it will begin to be easy to forget or to become cavalier about their experiences in Spain, to relegate them to a different country, to the past. "Cover away the fighting cities," Rukeyser writes, almost tauntingly, admonishing herself and her shipmates. The insinuation here is clear: *Go ahead and put those*

embattled Spanish towns out of your mind if you think you can; believe, if you will, that this is as easy to do as it was to watch Barcelona slip from the skyline. But, Rukeyser implicitly warns, you will not be able to hold this pose; you cannot truly forget this. The eyes of these fellow passengers are, after all, “death-afflicted,” and therein lies an apparent double scourge. The exiles’ eyes have been afflicted, of course, by the destruction they have witnessed in Spain, but they are also marked now—by having come so close to death and yet having escaped it—with knowledge of their own deaths. Rukeyser pushes this point ruthlessly. These death-afflicted eyes, she claims, “must hold the print” of the images they have taken in.

Rukeyser repeatedly refers to her five days in Barcelona as “shapes and images,” which will haunt her and her fellow survivors long after departure. This recurring trope in “Mediterranean” is particularly important in light of Lifton’s definition of the post-traumatic syndrome. To have suffered trauma, Lifton says, is also to be “haunted by images that can neither be enacted nor cast aside. Suffering is associated with being ‘stuck.’ Hence the indelible image is always associated with guilt”—guilt that stems from having survived the horrors that others have not (172). In “Mediterranean,” the “death-afflicted” eyes of Rukeyser and her fellow survivors are indeed permanently marked by trauma. As their ship turns toward land again, Rukeyser asserts,

[T]hese shapes endure,
rise up into our eyes, to bind
us back; an accident of time
set it upon us, exile burns it in. (5.29-32)

Metaphor evolves into conceit here, as Rukeyser continues with the theme of the “print” that the images of trauma impress on the passengers’ eyes. The “shapes” of those images “endure,” constantly presenting themselves to the survivors in recurring visions—“rise up into our eyes,” Rukeyser says—and, indeed, constantly pull the trauma survivor back into the moment of the traumatic event—“bind us back”—even as her physical surroundings change radically. The poet knows already that she will live and re-live that disastrous moment of war’s outbreak, that she will never entirely shake it free.

When a survivor “has been a witness to the suffering or death of other people” and been spared herself, Judith Herman says, “the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience” (54). Nor, in “Mediterranean,” can Rukeyser let go of this idea of surviving while others have not, or will not. She is unable to forget—or to stop “seeing”—those who have not survived; the whole central passage of “Mediterranean,” particularly Poems III, V, and VI, works and reworks the idea. Like Lifton, Herman finds that this burden of conscience manifests itself in a particular set of vivid images that “crystallizes the [traumatic] experience” in the survivor’s mind (38). Lifton goes on to assert, however, that “there is also the possibility of finding something like *alternative enactment* for the image that haunts one, of undergoing personal transformation around that image” (172). A survivor of trauma, in other words, can begin to heal herself by using the images that haunt her as a moral springboard for action in the world. As Lifton suggests, “The capacity for guilt was given us so that we might imbue all behavior, perhaps especially pain, with an ethical dimension” (172).⁹ When Rukeyser insists that her experience of the war gave her images “tideless for memory,” she evokes these powerful memories that do not change—are not

influenced by the tides of time—and that will spur her into bearing political testimony for the rest of her life (6.29).

Here at the end of “Mediterranean,” Rukeyser begins to look for an explanation, for the source of this troubling series of events. But no one is responsible. “[A]n accident of time set it upon us,” she concludes. The people on the boat, in other words, did not plan to witness the eruption of civil war; they are, rather, victims of pure coincidence, of the never-expectedness of trauma. The ambiguous “it,” which time’s accident sets upon the witnesses and which “exile burns in,” is the catastrophe—the war—from which these indelible shapes originate. Now, as she has already implied, Rukeyser more directly states that it is her exile—and the fact that she has gotten away, that she has survived, when so many others have not—that makes those shapes even more unavoidable and shocking, more burning, in her mind’s eye.

Rukeyser’s linking of her own survival to the lives of those she loves and who are still in Spain, whose lives are not nearly so secure, is evident in the closing stanzas of Poem VI. Even as the boat comes into dock at the French port of Sète and she acknowledges her physical presence in France, the poet’s mind is still possessed by images of Spain, its war, and the people whose lives are still in jeopardy there:

Barcelona.
Slow-motion splash. Anchor [...].
[...]
Now gangplank falls to deck.
Barcelona
everywhere, Spain everywhere, the cry of Planes for Spain.
The picture at our eyes, past memory, poem,
to carry and spread and daily justify.
The single issue, the live man standing tall,
[...] the city, all the war. (6.14-24)

The dropping of the gangplank here in the safety of France echoes and recodes the raising of that gangplank in Barcelona, which Rukeyser noted at the very beginning of “Mediterranean.” While that earlier mention of the gangplank signifies the poet’s physical separation from the site of her trauma, this second reference to the gangplank, as it falls now in new land, in effect opens a new phase of Rukeyser’s life. The falling gangplank stimulates afresh her memories of Barcelona and the trauma she witnessed there. Indeed, her repeated insertion of the name “Barcelona” into a narration of arrival elsewhere—and her privileging of that name, so that twice the single word “Barcelona” occupies a full line in the poem—indicate her inability to separate herself from those memories. Those memories so permeate her mind that, even in a different country, Spain for her is “everywhere.” Yet, as she has insisted earlier, Spain and its war cannot be contained entirely by memory alone. “The picture at our eyes”—the constellation of traumatic images of the Spanish Civil War that she and her shipmates carry with them—is, after all, “past memory,” or beyond it. Not simply memory then, but “poem,” the picture at Rukeyser’s eyes is one that she will “carry and spread and daily justify” to the world beyond Spain by means of her own poetry of witness.

“Mediterranean” ends with a fiercely willed, resolutely voiced declaration: “Exile and refugee, we land, we take / Nothing negotiable out of the new world; / we believe, we remember, we saw” (6.25-27). Nothing—no memory, no conviction, no political or ethical persuasion—that Rukeyser took out of Republican Spain, which was for her the “new world,” the world

that changed her life, would ever be negotiable. As early as 1938, the year in which she wrote “Mediterranean,” Rukeyser knew that Spain had fixed the course of her life’s poetic and political activism. In these concluding affirmations, she is clearly aware of this mandate. As these final lines also insist, the task of bearing witness for Spain will be made enduring by Rukeyser’s knowledge that she is not the sole bearer of this testimony. Rather, she is part of a larger body of witnesses. That body together has seen, and together now will “believe” and “remember,” the Spanish Civil War.

The Life of Poetry

In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser asserts: “I cannot say what poetry is; I know that our suffering and our concentrated joy, our states of plunging far and dark and turning to come back to the world—so that the moment of intense turning seems still and universal—all are here [...]” (172). Rukeyser’s poetry embodies a constant exchange between these two hemispheres. She knew well how to “plunge far and dark” into herself, dredging up traumatic memories that Spain had lodged in her; she was equally familiar, however, with the healing task of “turning to come back to the world,” bringing those memories with her—out into speech, out into poetry. “There is an exchange here,” Rukeyser insists, “in which our lives are met, and created” (172). In her introduction to *The Life of Poetry*, she turns again to that question which became a refrain in her life and in her poetry, a question put to her by one of her fellow refugees on the boat out of Spain: “And poetry—among all this—where is there a place for poetry?” (3).

As she first hears the question, the young poet reflects on the life that has just opened for her in Barcelona. This life, marked by political commitment and personal love, always and inextricably linked, gives Rukeyser the answer. She knows already that she has been called to be a witness, both for her sake and for the sake of those she has left behind in Spain. “Then,” Rukeyser assures us, “I began to say what I believed’ (3).

NOTES

¹ In less than three years, in a country smaller than the state of Texas, “nearly 300,000 people were dead. About 120,000 Spaniards and 25,500 foreigners died in combat; there were 15,000 civilian deaths and 108,000 murders and executions” (Mangini, Shirley. *Memories of Resistance: Women’s Voices from the Spanish Civil War*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1995. 70).

² While in this article I focus exclusively on her involvement with Otto Boch, Rukeyser briefly married—and then annulled her marriage to—the painter Glyn Collins in 1945; her only child, William Rukeyser, was born a year later, fathered by another man (whom Rukeyser never publicly identified). She also had lesbian relationships and, just before her stroke in 1978, was preparing to participate in a Lesbian Poetry Reading at that year’s meeting of the Modern Language Association. Beyond these bare facts, much of Rukeyser’s romantic life remains to this day “a matter of speculation,” as Anne F. Herzog remarks. Although Rukeyser is today generally identified as bisexual, I am limiting my discussion here to the one sexual relationship of her life that had directly to do with her Spanish Civil War experience.

³ For a decade after Rukeyser and Boch parted, Rukeyser suspected that Boch had died in the war; his letters reached her for a while from Spain, then stopped abruptly. For several years, she was haunted by the terrible fear that a telegram which she had sent him the day before Barcelona’s fall had led Fascist forces to Boch’s military headquarters and that they had killed him there. The fourth stanza of “Long Past Moncada” alludes to this horrible possibility: “If I indeed killed you, my darling, if my cable killed / [...] No further guilt / Could more irrevocably drive my days [...]” (15-18). Not until the late 1940s did Rukeyser receive official word that Boch had died at the Segre River battle, before the fall of Barcelona.

⁴ Tellingly, many of Rukeyser’s poems about the Spanish Civil War speak of that experience as a kind of waking up or arousing. For example, in Poem IV,

“Sestina,” from her 1944 poetic sequence, “Letter to the Front,” speaks of the spirit’s awakening in Spain; similarly, “The Return” (1968), wherein Rukeyser recounts her second, much later visit to Spain, ends with tropes of waking and rousing.

⁵ A following phrase, “the black-crowned night heron” (line 39), is also a reference to the phoenix. The *bennu*, a heron, was ancient Egypt’s version of the phoenix, seen as symbol of the rising sun and of life after death.

⁶ “I could not get back [...]” Rukeyser writes despairingly in “We Came for the Games;” “nobody would send me. You had to belong to a party or an organization or something, or have a press card. Nobody would give me a press card” (370). She recalls imploring her publisher for a press pass, but these negotiations were blocked by an editor, Whittaker Chambers, whose politics had swung from the political left to the right during the early crucial months of the war (370).

⁷ Speaking to the nature of traumatic repetition, Laub attests that survivors of trauma will experience all following tragic events in their lives not as mere tragedies but, rather, as a reliving or re-experiencing of that original trauma (65). The traumatic memory is thus an event which interrupts the “real time” of a survivor’s life not just once, in its initial occurrence, but repeatedly and at random in successive, “reiterated loss[es]” (66).

⁸ This is a recurring question in Rukeyser’s work on the Spanish Civil War. In “We Came for the Games,” she remembers a fellow refugee from Spain asking her this as they pulled out of the Barcelona port (370). Twice in *The Life of Poetry* she returns twice to this question (3, 159).

⁹ Lifton, who has worked extensively with survivors of the Hiroshima bombing, explains that some of those survivors “could reanimate their lives around peace-movement activities, which offered a sense of immediate activity in like-minded groups and ultimate significance within which their otherwise unas-similable experience could be understood” (177).

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