
Crossing into Witnessing

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Abstract

Transgression of conventional boundaries was fundamental to Muriel Rukeyser's work; she bridged disciplines, contested gendered and heteronormative expectations, adopted multiple genres, and traversed international boundaries in the 1930s and 1970s to protest for social justice. *Life of Poetry* (1949), Rukeyser's argument for an alternative to New Critical methods, thematizes the danger of artificial divisions – specializations of expertise and categorization of subject matter that can preclude vision and full exploration of human capabilities. As Rukeyser stated in a 1974 memoir essay about attempted anti-fascist Olympics in Barcelona in 1936, it was important, "Not to let our lives be shredded, sports away from politics, poetry away from anything. Anything away from anything" (qtd in Herzog 33). But Rukeyser's early border crossing that led to these later insights had to do with social class. Though she grew up in a wealthy Jewish household, early experiences with working class friends opened the door to more complex understandings of the world. Her education at Vassar was transformative and set Rukeyser on the path toward a clearer sense of vocation. A progressive university president and faculty emphasized dissolving boundaries between the town and the college, and modeled social engagement. On the cutting edge of the student movement for social change, Rukeyser travelled to Pennsylvania and West Virginia to interview coal miners; she covered a Scottsboro trial and was arrested for "fraternizing" with black reporters. Her early essays in the Vassar Miscellany News, letters, and poems divulge her struggle to adequately represent working class concerns, given her upper class status and her attraction to complex modernist writers like T. S. Eliot (often criticized as elitist in *New Masses* columns). This paper will discuss Rukeyser's negotiation of class as she began to craft her modernist-influenced poetry.

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