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# Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead": An Analytical Appreciation

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MURIEL RUKEYSER'S *THE BOOK OF THE DEAD*: AN ANALYTICAL ADMIRATION

by

EMILY JANE COGAN

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2017

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Emily Cogan

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

### Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*: An Analytical Admiration

Advisor: Robert Singer

Muriel Rukeyser's poetry has always focused around a particular event be it something of global proportions such as the Spanish Civil War (*Mediterranean*) or the Japanese occupation of Korea (*The Gates*) or, as with *The Book of the Dead*, a specific disaster closer to her home, America. Her poetry, however, never exists purely in the realm of politics; she never aligned herself with any particular political party and consequently her poetry is never simply a call to arms or a manifesto in verse. Throughout the body of Rukeyser's work there are echoes and allusions to poetic traditions, both American and International, contemporary and older.

This thesis proposes to examine the interplay of Rukeyser's specific focus, separate from her politics, and her use of and attitude towards poetic traditions. Rukeyser's collection *The Book of the Dead* will be the focus of this examination. The collection is made up of twenty separate poems of varying styles and incorporates a number of poetic techniques. The most important, or perhaps the recognized, is reportage, a common technique among modernist poets. Rukeyser tells the story of the Gauley Tunnel tragedy, an industrial disaster which occurred in West Virginia in the early 1930s.

Rukeyser's use of reportage and documentation will be investigated along side its use among her contemporaries. Additionally Rukeyser's allusions to other figures in American Poetry, with particular reference to Whitman as dictated by the collection, will be looked to in order to discover what else is at play in *The Book of the Dead*. If Rukeyser is merely attempting to bring a voice—a poetic voice—to those silenced why then would she incorporate others who have one? Is it a criticism or a continuation?

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## Introduction

Muriel Rukeyser had a promising start as a young poet: winning the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award, in 1935, for her first collection, *Theory of Flight*, at age twenty-one; she published her second collection, *U.S. I*, in the wake of this success; she was frequently invited to write articles, both opinion and reportage, for papers such as *New Masses* and *Daily Worker*, who often sent her on location for reportage of national importance. The two most famous examples being Barcelona to cover The People's Olympiad, and Gauley Bridge, West Virginia to investigate the Hawk's Nest Tunnel incident.<sup>1</sup> The quick succession of Rukeyser's first two collections is a true precedent for the rest of her career, which was prolific and long-lasting containing over a dozen poetry collections (the last of which was published in 1976), a novel, plays, children's books, a multitude of articles for different newspapers, and a critical manifesto, *The Life of Poetry*, published in 1949. However, it is as a poet she is most remembered, and I would attest, as she would most want to be remembered. In much of her poetry, but nowhere more than in *The Life of Poetry*, there is a passion for the art form, and a powerful belief in what it is able to achieve. For Rukeyser, poetry "is an art that lives in time, expressing and evolving the moving relationship between the individual consciousness and the world. The work a poem does is the transfer of human energy."<sup>2</sup> Why, then, she is not recognised as one of America's major female poets is somewhat of a mystery. In 1996, the *Paris Review* re-published *The Life of Poetry* along with some of her poems, but it did not create a renewed interest in Rukeyser's work. There is a spattering of criticism about her, but these works rarely focus on Rukeyser independently rather than in relation to other movements in poetry, most frequently Spanish Civil War poetry, or proletariat, political poetry.

It is not that these approaches to her work are unjustified. *Mediterranean*, Rukeyser's long poem about her experiences of being in Barcelona at the outbreak of war, should, and often is, recognised as one of the best examples of poetry from the Spanish Civil War. As Cary Nelson explains, Rukeyser went so far as to imagine how the War would be remembered and comment on the role poetry would play with in this memorialisation. Nelson notes that after the war it was

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<sup>1</sup> The People's Olympiad was a planned alternative to the Olympic Games to be held in Barcelona 1936. The Olympiad was in protest of the Olympic Organisation allowing a Fascist Germany to host the summer games of the same year. Due to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, these games never took place.

<sup>2</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry*, (Ashfield: Paris Press, 1996) xi.

the literature which favoured Franco which survived as “poets of the Republic were dead, in prison or in exile.” Proving herself not only technically gifted but superbly intelligent:

Rukeyser anticipated the focus early on in *Mediterranean*. Reflecting on the way memory seemed so quickly to magnify and clarify the experience of the war after she left Spain abruptly, she grasped what could be a hallmark of Republican experience for decades: exile.<sup>3</sup>

Nelson’s example of Rukeyser’s attitude towards the Spanish Civil War is important in terms of Rukeyser’s politics at large. Exile is by no means unique to the experience of the Spanish Republicans, it is, however, an experience which stems from the particular circumstances of events rather than their political beliefs. In other words, Rukeyser’s politics were never generalised but specific to each situation she found herself in, placed herself into, or turned her mind towards. Rukeyser’s are a politics of particulars. The best example to illustrate this mindset is her friendship with Korean poet Kim Chi-Ha. Arrested in March 1975, Chi-Ha was a dissident under the Park regime. Rukeyser led an international campaign to have him freed or, at the very least, a trial. According to Bruce Cumings, who also worked towards Chi-Ha’s liberation, “his trial, scheduled to begin on September 15, did not take place, and a military tribunal reinstated an earlier life sentence as a means of keeping him in jail.”<sup>4</sup> Rukeyser made no comment on the regime, or the global reaction to it, in her efforts to free Chi-Ha. It was an action against basic human rights, which, regardless of the political situation surrounding it, needed to be rectified.

As Louise Kertesz asserts “Muriel Rukeyser is not a poet of Marxism, but a poet who has written directly about the tragedies of the working class. She is a poet of liberty.”<sup>5</sup> Her involvement in the Kim Chi-Ha case certainly proves her a poet of liberty, however, I would suggest that it also proves her interests are not limited to the working class. Although she wrote for *New Masses* and *Daily Worker*, both closely connected to the American Communist Party, Rukeyser was never a party member. One would certainly class her as a leftist supporter yet her politics were pragmatic rather than ideological. As Adrienne Rich put it: “Rukeyser was one of the great integrators, seeing the fragmentary world of modernity not as irretrievably broken, but in need of societal

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<sup>3</sup> Cary Nelson, “Introduction” in *The Wound and the Dream: 60 Years of American Poets About the Spanish Civil War*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002) 34-35.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Cumings, “The Kim Chi-Ha Case”, *New York Review of Books*, October 16, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> Louise Kertesz, *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980) xi.



and emotional repair.”<sup>6</sup> Rukeyser needed to act, and not just think. Consequently, many of her most famous poems read as lyrical journals of her experiences as a journalist, or attempts to render these events in poetry, in order to raise awareness of them, or to tell the story that has not been told. As Kate Daniels argues in her preface to an anthology of Rukeyser’s poems:

She was never what is sometimes called a poet’s poet- the exquisite practitioners of craft capable of making other poets envy her sheer technical skill. She wrote for a larger audience, seeking readers in ordinary people, as well as among those who understood the difficulties of modern poetry.<sup>7</sup>

However, Rukeyser was a skilled poet, and the fact that the poems with this intention are still her most well-known, suggests they were popular at the time of their publication. It is, perhaps, their specificity which makes them such difficult reads today, and makes scholars question their relevance.

Undoubtedly, Daniels is praising Rukeyser for wanting to reach a wider audience, however, this desire is perhaps relevant to solving the mystery of why Rukeyser is not as widely read as she might have been. In my research for this project, many of the critical work I have found have referenced Rukeyser in relation to other “big name” poets. Some of these comparisons are fair, some are not. The two comparisons which happen most frequently are to Whitman, as a poet of possibility, and to Melville, as a poet of outrage. It is clear to see where these similarities came from. The journeys Rukeyser takes, and the openness of her poems is reminiscent of Whitman, whereas her anger at certain circumstances, and demand for changes reminds one of Melville’s outrage even if they angered by different things. However, I would argue, in outrage, that Rukeyser combines these in a unique way that deserves praise and attention in its own right, and not in light of her predecessors. As Stephen Vincent Benét commends *Theory of Flight* contains “little of the uncertainty, the fumbling, the innocently direct imitation of admirations which one unconsciously associates with a first book of verse.”<sup>8</sup> If it does not exist in her first collection, it is unlikely to exist in those following. Another factor which may play into Rukeyser’s move away from popularity is her refusal to write in a way that was expected of her. Kate Daniels goes

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<sup>6</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Muriel Rukeyser for the Twenty-First Century” in *A Human Eye: Essays on Art and Society, 1997-2008*, (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 2009) 35.

<sup>7</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, *Out of Silence: Selected Poems*, ed. Kate Daniels, (Evanston: Triquarterly Books, 1997) ix.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Vincent Benét, “Foreward” to Muriel Rukeyser, *Theory of Flight*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936) 5.

on to state that Rukeyser “refused to bow to the confining influence of earlier conventions of poetry by women.”<sup>9</sup> Rukeyser then, was unexpected and difficult to categorise from the beginning. Furthermore, Rukeyser fell afoul of circumstances all too common for female writers: she became a single mother and consequently had to write commissioned pieces, in order to support her child, and not just those she wanted to.<sup>10</sup> Naturally, then, her oeuvre is not all hits.

Rukeyser’s poem that will be the topic of this thesis is, in fact, the poem which suffers from comparison to the work of other poets most severely. *The Book of the Dead* is the first poetic series in Rukeyser’s second collection *U.S. I.* It was created out of Rukeyser’s trip to Gauley Bridge, West Virginia where she acted as a journalist for *New Masses* reporting on the proceedings of the Congressional Hearing of the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel Disaster. The poetic series is made up of twenty poems of varying length, style, and voice. It contains many documents, testimonies, and statistics from the hearings, as well as human anecdotes, and unofficial accounts of the events surrounding the disaster. Although the series as a whole is most certainly documentary, the same can not be said for each individual poem. Nevertheless, *The Book of the Dead* is with great frequency dismissed as a derivative of Ezra Pound’s documentary poem *The Cantos*. *The Cantos* is an incomplete, 116 part poem written between 1915 and 1962. A notoriously difficult work to read, Pound’s *Cantos* cite almost everything as a source, however, there are sections which are regarded as more in line with the documentary genre than others. The first, and most significant of these, are “The Adams Cantos” (*Cantos LII–LXXI*), first published in 1940-- it is important here to note that Rukeyser’s poem was first published in 1938, impressive time-traveling derivative-- and uses direct quotations from John Adams and reports of events he was involved in. Although, there are certainly moments in Rukeyser’s series where a comparison with Pound’s work proves fruitful, it will not be the focus of this paper. In fact, I have been unable to find any evidence that the two read each other’s work and all comparisons will be made with this detail in mind. Pound, in my opinion, has quite enough written on him, whereas Rukeyser does not.

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<sup>9</sup> *Out of Silence*, xiv.

<sup>10</sup> Tillie Olsen is another contemporary female writer whose career had to be put on hold while she raised a family and struggled to feed them through difficult times. Her initially forgotten bildungsroman, *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*, tells the story of the abrupt end of a young girl’s formation due to the circumstances surrounding herself and her family. In an example of life imitating art, Olsen stopped writing this novel when she fell pregnant in the 1930s, rediscovering and publishing it in 1974.

Due to the complicated serialisation of *The Book of the Dead*, one must approach analysing it with a strategy or structure in mind. A number of different methods have already been attempted. Robert Schulman, for example, looks at the order of the series in an effort to logically approach it: “formally, *The Book of the Dead* can be seen as a series of documentary photographs framed by “The Road” and “West Virginia” at the start and concluding with the powerful sequence from “Alloy” through “The Book of the Dead.”<sup>11</sup> To move through the series linearly has merit, not only that it is the way a reader does, but it allows the slow build up of facts to play out as Rukeyser intended. However, to move through it in this way prevents clear links between the poems which are not consecutive in the series. Tim Dayton in his in depth book-length look into the poem chooses a different slant. He looks at the individual poems in the series, and gives them a label; either introductory, documentary, a lyrical monologue, or a meditation, leaving the final poem of the series “The Book of the Dead” to stand alone as a coda. Like its poet, the last poem of the series defies categorisation and Dayton is wise to deal with it separately. Dayton goes on to link the three main types in his system-- documentary, lyric monologue, and meditation-- with a poetic tradition: the epic, the lyric, and the dramatic respectively.

Personally, I find Dayton’s approach more useful, even though I do not agree with all of his labelling. The need to separate the introductory poems, as such, seems superfluous; anyone coming to *The Book of the Dead* without some knowledge of what the poem was investigating, or of Rukeyser, seems unlikely. Furthermore, the facts of the incident, as Rukeyser accepts them, are provided throughout the poem, and not in an easy to digest list at the beginning. So then, my initial classification of the series is into three groups: documentary poems, lyrical monologues, and meditations and journeys. These groups will be analysed in three separate sections, each with a different focus and further distinction. Firstly, the documentary poems are additionally divided into poems featuring “official” documents, and those featuring documentary technology or techniques. I make this distinction in light of the trend in the 1930s to differentiate between “human” and “official” documents, as well as, the development of film cameras, x-rays, and the

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Schulman, “Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead”: The Modernist Poem as Radical Documentary” in *The Power of Political Art: The 1930s Literary Left Reconsidered*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) 183.

increased popularity of photographs as tools of documentation. Next, I look at the lyrical monologues, although, again Dayton's label is not fully accurate. This group is necessarily separated into Rukeyser's transformation of the testimonies given in hearings, or those she heard in conversations, into lyric poems, and where her lyrical voice is the most heard in the poem. The poems of this section are often, and should be, seen as documentary too. Indeed, documents are used in poems of all three groups; as Louise Kertesz notes "in these poems [the twenty poems that make up *The Book of the Dead*] Rukeyser uses poetry to "extend the document"<sup>12</sup>. However, I will, hopefully, show that Rukeyser's use of them is radically different to her use of physical documents, and thus, in need of a separation. Thirdly, I turn to the poems classified as meditations and journeys which, more clearly than the rest of the series, harken back to a poetic tradition. This section will primarily offer an in depth analysis of Rukeyser's meditations noting, when relevant, their relation to such poets as Whitman, Pound, and Milton. Finally, in keeping with Dayton's system, "The Book of the Dead" will be considered on its own, as a type of coda. Even though it is difficult to classify it in regard to the other poems in the series, "The Book of the Dead" is crucial to understanding Rukeyser's poetic project. It is the climactic culmination of the documentary, the lyrical, and the meditations; it is the whole series in one poem, which cannot be understood without the series.

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<sup>12</sup> Kertesz, 98.

### **A Note on the Hawk's Nest Disaster**

Hawk's Nest, West Virginia sits on the New River which has historically been noted for its potential hydraulic power. There have been numerous attempts to harness this power as early as 1899, by the Electro-Metallurgical Company. However it was not until the construction of the Hawk's Nest Tunnel, nearly thirty years later, that attempts were successful. In 1917, the Electro-Metallurgical Company of Fayette County merged with three other companies to form Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation who were responsible for the construction of the tunnel. Work began on the tunnel in 1927 with the aim of diverting water from the New River towards a hydroelectric plant at the nearby town of Alloy. However, once work had begun, and it became clear that the land was fertile with silica, the process was sped up. There is a fair amount of speculation about the tunnel serving two purposes: a dam and a silica mine. Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation, and its subsidiary company New Kanawha Water Company, controlled the speed and design of the tunnel's construction. The work was quick, and dangerous. Men were not fully prepared against the poisonous silica in the tunnel and, it seems, that the wrong type of drilling-- the quicker yet deadlier type-- was used. As a result of the negligent practices, many of the men developed silicosis, a lung disease with a high mortality rate. A plaque in Hawk's Nest State Park reads:

Construction of nearby tunnel, diverting waters of New R. through Gauley Mt. for hydroelectric power, resulted in state's worst industrial disaster. Silica rock dust caused 109 admitted deaths in mostly black, migrant underground workforce of 3000. Congressional hearing placed toll at 476 for 1930-35. Tragedy brought recognition of acute silicosis as occupational lung disease and compensation legislation to protect workers.

It is interesting to note that here the incident is labelled as a tragedy. The incident, while certainly tragic, is not by the classical definition a tragedy. These events were not caused by fate, or some fatal flaw within the men, but by the company who sent their workers into the tunnel without proper equipment.

The Hawk's Nest incident is one of the worst industrial disasters America has ever seen; the death toll is shocking with estimates reaching as high as 37 in the space of just two weeks. The disaster was not the type one imagines when one thinks of an industrial disaster; no tunnels or mines collapsed, no unplanned explosions or fires occurred, and no dams burst. Instead, through

the company's negligence the men developed silicosis. Silicosis is a fatal disease, if it develops to acute stages, with no known treatment even today. It is a case of postponing the inevitable rather than curing. Knowledge of the disease's effects predates its official discovery as silicosis; previously it was known by monikers such as miner's phthisis, grinder's asthma, and potter's rot. It received the name silicosis once the direct link between inhaling silica and the disease had been discovered. It had been one of those illnesses with recognisable symptoms, a known outcome, but without a medical name or known source. However, the discovery of silicosis happened before construction on the Hawk's Nest Tunnel began. In fact, as Michael Cherniack notes by the 1930s "the adverse effects on health resulting from the inhalation of silica had been publicized by the Bureau of Mines for more than twenty years."<sup>13</sup> There was, then, a deliberate lack of preventative measures taken as opposed to an ignorance of their need. It has always been the case that engineering feats have a certain human cost. The pyramids of Ancient Egypt, for example, were built by slaves of which an unknown, probably unrecorded, number died.<sup>14</sup> Yet, feats of the Ancient world are not recognised as disasters, or tragedies, in the same way the Hawk's Nest incident is.

Why then is Hawk's Nest labelled as such? I would suggest, and those who focus on the incident rather than Rukeyser's text such as Martin Cherniack and Patricia Spangler agree, that it is down to the cover up performed by Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation, and their subsidiaries, immediately after the event, and during the consequential Congressional hearing, as well as the failing of the hearing to bring any justice to the community involved in the construction of the tunnel. There is a lot of hearsay and rumours surrounding the actions of Union Carbide, and those they allegedly paid to help them get away with such actions. However, the nature of the work, as well as the circumstances of the country at the time, also played their part in allowing such actions to go largely unrecognised, let alone unpunished. Many of the tunnel workers came from the nearby town of Gauley Bridge but many were also migrant workers. During the first half of the Twentieth Century migrant work was a common practice, necessarily increased by the Depression. It made it difficult to track workers from the tunnel when they would move on

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Cherniack, *The Hawk's Nest Incident: America's Worst Industrial Disaster*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986) 79.

<sup>14</sup> Rukeyser may be purposefully making this connection by naming her poetic series after the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*.

quickly after sections were constructed, or when the pay dropped. Furthermore, the town of Gauley Bridge was a predominantly white town whereas most of the dangerous tunnel work was performed by migrant African American workers. Cherniack notes that “only 738 whites ever worked inside the tunnel” whereas 2244 African Americans did so.<sup>15</sup> These numbers come from Union Carbide’s official records and make no note of the undocumented workers mentioned in human anecdotes of the incident. Let us not forget how more welcoming to outsiders places become when there is dangerous work to do.

Still no definitive numbers of fatalities or an authoritative account of the practices and working conditions of the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel exist. Although, it is possible to prove the existence of silicosis in the lungs, it is not possible to prove where it came from. It would be naive to think that in the early 1930s Union Carbide were the only company with unsafe industrial practices. It is also too early for there to have been federal regulations of workers, conditions, and, as it was during the Depression, workers were desperate for work so standards could be lower still. Nevertheless, more than 500 suits were brought against Union Carbide, and their contractors Rinehart and Dennis, so one can safely presume that conditions were some of the very worst. Congressional hearings were held in 1933, in which many surviving and suffering workers spoke, a committee consisting of community members provided the findings from their independent investigation, and a subcommittee was formed to report back to William P. Connery Jr, the chairman of the House Committee on Labor. Although the findings of the subcommittee seemed to condemn Union Carbide, and prove the connection between their work practices and the disease found in the men, the conclusion was unsatisfactory:

Your subcommittee can do no more. Congress should do no less than to see that these citizens from many States who have paid the price for the electricity to be developed from the tunnel are vindicated. If by their suffering and death they will have made life safer in future for the men who go beneath the earth to work, if they will have been able to establish a new and greater regard for human life in industry, their suffering may not have been in vain.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Cherniack, 18.

<sup>16</sup> U.S Congress. House. Committee on Labor. 1936. *An investigation relating to health conditions of workers employed in the construction and maintenance of public utilities: Hearings on H.J.Res 449*. 74th Cong., 1st session, 193 qtd. In Cherniack, 79.

The recommended funding was not granted, the case was dropped, and the men were never thanked.



## The Documentary Poems

If one were to classify *The Book of the Dead*, as a complete series, there is no doubt that it would fall under the genre of documentary. As a poetic series, it is somewhat atypical in terms of 1930s documentary; the term is usually in reference to film. William Stott, who is largely seen as the authority on the period's use of documentation and reportage, divides documents into two forms: the human document and the official document. Stott's text begins with a question posed by *Harper's Magazine* in 1971: "What is a 'documentary'? Is it an honest and reasonably objective report or is it a case for the prosecution?"<sup>17</sup> *Harper's* makes the assumption that most viewers believe it to be the former whereas, Stott's argument is fueled by the possibility that either can be true. Indeed it is those examples, which play with the duality of truth, that he finds most interesting. For Stott, it is the word's root in "document" that allows for this duplicity. The two definitions reflect their type: one exists in the human world and one as an official dictionary entry. The latter, "the dictionary meaning, we use when we speak of "documentary proof" and "legal documents," of "documentary history" and "historical documents"." The former, that is a human document, "is the opposite of the official kind; it is not objective but thoroughly personal."<sup>18</sup> Stott's description of these two, as well as his translation of them into varying forms of documentaries, keeps them divided; for him, it is either one or the other. Whereas, the interplay of the two, in particular in terms of objectivity and subjectivity, is, I believe, what the documentarians of the 1930s, Muriel Rukeyser included, were most concerned with.

The distinction, made by Stott, works for documents as they stand alone and, to some extent, the photo-journals that emerged as part of the Farm Security Administration's project to document the lives of rural and migrant farmers in the United States. The most famous example of such a book is James Agee's and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which has become one of the ubiquitous examples of 1930s documentary. The other, Ezra Pound's, purely verbal documentary poem, *Cantos*. Other efforts at the documentary genre, Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* included, are usually placed in one of these camps. However, Rukeyser's series, as with so much of her work, resists this categorisation regardless of how frequently this work is

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<sup>17</sup> The context, for *Harper's Magazine*, was the controversy surrounding a television documentary called "The Selling of the Pentagon" which examined the cost of Vietnam War on the American taxpayer.

<sup>18</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 6-7.

diminished to an imitation of Pound.<sup>19</sup> Pound's work is of epic proportions, and it would be naive to suggest that all of it is similar to all of Rukeyser, or even, that all of it is documentary in style. The section in which Pound cites quotations from John Adams is the most documentary and the most frequently referenced in regard to *The Book of the Dead*.<sup>20</sup> I would suggest, and will go on to argue in the following section, that, although both use quotations, the use of documentary is very different. If there are similarities between Pound's *Adam Cantos* and Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, it is with her lyrical monologues, and not her examination, or transformation, of documents.<sup>21</sup> Her poem emerged from her investigation into the Hawk's Nest Disaster. The nature of such an investigation shattered the dichotomy of the human and the official document. After Rukeyser's transformation of personal testimonies, anecdotes, and stories, Stott's definition of human documents no longer applies. The insight they offer and sympathetic effect they have are not due to their being human documents but due to her poetic sequencing and technique. I would argue that, in *The Book of the Dead*, what began as human documents become the lyric. Rukeyser's approach to the "official" document, as we shall see, is equally as challenging. Rukeyser examines what constitutes an official document, who makes it so, and to what purpose. If official documents, as Stott suggests, are scrutinized less and trusted more, Rukeyser is asking why and questioning the hierarchy of these two types of documents.

Rukeyser's poetic series engages with another important aspect of 1930s documentary: the emergence of new technologies which allowed for a greater range and form of documentation. Paula Rabinowitz, borrowing terminology from Walter Benjamin, states that "the age of documentation corresponds to the age of mechanical reproduction."<sup>22</sup> The newly developed film camera, in particular, was making waves in the 1930s as a new form of realism using "sound and image recorded on tape and film to resemble the natural world heard and seen by the human sense." Rabinowitz's book, *They Must be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*, is mainly concerned with documentary films, yet, other projects, like that of the FSA, also benefitted from these technological developments, and the admiration of and, crucially, trust in them present in

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<sup>19</sup> She is not alone in her defiance. Richard Wright's *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941), more purposefully, presents photographs, of Edwin Rosskam, to examine the outsider's view of these communities and the society that allowed them in an attack on the white gaze towards African American individuals and culture.

<sup>20</sup> First published: *Cantos LII-LXXI*, (Norfolk.: New Directions, 1940).

<sup>21</sup> As Agee's work is not a poem, it is not directly relevant to the defense of Rukeyser as a poet.

<sup>22</sup> Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*, (Verso: New York, 1994), ix.

1930s culture. One need only look to the popularity of the city symphony film and of the Agee-style documentary journals to see how saturated 1930s culture was with documentary. The city symphony films offer an interesting perspective to the trend as they rarely had an outside narrative. Dziga Vertov's depiction and celebration of three Soviet cities, *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), is the trendsetter for city symphony films. The camera is seen moving around the city, sometimes with and sometimes without a cameraman. What is recorded is an unstaged, honest representation of life in the cities. However, as much as city life is celebrated, the camera, as an independent neutral image producer, is more so. At times, the camera is seen to move on its own, free from the direction of a cameraman. At one point the camera even emerges from its case, does a little dance, and takes a bow. Vertov's companion manifesto, *Kino-Eye*, which, aside from the science-fiction esque belief that man would develop the truthful camera-eye and evolve to a higher, more precise being, expresses the view that the camera-eye is superior to the human eye as it has no preexisting opinions or biases. *The Book of the Dead* evaluates this belief in technology's neutrality, or perhaps objectivity is a more apt term, in contrast to human subjectivity within the circumstances of the Hawk's Nest Disaster.

Rukeyser published *The Book of the Dead* into a culture already invested in documentary; indeed it is very much a documentary poem of its time. It is, also, a poem very much of its poet, making it a unique take on the form and the trend. A multitude of documents feature into many of the series' poems in different ways, in fact some of the poems emerge from them. This section will focus on the poems in which Rukeyser has used documents most extensively, and those which engage with the decade's new documentary technologies. The poems which are closer to Stott's "human document," that is Rukeyser's lyrical monologues, will be analysed in the next section. The documentary poems of this section, then, are those which engage with recording or image producing technologies, or those which engage with the divide between official and human documents, and the hierarchy of authority which coincides with them. Rukeyser's technological focus shifts more towards the x-ray than the photograph-- fitting considering the health repercussions of the Hawk's Nest Disaster-- although a camera's abilities and limitations are explored too; the limitations of the x-ray is pitted against that of the medical professional. The official documentary form is analysed in the second half of the section, through the poems in

which Rukeyser looks to the courtroom, committees, and legal action in order to examine how authority and truth can relate to one another, and how one can have the power to alter the other.

On first reading, “Gauley Bridge” appears to be a continuation of the technique used in “The Road” and the scene setting that Rukeyser performs through the first poem of her series. Both “Gauley Bridge” and “The Road” consist of regular stanzas, presented in a conventional layout without interruptions, quotations, or the use of primary documents, which will become so important to the project of *The Book of the Dead* at large. The stanzas in the two poems are of different length-- those in “Gauley Bridge” change from the quatrains of “The Road” to tercets-- but the overall effect, of regular stanzas on a page, creates a visible similarity yet, on closer inspection, the differences are great. As a poem situated strongly in documentary and reportage, *The Book of the Dead* is a poetic series designed to be read more so than heard. Thus, much of what Rukeyser attempts, and achieves, is done by how the words are placed on the page and how the punctuation links phrases and voices together. The first difference between “The Road” and “Gauley Bridge” is in the use of punctuation. While in “The Road” Rukeyser makes use almost excessively of enjambment to create the image of an open country, journeyed through by the poem, “Gauley Bridge” is composed entirely of closed stanzas; each its own entity. Tin Dayton suggests that “Rukeyser’s use of closed stanzas [...] rather than providing a sense of logical completeness, in this case the closed stanzas generate a sense of enclosed claustrophobia.”<sup>23</sup> Dayton believes that Gauley Bridge is a town characterized by tedium: the sense of nothing happening. The use of closed stanzas, in complete opposition to the enjambment of “The Road”, suggests stagnation rather than freedom; Dayton sees no possibility of movement.

However, I would suggest that the punctuation marks a temporal difference, rather than a spatial one. The evident mixing of historical and contemporary events in “The Road” contrasts sharply with the immediacy of the present in “Gauley Bridge”. The arrival point of “these roads that will take you into your own country” that is, the destination of the speaker’s journey in “The Road” is the town of Gauley Bridge (9).<sup>24</sup> It is here that the unnamed, and ungendered, photographer

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<sup>23</sup> Tim Dayton, *Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead”*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003) 39.

<sup>24</sup> Muriel Rukeyser, “The Book of the Dead” in *U.S. I* (New York: Covici-Friede, 1938). Please note that page numbers, and not line numbers, will be used to incorporate Rukeyser’s alternation between prose and verse.

unpacks camera and case. The closed stanzas that make up “Gauley Bridge” are the photographs taken; each stanza is a separate snapshot of the town echoed in Rukeyser’s use of regular length and layout. The vast majority of the stanzas offer separate examples of this technique.

The bus station and the great pale buses stopping for food;  
 April-glass-tinted, the yellow-aproned waitress;  
 coast-to-coast schedule on the plateglass window. (16)

Each stanza introduces something new, yet, the subject described in each rarely moves between stanzas. That waitress in the yellow apron, however, appears twice but in two different circumstances, and, what I believe to be crucial to the effect Rukeyser is creating, seen by different eyes.

And in the beerplace on the other sidewalk  
 always one’s harsh night eyes over the beerglass  
 follow the waitress and the yellow apron. (17)

The waitress is seen from two perspectives, the camera gaze and the male gaze, but is, in both, surrounded by glass. It would be too simplistic to argue that Rukeyser is merely equating photographs with poetry, taking the stance that the visual and the verbal can depict the same things. The repetition of glass acts a reminder of the many ways we see things, as well as the obstacles between us and the object we are viewing. Rukeyser is exploring the connection between the two as well as the function of that which she is less familiar with: the camera. Although in the town of Gauley bridge as a reporter, Rukeyser had a photographer with her as she had little experience with the apparatus.

However, as with Vertov’s film, the photographer, mentioned in “The Road”, does not appear in the panoramic image created in “Gauley Bridge. The camera moves as if it were an independent, on-site reporter; it is through the camera eye (Kino Eye) that we see the town of Gauley Bridge, not through the photographer’s. Rukeyser is toying with the idea of the camera as a neutral reproducing machine-- more prominent in the 1930s before photo doctoring technology was perfected-- by removing the photographer and consequently shortening the distance between the town and her readers. These snapshots appear more immediately, more honestly, because they are not translated by some other figure. The camera, then, appears able to present an image of the town without ulterior motives. The autonomy of the camera mirrors the desolation of the town it captures. The deserted camera which opens the poem is reflected by “the deserted Negro

standing on the corner” who ends the first stanza (16). This form of identification, by type, is repeated throughout the poem with no figure granted more identity than “the man who withdraws” or “the tall coughing man”(16). Robert Shulman offers an enlightening take on technique:

In a context of precise physical notation, the phrase “the man on the street” records a physical presence but in a way that generalizes him into the representative “man on the street,” a connotation that contributes to the irony of “any town looks like this one-street town.” “Any town” may look like this town but this town is also special because of “the tall coughing man” and this “man on the street” who leaves the doctor’s office, the slammed door” and doom” conveying a sense of emotional disturbance and finality, presumably for the same reason the man in the post office is coughing.<sup>25</sup>

This ability to recognise something familiar in an image of somewhere else is precisely what the FSA photography series attempted to recreate. However, in Rukeyser’s poem the feeling of other is heightened. As we will see, Gauley Bridge looks like any town but not every town is like Gauley Bridge. As the camera moves through the town, these labels become less precise until it is simply an undefined figure that is left: “always one’s harsh night eyes over the beerglass/ follow the waitress and the yellow apron” (17). There is something of Rukeyser’s inherent feminism in this image. “Gauley Bridge” is a town of male clients, female servers, and aligning the gaze of the camera with, what I would argue is the oldest gaze, the male gaze simultaneously highlights what the camera is able to capture, and how saturated society is with images.

This saturation is further reflected in the almost excessive amount of references to the camera, glass, and sight. In no other poem, in the series, are references so frequent nor the focus on the town’s desolation so prevalent. Shoshana Wechsler counts “nearly 20 references to “glass” or to “eyes” coexist in the space of only 40 lines.”<sup>26</sup> Rukeyser intertwines these two objects through repetition in “Gauley Bridge” while reminding her readers of their connection outside of the context of the poem. The need and, consequent, high price of glass is the reason construction on the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel was so quick and, consequently, unsafe. If even the town damaged by the disaster is filled with glass, the cities, inhabited by Rukeyser’s readers, would be more so. There is a sense of complicity here; after all the trend of documentary relied on glass and

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<sup>25</sup> Shulman, 194.

<sup>26</sup> Shoshana Wechsler, “A Ma(t)ter of Fact and Vision: The Objectivity Question and Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead” ” in *Twentieth Century Literature*, 45.2, Summer, 1999, 129.

cameras. However, in her investigation into this specific incident, Rukeyser is not trying to alienate her readers, but to bring those at fault to account. To do so, she needs readers on-side and sympathetic; she needs support. The repetitious alignment of the glass becomes then, more pragmatic. It emphasises the similarities between town and city but, more importantly, it is part of Rukeyser's critique of the voyeuristic aspect to documentation. The snapshots of Gauley Bridge town have no narrative within the poem, even as they make up part of the narrative of *The Book of the Dead*. At least until the final stanza where the poem's voice changes from descriptive to questioning:

What do you want -- a cliff over a city?  
A foreland, sloped to sea and overgrown with roses?  
These people live here. (17)

The direct, jarring last line reminds readers that people lived through this tragedy and are not figures, objects, or statistics. An effect heightened the greater the distance from the disaster. According to Louise Kertesz, this stanza has a particular audience in mind:

[the stanza] seems addressed to those poets like [Archibald] MacLeish who could still write in 1933 of their nostalgia for red roofs and olive trees. Rukeyser seeks the possibility in human life where modern people must actually live it; she has no pastoral fantasies, no nostalgia for a more 'lovely' world.<sup>27</sup>

Rukeyser holds the same standards for poetry as she does for reportage or journalism: both must honour the people in them as people and not merely use them for one's desired effect.

"Gauley Bridge" is not as complimentary towards photography as it first appears. Rukeyser uses the anonymity and typecasting, intrinsic to photography, in order to analyse the ethics surrounding photographic documentation, and the montage genres that make use of it. The photographic series presented through the closed stanzas of "Gauley Bridge" creates a full picture of what life in the town was like. While being "fixed on the street," the camera eye sees all aspects of town-life: the post-office, hotels, buses coming and going doctor's office, and the movie-house (16). It can even, if the timing is right, capture details of these places and the people who frequent them. "The tall *coughing* man stamping an envelope" (my emphasis), for example, is caught in the double action of stamping and coughing (16). Problematic praise for photography in two main ways. Firstly, the timing is not, as much as Vertov would like us to

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<sup>27</sup> Kertesz, 101.

believe, down to the camera. There is always a photographer: cameras are not an automaton producing an unbiased truth. Secondly, photography cannot tell the full story. What can be assumed from the inclusion of this man, and his two actions, is a connection to the industrial disaster, a case of silicosis. In the context of the poem, these assumptions can be made from the photograph however, they are assumptions and do not come from the photograph alone. An image of a coughing man stamping an envelope could have any number of meanings in another context. The camera, as a new technology, has its benefits, benefits which are particularly important to the Gauley Bridge community, but photographs and their benefits do not exist in isolation. The camera offers a means for precise, neutral recording but, without a surrounding context, the worth of these recordings is low.

It is this connection, the co-dependency between narrative and image, that is crucial to understanding the technique of “Gauley Bridge” and Rukeyser’s larger project in *The Book of the Dead*. The importance of narratives in providing a full and accurate story is present throughout the whole poetic series. Photographs are a crucial aspect of this story but remain only one part of a larger whole. There are moments throughout “Gauley Bridge” which highlight the limitations of photographic images. The doors around the town of Gauley Bridge, for example, “shut handleless”(16). The camera fails to capture those who move too quickly for it-- a limitation echoed by the little boy who runs with his dog and “blurs the camera glass fixed on the street”-- and the camera alone would never be able to gain access to what is behind closed doors (16). To look in detail at the snapshots which make up “Gauley Bridge” is to see that, even whilst imitating a camera, Rukeyser does not limit herself to what they are able to achieve. The images are not, in fact, photographic, but poetic snapshots; the camera is reproduced by the poetic voice, as much as it reproduces the figures it captures. Sounds, movements, emotions are frequently added, and suggested, even in what is meant to be a still image. Rukeyser treats the camera and the town the same way: both are a site for investigation. Is the camera’s neutrality really offering the full picture in an investigation where x-rays, another of the types of photographs Rukeyser works with, may have been purposefully misread? Neutrality is not truth. It is the truth that Rukeyser is trying to tell.



The camera is not the only new, image-producing technology Rukeyser examines in *The Book of the Dead*. They are, both in terms of Rukeyser's investigative poem and the official investigation, of less importance than the other technology used: x-rays. In the 1930s, x-rays were still a relatively new medical technology. They were first discovered and researched around 1896, by Wilhelm Roentgen, although, as with many medical discoveries, the advent of war propelled their development. Marie Curie worked towards field x-rays for the French army during the First World War and her research soon spread internationally. This connection between x-rays of the men, and their history with war, will become important later in *The Book of the Dead* when Rukeyser compares the fatal proportions of war and those of the Hawk's Nest Disaster. The use of x-rays really begins with the ninth poem "The Disease". Their difference from photographs are highlighted in two main ways. First, x-rays are directly involved in the investigation, as opposed to being used, as photographs are by Rukeyser, to introduce the event and surrounding community. X-rays, consequently, are placed in direct conversation with the verbal statements and testimonies, which made up the rest of the investigation, and much of the documentary material for Rukeyser's poem. Second, unlike the photographs of "Gauley Bridge", x-rays can tell at least part of a story on their own and have some form of truth to them, which cannot be altered or corrected by a narrative no matter how hard-- and Rukeyser exposes incidents of this deceit later in *The Book of the Dead* -- one tries. Timothy Dayton argues that "The Disease" is the most objective of Rukeyser's documentary poems. A fair assessment but where Dayton argues it is because of the poem's voice "the impersonal and scientific voice of a doctor describing the nature and progress of silicosis," I would suggest otherwise.<sup>28</sup> The objectivity, in fact, reflects the objectivity of the x-ray, and not the medical expert translating it. It is, I think, the x-rays' access to truth that makes it more objective than the photograph. Or, at least, makes it appear so: the image cannot lie but it can be misread. It is Rukeyser's comparison between medical testimony and medical image that proves the x-rays more important, in terms of the investigation, but also, I would argue, in terms of Rukeyser's poetic project.

"The Disease" is a poem lacking intimacy; there is no sense that the two speakers in the poem have a connection to one another or the body in question, outside of the situation (presumably a hearing). The body is unidentified just as a body would be to a radiographer; its only possible

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<sup>28</sup> Dayton, 77.

identity is as a tunnel worker who, like many others, were medically examined, diagnosed, sued the company, and failed. Rukeyser attempts, quite successfully, to present the disease through the poem as an x-ray would. This presentation is verbal, and not visual, but by creating a dialogue mimicking that between a doctor/ patient Rukeyser recreates the situation of the x-rays. “The Disease” features three x-rays represented in three stanzas. The first stanza depicts the anatomy visible in the x-ray:

[...]These are the ribs;  
 this is the region of the breastbone;  
 this is the heart (a wide white shadow filled with blood).  
 In here of course if the swallowing tube, esophagus.  
 The windpipe. Space between the lungs. (31)

The next, the effect the disease has had:

Now, this lung’s mottled, beginning, in these areas.  
 You’d say a snowstorm had struck the fellow’s lungs.  
 About alike, that side and this side, top and bottom.  
 The first stage in this period in this case. (31)

The description presented through this dialogue, adapted from the hearing transcripts by Rukeyser, is so precise, an image of the x-ray is unnecessary. These stanzas, with the addition of the stanza depicting the state of the lungs after ten months development, are purely descriptive which suggests this medial voice, at least, is unbiased. What begins as a condescending description of the internal structure of the chest, is revealed to be a necessary labelling of lungs so damaged they are unrecognizable. All one need know, and indeed all Rukeyser states, about the later lungs is “you will notice the increase” of this snowstorm effect (31). The story of the lungs is entirely encapsulated in these three images shown over three stanzas.

The objectivity of this medical voice, we can presume with some certainty, is a result of habit. However, the responding voice is equally so: “Between the ribs,” “Let us have the second,” “Indicating?” (31,32). This tone is likely not habitual, and the continuous questioning towards the end of the poem dismisses the idea that the responder is uncaring. The objectivity of the two speakers, then, reflects the objectivity of the x-rays but the information provided is not sufficient. The images, although objective, do not tell the complete story. The image created by the radiographer can prove the existence of the disease in the lung but not its cause, progression, or

outcome. To counter this effect, Rukeyser interrupts-- a technique that she uses frequently throughout *The Book of the Dead*-- with a different voice:

“It is growing worse every day. At night  
 “I get up to catch my breath. If I remained  
 “flat on my back I believe I would die.” (32)

This interruption functions as a powerful reminder of the divide between those suffering, as a result of the incident, and those deciding the result of the investigation, as well as the knowledge gap between the two groups and, indeed, those suffering and us, as readers. Rukeyser heightens this divide by immediately following the interruption with the medical expert’s version of effects:

That is what happens, isn’t it?  
 A choking off in the air cells?  
 Yes. (32)

The impersonal nature of the x-ray dictates it can only show the effect on the body, not on the person; the physical cost, not the human cost. Thus, like the photographs in “Gauley Bridge”, the x-ray means little without a larger context. In the context surrounding the Hawk’s Nest Disaster this limitation proved fatal to a number of workers.

Michael Thurston, in his informative chapter on *The Book of the Dead* and its position in the tradition of 1930s documentary, details the editing Rukeyser performed on the documents connected to the Congressional Investigation she used in the poem. According to Thurston’s research, multiple x-rays for a number of cases, were submitted to the hearing, yet Rukeyser uses only one in her poem.<sup>29</sup> Although, perhaps one is enough. It is usual practice for her, throughout *The Book of the Dead*, to use one example to represent many; a technique similar to the typecasting in “Gauley Bridge.” Furthermore, her end goal is different. Rukeyser is not attempting to represent the men in the hearing, rather, she is attempting to represent the hearing, and the facts and authorities involved. In the sequence of *The Book of the Dead*, “The Disease” comes almost halfway through; readers, likely already sympathetic to the struggles of the working class, will already be convinced of who is to blame for the Hawk’s Nest Disaster.

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<sup>29</sup> Michael Thurston, (1995) *Engaging aesthetics: American poetry and politics, 1925-1950*, (Doctoral dissertation), retrieved from MLA International Bibliography Database, (Accession No. 9624515). Thurston offers an indepth look into the documents used by Rukeyser in her creation of *The Book of the Dead*. His is a much more detailed investigation into these documents than other works on the poem, and is treated with some authority.

Consequently, the x-rays are not there to prove the existence of silicosis, but to comment on the hearing's lack of concern with the people affected by the disaster-- "these people live here" returns to mind. An x-ray is impersonal but used to expose the inhumanity of the doctors involved in the hearing.

The twelfth poem in *The Book of the Dead*, "The Doctors," is separated from "The Disease" by two lyrical monologues: "George Robinson: Blues" in the voice of a black migrant worker, and "Juanita Tinsley" named for the one member of the committee from outside the Gauley Bridge community. The pattern of these poems resembles a chiasmus (documentary poem, lyrical monologue, lyrical monologue, documentary poem), and this sequencing functions the same way as the personal interruption in "The Disease," that is, as a reminder of the human cost of the Gauley Bridge Tunnel, and those attempting to live through the disaster. "The Doctors" features three specific doctors --Dr. Hayhurst, Dr. Goldwater, and Dr. Harless-- two of which appear in separate question and answer dialogues which bookend the poem, and the remaining, who refused to be present for the Congressional hearing. Consequently, the middle section of the poem lacks the presence of a medical expert's voice. Instead, Rukeyser presents an unnamed newspaper reporter relaying the information they received from Dr. Harless (the absent doctor) as well as a transformed version of his letter to the court.<sup>30</sup> This absence was unacceptable to Rukeyser, even if his excuse "due to an illness of [his] wife" was true (39). There is also some grounding in Dr. Harless' claims that it was a matter "of local interest" and "nothing less than a racket" (39). The numbers and facts surrounding the disaster are, to this day, unclear and inconsistent. Nevertheless, as Martin Cherniack states, in his detailed medical investigation *The Hawk's Nest Incident: America's Worst Industrial Disaster*, even if silicosis was a recently discovered disease, the effect of silica was not. In fact "the adverse effects on health resulting from the inhalation of silica had been publicized by the Bureau of Mines for more than twenty years" by the time of the Hawk's Nest Disaster.<sup>31</sup> How much corporations and doctors listened is another matter. Rukeyser proves unaccepting of these excuses.

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<sup>30</sup> It is interesting to note that Rukeyser was there in this capacity: an outside reporter for a newspaper. She was at Gauley Bridge primarily as a journalist yet it is her poem surrounding the event that survives. The interplay between poetry and reportage, then, is one Rukeyser experienced first hand.

<sup>31</sup> Cherniack, 79.

Rukeyser uses her skill at poetic sequencing to expose Dr. Harless as thoughtless, if not cruel. The other two doctors had no direct connection to Gauley Bridge, or the Hawk's Nest Tunnel; they were brought in for the hearing as experts on occupational diseases; discounting the idea that knowledge of silicosis was limited. Dr. Hayhurst, in particular, with his experience at both the 'Bureau of Mines/ and Bureau of Standards,' provides information on the disease hitherto unknown in the context of the poem, and presumably in the actual investigation:

Danger begins at 25%  
 here was pure danger  
 Dept. of Mines  
 came in, was kept away. (37)

To further blacken Dr. Harless, in comparison, Rukeyser includes the fact that he, Harless, showed Hayhurst the lungs in order to get his expertise. Dr. Harless is simultaneously shown to be inept and dishonest. Rukeyser thus cuts his letter off before he can sign off: "If I can supply further information..." (39) To Rukeyser, he has failed to supply any relevant information, and, by refusing to allow him a sign off, she is suggesting there is no other information, or anything else, he could provide.

The final section of "The Doctors" switches back to a question and answer format, this time involving Dr. Goldwater, who is as evasive in his presence as Dr. Harless is in his absence. Dr. Goldwater's answers consist almost entirely of excuses and uncertainties: "most doctors avoid dogmatic statements./ avoid assiduously "always," "never." and "Medicine has no hundred percent./ We speak of possibilities, have opinions" (40). Rukeyser is not disputing these statements: medicine is not an exact science. However, as the persistent Mr. Griswold points out: Doctors testify answering 'yes' and 'no' / Don't they?"(40) It is worth remembering here, that this quote is from the hearing, only slightly altered. Rukeyser changed much more of the structure of testimonies and statements, than she did what was in them; their form more than their content. For the case of "The Doctors" then, it is one of priorities. In the circumstances, the doctors' habitual lack of commitment, whose education and experience has been emphasised, has failed the workers. This avoidance is the sharpest point of contrast between the medical testimony and the medical photograph. Rukeyser draws these two aspects together for comparison by ending "The Doctors" in an echo of the end of "The Disease":

---Did you make an examination of those sets of lungs?

--- I did.  
 --- I wish you would tell the jury whether or not those lungs were silicotic. [one can almost here in the questioner's voice that he knows the answer will not be a straight one.]  
 --- We object.  
 --- Objection overruled.  
 --- They were. (41)

Readers learn at the end of "The Disease" that silicosis causes death, and at the end of "The Doctors" that the men who worked the tunnel had it. There is nothing in the x-ray machine as a new technology that causes false narratives or conclusions. It is in their interpretation by people; whether medical experts, or otherwise. The contrast between the visual and verbal, "The Disease" and "The Doctors" is a reminder of our responsibility as readers and interpreters of images, to do so honestly.

The third poem in the triad of poems centered on the disease, "The Disease: After-Effects," is not as obviously documentary as its prequels, however, it is too consistent with their function within *The Book of the Dead* to not address here. The title is reminiscent of "The Disease" and thus one expects more of the same, once the silicosis has had longer to progress perhaps. However, what Rukeyser actually narrates is the story of a congressman, whose father once suffered from the same disease, and his efforts to pass "a bill to prevent industrial silicosis" (59). This surprise is lessened, to some extent, by the similarities between the poem and the rest of the triad and the theme continued within it. For example, there is a combination of official language and interruptions in a more personal voice. In "The Disease: After Effects," between the agenda of the house meeting and the decisions made during it, the voice of the gentleman from Montana stands out starkly. As Hawk's Nest is not near Montana, there are two possible explanations for the inclusion of this voice: either his father was a migrant worker who moved to Montana after working on the tunnel, or, what is more likely, the Hawk's Nest disaster was not unique. The Whitmanesque list of other states in which these tunnels have been built-- "Butte, Montana; Joplin, Missouri; the New York tunnels, / the Catskill Aqueduct. In over thirty States."-- further suggests that the people of Gauley Bridge were not the only ones affected by silicosis (60). "The Disease: After Effects" is not, then an analysis of new technology, like "The Disease," nor an attack on those dishonest in the hearing, as in "The Doctors" but a commentary on how the country at large, those in position of power in particular, reacted to such events.

Although the gentleman from Montana stands out in “The Disease: After Effects,” he does not in terms of *The Book of the Dead*. He was a real Congressman from Montana, and yet another real figure Rukeyser gives voice to through her poetic endeavor. The majority of “The Disease: After Effect” details his reasons for wanting a protective, preventative bill. On the agenda, provided by Rukeyser, it is listed last, after a munitions embargo to Germany and Italy, as well as, the release of Tom Mooney, and a bill for a TVA at Fort Peck Dam.<sup>32</sup> Not only does this listing explain Congress’ priorities, it also explains the global and national situation contemporary to the Hawk’s Nest Disaster. These references would most certainly be picked up instantly by Rukeyser’s contemporary readers and, I’m sure, none of them are there without careful consideration. However, it is the munitions embargo which is of most importance in consideration to the rest of the poem. It is against “Germany and Italy/ as states at war with Spain”(59). The Spanish Civil War broke out in the same year Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead* was published, 1936. Rukeyser’s next journalism job was to go to Barcelona for the opening of the People’s Olympics (a version of the Olympic Games protesting the organisation allowing fascist Germany to host) causing her to be there for the outbreak of the war. Her long poem about this experience *Mediterranean* was published in the same collection as *The Book of the Dead*. It may be assumed then that they were of equal importance to Rukeyser. After all she states in “The Disease: After Effects” that:

Only eleven States have laws.  
There are today one million potential victims.  
500,000 Americans have silicosis now.  
These are the proportions of a war. (60)

Her concern is revealed, once again, to be with the human cost of events. If the human costs of war and industrial disasters are the same, in Rukeyser’s ethics as she sets them out in *The Book of the Dead*, the world’s concern should be too.

After this powerful stanza the poem begins to fragment; it becomes more lyrical, more abstract, and more critical. Rukeyser plays off the idea that international issues are more important than

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Mooney was a labour leader convicted of the San Francisco Preparedness Day Bombing in 1916. At the time, there were suspicions of false testimony and perjury surrounding the case-- not unlike that of Hawks Nest-- and he has since been pardoned.

domestic ones. The fault lies with the importance given to the house: “all our meaning lies in this/ signature: power on a hill” (60) and our inability to see our own country:

no plan can ever lift us high enough  
to see forgetful countries underneath,  
but always now the map and X-ray seem  
resemblent pictures of one living breath  
one country marked by error  
and one air. (61)

These lines are some of Rukeyser’s most obscure in *The Book of the Dead* but when taken in the context of “The Disease: After Effects.” they are important. The two countries are presumably America and Spain; the map and the x-ray return us to the earlier poems and the refrain “these are the roads you take into your own country”; the error is perhaps America’s, or even Spain’s, failure to see itself or to recognise the similarities in their issues. However, what is clear is that Rukeyser feels a tie between the two situations which has been missed, and perhaps one the Congressmen of America have missed in themselves: their house is connected to all the homes in America. The x-ray is the perfect image for Rukeyser: the unidentified body in the x-rays of “The Disease” becomes any body, all bodies. The image is a reminder of her previous claim; we must look internally as well as externally, domestically as well as internationally. The armies mentioned are as much Spanish soldiers as they are American workers. The x-ray acts as a reminder that while progress in the safety and recovery of soldiers is being made, the same is not true of domestic workers.

The poem closes with a move back into America, back into Congress, and back to silicosis. She parallels the effect of the disease on the body and the actions in the courtroom:

[...]blocking all drainage from the lung  
eventually scars, blocking the blood supply,  
and then they block the air passageways (61)

Dayton notes how Rukeyser mirrors “the blockage of the air passage that steadily diminishes the energy of the victim, and the blockage of the bill that would have granted the subcommittee greater powers of investigation.”<sup>33</sup> By this stage in *The Book of the Dead*, the description of silicosis and its effects is familiar. However, the sharp interruption that follows this stanza-- “Bill

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<sup>33</sup> Dayton, 80.



blocked; investigation blocked"-- is not (61). It is a harsh action told in harsh sounding words; far harsher than those describing the effect of the disease. This interruption functions in opposition to that in "The Doctors": it is the official voice interrupting the human. The balance that Rukeyser has been playing with throughout her use of documents shifts here, from the visual and the verbal, to something closer to Stott's divide of the human and the official. However, Rukeyser is not simply playing with these two different types of documentation; it is more a play between documents that emerge from experience rather than expertise. The workers are placed against both the uncooperative doctors, and the unlistening congressmen. "Bill blocked" is neither the expected or the desired outcome for readers of *The Book of the Dead*. However, as "The Disease: After Effects" follows on so neatly from "The Disease" and "The Doctors" this brusque interruption is the expected ending to the poem. It follows the precedent set by "yes sir" of "The Disease" and the "they were" of "The Doctors". Yet "The Disease: After Effects" continues into one of the rare moments we hear Rukeyser's own poetic voice:

These galleries produce their generations.  
 The Congressmen are restless, stare at the triple tier,  
 the flags, the ranks, the walnut foliage wall;  
 a row of empty seats, mask over a dead voice.  
 But over the country, a million look from work,  
 five hundred thousand stand. (61)

These lines function as a representation of the class divide in America; the first four of those with authority, those in power, and the final two of the workers. The language also reminds one of war "the flags, the ranks" and "five hundred thousand stand". The blocked bill is not the end; fighting is possible.

Rukeyser's version of the interplay between the human and official appears in two other poems in the series: "Praise of the Committee" and "The Bill." Although these poems are far apart in *The Book of the Dead*-- the sixth and nineteenth respectively-- it is quite clear that the two poems have a strong link. "The Bill" resulted from the committee. The logic of the investigation and hearing Rukeyser is narrating in her poetic series, dictates a continuation to be true while her use of repetition remind readers of it. Incidentally, the ambiguity of who makes up these committees is another feature the two poems share. The subcommittee of "The Bill" is presumably a Congressional one whereas the Committee in "Praise of the Committee" is, in fact, made up of

members of the Gauley Bridge community, including tunnel workers and one New York social worker, who banded together to perform the investigation no one else would. Why Rukeyser keeps this ambiguity regarding the committee members is difficult to know. There is little about it in the criticism surrounding *The Book of the Dead*; usually the members are explained, occasionally named, but it is rare that any reasons for this lack of clarity, in such a precise poem, are speculated. I would, rather tentatively, suggest Rukeyser does so in order to remove the possibility of their findings being labelled as subjective. “Praise of the Committee” is a relatively early poem in the series so a lack of subjectivity, allows for it to function as an introduction to the facts surrounding the event. Additionally, it removes readers from their own subjectivity. We take their view objectively and without presuppositions because we are not given the information to do so.

It becomes increasingly more apparent, throughout *The Book of the Dead*, that the form of the poem reflects its content, and vice versa. Consequently, the form of these two poems also act as a link between them. “Praise of the Committee” is, quite rightly, seen by many as the documentary extreme of the series. It contains almost all the facts of the disaster, including those about the town, company, and people still living there; it is a fragmented conglomeration of them without any conventional poetic structure; and, what separates it most from the other documentary poems in the series, Rukeyser adopts the form of an actual official document for most of the poem. The changing refrain of “*These are the lines on which a committee is formed*”, “*The Committee is a true reflection of the people*” could be found on an official transcript (20). I would suggest, though, that if this is true for “Praise of the Committee” then it must also be true of “The Bill” marking both of them as the documentary extremes of the series, combining them regardless of their distance within it. The effect of this documentary form is an unusual one. The expectation of the use of an official form would be a poem that would read cohesively with a solid structure; which is somewhat true of “The Bill”, until Rukeyser’s signature interruption, but less so of “Praise of the Committee.” In “The Bill” the facts first announced in “Praise of the Committee” are repeated within a more secure structure. “Praise of the Committee” contains many fragmented lists of, seemingly, unrelated items:

Active members may be cut off relief,  
16-mile walk to Fayetteville for cheque-  
WEST VIRGINIA RELIEF ADMINISTRATION, #22991 (21)

Whereas “The Bill” transforms these facts into a more grammatical format mimicking Rukeyser’s transformation of these documents into a poem. Furthermore, the aphorism of “THAT” adds an authority to the voice of “The Bill” which is not present in its sister poem. This reiteration echoes one of Rukeyser’s more subtle themes in *The Book of the Dead*: the community’s lack of knowledge surrounding the disease. The excessive listing of the medical educations in “The Doctors” in contrast to the frequency of the speaker’s of the lyric monologues claiming “they don’t know” springs to mind. The committee made up of community members present a more fragmented case, whereas those presumably connected to Congress have more succinct argument. Considering the distance these poems have from one another in the series, it makes sense that the subcommittee has had longer to put the pieces together; the information and case began in “Praise of the Committee” has been heard by the subcommittee in “The Bill.” Yet again the form is reflecting the content.

The fragmentation shared between the two poems is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it ties back to the other documentary poems discussed above. The snapshot effect in “Gauley Bridge” is echoed, to a slight extent, in this fragmentation; readers gain little bits of knowledge in quick succession as with looking at photographs. However, here, because we are in the verbal word of fact, there is no need for immediate interpretation. “The Disease: After Effects” shares a use of multiple voices with both “Praise of the Committee” and “The Bill”. However, the former has named figures whereas the latter two do not. “The Bill”, too, shares the poetic structure with “The Disease: After Effects” as both end with Rukeyser’s own poetic voice. This doubling leads up to the coda “The Book of the Dead.” Secondly, Rukeyser uses fragmentation differently in the two poems, “Praise of the Committee” and “The Bill,” to draw differences between the two committees. It is possible that “The Bill” is not regarded as quite as extreme in its documentation because it is less fragmented than “Praise of the Committee”. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, facts presented as fragments allows Rukeyser to remove her own voice and opinion, her own subjectivity, about the facts in order to critique how others did so. As with “The Disease” and “The Doctors” two poems discuss the same facts but with different voices. However, unlike the other companion poems, the facts are what is unbiased here, and feature in both of the poems. It is, then, a case of what comes after them that is of importance. “Praise of

the Committee” is early in Rukeyser’s investigative *The Book of the Dead*, and is consequently followed by a poetic rendering of an investigation into the Hawk’s Nest disaster. Contrastingly, “The Bill” is second to last poem, the last before what many call the coda, so has more of a sense of finality. The hope professed in “Praise of the Committee” has vanished, resulting in the unsatisfactory subcommittee subcommitting. This committee is judged almost as harshly as the absent Dr. Harless in “The Doctors”.

Yet, Rukeyser seems to remain hopeful and the poem does not end. In a somewhat unusual manner for *The Book of the Dead*, it is only at the end of “The Bill” that she interrupts the poem:

Words on a monument.  
 Capitoline thunder. It cannot be enough.  
 The origin of storms is not in clouds,  
 our lightning strikes when the earth rises,  
 spillways free authentic power:  
 dead John Brown’s body walking from a tunnel  
 to break the armored and concluded mind. (65)

It is, perhaps, not accurate to call the final stanza of “The Bill” an interruption in terms of the particular poem but, in terms of the series, it most certainly is: the voice resembles neither what spoke before nor after it. The stanza is important in regard to how Rukeyser’s interruptions function throughout these documentary poems. The words are simple yet the meaning unclear. “Capitoline thunder” is both an out of place reference to Ancient Rome, and to every city with a capitol hill; “words on a monument” a reference to those remembered and commemorated by history. Authority and history is, once again, declared insufficient: something else must be added. In “The Disease” this something is the human experience told by the one who experienced it; in “Praise of the Committee”, as noted by Robert Schulman, it is a technique borrowed from Brecht:

She [Rukeyser] uses the first of a series of Brechtian interpolations like those in a Living Newspaper: “*The Committee is a true reflection of the will of the people.*” The sharp contrast between the committee and the corporation may also be setting up the congressional committee, which may not be “a true reflection of the will of the people”<sup>34</sup>

These interruptions, although on the surface seems completely different to Rukeyser’s interruption in “The Bill,” is actual similar in the effect it creates. Rukeyser uses them to direct

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<sup>34</sup> Shulman, 199.

her readers, in an extremely subtle manner, on how to interpret the documents she has already translated, and the circumstances which produced them using both their content and their form. By invoking the form of the Living Newspaper, which dealt almost exclusively in facts told in a theatrical manner, Rukeyser is adding another layer of authority to her poetic voice. Naturally each document, or documentary technology, needs to be read somewhat differently. The minutes of the community based committee in "Praise of the Committee" is not missing the personal angle of the x-ray in "The Disease", for example. Nor does the heavily factual transcript of "The Bill" lack the verbal narrative of the "Gauley Bridge" photographs. The interruptions present in both sets of documentary poems are, in fact, Rukeyser's own poetic voice and her instruction. It is, in the literal structure of the series *The Book of the Dead*, and in the concepts Rukeyser is playing with within it, the voice that guides you through the investigative journey, translating the documents-- whether visual or verbal, human or official-- into a solid argument for both the case of the workers and the position poetry has in the investigation into the Hawk's Nest disaster. There is a dark sense of irony in the power of Rukeyser's work, and her ability to draw attention to those voices not listened to. Rukeyser has become an unheard voice; her poetry is no longer widely read or studied; yet her mission to hear the unheard is as relevant today as it has always been.

## The Lyrical Monologues

There are many possible ways of dividing up *The Book of the Dead*'s lyrical monologues: those spoken by the Gauley Bridge community and those by outsiders, those spoken by workers of the tunnel and those not (this divide is also a gender divide), those spoken by people directly affected by the disasters and those not, those in which the main poetic voice is a named character and those in which the main poetic voice is unidentified. Of course, they can also be viewed as a whole, and, in some ways, that is useful too. However, in this section, the last method of dividing them will be used, as it allows the focus to stay on the poetics of *The Book of the Dead*, rather than on the disaster it depicts. It allows a greater comparison into the different ways Rukeyser uses similar techniques and formats, as well as an insight into who she chooses to imitate and give a direct voice to, who she chooses to allow a voice, and why. In approaching the lyrical monologues in this way, I hope to uncover the reasoning behind Rukeyser's changing poetic voice as well as her use of this different type of documentary poem. While it is true that Rukeyser spent time in Gauley Bridge while reporting for *New Masses*, much of what is transcribed into the lyrical monologues comes from official statements, letters, preexisting interviews, and not what she, herself, heard.

It seems, then, Rukeyser utilises William Stott's distinction between the two types of documentary. Stott claims that documents are either human or official in type. The official document deals with the objective, often taking the form of something associated with an official authority: for example, a license, an identification card, or a photograph. Whereas human documents are more subjective, more personal, and, as they are not official, have no conventional form. As Stott differentiates: "There are two kind of documents, or tendencies within the document genre. The first, the more common [the official document], gives information to the intellect. The second [the human document], informs the emotions."<sup>35</sup> The previous section, although some notions, or to use Stott's term tendencies, of the human document existed, dealt largely with the official document. With the lyrical monologues, Rukeyser's approach is different. They are certifiably human documents even when they were created in an official setting. Nevertheless, the lyric monologues of *The Book of the Dead* so not always register as being documentary, perhaps because human documents do not have a

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<sup>35</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) 12.

recognisable form. Stott's use of the term "tendencies" is also important here. These are not set definitions, there are no specific characteristics; simply elements that tend towards or away from the human, the subjective, the emotional. In this section I hope to make the connection between the different levels of Rukeyser's poetic voice, and the varying degrees the lyrical monologues resemble the human document clearer.

There is, I would argue, one lyrical monologue that is not easily categorised into the two dividing groups the rest can be. This is the third poem of the series, and the first lyrical monologue, "Statement: Philippa Allen." Although the poetic voice has been assigned to the figure of Philippa Allen, the voice actually appears to belong purely to Rukeyser. This technique is similar to T.S Eliot's assignation of voice to Prufrock in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. However, with a significant difference, the key difference really between the two poets, that Rukeyser's character is real whereas Eliot's is fictional.<sup>36</sup> It is perhaps due to its early position in the poetic series that Tim Dayton classifies it as an introductory poem, rather than a lyrical monologue.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, as Robert Shulman notes, Rukeyser makes small adjustments between Philippa Allen's actual statement and that which is presented as her statement in the poem in order to depersonalise it, removing some of the human tendencies. "Rukeyser slightly carries the punctuation of the transcript to heighten the dry, factual quality [...] as distinct from the more lyrical personal style of other sections."<sup>38</sup> Shulman does not follow Dayton's classifications, and so is really speaking about the series at large. Nevertheless, it is true, while reading "Statement: Philippa Allen" we learn very little about its speaker. The first few lines act as an introduction to the speaker:

-- You like the State of West Virginia very much, do you not?  
 -- I do very much, in the summertime.  
 -- How much time have you spent in West Virginia?  
 -- During the summer of 1934, when I was doing social work  
     down there, I first heard of what we were pleased to call  
     the Gauley tunnel tragedy, which involves about 2,000  
     men. (13)

<sup>36</sup> The difference between the two poets will be considered more fully, in the third section of this thesis which focuses on the meditative poems of *The Book of the Dead*.

<sup>37</sup> For a list of Dayton's classifications please see page 28 in his book: *Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead"*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003).

<sup>38</sup> Shulman, 191.

These lines do not carry much information. The speaker is a social worker who has spent one summer in West Virginia, most likely with the men involved in the Gauley tunnel tragedy, although this connection is unclear. There are, however, important clues hidden within Allen's answers. The present tense of "involves" reminds readers that the investigation was ongoing, during the time Rukeyser was writing her poem; the fact that the social worker was visiting West Virginia shows that the tragedy had already gained national coverage; and, that she is giving a statement, in which she mentions her first visit, suggests not only is she continuing her work, but that her work is important to the investigation and the men.

I would like to take a moment to address the somewhat problematic phrasing of "what we were pleased to call the Gauley tunnel tragedy" (13). It is possible, Allen simply misspoke in her statement when she claimed they were "pleased to call" what happened a tragedy however, Rukeyser purposefully included the phrase so it is worth investigating. I have searched through analysis, by other scholars, of this specific poem and have found no suggestions of what is meant by the phrase, nor are there many clues within the series itself. It would be easy to read it as an example of the modern poets' love of an ironic tone. However, these words are Allen's and, so, completely removed from this tradition. Allen, of course, does not mean tragedy in the traditional greek definition. It was not a drama, or series of events, dictated by fate or some inherent character flaw. It was a tragic loss of lives, and a distressing lack of concern. To put forth a theory, I would suggest that it is perhaps pleasing that it can be called a tragedy as the label of "a tragedy" may have helped to attract national press and interest. "Tragedy at Gauley Tunnel" is more attention grabbing than "Incident at Gauley Tunnel." It should be remembered that most of the initial investigation was performed by a voluntary committee made of members of the community, a part of whose aim would have been to garner national attention. The phrase reminds readers of this achievement. Personally, I find it difficult to imagine Rukeyser praising the prioritising of one tragedy over another; she was "a poet of liberty, civil liberty, women's liberty and all the other liberties that so many people think they themselves just invented in the last ten years."<sup>39</sup> Or simply, an undiscerning poet of liberty. Why then include this problematic phrase? The best reason I have to offer, is to draw attention to the unconscious preferential treatment to events which are labelled a certain way. Later in *The Book of the Dead* Rukeyser

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<sup>39</sup> Kertesz, xii.



compares the national numbers of those affected by silicosis with those affected by wars -- “These are the proportions of a war” (60)--questioning why one is seen as more important than the other. It is not that Rukeyser would limit the coverage of war, but raise the coverage of industrial neglect and consequent illnesses. The difficult phrasing in “Statement: Philippa Allen” forces a reader to pause and consider which is, really, what Rukeyser is constantly trying to make her readers do.

The first couple of lines of “Statement: Philippa Allen” also showcase the other change Rukeyser made to the actual statement in her poetic rendering of it. As Shulman notes:

Rukeyser edits the order of the statement and gives it the dramatic form of question and answer-- in the original, Philippa Allen, testifies at length and the congressman only occasionally raises questions. Throughout, Rukeyser selects and arranges Allen’s words so as to highlight the political poetry latent in ordinary speech.<sup>40</sup>

The celebration of everyday language prevents Rukeyser from being too lofty, a poet’s poet: the search for the *mot juste* is not important here. The language, or words, that are important, are the words that have already been spoken. Rukeyser looks for beauty in the ordinary, but more importantly, she looks for truth. If the problematic phrasing of “what we were pleased to call the Gauley tunnel tragedy” reminds readers to pay attention to events which are not given an important title, the rest of “Statement: Philippa Allen” reminds readers to pay attention to those without authority, those often not listened to. The sense of poetry in ordinary speech culminates at the end of “Statement: Philippa Allen” when the line between who is speaking, Rukeyser or Allen, becomes more and more blurred.

I feel this investigation may help in some manner.  
I do hope it may.  
I am now making a very general statement as a beginning.  
There are many points that I should like to develop  
later, but I shall try to give you a general history of  
this condition first.... (15)

Shulman reads these lines as a way for Rukeyser to stress Allen’s distance from the community at Gauley Bridge, and question whether the investigation will actually do anything: “As much as

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<sup>40</sup> Shulman, 190.

she values Allen, Rukeyser also uses the genteel formality of Allen's speech to stress her distance from the workers and to cast doubt on how much good the investigation will do."<sup>41</sup>

However, I would suggest that this blending of voices suggests something else, as Rukeyser is investigating the same incident Allen was. It suggests that there is worth in the voices that may not seem to carry any, it suggests that time should be made to speak to all people involved. The phrase "I have talked to people; yes" is true of both Rukeyser and Allen (13). It sets out Rukeyser's method and intentions for *The Book of the Dead*. The poetic series offers an investigation, which she hoped would help spread news of the disaster, and change the public's reaction to such disasters. Finally, "Statement: Philippa Allen" suggests that one need not only listen to experts. This message is picked up later in the series through the poems "The Disease" and "The Doctors," as explored in the previous section. However, here, by allowing Philippa Allen, an outsider social worker, be the first person to talk about the disaster, the relevant facts, even when these facts are to do with the medical science of the incident, Rukeyser disputes all forms of authority. Allen gives most of the facts of the incident from the number of workers, to their wages, the history of the companies involved, to the chemical makeup of silica, but she does not touch on the working conditions or the worker's lives, after developing the disease. In other words, she does not speak of what one would expect a social worker to be expert in. Tim Dayton suggests that "Rukeyser makes Allen's the first voice to speak of the disaster in homage to Allen's efforts at uncovering and publicising it" and I think this suggestion is likely true.<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, as the first voice presented, readers have no choice but to grant Allen authority; all else we learn will, and must, be held up against her account. Rukeyser has attempted to make the human objective.

The next two poems I have classed as lyrical monologues, "The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones" and "Mearl Blankenship," are not technically monologues. They are not told through one soliloquising voice. Instead, they combine elements of the monologue with Rukeyser's own lyric voice and, in the case of "Mearl Blankenship," other forms of texts. These two poems, then, cannot be seen as purely human in tendency, or even a purely human form of documentation.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 192.

<sup>42</sup> Dayton, 39.

Rukeyser is playing more with the poetic form of the lyric, with these two poems, than she is addressing the notion of testimony, reportage, and documentation, as she does with other lyric monologue. As Tim Dayton asserts, “Rukeyser’s monologues tend decidedly toward the lyrical, as opposed to the dramatic pole of the form.”<sup>43</sup> Rukeyser has not created Shakespearean monologues by any means, even when they are more pure monologues. However, none of the poems in this section resemble a conventional poetic monologue either. There is rarely an internal focus, a deep meditation, or a personal revelation. The monologues, whether more lyrical or personal in nature, do not have the effect one expects of monologues. One of the only similarities Rukeyser’s version shares with the more traditional form is the address; the speaker of her monologues appear to be addressing a single person audience. This person appears to be the solitary reader, or Rukeyser, when in fact it is more likely to have been a full courtroom.

In “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones” and “Mearl Blankenship” the presence of another voice complicates the conversation. “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones” becomes complicated not only through its lack of clear addressee but through its lack of direct voice. A monologue is a problematic label for this poem as it has barely any of the markings of a monologue. Indeed, Robert Shulman argues that it is, in fact, a third-person portrait like “Gauley Bridge” and not a monologue. However, unlike “Gauley Bridge” it is organized by the clock and not by the camera.”Instead of the camera, Rukeyser uses the movement of the clock to organize the poem and convey a sense of time passing.”<sup>44</sup> The poem is one of the most regular of all the series consisting of nine regular stanzas of four lines each, ordered by an aphorism of an hour: “on the hour”, “on the quarter”, “on the half-hour” and so on (18,19). Yet both Tim Dayton, and I, disagree with Shulman, and class “Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones” as a monologue. Dayton suggests the poem “consists of Jones’s reflections as occasioned by the sight of the hydroelectric complex.”<sup>45</sup> It is no doubt the sense of reflection that marks “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones” as a monologue for Dayton. I agree, however, I think Rukeyser is offering more than the reflections of one man.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>44</sup> Shulman, 196.

<sup>45</sup> Dayton, 43.

The use of an unidentified, unembodied voice allows Rukeyser to blur the distinction between man, town, and tunnel. There is a significant amount of personification of the tunnel, dam, and other industrial sites. As early as the second stanza, Rukeyser depicts “the mouth of the tunnel that opened wider” (18). A tunnel being described as having a mouth is, of course, commonplace, but it is the automatic opening, the automation, which makes this image stronger than average. The mouth of this tunnel widened itself, in a rather sinister way, “when precious in the rock the white glass showed”, and had no need for assistance from an outside voice. Two stanzas later, Jones remembers “how they enlarged/ the tunnel” making it clear that in the reality of this poem, at least, the tunnel and the men act as one. Furthermore, the town is present in almost every stanza of “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones” whether in terms of which industrial buildings were situated there, who the people who lived there or in the surrounding areas were, and the natural landscape that sparked the building of the power plant, dam and tunnel:

[...]the Negro woman throws  
 gay arches of water out from the front door.  
 It runs down, wild as grass, falls and flows. (18)

This ordinary arch of water is as wild as grass, sure, but also as wild as the New River, the river Vivian Jones sits at, at the beginning of the poem, “where the men crawl, landscaping the grounds” (18). The use of the river invokes the idea of the water cycle, which is reflected in the cyclical, temporal, tone of the poem where each part is interconnected even as it is unclear how.

In the second half of “the Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones”, Rukeyser creates an image to represent, and further, this blurring. The main feature of this image is snow; it first appears as Jones reaches the great wall face. The snow behaves as one would expect; it is described as “fallen mist” “white dropped water”, seen as it “rushes down it's river”-- another allusion to the water cycle-- until it has settled and Jones “stamps in the deep snow”, “stamps this [what happened in the tunnel] off his mind again” (19). Of course, Rukeyser is not describing real snow here, or not just real snow. The snow is at once the silica dust, and the dust of the corpses of those who inhaled it. In the course of the poem, the snow literally surrounds the town, just as the snow, figuratively as silica dust, did. The connection between these types of snow is hinted at throughout the poem but there are two moments where it is more clear. Rukeyser makes two

references to the glass in the poem which is the image that solidifies the duplicity of the image of snow. The first is during Jones' reflection of what happened to the men "hundreds breather value, filled their lungs full of glass/ (O the gay wind the clouds the many men) (18) and the second is in Rukeyser's actual description of the snow "immense and pouring power, the mist of snow,/ the fallen mist, the slope of water, glass" (19). The snow that appeared to Vivian Jones only looks like snow, it is, in fact, silica dust which has already entered all the men. This repetition also acts as a reminder that the dust is still there even after it "has done it's death-work in the country"(19). The gay wind carries the many men who have been killed through this silica dust and have become another type of dust altogether.

This powerful image is picked up in the final stanza of the poem:

And the snow clears and the dam stands in the gay weather,  
O proud O white O water rolling down,  
he turns and stamps this off his mind again  
and on the hour walk again through the town. (19)

The first line suggests two things. Firstly, that the visit Vivian Jones' makes the powerplant is a habitual one, which he makes even as the seasons change and snow gives way to warmer, gay weather. As an engineer, Jones was connected to the tunnel, but in no danger of contracting silicosis. Perhaps this routine visit is invocative of survivor's guilt? He seems removed from the combination of man, tunnel, and town that Rukeyser so carefully creates. This removal becomes important later in *The Book of the Dead* with "Power" in which Rukeyser recreates *The Inferno* and *Paradise Lost* with Jones playing the role of guide. Secondly, the first line suggests that the men have been carried off by the wind; they have passed over, become part of nature. The second line continues this thought, the men, now as dust, follow in the Whitmanesque movement of nature. Again, this resonates with a later poem in the series "The Cornfield" in which Rukeyser details the coverup performed, and the makeshift graves that many of the men fell victim to. Jones, however, does not dwell on this part of the story. He cuts off his reflection and goes back to his life. As with most of the documentary poems, Rukeyser uses the form of the end of the poem to reflect its content. The rest of the poem follows a pattern: a stanza beginning with a part of the hour, followed by two stanzas depicting how that time is spent. The end section begins the same way, but is cut short: the final quarter of the hour is the last line of the only following stanza. The reflection has been cut off, and so must the poem be.

“Mearl Blankenship” the second lyric monologue to majorly feature a voice outside of a monologue, is almost the complete opposite to “Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones” in terms of form and style. Where the latter is structured, the former is fragmented, one has routine, the other no sense of time. The two poems seem to begin the same way, with a voice describing the man named in the title: “He stood against the stove/ facing the fire” and “On the hour he shuts the door and walks out the town” (24,18). However, differences soon occur. There is little reflection in the text of “Mearl Blankenship” but vague references to his experience of the Hawk’s Nest disaster. The first two stanzas, for example, are syntactically incomplete:

He stood against the stove  
facing the fire --  
Little warmth, no words,  
loud machines.

Voted relief,  
wished money mailed,  
Quietly under the crashing: (24)

There is little continuity between lines, and these phrases would mean very little outside the context of the disaster. The first two lines of the second stanza are references to the compensation deserved, if not necessarily received, and the crashing is presumably the noise of the machines, yet it is unclear what the loud machines are. Are they haunting echoes of what he heard in the tunnel, necessary equipment to help him breathe, or does he still live in the camps nearby the still functioning power plant? Whichever, Rukeyser is using this poetic voice to play with spatiality. Here, it describes how the disaster has infected the home, removing the ability of the fire to provide any comforting warmth. Additionally, the only other time we hear this poetic voice, is when it relocates Blankenship in front of the wall by the river.

It would seem Blankenship and Vivian Jones make the same journey, although, like their poems, one is less organised. By placing them in the same physical space, Rukeyser can use the poems’ style and structure to highlight the differences between the two men. Firstly, there is a practical reason readers never hear Vivian Jones’ voice: he was never in the position to give testimony, whereas Blankenship was. Notwithstanding, Blankenship’s words, presented by Rukeyser, are

not necessarily those heard at the hearing. He begins by describing what life is like living with the disease:

“I wake up choking, and my wife  
 “rolls me over on my left side;  
 “then I’m asleep in the dream I always see:  
 “the tunnel choked  
 “the dark wall coughing dust. (24)

This depiction seems almost too intimate to be told in a courtroom, however, chances are it was. There are echoes of Vivian Jones here too. Both men seem haunted; one through their dreams and the other through their thoughts. Yet, crucially, only one wakes choking. I would argue that the most important difference Rukeyser finds between the two men, and thus the one she highlights most strongly, is the difference of class. Mearl Blankenship is a blue collar, whereas Vivian Jones is white collar: their experiences of the same incident are completely different.

Rukeyser’s priority becomes increasingly apparent as she introduces the main bulk of the poem’s text. It takes the form of a letter, written by Blankenship, which he asks, whomever the poem is addressing, to

“Send it to the city  
 “maybe to a paper  
 “if it’s all right. (24)

Although it is unclear who Blankenship is addressing, Shulman reassures that this letter is a true representation of the one Mearl Blankenship actually wrote for someone to send to the city on his behalf: “Beyond the telling revelations about the lawsuits, Blankenship’s health, and conditions in the tunnel, in “Mearl Blankenship” Rukeyser’s fidelity to his language and sensibility conveys her respect for him as a working man.”<sup>46</sup> A reassurance that only increases my curiosity to know to whom he is speaking.

The letter itself is fairly straightforward. It states who is writing, why, what they did in the tunnel, what has happened since his diagnosis and the trial began, and ends with a plea for help:

I am a Married Man and have a family. God  
 knows if they can do anything for me  
 it will be appreciated

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<sup>46</sup> Shulman, 204.

if you can do anything for me  
let me know soon (26)

The letter is moving and, on the surface, Rukeyser seems to be answering his plea and engaging in a dialogue. She is sending it, through poetry, her preferred means of communication, to people who may be able to help. The interruption that connects Mearl Blankenship to Vivian Jones comes midway through the letter, immediately after Blankenship suggests he does not have much time left “I am still here/ a lingering along (25). Contrasting the two, at the emotional height of the letter, allows Rukeyser to show the desperation of Blankenship’s state without causing an overt amount of pity for him. He is not asking for help for himself, but for those he no longer can help. There is also a sharp contrast between the action of lingering and how Rukeyser’s voice describes Blankenship:

He stood against the rock  
facing the river  
grey river grey face  
like X-ray plate enlarged  
diffuse and stony  
his face against the stone. (25)

Rukeyser presents Blankenship as standing defiant, even while her readers know he will die. There is a continuation of the theme of “Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones” as the man, and the rock, the surrounding nature are likened and combined. However, here it is not the industry, or the engineering, that makes up the third part, but the disease represented by the X-ray. There are hints in this interruption, of why Rukeyser creates lyric monologues. In “Mearl Blankenship” especially, but also in many of the other monologues, Rukeyser is giving a specific human voice to those who are normally just seen as statistics. She is putting into practice what she criticised about x-rays; she is giving a human face to the examined lungs, and showing these men to be powerful, and not stereotypical victims.

Dayton believes “Mearl Blankenship” is simply an exploration of “the epistolary form of the dramatic monologue, with exterior comment provided for contextualising purposes.”<sup>47</sup> However, there is another element of the letter that is key to Rukeyser’s project in *The Book of the Dead* more generally. Although Rukeyser transforms the letter into poetry, this change only affects the

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<sup>47</sup> Dayton, 44,45.



punctuation, sentence structure, and line length: the syntax and words remain the same. She has refused to use an elevated poetic language, or alter the wording to make it more intelligent, more beautiful, or more effective; she relies on what is already there. As Robert Shulman notes “Rukeyser uses rhyme to heighten slightly the ordinary language Blankenship uses [and] perfectly captures the language of work, the unsubordinated syntax (&...&...&), and the matter-of-fact rendering and acceptance of the fatal power relations in the tunnel”.<sup>48</sup> The rhyme, noted by Shulman, allows Rukeyser to draw readers’ attention towards certain aspects, and make certain connections which Blankenship’s natural language would not do. The example Shulman gives is:

& now he is dead and gone  
But I am still here  
a lingering along. (25)

By turning the prose of the letter into verse, Rukeyser creates an off-rhyme (gone/along) and, according to Shulman, “the shift from “&” to “but” emphasize[s] the dying fall of Blankenship’s life.” The poetry is in the language already, Rukeyser is just highlighting it. But for what purpose? For Dayton, like the documentary poems, it “displays Rukeyser’s interest in the nature and resources of language in the hands of a non-literary user”.<sup>49</sup> This explanation, however, seems overly simplistic, and the motivation too self-serving to ring true to Rukeyser’s interest in the plight of others, and her persona as a “poet of liberty.”<sup>50</sup>

Shulman suggests that her refusal to elevate language to some poetic standard, and her celebration of the language of the everyday man, is connected to her political convictions. By raising the language of the working man to a position that must be noticed, read, considered, she is celebrating their position without having to resort to slogans or taking the risk of being labelled a propagandist:

In this political poetry the politics are deeply encoded in the language itself, so that Rukeyser does not need slogans about workers to celebrate their dignity, importance, and humanity. She has the committee speak in a voice of steel, but in *The Book of the Dead* individual workers like Blankenship are not militant members of the vanguard. They are

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<sup>48</sup> Shulman, 203.

<sup>49</sup> Dayton, 45.

<sup>50</sup> As named by Louise Kertesz, in *The Poetic Vision of Muriel Rukeyser*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980).

decent men and women who needed work, were lied to and exploited by the company, and are now saying modestly, “it will be appreciated/ if you can do anything for me.”<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, Shulman’s view may be true of all the lyric monologues. The majority of them are spoken by workers, or those of the working class. There are three workers, two social workers, the wife of a worker, and Vivian Jones, whose voice we do not hear, as he is of another class. The voices heard in the documentary poems, such as those of the doctors, or the committee members, also function in a different way. They are figurations of the person, present to allow for analysis and examination of character by the poetic voice, and, through this, the reader. In the lyric monologues, however, the voices represent the stories of the speaker and it is these events, told through their own voice, that is up for consideration. Furthermore, Shulman is correct in realising the importance of the lack of political slogans, or propaganda. The voices of all the lyrical monologues either tell the story of what happens, or explain the effects and consequences. It is only in “Mearl Blankenship,” through the letter, that anyone asks for help. This plea is not one made out of some political leaning, or a larger political movement, but desperation.

Rukeyser has come under heavy criticism on account of her apparent privileging of the working-class over the other intersectional groups which existed within it, namely the African-American workers who worked the most dangerous jobs, and so presumably suffered the most, and were at the highest risk of contracting silicosis. The figures asserted by Martin Cherniack stand at 738 white tunnel workers against 2244 African-American.<sup>52</sup> David Kadlec is one of the many who comments on the imbalance of representation in Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*:

In her Gauley tunnel poem, however, the poet’s arcane exposure of capitalistic mechanisms of erasure was bought at the cost of the historical racial dimensions of Hawk’s Nest. While the feminist social poet had been criticized by male peers for promoting “unscientific” varieties of socialism in “The Book of the Dead,” her sharp portrayal of the class basis of industrial exploitation was nothing if not doctrinaire.<sup>53</sup>

Catherine Gander agrees, claiming:

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<sup>51</sup> Shulman, 204,205.

<sup>52</sup> Cherniack, 18.

<sup>53</sup> David Kadlec, “X-Ray Testimonials in Muriel Rukeyser”, in *Modernism/Modernity*, 5.1, 1999, 26.

Rukeyser's own approach to the central issue of race and race relations in the town of Gauley Bridge and in the broader arena of capitalist commerce and industry during the depression era is surprisingly muted.<sup>54</sup>

How fair critiques like Kadlec's and Gander's are, relies on a number of factors not discussed in their work. My defense of Rukeyser would lie in her methodology; she is taking the documents, testimonies, and facts, available to her, in order to transform them into a poetic series, which tells the sequence of events while commenting on, and, indeed, inviting commentary on, the fallout from these events. George Robinson, one of the African-American workers who testified, and speaker of Rukeyser's attempt at a blues poem "George Robinson: Blues," spoke of threats and beatings to coerce even sick men to work. The fear this behaviour would create, along with the largely migrant nature of the workforce, may simply mean that there were less African-American testimonies to use. As Gander goes on to state "Rukeyser's figuring of the working-class people of Gauley Bridge constitutes a unification that appears to almost ignore the tensions inherent in racial difference, and certainly to omit the class based conflicts existent within the white community."<sup>55</sup> This analysis is true, and farbeit for me to assess how successful this method is at solving these tensions.

It is a method, as Kadlec claims, "doctrinaire" to the left. Nonetheless his criticism on it, fails to recognise Rukeyser's attempt at humanising the specific members of the working-class to prevent what happened at Gauley Bridge from being dismissed as just another industrial disaster, and those responsible being let off, scot-free. What is more useful than focusing on this divide, and what is certainly more relevant to this paper, is to look at the poem in which Rukeyser addresses the African-American workers' experience, "George Robinson: Blues" in relation to the poems which address the experience of his white counterparts, "Mearl Blankenship" and "Arthur Peyton". George Robinson's poem takes the form of a blues song, although Kadlec, Gander, and Dayton all agree it is one of the least successful individual poems in *The Book of the Dead*. The language of Robinson's testimony-- it is worth noting that Gander expresses anger at Rukeyser's change of Robinson, the actual worker's name, to Robinson-- is forced to take on the

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<sup>54</sup> Catherine Gander, "The Senses of Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead" ", in *European Journal of American Culture*, 30.3, 2011, 189.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 189.

rhythm of the blues making it sound stilted, awkward, and heavy-handed.<sup>56</sup> It is almost the complete opposite of the celebration of the language of the everyday that occurs in “Mearl Blankenship”. The first stanza, for example, is an uncomfortable read even as it relates back to the rest of the poetic series:

Gauley Bridge is a good town for Negroes, they let us stand  
 around, they let us stand  
 around on the sidewalks if we’re black or brown.  
 Vanetta’s over the trestle, and that’s our town. (33)

The superfluous repetition to match the rhythm is typical of the rest of “George Robinson: Blues”. Perhaps, even the name change is to add the extra body needed to move from the lyric to the blues. Yet, there are elements in the poem, indeed in this stanza, that are typical of *The Book of the Dead* at large. For example, “the deserted Negro standing on the corner” in “Gauley Bridge” suddenly has a name, and seems less deserted (16). The last line adds more to a reader’s knowledge of the geography of the area, something Rukeyser has moved to do throughout the poem. Vanetta is a separate town but, at least according to this version of George Robinson, there is not so much tension between the two. From reading Kadlec and Garner it seems like this was not true, however, the inclusion of an opinion which is different to the accepted view is, absolutely, in line of the rest of Rukeyser’s work in *The Book of the Dead*. She is asking her readers to analyse the facts and work out what is true, what actually happened, while keeping an eye on where these facts originated from, and if they can actually be classed as facts.

What “George Robinson” Blues” does not include, is almost as important as what it does tell us. In “Mearl Blankenship” we were introduced to a worker who had seen a doctor, knew how his health used to be, and had some form of action to take. “George Robinson: Blues” features no such information. It is much less personal than “Mearl Blankenship”, and, as we will see, “Arthur Peyton”. Robinson only speaks in generalities, “when a man said I feel poorly” for example, or “thirty-five tunnel workers the doctors didn’t attend” (33). Robinson does not tell his specific experience of the tunnel, nor only the African-American experience, but of the worst parts of the work. It is in “George Robinson: Blues” where readers first hear of the cover-up graves Union Carbide and Carbon Company commissioned; the beatings, threats, and unfair

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 189.

sackings that occurred; the dust permeating into everything including the drinking water; and the deadly blasts that took the lives of men before silicosis had the chance to. It is, consequently, one of the darkest, most important poems which makes the failing of style all the more regretful.

Rukeyser, who so successfully in many of her other poems aligns form and content, does not attempt to do so here, and the loss is significant. It is fairly conventional for the blues to tell the story of hardship, however, if we look at the stanza about water:

The water they would bring had dust in it, our drinking  
water,  
the camps and their groves were colored with the dust,  
we cleaned out clothes in the groves, but we always had  
the dust. (34)

The repetition, used in order to create the blues rhythm, turns one away from the content, rather than drawing one in as a good song should. “George Robinson: Blues” stands out in the series as, although it takes its content from a testimony, none of the monologue resembles that testimony or any other aspects of documentation. The effect, rather than adding importance to one of the least heard voices connected to the disaster, in fact, makes the voice sound unreliable. It is too general, too forced, too repetitive.

“Arthur Peyton,” the last worker’s monologue and the final monologue in *The Book of the Dead*, succeeds where “George Robinson: Blues” fails: it is more in keeping with the style and technique Rukeyser has used throughout the rest of the series. It combines the epistolary element of “Mearl Blankenship” with the strong external poetic voice of “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones”, as well as the question and answer format used in some of the documentary poems. Rukeyser has not altered the voice of the testimony through form, as she did with George Robinson’s, but through fragmentation and interruption. “Arthur Peyton” comes just before the section of long meditations, which will be discussed in the next section, making it the last time, in *The Book of the Dead*, readers hear a voice directly connected to the disaster. These meditations are, for the most part, removed from the disaster and centered around industrial works more generally. The importance of Arthur Peyton’s voice, then, must not go unrealised. Shulman places it in relation to “Statement: Philippa Allen”, the first of the lyric monologues:

Philippa Allen revealed that, in Peyton’s words, “all companies concerned” knew the value of the silica to be used by Electro-Metalurgical to make steel. Through Arthur

Petron, Rukeyser reveals the human cost, the human agony, of using human beings to make steel.<sup>57</sup>

This use should really be applied to “George Robinson: Blues” however Rukeyser’s failing with the blues form prevents the poem from being as powerful. “Arthur Peyton” is framed by the speaker addressing his unidentified fiance; it is a romantic element missing from the rest of the series. One first glance, it appears as an unnecessary, sentimental addition, however, Rukeyser contrasts it sharply with the letter Peyton received from the compensation company. The fragmented love letter is opposed to the stock letter full of banal phrases. Arthur Peyton asks his love, in despair, to “never again tell me you’ll marry me” (46). Yet these declarations are made while he is passed off with customer pleasing, nonsense phrases:

we were able to collect in your behalf  
in regard to the above case.  
In winding up the various suits,  
after collecting all we could (45)

One is emotionally full, and the other empty. The company, paying the measly \$21.59 in compensation, has missed the human cost, and agony, that Peyton represents to Rukeyser’s readers.

“Arthur Peyton” is also one of the most fragmented lyric monologues. There is no regularity to the rhyme, nor the length of the stanzas. The letter exists in isolation, while the rest of the poem consists of a combination of a love song/letter, facts about what working in the mines was like, conversations with doctors, the retelling of these conversations, descriptions of the nature surrounding the town, and a return to Rukeyser’s frequent referencing of glass. At times, it is unclear how to separate these elements. For example, the stanza in which the infamous Dr. Harless is mentioned:

O love tell the committee that I know:  
never repeat you mean to marry me.  
In mines, the fans are large (2,000 men unmasked)  
before his verdict the doctors asked me    How long  
I said, Dr, Harless, tell me how long?  
-- Only never again tell me you’ll marry me.  
I watch how at the tables you all day  
Follow a line of clouds    the dance of drills (45-46)

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<sup>57</sup> Shulman, 217-218.

The same question seems to be asked by both patient and doctor, the instructions to his love are either unfinished or unintelligible, it is only the mines and the tunnel which remain fixed and strong. Rukeyser has returned to what she does best, matching her form to her content. “Arthur Peyton” as the fragmentary extreme of *The Book of the Dead* gives voice and space to the ramblings of a dying man.

The two other lyric monologues, “Juanita Tinsley” and “Absalom,” are both spoken by a female voice. “Absalom,” is much longer and more complex than “Juanita Tinsley” which functions like an additional counterpoint to “George Robinson: Blues.” It offers insight into another type of work that was done during, but more importantly, after the disaster at Hawk’s Nest. Juanita Tinsley was a social worker connected to Gauley Bridge who concentrated her efforts on the workers once disaster had struck. In Tinsley’s words “even after the letters, there is work/ sweaters, the food, the shoes” (35). The letters are presumably like those Mearl Blankenship sent, or those Arthur Peyton received; Rukeyser leaves it unclear. “Juanita Tinsley” immediately follows “George Robinson: Blues,” a sequence which helps increase a reader’s knowledge of the circumstances around the tunnel, with information not likely to be included in newspaper reports. Unlike “George Robinson: Blues,” “Juanita Tinsley” is a fairly conventional lyric poem consisting of regular stanzas, until the final stanza which is longer. Even as its structure is more regular, its message is less apparent. It starts with a clear list-like description of what work she did, quoted above, and then moves into a nostalgic reflection on the town of Gauley Bridge, the area Juanita Tinsley is from, and a reflection of America more generally. I have separated Juanita Tinsley from Gauley Bridge under the guide of Shulman who notes her as “the outside member of the committee”, the same committee from “Praise of the Committee.”<sup>58</sup> Although, elsewhere this outsider is noted as Philippa Allen, so have perhaps acted presumptuously. Nevertheless, Rukeyser refuses to make clear what area Juanita Tinsley is talking about, throughout her self-titled poem. For example:

When I see my family house,  
the gay gorge, the picture books,  
they raise the face of General Wise (35)

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 210.

The gay gorge may well be in Gauley Bridge, but it is not confirmed, it may be anywhere in America. It is precisely this blurring that is important to Rukeyser's inclusion of Juanita Tinsley's monologue. It is not an experimental poem, like many of the others in the series, it is fairly traditional in style and structure. This confusion, through Rukeyser's descriptions and syntax, must be what is important. It allows the disaster to transcend its particular place and become an American national disaster.

This combination of areas makes the voice difficult to identify, even as the title of the poem gives a name. It is not a personal experience like "Mearl Blankenship," nor is it one voice speaking for the many like "George Robinson: Blues." It seems, to me at least, that the voice could be as much Juanita Tinsley's as it is Muriel Rukeyser's in the manner of "Statement: Philippa Allen". The fourth stanza, which has no direct relevance to the Hawk's Nest Tunnel or Gauley Bridge, is perhaps the best example of Juanita Tinsley's and Rukeyser's voices merging:

I know in America there are songs,  
forgetful ballads to be sung,  
but at home I see this wrong. (35)

These songs may be those of MacLeish, which Rukeyser criticises in "Gauley Bridge", or those of Whitman who tell of a united, open country. Incidentally, Tillie Olsen, another 1930s female writer, began a book around the time of *The Book of the Dead's* publication, called *Yonnonidio: From the Thirties* which, like this stanza, does not criticize the limitations of Whitmanesque songs, but implies that there are other important stories to be told through attempts to tell them. It is Rukeyser who, throughout the whole of *The Book of the Dead*, has attempted to raise the importance of this particular event, but more so of industrial disasters which are often dismissed. This idea is crucial to the final poem "The Book of the Dead" but is a key part of "Juanita Tinsley" as well. The poem closes on a hopeful note:

The scene of hope's ahead; look April  
and next month with a softer wind,  
maybe they'll rest upon their land,  
and then maybe the happy song, and love,  
a tall boy who who was never in a tunnel. (36)

This ending modulates between unrealistic hope and a more pragmatic attitude; it does not hope for safe mines but for boys to not need to enter tunnels; it does not hope for no deaths, but a



peaceful rest for those who have passed. It is unlikely to be only one voice. Rukeyser's may be the more pragmatic, and, as we will see with the meditation poems, she is no enemy of industry. However, the technique is typical of her. The use of nature, it is with spring that new scenes will come, and the power of song, and of poetry, are all Rukeyser, even if the naive hope is Juanita Tinsley.

The last lyric monologue to be discussed, "Absalom", is as difficult to categorise, within the section, as the first. Its title has a biblical source: King David's third son was named Absalom.<sup>59</sup> Known for his beauty and his opulence, he seemed to have little sense of justice. It is claimed, for example, that he made 50 of his subjects run before his mighty chariot. Why Rukeyser has invoked this figure here is unclear unless it is simply to highlight the tradition of exploitation. "Absalom" straddles a position between the lyric monologues and the meditation poems, which will be dealt with in the next section, and so it is fitting to close this section with this poem. Even in scholarship which deals with each poem of *The Book of the Dead* in detail, the lyric monologues tend to be moved over rather quickly, whereas "Absalom" receives more attention. I would suggest that it is the lyric monologue with the most voices, and where Rukeyser is most experimental with her own poetic voice. As it happens, this multitude of voices is likely to be the reason the poem is so difficult to categorize. The poem itself consists of 78 lines. Tim Dayton took the time to count how these lines are distributed: 22 consist of quotations from, or references to the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*; 56 lines are taken from the original testimonies of different speaker. Dayton goes further to detail where these 56 lines originated from:

25½ were originally spoken by the woman upon whom the voice in the poem is constructed, Emma Jones. Another 25 lines were originally spoken by Philippa Allen, and 5½ were originally spoken by Emma Jones's husband, Charles Jones, himself a victim of silicosis.<sup>60</sup>

Although this monologue has the most voices of any, perhaps even of any poem in the series, each is easy to identify. The quotations from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, for example, are all italicised: "My heart is mine in the place of hearts,/ They gave me back my heart, it lies in me"(28). For the three present speakers of "Absalom" it is the content which points to who

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<sup>59</sup> Faulkner's novel of a similar name, *Absalom, Absalom*, was published in 1936. Although this date is before *U.S. I*'s publication date, 1938, Rukeyser had already made her trip to West Virginia so a connection between the two works is unlikely.

<sup>60</sup> Dayton, 47.

initially spoke the words, even while the majority seems to be spoken by Emma Jones. The opening two lines “I first discovered what was killing these men. / I had three sons who worked with their father in the tunnel” seem to be spoken by the mother and wife, but are in fact taken from Philippa Allen’s statement; she was the social worker on their case (27). The blurring of origin makes the words of the son all the more striking:

[...] “Mother, when I die,  
 “I want you to have them open me up and  
 “see if that dust killed me.  
 “Try to get compensation,  
 “you will not have any way of making your living  
 “when we are gone,  
 “and the rest are going too.” (28)

Both the content and the form are reminiscent of “Mearl Blankenship”. Charles Jones’ monologue is shorter, but no less desperate. Rukeyser’s unusual method of beginning each line with a quotation, presumably to signal a direct quotation, is repeated.

Why Rukeyser chooses to mark these as direct quotations when so much of *The Book of the Dead* uses unmarked quotations, is unclear. However, it does speak to one of the main explorations in “Absalom,” that is, Rukeyser’s exploration of different discourses and how they connect and change if taken out of their usual context. To leave the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* to one side momentarily, the interplay between mother, son, and social worker is something Rukeyser does elsewhere within the series. The sequence of “The Disease,” “George Robinson: Blues,” “Juanita Tinsley,” and “The Doctors,” for example, plays off the opposition of the human and the official in order to critique the inhumanity of the doctors. Something similar is happening in “Absalom” but to a different end. The deeply affecting testimonies of mother and son are pitted against the more pragmatic, clinical voice of the social worker. Compare the words of the son, quoted above, to the description of the family:

The oldest son was twenty-three.  
 The next son was twenty-one.  
 The youngest son was eighteen.  
 They call it pneumonia at first.  
 They would pronounce it fever. (29)

It is purely factual; containing nothing more than what it should; nothing can be learnt but what has been said. There is no emotional effect. Or, at least, there is no emotional effect when the

lines are read in isolation. In the context of “Absalom” the change in tone not only heightens the emotional intensity of the more personal, anecdotal sections, but enhances Rukeyser’s suggestion of the ability of poetry to tell fuller, more rounded, stories. The poem is taken from the prose statements, and testimonies, of real people but these sentences have been shortened and transformed to verse. “Absalom” rarely has run-on lines, and most lines are made up of one sentence which, while making up the content of the poem at large, are also a self-contained unit of meaning.

Rukeyser’s use of the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* is equally important in this regard. It is a funeral text, much like Rukeyser’s version, based on the *Papyrus of Ani*. First translated from hieroglyphics by Karl Richard Lepsius in 1842, it was later popularised, and retranslated, by the keeper of the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum, E.A Wallis Budge, in 1895. A brief skim through Budge’s version shows that, like Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*, it is a combination of verse and prose, although the majority is verse, and broken into sections which tell different aspects of the same story. At the very basis, then, Rukeyser is invoking the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, to raise her version to the same level and note the similarities between the two. However, if one looks more closely at what she has quoted from, and how she has used the Egyptian counterpart, a more interesting intention is revealed:

*I have gained mastery over my heart  
I have gained mastery over my two hands  
I have gained mastery over the waters  
I have gained mastery over the river. (29)*

The stanza above, from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, almost seems like it could have been written for the Hawk’s Nest Incident. Indeed, this is true of most of the quotations Rukeyser uses. She is aligning the workers of the tunnel with something older, something grander. For Rukeyser these men deserve the same funeral rites, deserve to be remembered through the ages, deserve to have their mastery recognised. The frequent use of the word mastery is interesting, as it reflects the human mastery over nature, the workers mastery over the specific element of nature, and a control over emotions and rationality. Rukeyser was never an anti-industrial, like, say Wordsworth, but saw the mastery in it, and in those who made it a reality. This belief of Rukeyser’s again ties her to Ancient Egypt. It is not too much of a stretch to suggest that Rukeyser would be impressed by the pyramids but concerned with those who gave their lives to

build them; just as she is impressed with the Hawk's Nest Tunnel while wanting justice for those work on it killed. As Emma Jones says in the closing of "Absalom", "He shall not be diminished, never; I shall give a mouth to my son." (30) Rukeyser successfully combines the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* funeral rites, the desire of the mother, fulfils the dying request of the son ("Absalom" is immediately followed by "The Disease"), and lays out her intention for *The Book of the Dead*.

## The Meditations

The meditations are some of the most complex, and most powerful, poems in *The Book of the Dead*. Conversely, they are also some of the least written about. I had always thought that this was because *The Book of the Dead* is, most frequently, labelled as a documentary poem and so the poem with these tendencies, of which the meditations have few, are most focused on and written about. Having written about the documentary poems, and the lyric monologues, which in other scholarly works come under this label, and attempting to write about the meditation poems, as a cohesive whole, I am less convinced of this reason. The meditations are similar to the other poems in *The Book of the Dead*, but it is difficult to pinpoint how and why; they effortlessly link with the other meditations as you are reading them but resist comparison once analysed; and, they are reminiscent of other poems, and the work of other poets, but, like they are to one another, these similarities are hard to describe. I do not think I am alone in these difficulties; the only two scholars I could find who have written on these poems extensively, within the already small number of critics who have taken the time to look at *The Book of the Dead* in detail, are Timothy Dayton and Robert Shulman. Even then, I find their analysis less helpful than it is with other poems in the series, and more of a relaying of what the poem says rather than how it functions; something I have tried to not do in this section to varying degrees of success. Furthermore, both Dayton and Shulman make note of when a poem reminds them of another but without much detail. Dayton, for example, states simply that series of three poems “in their meditative quality, resemble the later poetry of Wallace Stevens” without further explanation.<sup>61</sup> Yet, I find myself agreeing with him but could not say why.

I have, then, used a method I have thus far avoided in my analysis of Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*, and gone through those poems, I see as meditations, in the order they appear in the series, and have not aligned them by another distinguishing factor. Conveniently, this method allows for the meditation poems to be separated into two groups. First, the earlier poems, “The Road” and “West Virginia” and secondly the series of the three sequential meditations “Alloy,” “Power,” and “The Dam.” The final poem in this category, “The Cornfield,” comes about midway between these two groups and acts as a sort of bridge between the work the two sets of meditations are performing. There is one theme, however, that runs through all of the meditative poems:

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<sup>61</sup> Dayton, 104.

journeys. This connection is interesting in terms of Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*, and, indeed, the oeuvre of her work, and in the American literary tradition more generally. Rukeyser often made journeys as part of her work, like the one she made to West Virginia in order to report on the events at Gauley Bridge. By connecting journeys to meditations she is offering an insight into her methodology, and how she works as a poet. Journeys play a crucial role in discovery and inspiration. Perhaps more interesting, however, is the American-ness of this tradition. Travel for discovery is an American action. Compare the journeys of Whitman, for example, or even that which Rukeyser takes here to find the truth of what happened at Gauley Bridge, with those of their European counterparts. Robert Walser's work also often begins in journeys, as do those of the English Romantics. Yet, there is not the same investigatory sense, the same discoveries described. The journey is the work in these European versions, whereas Rukeyser, and her compatriots, has, if not a destination in mind, at least a purpose.

To move through the meditations sequentially, as they appear in *The Book of the Dead*, one must begin with "The Road", which is also the first poem of the series. It is directly followed by another poem I have labelled a meditation, "West Virginia". Tim Dayton, however, classifies them as introductory poems. I have rejected this label, even while accepting and using many of Dayton's others, as I am unsure what it is, exactly, they are meant to be introducing. Neither poem is directly connected to the Hawk's Nest disaster. Indeed only one of the meditation poems is. Although they open the poetic series, they offer no hints at what one should expect from the latter poems; and neither offers any of the information one would expect from an introduction. "The Road" is ambiguous about where the journey will end, while "West Virginia" offers some history of the area, none of which is particularly relevant to the events at Hawk's Nest. In fairness to Dayton, in his method of categorizing the poems of *The Book of the Dead*, these two are grouped with two other poems, "Statement: Philippa Allen" and "Gauley Bridge", and it is the four together that act as the introduction. It is here where our techniques differ. In order to use my technique of analysing each poem individually, and then looking at how it relates to the others in the series, Dayton's type of classification does not work. Each poem, for me, must be labelled as an individual entity, and not in regard to those around it.

There are, of course, a number of other elements, outside of a method of categorisation, which signal “The Road” and “West Virginia” as meditations, and not introductory poems. Firstly, “The Road” is ambiguous, not only in terms of what journey is being taken, but by whom and who the speaker is talking to. It opens with a sense of familiarity:

These are the roads to take when you think of your country  
and interested bring down the maps again,  
phoning the statistician, asking the dear friend,

reading the papers with morning inquiry. (9)

The direct address implies that the speaker knows the person to whom they are speaking. The use of “again” marks the action as a repeated one as well as moving the relationship between speaker and addressee beyond mere acquaintance: this speaker knows their addressee’s habits, and reactions, well. The statistician, is an unusual inclusion but adds to the overall tone of familiarity, almost as if this is a statistician they both know, one they both use frequently. As the poem continues, so does the direct address: “Or when you sit at the wheel and your small light” to “Past your tall central city’s influence” (9). Robert Shulman believes this is a purposeful move with a direct desired effect. He claims Rukeyser “establishes a direct connection with us, gets us with her from the start on “these roads” as if we know them, too” in order to the country described to “become not only the United States but also the country as opposed to the city”.<sup>62</sup> Rukeyser is inviting readers to leave their city as she left hers.

As the poem continues, the distinction between speaker and addressee becomes less clear. Once the journey past the mountains of the West Virginia and the surrounding areas has been made, and the destination reached, another figure enters into the poem:

Now the photographer unpacks camera and case,  
surveying the deep country, follows discovery  
viewing on groundglass an inverted image. (10)<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Shulman, 186.

<sup>63</sup> It is worth noting that this inverted image is unlikely to be a reference to Marx’s camera obscura, although some criticism on *The Book of the Dead* suggests otherwise. Walter Kalaidjian in his article “Muriel Rukeyser and the Poetics of Specific Critique”, for example, suggests that one of the reason’s Rukeyser uses camera work as metaphor is due to Marx’s influence. However, the text was not published in English until as late as 1969 so it is unlikely Rukeyser was familiar with it. The “inverted image” of her poem, is more literally, the inverted image early cameras presented to their photographers.

At this point in “The Road,” the photographer could be either the you who is directly addressed, or the dear friend. However, I would suggest, that the latter is more likely and, only a few lines later with the declaration “Here is your road, tying / you to its meanings”, the speaker is revealed to be addressing herself (10). Any reader with some prior knowledge of Rukeyser would know of her works as a journalist, or of her curiosity into politically charged events, even as she refused to join into partisan politics. In fact, in “The Road”, all of the direct addresses are relevant to Rukeyser. She lived in New York City but would travel for reporting jobs, one of which was to Gauley Bridge, West Virginia; she made the journey to Gauley Bridge with her friend, photographer Nancy Naumburg; and, if the title of the collection containing *The Book of the Dead, U.S I*, tells us anything it is that she was interested in travelling, and unifying, her own country.<sup>64</sup> The ambiguity of to whom “The Road” is addressed, but more so the ultimate self-addressing, is what marks this poem most clearly as a meditation. Rukeyser is looking at her own actions, yet, there is no internal reflection marking it as a monologue.

The journey in “The Road” is significant as it marks the poem as a meditation, but also in regard to the poem’s position in the series of *The Book of the Dead*, and in relation to the other meditations. The idea of a journey, is introduced as early as the title --perhaps even the title of the collection but let us imagine momentarily that the series exists in isolation-- and is continued throughout “The Road” through Rukeyser’s heavy use of enjambment, long, winding sentences, and the poem’s physical move from home comforts to unknown country. This punctuation is the first example, of many to come, of Rukeyser using the form of her poem to reflect its content. Here, it allows for the reader to feel like they have shared in the speaker’s journey. Indeed, Rukeyser wants to bring them with her to West Virginia where the larger work of *The Book of the Dead* will happen. More generally, this technique allows for an ease, and unity of reading, even when the facts and stories Rukeyser informs her readers of, are not easy to digest. Although, this effect is hardly relevant for “The Road”, the ease of reading it creates will shortly become important, when the structure of “The Road” is compared with the poem that follows it “West Virginia”. Interestingly, there are two moments in “The Road” where the punctuation no

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<sup>64</sup> *US I* is named after the Highway that runs the length of the East Coast of the United states from Fort Kent, Maine to Key West, Florida. Coincidentally, or perhaps not, the highway was finished in 1938, the same year Rukeyser’s collection was published.



longer mirrors the roads of possibilities suggested throughout by Rukeyser's almost excessive use of run-on lines and stanzas.

The first of these moments is in the fourth stanza.

Past your tall central city's influence,  
outside it's body: traffic, penumbral crowds,  
are centers removed and strong, fighting for good reason. (9)

This stanza is situated between two of her most prolific uses of enjambment. The use of unclear descriptions, and unanswered statements is unusual. The use of the word "penumbral" suggests that the crowds are not fully realised, or perhaps, do not realise themselves fully, a fitting description for a meditative poem. "Penumbral" suggests a shadow existence, something not quite solid making the "good reason" they are fighting impossible to know. These crowds are paradoxically shadow figures and strong. Considering Rukeyser is not much of a cerebral poet, one would expect this duality to be explained, or at least, explored further. Nevertheless, Rukeyser is a poet who does not use her punctuation lightly and thus there must be reason for this closed stanza.<sup>65</sup> The stanza follows three which detail the beginning of a journey to an, as-of-yet unspecified, location. This closed stanza only informs readers of the origin of the journey, and not its destination. The image of "your tall central city's influence" represents both Rukeyser, and her reader, leaving something behind physically and mentally.

The second instance of Rukeyser's different punctuation in "The Road" plays with the juxtaposition of the natural countryside and how urbanisation, or industrialisation, have altered it. The poem's journey into the countryside is interrupted by "resorts, the chalk hotel" reflected in the sentences which become shorter and more fragmented. These breaks only occur in stanzas that depict man made additions to the natural landscape: "airports" "White Sulphur Springs" and "KING COAL HOTEL" (10). The change in punctuation means that these images appear in quick succession, almost as if one is seeing them out of a car window: another example of Rukeyser's form reflecting her content. In the middle of these manmade additions, lies a purely

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<sup>65</sup> In her introduction to *Out of Silence: Selected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, Kate Daniels relays an anecdote in which Rukeyser, sick of having her poem misprinted, began to stamp the margins of her manuscripts with a message in red-ink: PLEASE BELIEVE THE PUNCTUATION.

descriptive stanza, which returns to the punctuation Rukeyser has used for the majority of “The Road”:

The simple mountains, sheer, dark-graded with pine  
in the sudden weather, wet outbreak of spring,  
crosscut by snow, wind at the hill’s shoulder. (10)

Rukeyser makes it clear that the two, the man made and the natural, do not sit in perfect unity by separating them through her use of punctuation. Nevertheless, there does not seem to be a preference for one over the other. The blame, if there is any, seems to lie with the “gay blank rich faces wishing to add/ history to ballrooms, tradition to the first tee” not because of their destruction of anything natural, nothing of the sort is mentioned, but because of their blank faces, their lack of understanding of the traditions and history they claim to be acting in the name of (10).

It is extremely likely that the journey in “The Road”, and the punctuation used to represent it, is in reference to Walt Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road”. Both share a use of enjambment and both begin with their speaker starting a journey. However, if one were to compare the two opening sections, it is clear that there are differences. “These are roads to take when you think of your country” compared to “Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road” are as different in tone as they are in valency. There is something more somber, more pragmatic about Rukeyser’s opening line, whereas Whitman’s is looser, his speaker more free. It is he who has mastery over the road “leading [the speaker] wherever I choose.” Where for Rukeyser it is the roads that “will take you into your own country.” She, or her speaker, seems less in control of their actions. As Tim Dayton summarises: “Whitman’s confident, capricious self determines its journey while Rukeyser’s speaker presents the journey as one into a world that more likely determines the self.”<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, Whitman’s verse is all inclusive; there is no specific moment of utterance; no specific locations or destinations:

The earth expanding right hand and left hand,  
The picture alive, every part in its best light,  
The music falling in where it is wanted, and stopping where it is not wanted,

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<sup>66</sup> Dayton, 32.

The cheerful voice of the public road, the gay fresh sentiment of the road. (38-40)<sup>67</sup>

His journey could be to any place, at any time. Like elsewhere in his poetry, Whitman is speaking in a universal voice. Rukeyser's journey, and her larger project with *The Book of the Dead*, is different. She is attempting to reach a universal audience through a very specific story.

There is another significant difference between Whitman's "Song of the Open Road" and Rukeyser's "The Road," which has less to do with their poetics, and more to do with the time in which they worked. Rukeyser's poem, published in 1938, is saturated with new technology in a way Whitman's pre-1900 counterpart could never be. Her journey is made by car, his by foot; she is accompanied by a photographer, his is only recorded verbally; hers marks a stark difference between the cityscape and natural landscape, his is centered around the different people he met. As these differences are due to their different time periods, they are easy to ignore when comparing the two poets. However, when looking at "The Road" in comparison to the rest of the meditations in *The Book of the Dead*, the speaker's attitude towards technology becomes more important. Introducing them so early in the series paves the way for the documentary poems, which focus on new technology and the new documentary techniques created by them. More importantly, however, and as detailed above, Rukeyser is not an enemy to new technologies, and what comes with them. The meditative series, near to the end of *The Book of the Dead*, follows on from this notion and celebrates industry and technology, marking it as a place for poetry which is not a particularly common practice. The end of "The Road" for example, is more than the fragmented non-ending Shulman describes. "To underscore an ending that is not an ending, Rukeyser avoids a rhetorical climax and uses the understatement of a sentence fragment."<sup>68</sup> It is a merging of nature and technology, countryside and industry:

[...]Here is your road, tying

you to it's meanings: gorge, boulder, precipice.  
Telescoped down, the hard and stone-green river  
cutting fast and direct into the town. (10)

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<sup>67</sup> Walt Whitman, "Song of the Open Road" in *American Poetry*, ed. Percy H. Boynton, (Charles Scribner's Son: New York, 1921) 490.

<sup>68</sup> Shulman, 187.

The road acts as telescope; the gorge, boulder, precipice, as its sides, directing and magnifying one's vision. The river enters the town of Gauley Bridge, the focus of the series. Readers have not yet been told that this river was made faster, more direct, by a man-made dam. Here, the convergences of the river and the town seems almost natural, a progression as natural as that of Rukeyser's open road from Whitman's.

The harmony between man and nature is reflected in her use of regular stanzas which read smoothly without interruption. "West Virginia", the next poem in the series and the next meditation, is in complete contrast to this regularity. It is a fragmented poem, consisting of four sections-- each with a different structure, if any structure at all-- which move through history in a nonlinear manner. However, these sections are not a typical example of self-contained parts making up a larger whole. None of the sections really read like a concise piece, even as they share certain elements. They all, for example, feature a journey of some kind. These journeys vaguely alternate between those made by man, and those made by nature. For example, the first was made in

1671-- Thomas Batts, Robert Fallam,  
Thomas Wood, the Indian Perecute,  
and an unnamed indentured English servant (11)

Rukeyser took this history from Phil Conley's history of the area, *West Virginia Yesterday and Today*, but alters the focus: the "important" men are just named, whereas the lowly servant is given a whole line. As Tim Dayton notes, this servant "prefigures in his anonymity the workers" at Gauley Bridge almost 250 years later.<sup>69</sup> The history of America, as it is known today, recurs throughout the poem while the journeys turn to those made by nature. The poem ends following the rivers which "cut the rock [...] opening mines,/ coming to life" (12). It is almost as if history has been reversed, just as the focus of history books has been. The journeys are aligned, and connected, even if told in an unusual order. It is these journeys that make "West Virginia" a companion poem to "The Road". The journey Rukeyser makes, with her dear friend photographer, is just another in a long line of historical journeys into America.

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<sup>69</sup> Dayton, 36.

The beginning of the second section highlights this connection: “Coming where this road comes” (11). This road is the road taken by Rukeyser, and by Batts, Fallam, and their crew before her. This road is also the road taken by the Kanawha river, later renamed the New River, and the site of the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel. The use of the river’s native name, along with granting it the moniker of “the rapids of the mind” allows Rukeyser to present the river as what combines these elements. It is by following this river, or perhaps more accurately following those who followed the river, that Rukeyser began her investigation at Gauley Bridge. As mentioned before, it is the river that brings the country to life, just as it bring the *The Book of the Dead* to life. There is a perverse flipping that takes place here: Rukeyser is not there for the lives that the river granted but for the lives lost there. Yet this reversal does not alter the poet’s perception of the river; it is still praised as a life-giving force. Through this idea, “West Virginia” is paving the way for, and introducing readers to, the later meditations and the elements they contain. Where “The Road” offers a reflection of how industry meets nature, “West Virginia” is a meditation on the progression of industry alongside the progression of history but the sense of a harmony is present in both. In the last section of “West Virginia”, the section, I would suggest, is most complex and fragmented, Rukeyser focuses on the dead who surround the life-giving river.

Done by the dead.  
Discovery learned it.  
And the living? (12)

The focus is on the divide between the dead and the living. As “West Virginia” is a poem based in history, this dead is not just the dead who died in the building of the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel, but the dead of the war, and the dead of the discovery of America. Rukeyser’s poem will remember them, it is *The Book of the Dead*, but it will also remember those living with the fall out. As the poetic series continues, these living can be further divided: those suffering with silicosis and their families, and those who caused the disaster and allowed it to worsen who have, up until the federal investigation Rukeyser is reporting on, been left unquestioned, and unremembered.

The third section, along with the reference to Batts and Fallam, complicates this union slightly. Although still concerned with the progression of America, the third section focuses on its military history or its history of revolution. The section begins:

War-born:  
The battle at Point Pleasant, Cornstalk’s tribes,

last stand, Fort Henry, a revolution won; (11)

Presumably, Point Pleasant is point pleasant West Virginia, which sits on the Kanawha River, yet there is some sense of universality in the title: there are numerous Point Pleasants in the United States. The battle is one of many between the Native Americans and the Virginian Colony. Perhaps surprisingly for such a staunchly left-wing writer, Rukeyser does not touch on the politics of colonisation. Instead, she places the river as a “frontier [that] defines two fighting halves” into the context of the battle (12). The river, and its power, survives the war unchanged, it predates and outlives war, colonisation, and human interference. The inclusion of America’s military history, although problematic, heightens the power of nature and the achievement of the men who tamed it through dam, tunnel, and hydroelectric plants. Once again, Rukeyser is placing industry and war in conversation. However, this time, she is not questioning why we remember the dead of war more than the dead of industry, even when the numbers are the same-- “these are the proportions of war” (60)-- but the achievements of war are celebrated but the achievements of industry are not. After all, only one harnessed the power of the river for the masses.

The next meditation, “The Cornfield”, is the last before the series of three meditations, which lead up to the final poem of the series. Unlike any other of the meditations, it sits in isolation, bookended by a documentary poem on one side, and a lyric monologue on the other. Although he ultimately classes it as a meditation, Dayton describes “The Cornfield” as “alternating between the documentary mode, which draws once again from testimony delivered before the House subcommittee, and the meditative style”.<sup>70</sup> Due to our different methods of classification, I see this alternation as more between a meditation and a lyric monologue, than a meditation and a documentary poem, but, in either case, the meditative style is clearly the strongest. The testimony Dayton refers to is that of George Robinson -- the second time his voice is heard in the series-- and is in the form of question and answer, a technique used frequently throughout *The Book of the Dead* but rarely in the meditations.

--Tell me this, the men with whom you are acquainted,  
the men who have this disease  
have been told that sooner or later they are going to die?  
--Yes, sir.

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<sup>70</sup> Dayton, 87.

--How does that seem to affect the majority of the people?  
 --It don't work on anything but their wind.  
 --Do they seem to be living in fear  
 or do they wish to die?  
 -- They are getting to breathe a little faster. (43)

As in George Robinson's self-titled monologue, Rukeyser has kept much of his words the same and, here, has not altered the rhythm and syntax of his language. It is a more successful, more powerful, use of his voice. Not simply because of the confirmation that the men will die, but because it returns at the end of "The Cornfield" in a twisted couplet, recognisable by Robinson's particular way of talking:

-- No, sir; they want to go on.  
 They want to live as long as they can. (44)

The inclusion of George Robinson's voice, for the second time, is evidence for "The Cornfield" being seen as a lyric monologue, or a documentary poem. There are other, smaller, moments in the poem when a particular voice can be heard.

Ask the man on the road. Saying, That cornfield?  
 Over the second hill, through the gate,  
 watch for the dogs. Buried, five at a time,  
 pine boxes, Rinehart & Dennis paid him \$55 (43)

This voice, however, and who it is addressing, are both unidentified. It does not seem to appear to Rukeyser, or the speaker of the poem. In fact, it seems to be addressing the previous voice of the poem and engaging it in dialogue. Rukeyser has not separated this voice from the speaker of the poem, which she has done in previous poems, such as "Mearl Blankenship", which further removes it from either the lyric monologues or documentary poems. The techniques she uses throughout the early part of "The Cornfield" resemble "The Road" and "West Virginia" whereas it is the final section, just after George Robinson's reappearance, which, in Dayton's words, "establishes the tone which categorizes the major meditative sequence of "Alloy," "Power," and "The Dam."<sup>71</sup> Throughout the earlier part of "The Cornfield" Rukeyser uses obscure lists-- "Error, disease, snow, sudden weather" and "Overalls. Affidavits"-- just as she does in "West Virginia"(42). However, in "The Cornfield", unlike "West Virginia", readers are not drawn into the action of the poem, nor invited to share in the sense of progression. The speaker of "The

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 87.

Cornfield” remains separate from that which they are describing, and keeps their audience separated too. The repeated aphorism of “For those given to” keeps the poem impersonal while the use of imperatives such as “Contemplate,” “Swear by the corn” and “Now turn” keeps a distance between the speaker and what they are describing (42,43).

This distance is one of the main ways the poem reads like a meditation. The poem’s present is in the action of internalising information shown by the speaker constantly ordering herself on what she needs to do. The speaker is thus as difficult to locate and identify as the speaker in “The Road”. The lines “For those given to voyages: these roads/ discover gullies, invade, Where does it go now?” not only continue the road from the first two poems but reference the ideas within them (43). These lines also suggest that Rukeyser, herself, is the speaker of the poem; she is one given to voyages and she follows this road further into her investigation of the Hawk’s Nest tunnel tragedy. The road which opens the series is granted its full history in “West Virginia” but, here, it is specified as the road leading to the undertaker who buried the men without ceremony. The ritualistic aspect of “The Cornfield” stands out in contrast to what these dead men lost. The repetition of “swear by the corn” and the repeated use of imperatives allows for the poem to read, in part, as instructions to a ritual: an effect fitting for a poem in a series entitled *The Book of the Dead*. However, the only ritual present in the poem appears to be that of the undertaker making the ritual a dark, twisted one.

[...] They say blind corpses road  
with him in front, knees broken into angles,  
head clamped ahead.” (42)

This ritual is twisted further from the normal funeral rites: it is a ritual in erasing the dead, not commemorating them.

The section of “The Cornfield” that sits between the two occurrences of George Robinson’s voice is where the poem is most clearly meditative. Outside voices fall away allowing for one, Rukeyser’s, to take over the poem. On the surface, this section is about gardens, and many of the descriptive lines within it are accurate descriptions for a garden. “Marked pointed sticks to name the crop beneath” for example, is how gardens are actually marked (44). However, surrounded by George Robinson’s testimony, these descriptions become more sinister, taking on another



meaning altogether. The reference to Mellon's ghost is, according to Dayton, a reference to Andrew Mellon, a member of the wealthy Mellon family who worked as Secretary of the Treasury under Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover. His inclusion is unusual as he had no direct ties to the events of Gauley Bridge. He died in 1937, fairly close to the publication of *The Book of the Dead* and, it is perhaps safe to assume, his death, unlike the deaths of the men at Gauley Bridge, would have been reported nationally. Rukeyser includes him, then, to contrast the different statuses of the living with the equalising power of death: "Does Mellon's ghost walk, povertied at last" (44). The section is driven towards the final line "Sowing is over, harvest is coming ripe", another horticultural description with a deeper meaning, which almost mythologizes the dead men, making them seem like some powerful force that will rise again and not be silenced (44).

The technique of using mythology over history, or rather mythology as history, places Rukeyser in the same trajectory as T.S Eliot. Myth allows for a lack of definitive answers, and revels in uncertainty. It allows for multiple interpretations to exist at once, without pressure of the writer to claim one as truth. For Eliot's *The Wasteland* this effect was particularly prominent. *The Wasteland* is a many faceted poem, all of which I cannot begin to touch on here. Nevertheless, in part, it is a commentary on post-war Europe and the destruction and devastation that saturated the continent, which had once, for Eliot, appeared to be a haven from his home nation of America. Of course, *The Wasteland* is not like Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead*: there is no documentation, or markers to remind readers exactly where they are, and exactly what has happened. Eliot's depiction is of a desolation of spirit, Rukeyser's of a desolation of a whole class on men from one town. Rukeyser is attempting to elevate real men to status of myths, whereas Eliot is creating new myths for a modern era. The moments in "The Cornfield" and the rest of the meditations which resemble *The Wasteland* the most, those moments when the destruction seems to be everywhere with one lonely traveller moving through it, are often also the moments Rukeyser reminds her audiences most clearly that she is dealing in fact, that "these people live here" (17)

Compare, for example, Rukeyser's painstaking attempt to individualise the owner of each voice she uses throughout *The Book of the Dead* with Eliot's generalisation of the unbidden, uneducated masses:

Who are those hooded hordes swarming  
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth  
Ringed by the flat horizon only  
What is the city over the mountains  
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
Falling towers Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London  
Unreal (369-377)<sup>72</sup>

They move as one, like a swarm of locusts descending on cities known for their culture and their intelligence. If Eliot is mythologising these men, it is as Biblical plagues, not heroes of industry to be celebrated. Even the undertaker, when Rukeyser describes him early in "The Cornfield" regardless of the villainous role he plays: "The long-faced man rises long-handed jams the door/tight against snow, long-boned, he shivers" (42). Rukeyser's mythology is different to Eliot's because of her concern in the real, tangible world of people and of liberty. It is this difference between "The Cornfield" and Eliot's *The Wasteland* that truly sets the tone for the series of meditations, which follow. Rukeyser, as much as her pragmatic mind will let her, leaves the disaster behind and turns towards the poetic tradition. Each "Alloy," "Power," and "The Dam" can, and should, be read as part of an older poetic tradition, as well as part of *The Book of the Dead* series at large, and Rukeyser's investigation into the events of Gauley Bridge. The merging of these three purposes makes them, I would argue, some of the most interesting poems in the series as well as those which function best as individual poems. However, without the groundwork of "The Cornfield" which barely resembles those that come before it, the latter three would not be as successful.

The first in the series of meditative poems is "Alloy," whose title refers to three different things. In Dayton's words "to the town originally named Boncar, where the steel processing plant was located; to the ferrosilicon alloy produced in the plant; and to the alloy of the negative and the

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<sup>72</sup> T.S. Eliot, "The Wasteland" in *T.S. Eliot: Poetry, Plays and Prose*, ed. Sunil Kumar Sarker, (New Delhi: Atlantic, 2008) 104.

positive produced by *The Book of the Dead*.”<sup>73</sup> I have attempted to highlight the interplay of the positive and negative aspects of industry Rukeyser performs in her series: the achievement of industrial feats versus the loss of lives of those who had such mastery. The contrast between the two is most stark in “Alloy”. The negative side, the destruction has surpassed only affecting the men but has taken over the landscape. It has turned the sloping hill to a “hill of glass,” a “crystalline hill: a blinded field of white/ murdering snow”, covered by “clouds over every town/ [that] finally indicate the stored destruction” (47). None of these images are new: murdering snow, for example, featured heavily in “The Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones”. However, the focus on the landscape, and not the men, is new. It symbolises the passing of time, there seems to be no men left from the original disaster. The “stored destruction,” that is the silicosis which builds in one’s lungs until they can no longer function, can no longer be mistaken for something else, it has taken too many victims. There a distinct movement in the poem from the outside, the landscape, to inside one of the industrial site. The poem moves from the tainted hills “down the track, the overhead conveyor/ slides on it's cable to the feet of chimneys” and then below, to where the work is done:

Here the severe flame speaks from the brick throat,  
electric furnaces produce this precious, this clean,  
annealing the crystals, fusing at last alloys. (47)

The industrial site is shown to be at once impressive and fearsome. The images are hellish, yet the process and its outcome, magnificent. The contrast is both between positive and negative, power, potential and desolation. The title, “Alloy,” then, also refers to the combination of these elements.

Furthermore, there is one other notion, I would suggest, the title represents. “Alloy” is the first meditation of the series and thus, functions as its opening number. It immediately follows “Arthur Peyton”, the last of the lyric monologues, and must then act as a hinge between what has come before and what will come after, the cog that keeps *The Book of the Dead* moving. Perhaps this function is not exactly the same as an alloy, but with a little artistic license, it is perhaps a poetic alloy, where the two sections meet. Throughout “Alloy,” Rukeyser uses regular closed stanzas, as she does in both “The Road” and “Gauley Bridge”; the first poem of *The Book of the*

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<sup>73</sup> Dayton, 100.

*Dead* and the first documentary poem respectively. Rukeyser's repetition of technique signals that another change in form is about to occur. The use of regular stanzas links it to "The Road," which is both the first poem of the series, and the first meditation. By repeating the technique within another meditation it signals a change within the category; again something which is not new to *The Book of the Dead*.

However, it is the closed stanzas that are of real interest and that link "Alloy" to Gauley Bridge". The two poems even share the frequent references to glass. Instead of acting like snapshots of a town, these stanzas are snapshots of industry.

Hottest for silicon, blast furnaces raise flames,  
spill fire, spill steel, quench the new shape to freeze,  
tempering it to perfected metal. (47)

The stanza is as self-contained as the process it describes. Rukeyser has added another level to her imitation photographs; she is imitating the machinery of the steel processing plants. Each part of separate, but together they make a fully functioning whole. The notion of "Alloy" as a cog is significant here; it keeps *The Book of the Dead* moving seamlessly along, even through different sections, and parts that do not seem to follow on from one another easily. That is, until the last section of the poem where the punctuation, and the topic changes. Rukeyser moves away from the landscape, through the steel processing plant to focus more directly on what happens within it. Naturally, then, the workers, the expected and past subject of Rukeyser's poetry, reappear.

Forced through this crucible, a million men.  
Above this pasture, the highway passes those  
who curse the air, breathing their fear again. (48)

The movement from the outside, natural landscape into the plant, then deeper still takes on a new meaning here. They are no longer two separate entities; the danger exists in both; it is just a difference of intensity. The danger is all consuming. The journey down also imitates what the actual journey to the center of the world, with its molten centre, creating a sense of something natural about this journey. This sense contrasts with the word "forced" in the first line of the stanza, once again perpetuating Rukeyser's support of industry, and celebration industrial feats, but refusal to excuse for any human cost.

Although Rukeyser has made it clear that she believe industrial progress to be necessary, she has, as of yet, not implied that it could be natural. The focus has been less on the industrial matters than on the human. Robert Shulman's reading of "Alloy" is then, somewhat difficult to understand. He comments on its place within the series, marking it as a direct continuation of the poem that comes before it, "Arthur Peyton".

"Arthur Peyton" is the last of the dramatic monologues in *The Book of the Dead*. In "Alloy" Rukeyser immediately reinforced what she has rendered in Peyton's voice. "This is the most audacious landscape," she begins, referring to the brilliant white hills around the town of Alloy.<sup>74</sup>

"Arthur Peyton" does mention the landscape surrounding the town, but it is much more a personal account of one man's suffering, and the love and life he will lose. What then, Shulman believes "Alloy" to be reinforcing is unclear. Rukeyser's description of the men, quoted above, is somewhat atypical of *The Book of the Dead*. They are not individualised, unnamed, and, it seems, Rukeyser has left the men of Gauley Bridge behind to focus on men, presumably workers, more generally. The nature of these men can only be presumed from the context of the poem because Rukeyser does not tell us anything else. They have become much more like Eliot's hordes than the worker's reader of *The Book of the Dead* have come to know by name. "Alloy," rather than reinforcing what came before is, in fact, signalling a change of focus once again.

"Power," the next poem in the series, begins in the same way, with a description of the landscape and the industrial sites. The similarities go so far as to share the strange personification of these sites. The foothills "sloping as gracefully as thighs" in "Alloy" become more sexualised in "Power"(47). The heat from the sun spreads to warm the mountains.

[...] yielding the sex up under all the skin,  
until the entire body watches the scene with love,  
sees perfect cliffs ranging until the river (49)

In "Alloy," these hills were only described as if they were a body, however, in "Power" Rukeyser goes further, and gives them human feeling and sentiment. By opening the poem with this personification, and internalisation, Rukeyser is playing with the definitions of the types of poetry she uses throughout *The Book of the Dead*. The focus on feelings, the effect external sense have on the internal situation, is more suited to, in fact is what we have seen in, the lyric

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<sup>74</sup> Shulman, 219.

monologues. This unusual type of personification reaches its peak with the image of the “magnificent flower on the mouth” (49). For Tim Dayton, this image is the climax of the “beauty and vitality of the scene, with intricately interlaced grammatical structures, numerous present-participle constructions, and enjambed or only lightly end-stopped lines conveying a sense of a fecund natural world.”<sup>75</sup> Indeed, there is almost something reminiscent of human sexuality in the image, female sexuality and reproduction in particular. Yet, here, it is applied first to natural landscape, and then to industrial sites.

The location of “Power” is not far removed from Gauley Bridge, so this natural world, with all of its fecundity, is the river; the New River that was harnessed by the tunnel which killed the workers. Nevertheless, the river’s sinister history is not present in the opening of “Power”. Rukeyser has moved away from the disaster to look at the landscape as it exists separate from human influence. That is not to say that there are no connections between the human lovers, used as metaphor for the river, those figures that have featured in earlier poems in *The Book of the Dead*, and the river, as it exists in “Power”. The river is described as making another journey, to add to the many that have already taken place during the poetic series:

[...] the river  
cuts sheer, mapped far below in delicate track,  
surprise of grace, the water running in the sun (49)

The journey of the river is not the organised, planned journey the speaker of “The Road” takes, nor is it regimented like Vivian Jones’ habitual pilgrimage back to the power plant. It is a more disjointed, choppy journey, perhaps to reflect a more natural flow of water. However, the intercutting of the river’s journey with the image of the two lovers marks Dayton’s view of the river as the source of power as incorrect. In fact, it is the sun that is the source of power. “Power” opens with the heat of the sun’s descent to earth where it simultaneously warms the mountainous landscape, river, and the two lovers. The river and the lovers do not share a journey, per se, but they do share a life force; their energy begins in the same place “the quick sun” (49).

The tone of “Power” soon changes from a celebration of the vitality and fecundity of the landscape, and the humans who inhabit it, as the poem moves to focus on something more

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<sup>75</sup> Dayton, 102.

ritualistic. The poem's action moves closer to the "steel-bright, light-pointed, the narrow-waisted towers" of the plant, in which the water of the river is used, eventually moving inside of it (49). At this crucial point in "Power" Rukeyser returns to the refrain she introduced in "The Road" but this time, with an additional line making it a couplet, rather than a stand alone line.

This is the midway between water and flame,  
this is the road to take when you think of your country (49)

Both the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* and Rukeyser's modern rendition of it are evoked in this couplet. According to Robert Shulman, the water and the flame are parts of the ritual laid out in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, and Rukeyser's use of her own refrain extends the route of the original road.<sup>76</sup> It is no longer enough to only delve into the unfamiliar towns, to leave the city behind and discover new areas of your country, now Rukeyser is leading her readers inside the industrial sites, down further, into the depths the workers suffered in. However, unlike in "Alloy," this site is no longer in use; readers see no men at work. Instead Rukeyser presents a pristine, immobile plant lit by the sun. This journey down is not, really, about the function of the plant, but the connection it has to the sun, solidifying the sun as the primary giver of power. The road has become yet more universal. It is now the road taken by all forms of energy, originating with the sun.

The journey of the sun's heat descending is reminiscent of another famous poetic journey: the fall of Satan and man's fall from grace as retold by John Milton in *Paradise Lost*. Rukeyser quotes from the third book of the epic-length poem.

" 'Hail, holy light, offspring of Heav'n first-born,  
'Or of the' Eternal Coeternal beam  
'May I express thee unblamed?' (51)

It is not only Milton who is referenced in "Power". Rukeyser combines the imagery of descent with circular imagery-- "This is the second circle"(51)-- in a technique reminiscent of Dante's in his *Inferno*. The hydroelectric plant has become the underworld, linking Rukeyser's poem into a poetic tradition that explores the nature of death, and the afterlife beginning at the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, moving through the early modern period up until Rukeyser's current time. What is a representation of powerful otherworldly figures in Milton, and terrifying representations of

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<sup>76</sup> Shulman, 221.

suffering in Dante, is replaced by imposing images of machinery, made all the more imposing in a poem this late in *The Book of the Dead* when the damage the machines have the potential to cause is already known.

This is the second circle, world of inner shade,  
hidden bulk of generators, governor shaft,  
round gap of turbine pit. Flashlight, tool-panels,  
heels beating on iron, cold of underground,  
Stairs, wire flooring, the voice's hollow cry. (51)

Dante's influence is clear here, in the use of circles to separate the sections, and the hollow cries of people unseen, and unidentified. Milton's influence is less so.

The journeys taken in "Power" and *Paradise Lost* share a direction, a downward spiral, but are through different worlds. The site of her poetry is a real location, a real tomb. As we follow our guide down into the plant, this idea is already in the back of our mind due to previous poems. In "Power", there is no hint of this idea until near the end of the poem when the direction changes and an attempt at ascension is made.

His face is a cage of steel, the hands are covered,  
points dazzle hot, fly from his writing torch,  
[...] Says little, works: only: "A little down,  
five men were killed in the widening of the tunnel." (52)

The guide has become more guarded, and, after this revelation, the imagery moves from being imposing to being enclosing: there seems to be no way out. The poem ends with finality "this is the end" (53). However, it is unclear whether this is the end for the speaker, guide, and reader, or for the men who perished in the tunnel. Rukeyser, once again, aligns the natural journey of the sun, and landscape, with the journey of the men.

Down the reverberate channels of the hills  
the suns declare midnight, go down, cannot ascend,  
no ladder back: see this, your eyes can ride through steel,  
this is the river Death, diversion of power (52,53)

These few lines represent "Power" as a poem on a larger scale. The combination of the modern and the ancient, through the inclusion of the multiple suns and the river Death, symbolising at once the River Styx and the river that caused the men of Gauley Bridge to die, along with the corruption of a natural process are what Rukeyser has been discussing throughout "Power" and



the other poems of *The Book of the Dead*, which are not telling an individual human story. The plant is aligned with a tomb, but only once it has become an unnatural part of the journey. The mirroring between the sun heating the mountains and the mountains causing the river and consequently the plant has vanished. The tunnel has gone too far, nothing can ascend from its tomb.

The human aspect is still present throughout “Power”. Vivian Jones, whose lyrical monologue also featured the inside of the dam, returns to act as a guide in “Power”. Dayton describes the engineer Jones as an “unwitting Virgil” acting in place of one of the most famous guides of descension, in the poetic tradition: Dante’s version of Virgil.<sup>77</sup> However, Rukeyser uses him in a different function than Dante uses Virgil. Vivian Jones is not a well-known name, only those who have read the whole of the series would recognise him. Thus he is given another introduction: “This is the engineer Jones, the blueprint man / loving the place he designed, visiting it alone” (50). There is an echo of Rukeyser’s celebration of industry here, what he designed is described as impressive. However there is also an echo of the divide between the workers and those who planned the work. Jones is not responsible for silicosis, or the dangerous conditions of the work, but the focus on his planning highlights the lack of planning that others did. Finally, the reintroduction of Jones allows Rukeyser to link this poem back to others. Of course, this connection is strongest to the lyric monologues, “Face of the Dam: Vivian Jones” most explicitly, but it furthers the shift away from the personal, from Gauley Bridge, that the series of meditations performs. So little of Jones is recognisable that if this poem was read in isolation, indeed, if it could exist in isolation and be located in a plant free from tragedy, he would be any engineer commandeered by Rukeyser to act as her Virgil.

The third meditation of this mini-series, and the last meditation of *The Book of the Dead*, is seen, by the few who have actually written in detail on the poetic series, as the most powerful of the three. “The Dam” begins, as one would expect of a poem in a series, as a continuation of the poem that preceded it, “Power.” The opening sequence of “The Dam” is a meditation on the difference between power and energy. Power, as it was in the poem named after it, is praised as a natural, necessary entity. Rukeyser does, however, grant power an additional characteristic in

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<sup>77</sup> Dayton, 104.

“The Dam”. From the very first lines of the poem, the idea that power is a continuous, unending force is evoked and celebrated: “All power is saved, having no end” (54). This notion carries through the poem and, in one of the examples of Rukeyser’s form reflecting her content, is the idea that closes the poem: “It [water] changes. It does not die” (58). Although Rukeyser has expanded her scope of power away from just the New River in West Virginia, rivers, and water more generally, are still a prominent feature in her discussion of power. The water cycle as a journey is described in the opening lines of the poem.

[...] Rises  
in the green season, in the sudden season  
the white the budded  
And the lost. (54)

The layout of the page is unusual, and it is worth noting Rukeyser uses it multiple times in “The Dam”. In part, this layout reflects the action it is describing: the sudden drop of a half-line reflects the sudden season. The repetition of the layout allows Rukeyser to visually link this section of the poem to others, while she verbally connects the water cycle to other parts of the natural world and the cycles that exist within it. The use of the word “budded” references the plant cycle and later in the poem Rukeyser describes “constellations of light” reminding readers of the earth’s reliance on phenomena outside of it.

There is, however, another reason for Rukeyser’s focus on power’s continuous existence. It allows for her to draw a contrast between power and energy. The divide between the two, in true Rukeyser style, is marked by punctuation. The opening section, detailing the unending nature of power, is told through enjambed lines and long, flowing sentences. There is a noticeable change just before the word “energy” is introduced. The sentences are cut shorter, and are more fragmented. For example, compare “Water celebrates, yielding continually/ sheeted and fast in it's over fall/ slips down the rock” with “kinetic and controlled, the sluice/ urging the hollow, the thunder,/ the major climax” (54). Even the words used are harsher in the second section describing energy. The word itself, “energy”, appears separated from the rest of the text, and in bold, signalling it as important, but also, as an unnatural addition to what has been described before it. Rukeyser removes the sense of harmony as she describes energy as having a “fiery glaze, / crackle of light, [...] the moulded force” (54). The entity of energy is no longer something natural, but something moulded, something created. This attitude is different to what

she has previously expressed throughout *The Book of the Dead*. No longer does she seem to see industry as a natural continuation of the power from the heat of the sun. The end two sentences-- "It changes. It does not die."-- rather than celebrate the feat of man over nature, which Rukeyser has done before, suggests that they failed in their endeavor (58). Interestingly enough, the final stanza of the poem is an uneven mix of the two tempos suggesting an effort towards a semblance of balance; an attempt at finding a harmonious way of combining the two.

Yet, the result of this failure is not necessarily the victory of the power of nature over the attempts of man to harness, and mould it. A later sequence in "The Dam" introduces a more scientific aspect to the poem, set apart, just like the word energy, from the rest of the text on the page. This layout is a more subtle separation, the few scientific stanzas are aligned just slightly more towards centre, yet what it symbolises is significant. This sequence introduces another idea that will haunt the rest of the poem; the idea that power has been harnessed to make energy for financial and economic gain rather than as a way to enjoy natural power. Rukeyser spent time detailing the riches of nature, only to introduce another form of riches. The lines "The balance-sheet of energy that flows/ passing along its infinite barrier" follow a series of scientific equations (56). Balance-sheet, alone, is only a very gentle nod towards the economic world but, the opening of the stanza immediately following it-- "It breaks the hills, cracking the riches wide"-- continues the theme, and suggests that one of these types of riches has the power of destruction. This disjunction takes on a more sinister form when the imagery of industrial disasters is brought in. "Blasted, and the stocks went up" is Rukeyser's rail against the prioritising of money making at the expense of both nature, but more so, of people. In only the previous poem, we heard of men dying in a tunnel blast, never to be brought back to the surface. It is not then, that energy should not be harnessed from power but that it should not be done for financial benefit.

Later in "The Dam", Rukeyser even aligns the men who worked in the tunnel with the water used in the tunnel.

The dam is used when the tunnel is used.  
The men and the water are never idle,  
have definitions. (57)

The use of word “definitions” is troubling as it dehumanises the men. These definitions the men have are not like those Rukeyser has tried to grant them through individualising them in lyric monologues, but more of a function. Like the water, they play a part in the processes of the dam, and, to those higher up, only exist within the world of the dam and tunnel. This idea is echoed twice more in “The Dam”. First, in Rukeyser’s personification of the dam which contrasts with the dehumanisation of the men. “The dam is safe. A scene of power./ The dam is the father of the tunnel.” (57). Any danger then, does not come from the dam itself, but from outside influences, like those Rukeyser placed outside the main body of her poem. If the dam is the father of the tunnel, is it not also connected to those who only exist inside it? Secondly, Rukeyser aligns the water, the men and their cities, through a shared action: “Whether snow fall,/ the quick light fall, years of white cities fall” (55). This moment is the only example of Rukeyser suggesting that something man made has a place in the natural cycle as it too must fall. Yet, it is not true of everything manmade. The balance-sheet of energy’s barrier is infinite. The last two lines of the poem are, once again, relevant. Water can change, and cannot die, but this is where it differs from the men, why the men having definitions is so dangerous, and when energy becomes something bad. The difference between the power of natural riches and the manmade power of riches are complete opposites and “The Dam”, like so much of *The Book of the Dead*, celebrates the former.

Rukeyser’s discussion of power and energy, water and man, only makes up half of “The Dam”. Between the sections on this topic, Rukeyser inserts quotations from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, and, in an extreme use of documentation even by the standards of Rukeyser’s *The Book of the Dead*, a clipping from Union Carbide and Carbon Company’s stock report. Although an unusual addition to a verse of poetry, the stock quotation, is, in fact, more easily digested. It functions in a similar way to the lines detailed above, reminding readers of the financial aspect of the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel. However, Rukeyser is using a different format to broaden the implications of an economic priority. The stock quotation is something one could find, and perhaps has found, in a newspaper. It brings the disaster out of the poem and back into reality. It is something recognisable, something quotidian, subtly suggesting that the mindset that allows for these types of disasters is also something quotidian and known. Tim Dayton has a slightly different reading. In connection to this stock quotation, he states “any temptation to blame the

small, obscure southern company, Rinehart and Dennis, and to absolve the big, sophisticated northern corporation, Union Carbide, should be resisted.”<sup>78</sup> He goes on to question whether the corporation is solely at fault. Yet, this stock quotation actually suggests the same argument as Dayton. Rukeyser is using it to implicate the stockholders, reminding them that, because of newspapers like the one she worked for, their dirty laundry will always be public.

The use of a quotation from *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* is a little harder to understand in regard to the rest of “The Dam,” which largely focuses on the separation between nature and finance, science and workers. In the quotation, the “I” does not seem to have been assigned to a particular person making it different from those Rukeyser used previously, in *The Book of the Dead*.

*I open out a way over the water  
I form a path between the Combatants:  
Grant that I sail down like a living bird,  
power over the fields and Pool of Fire.  
Phoenix, I sail over the phoenix world. (55)*

It is clear from reading this passage why she has used it in “The Dam”. The quotation begins with water, has the notion of renewal, as well as fire, and the sense of labour or battle. All these have been used by Rukeyser in regard to the New River and its industrial sites. Robert Shulman neatly summarizes Rukeyser’s use of this passage.

The water, the Pool of Fire, and the power of the god pick up images and themes Rukeyser has been developing. The religious promise of renewal and eternal life puts in perspective the land’s disease, the thunder and the fiery glaze, even as the phoenix and the phoenix world look ahead to the revolutionary implications Rukeyser invokes at the end of “The Dam.”<sup>79</sup>

What perspective Shulman means is somewhat unclear. Is the land’s disease diminished by the emphasis on nature’s ability to renew itself? Or is the disaster made worse as it takes this power away? It seems that Rukeyser has lost some of her hope and her fight that industry can, should, and will be done better. Nevertheless, these two sections, combined with the scientific quotations, still do not make up the majority of “The Dam.” That honour is still the more human

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<sup>78</sup> Dayton, 18.

<sup>79</sup> Shulman, 226.

side; it is the images of the men at work, how they interact with nature that are the most powerful sections of the poem. Rukeyser, in a style typical to *The Book of the Dead*, is invoking these different elements-- economics, ancient ritual, nature, science-- in order to bring the human to the forefront. The poem that immediately follows "The Dam" is one of the documentary poems, "The Disease: After-Effects," in which we see a congressman trying to change industrial legislation; the cycle continues but it can be improved.

### **“The Book of the Dead” as Conclusion**

The final poem in Rukeyser’s series, “The Book of the Dead,” is also the poem from which the series takes its title, or perhaps the naming is the other way around. In an attempt to mimic Rukeyser’s technique, of reflecting the content of her poetry in its form, I plan to use this concluding poem as a means of concluding my thesis. Tim Dayton labels this final poem as a coda: an accurate label in many ways. In the musical definition of a coda, the final passage functions by both adding something to the overall structure of the piece while simultaneously concluding it. In ballet, the definition is clearer; the dances performed in the coda are new, yet the dancers move across the stage as if on parade. However, with Rukeyser we are in the verbal world, no matter how many times she plays with layout and punctuation. The characters she has so carefully detailed throughout the rest of *The Book of the Dead* do not get a ballet-like curtain call. Only the ideas and concepts slipped into the story of Gauley Bridge are granted this honour. “The Book of the Dead” is the longest poem of the series and separated into three sections by asterisks. Unfortunately for my imitation of Rukeyser, these three sections do not line up neatly with the three sections of my thesis.

The use of asterisks is a new technique in *The Book of the Dead*. There is no one poem in the series that is not, in some way, separated into different sections; whether it be different poetic voices, different locations, sections in quotations, or sections in Rukeyser’s poetic voice. The asterisks are a more concrete difference, and carry with them more of a sense of an ending. I would suggest that Rukeyser has used this more definite technique because “The Book of the Dead” is the conclusion to her series. The sections lead on from one another but she does not want to run the risk of having them bleed into one another, or having their boundaries blurred. Rukeyser may have also used the asterisks to counteract the lack of other techniques she has used throughout *The Book of the Dead*. The stanzas in “The Book of the Dead” are all tercets regardless of which section of the poem they are in. Consequently, there are less visual clues as to when the sections break and change: a method Rukeyser has repeated in other poems in the series.

Tim Dayton’s categorisation of “The Book of the Dead” as a coda is not only fitting but useful in understanding the poem. He goes on to describe the poem as a foray into “other poetic and

discursive modes: the catechism, the prospect poem, and the public poem in the tradition of the American jeremiad.”<sup>80</sup> These discursive modes, and types of poetry, however, are not easily recognised in “The Book of the Dead.” Unlike other poems in the series, there is no call and answer reminiscent of the catechism tradition; the poem has too celebratory a tone to be part of the jeremiad tradition of laments; and, finally, the notion of a prospect poem, although the most appropriate form of those listed by Dayton, is still not quite apt as Rukeyser is praising the nation of America more than its countryside. If there is a connection to the American jeremiad tradition to be found, it would alter the reading of *The Book of the Dead* I have detail up until this point. The fine line Rukeyser walks between celebrating industrial feats and memorialising the unknown workers who achieved them, would be rubbed out and replaced by a one dimensional lamentation. The other aspect of the jeremiad --the harangue or warning of the privileging of science or technology over man-- is, of course, relevant to Rukeyser’s project in *The Book of the Dead* at large. Nevertheless, it is no more relevant in this final poem than it is elsewhere. In fact, it appears less frequently than it does in other poems, such as the meditations.

In order to do justice to each section of “The Book of the Dead,” while attempting to show how, as a whole, it functions as a conclusion to the series *The Book of the Dead*, I will briefly analyse each section and detail the work Rukeyser is performing in each. The first section begins with *The Book of the Dead*’s, by now, familiar refrain: “These roads will take you into your own country” (66). The tense of the refrain has, as it has been doing throughout the series, changed once more. Where the first incident of the refrain, “There are roads to take when you think of your country,” is still in the realm of possibility; these are the roads that will lead you if you choose to take them (9). By the end of the series, however, these roads, although still described in the future tense, the decision has already been made and the roads are definitely going to be travelled. There is a clear progression from the beginning of the series, in which a journey is being planned, and the end, in which it has already been taken. The repetition of the refrain at the end of *The Book of the Dead* is then, if not to encourage others to take similar journeys, then to remind readers that there are journeys out there to be made. It is almost as if Rukeyser has lost her humility, and is preempting the success of her poem, both as a poem in literary circles, but,

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<sup>80</sup> Dayton, 110.



more importantly, as a guide to the Hawk's Nest Tunnel tragedy and a help to the ongoing investigation.

However, because the refrain is so familiar-- the exact wording is used, at one point, in "The Road"-- it harkens back as much as it looks forward. It links "The Book of the Dead" with the rest of the series, which the rest of the first two stanzas continue to do:

These roads will take you into your own country.  
Seasons and maps coming where this road comes  
into a landscape mirrored in these men.

Past all your influences, your home river,  
constellations of cities, mottoes of childhood,  
parents and easy cures, war, all evasion's wishes. (66)

The combination of the natural and the human world, a prevalent theme throughout *The Book of the Dead*, is repeated here, along with more of the language from other poems. As she did in "The Road," Rukeyser is inviting her readers to move "past all [their] influences" and discover things for themselves. Yet, this time, she is not placing herself there as a guide, readers will have to make their own way. Nevertheless, the ever-helpful Rukeyser does offer some assistance. The "constellations of cities, mottoes of childhood" suggest a return to some primal sense of direction; navigation by stars and directions passed on through time. This notion is picked up later, in the same section, when Rukeyser retells, once more, the journey of the first "discoverers" of America.<sup>81</sup> The focus is, quite naturally, on the journey made by these pioneers, not their other actions, and is clearly an attempt by Rukeyser to inspire her readers:

See how they took the land, made after-life  
fresh out of exile, planted the pioneer  
base and blockade,

pushed forests down in an implacable walk  
west where new clouds lay at the desirable  
body of sunset (67)

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<sup>81</sup> I have put discoverers in quotation marks for the following reasons: America was not some far-off uninhabited land waiting to be discovered. However, *farbeit* for me, especially in a thesis on poetry when the poet herself has not done so, to discuss the moral implications of including this historical moment. However, it is worth noting that the positive manner in which Rukeyser details this excursion seems out of character for her. As *The Book of the Dead* shows, Rukeyser is a staunch defender of the oppressed.

“After-life” takes on a new meaning here, it becomes only a stage in the journey of life, possibly reiterated in different manifestations, an achievement as opposed to a condemnation. This journey is one to be admired not only because it was difficult, but because of the potential it uncovered. Rukeyser’s description of the journey of America’s “discoverers” continues until the end of the stanza. The final stanza of this section is full of joy at the potential they discovered in America:

and unmade boundaries of acts and poems,  
the brilliant scene between the seas, and standing,  
this fact and this disease (68)

Of course, *The Book of the Dead* is still a series memorialising the dead. “This disease” is there as our reminder; Rukeyser will only allow for so much celebration. However, there are three stanzas in “The Book of the Dead” which do not quite tie in to the notion of journeys; whether it be Rukeyser encouraging her readers to take journeys or her description of past journeys. There is a sharp turn after the first two stanzas, when Rukeyser brings a direct address into the poem through a question and answer format: “What one word must never be said?” (66). I would argue against Dayton when he recognises these few stanzas as a catechism and suggest, rather, that it is a protesting chant:

“What three things can never be done?  
Forget. Keep silent. Stand alone.” (66)

This stanza, to me at least, sounds like what would be heard at a rally, perhaps a rally in defence of those men who died at Gauley Bridge, and not what one would hear in a Catholic Sunday school. The answers given are, in short, Rukeyser’s mode of operation, and her incentive behind the project of *The Book of the Dead*. These men cannot be forgotten; she cannot keep silent; and we must stand with those men. As the last poem in the series, “The Book of the Dead” comes after the meditative series which moved away from the specifics of Gauley Bridge. Rukeyser does not return to them here. These men are whoever needs someone to speak for them, found at the end of whichever road.

The middle section of “The Book of the Dead” is marked by the asterisks that occur throughout the poem, but also by a subtle change in format. Throughout this section, the lines are justified

and aligned to the right of the page whereas, in the first and last sections of “The Book of the Dead,” the lines are centered leaving one half-line to close each tercet. The section moves clearly through different ideas beginning with the nebulous concept of “half-memories” and ending with a direct address to “you young, you [...] finishing the poem” (69,70). The journey of the poem moves from the abstract to the solid: we young finishers of the poem are presented alongside “men of fact.” Tim Dayton, however, reads this section of the poem slightly differently:

The second section has a curious structure: it falls into two groups of three stanzas each, followed by a four stanza group. The first two groups each consist of two stanzas concerned with the realm of myth followed by a contrasting stanza concerned with the here-and-now of the New River valley. [...] The section concludes with a four-stanza group that issues a call to reengage the world of the present.<sup>82</sup>

Dayton is correct in terms of the structure of the section. It is most easily understood when broken into the groups detailed above. However, I think he misses something important in the first two groups of three stanzas. Readers are only aware that they are returning to the “here-and-now of the New River valley” because they have read the rest of *The Book of the Dead*. The section itself is not specific enough to make this conclusion:

This valley is given to us like a glory.  
To friends in the old world, and their lifting hands  
that call for intercession. Blow falling full in face. (69)

The stanza above is the sixth stanza in “The Book of the Dead,” which, by Dayton’s assessment, would make it about the New River valley. Undoubtedly, within the context of the series, the valley Rukeyser mentions is the one by Gauley Bridge. But how much can the rest of the stanza be related to this town? Perhaps the men of Gauley Bridge who, like Arthur Peyton, are these friends in the old world calling for help. However, it’s also possible that Rukeyser is referencing the Spanish Civil War, as she has done previously in the series, and indeed in this poem, and is commenting on America’s failure to intervene. It should be remembered that Rukeyser visited Barcelona between her visit to West Virginia and the publication of *U.S. I*.

It is this dual possibility that makes Dayton’s rigid description of the first two groups of stanzas, in “The Book of the Dead,” misleading. There is a sense of myth in these sections however, there is also the sense of history: “in music knowing all the shimmering names” and “in museum life,

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<sup>82</sup> Dayton, 111,112.

centuries of ambition” (69). Both oral and written history are present here. The first section of “The Book of the Dead,” in which Rukeyser details the history of the discovery of America and details her contemporary, international current affairs, becomes relevant again here. The first section of the poem, the modern history it relays, and the “here-and-now” of the New River valley are placed alongside “the Carthaginian stone meaning a tall woman” and the songs that tell of “shimmering names,/ the spear, the castle, and the rose.” The combination of these facets of history, whether a mythological history or not, is what Dayton misses. He ignores the aspects of the mixture, which pertain to elements of the now, which are not connected to the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel tragedy. A broader reading of the first two groups, in the second section of “The Book of the Dead,” slightly alters their connection to the final group of the section. Although the different aspects of history are placed alongside one another, the now, and not just the here-and-now, is given priority. The “you” she is addressing is no less universal, but their aims and attention become more so:

and you young, you who finishing the poem  
wish new perfection and begin to make;  
you men of fact, measure our times again. (70)

As noted by both Dayton and Shulman, this stanza is another one of the moments when Rukeyser is reminiscent of Walt Whitman. Dayton describes the ending as “an extended summons reminiscent of the end of *Song of Myself* in the directness of its address and in its anticipation of affecting the reader.”<sup>83</sup> Nevertheless, this stanza is also typical of Rukeyser in its hope for change and belief in the power, and drive, of people to do so. Whitman invites his readers to come along with him for as much, or indeed as little, of his journey as they can:

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

Whereas Rukeyser invites her readers to join her in, striving, not for discovery or knowledge, but creating an improved world. Shulman notes another similarity between the summons issued by these two poets:

Also like Whitman, Rukeyser is at one not only with the poetically and politically inspired young but also with “you men of fact,” the scientists and technicians she urges to

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<sup>83</sup> Dayton, 112.

“measure our times again,” so that she enlists the “men of fact” in the enterprise of judging a present in need of radical renewal.<sup>84</sup>

By position the “men of fact” on her side, Rukeyser’s judgements gain authority, and her summons gains credibility. In the world of *The Book of the Dead*, it is a fact that justice needs to be brought to the men of Gauley Bridge, and changes to industrial safety laws, so they no longer favour the corporations over the workers, just as it is a fact, for Rukeyser, that America should have intervened in the Spanish Civil War.

The final section of “The Book of the Dead” appears to pick up where the second section leaves off: “These are our strength, who strike against history.” (70). I first read this line as a commendation for those who struck out against the norm, and in many ways it is. It may reference the figures of the young, and even the men of fact from the preceding stanza. However, what follows is an ode to the working class. The word “strike” gains a double meaning: it is those who acted differently, changed the norm, but it is also those who went on strike to make these changes:

These touching radium and the luminous poison,  
carried their death on their lips and with their warning  
glow in their graves.

These weave and their eyes water and rust away,  
these stand at wheels until their brains corrode,  
these farm and starve,

all these men cry their doom across the world,  
meeting avoidable death, fight against madness,  
find every war. (70-71)

Although Rukeyser says “all these men,” she has included the textile industry, which, by and large, was an industry of female workers. It is a touching dedication to the working class, and is, in my opinion at least, the moment in the series, which best lives up to the name *The Book of the Dead*. Rukeyser uses enjambment heavily in this section reflecting an urgency that has been missing elsewhere in “The Book of the Dead.” Her message is clear: the time to act is now, before you move too far from the words of the poem and forget their effect.

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<sup>84</sup> Shulman, 237.

The section continues to applaud the achievements of this class:

new processes, new signals, new possession.  
A name for all the conquests, prediction of victory  
deep in these powers. (71)

As she has done elsewhere in the series, Rukeyser commends industrial feats while condemning the practices which allow them to be so deadly. Yet here, in the final section of the final poem in her series, she goes further, and leaves the world of the poem demanding that the poem's voice, the de facto voice of the workers, be listened to:

Carry abroad the urgent need, the scene  
to photograph and to extend the voice,  
to speak this meaning. (71)

Rukeyser seems to be speaking from her future, our present; seems to be aware of globalisation before it happens; and, most importantly, aware that while the products of such an phenomenon will travel, the voices of those most negatively affected will not. It is a message, I'm sure, she wished to be ephemeral but is not; if anything it is perhaps only becoming more important.

Throughout the ode with which she closes *The Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser remains pragmatic. She knows that we need these types of industry, and she knows that in order for them to be most efficient they must keep evolving. However, even while she lists of the achievements, she cannot forget those who make them possible, and asks that we do not either: "communication to these many men,/ as epilogue, seeds of unending love." (72). These final lines of the poem, are a simple summary of what Rukeyser desires of her readers: Do not forget those not mentioned in history, do not forget those who suffer now, do not abandon them to their struggle. Or as she cried earlier:

What three things can never be done?  
Forget. Keep silent. Stand alone. (66)

There is, however, one idea, or perhaps concept is more appropriate, that ties these three sections together. The word "frontier" appears throughout "The Book of the Dead" a total of five times; each in a slightly different context. To me, as a Brit, this word does not carry much significance; it is simply an unusual synonym for a country's border, or some other dividing line. The same is not true for Rukeyser. *The Book of the Dead* has heavily, and frequently, featured the discovery

of America, the journey of those first colonists, and their continued journey west. In the American canon, and lexicon, these instances are also covered by the term frontier. Rukeyser's first three uses of "frontier," all of which occur in the first section of "The Book of the Dead," all belong to this category. The repetition of "frontier" in the first section, in fact, mirrors the journey made by those first colonists. It begins at the "frontier of Europe," which is then a "frontier pushed back like river" until "California and the colored sea:/ sums of frontiers" are reached (67,68). The next two uses, which do not abide by this definition, are more interesting. They do not seem to be attached to any known, or definite border. Firstly, Rukeyser seems to be granting the term frontier a military relevance:

Are known as strikers, soldiers, pioneers,  
fight on all new frontiers, are set in solid  
lines of defense. (71)

The use of "pioneers" here keeps the other definition of "frontiers" in mind, even as Rukeyser extends it. It is now, not only those first "Americans" who pushed and broke frontiers but all Americans, workers and fighters included. This inclusion seems to be regardless of cause. However, "solid lines of defense" suggests that it is only inclusive of those with a justified reason for fighting. The final use of "frontiers" is in much the same vein:

Down coasts of taken, countries, mastery,  
discovery at one hand, and at the other  
frontiers and forests (72)

This final iteration of the term "frontiers" is in the third-to-last stanza which adds another layer to the fighters mentioned above. The improved world, Rukeyser believed her readers will want to create, will be the next frontier to tackle.

How this relate to the topic of the rest of *The Book of the Dead*, Rukeyser's poetic style within it, and, indeed, her other poetry is key to understanding "The Book of the Dead" as a coda or conclusion. Edna Lou Walton, in her review of *U.S. I*, for the *New York Times Book Review*, claimed that Rukeyser's focus on a "village dying of silicosis [...] is the material for poetry, but it is not poetry." Perhaps, then, this final poem, which is the only one able to be read in isolation and still understood, is necessary in order to make poetry of the material. If Walton is correct, *The Book of the Dead* may need this addition in order to be a successful poem and not just a journalism in verse. Walton further asserts that, what Rukeyser presents "is reporting and not the

imaginative vision.”<sup>85</sup> Walton means this comment as a negative criticism, but I think it is actually a rather accurate description of what Rukeyser was attempting to do. A rather successful attempt, it would seem, if Walton believes it so avidly. Earlier in this thesis, I noted how Rukeyser brings mythology into reality, while T.S Eliot does the reverse. This move is exactly what she is attempting with *The Book of the Dead* at large; to raise the everyday to poetry, making it, not just material for poetry, but poetry in its own right. Rukeyser’s consistent use of unaltered quotations from ordinary people is her drawing her reader’s attention to the poetry in the quotidian; it already exists for her so there is no need to transform it from material to poetry. The final poem, is not included as an attempt to solidify the series as poetry; it is an effort to broaden her readers definition of poetry. The Hawk’s Nest Tunnel tragedy becomes almost a case study: one moment in which one writer found poetry, used as an effort to encourage and inspire others.

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<sup>85</sup> Edna Lou Walton, “Muriel Rukeyser’s Poetry,” Review of *U.S I* by Muriel Rukeyser, in *New York Times Book Review*, March 27, 1938, 19.



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