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DARK MATTER:
SUSAN HOWE, MURIEL RUKEYSER, AND THE SCHOLAR'S ART

by

STEFANIA HEIM

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2015

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

DARK MATTER:
SUSAN HOWE, MURIEL RUKEYSER, AND THE SCHOLAR'S ART

by

Stefania Heim

Adviser: Professor Joan Richardson

Instead of describing poetry as a set of constraints or history of practices, Muriel Rukeyser calls it “one *kind* of knowledge.” *Dark Matter* heeds Rukeyser’s call, theorizing a poetics of the “scholar’s art,” in which documentary investigation, autobiographical exploration, and formal innovation are mutual, interwoven concerns. The dissertation pairs American poets Susan Howe (b. 1937) and Muriel Rukeyser (1913-1980), reading their hybrid works not through the received categories of American poetry, or through common generic and disciplinary divisions, but using an inductive methodology that takes its lead from the poets. Understanding Howe and Rukeyser’s literary experiments as serious interventions in broad fields of thought, I seek out and delve into their many sources – literary, historical, mythological, philosophical, scientific, and intimate.

Rukeyser is commonly read as feminist poet of witness, and Howe an aesthetic innovator. The assumptions that underlie these categorizations get at the heart of what poetry is, why it matters, and how it relates to the project of living. Implicit are ideas about the relationship between poetry and politics, what constitutes artistic experimentation, and how poems should and do address lives, particularly the intimate lives of women. Within these frameworks, the qualities that have made Rukeyser’s genre-challenging books so difficult to interpret and place are the same that have secured for Howe’s a preeminent position in contemporary poetry. But just as Rukeyser’s experiments in form are illegible to readers with particular expectations of realism, Howe scholarship suffers from a related, if inverted, short-sightedness: many revel in her linguistic ingenuity without probing its

profound philosophical underpinnings or explicitly personal stakes. An act of scholarly reclamation, *Dark Matter* interrogates texts of Rukeyser's that have received scant or no critical attention: her 1942 biography of physical chemist Willard Gibbs, her musical about Harry Houdini (1973), and *The Orgy* (1965), her book about the pagan festival, Puck Fair. I read these alongside kindred texts by Howe: *Pierce-Arrow* (1999), which is indebted to Pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce; *The Liberties* (1980), which joins Jonathan Swift's mistress Stella and Shakespeare's Cordelia; and *THAT THIS* (2010), which investigates archival scholarship through the lens of personal grief.

Acknowledgments

There is nothing so humbling and gratifying as giving thanks.

First: It would be impossible to dream up a more inspiring and awe-inspiring dissertation committee. Joan Richardson, Ammiel Alcalay, and Wayne Koestenbaum all provide models for an intellectually, personally, and historically urgent scholarship that is interwoven with grace and wit, wonder and joy. That I have been the occasion for convening these great minds into more than one room is a source of continual amazement to me. I am particularly grateful to Joan for infusing thinking with feeling, feeling with thinking, and doing it always with love; to Ammiel for his deep and unerring sense of the stakes; and to Wayne for his thrilling investment in serious play. I would also like to give special thanks to Nancy K. Miller for her generative and generous teaching and for showing me how the hardest questions often seem the most straightforward.

One of my driving convictions throughout the long process of writing this dissertation has been that life and literature cannot be separated, that thinking happens in relation, and that our work on the page matters in “real life.” I could not have chosen better subjects. Susan Howe’s humility and warmth are as astounding as her brilliance, and I am deeply grateful not only for her words, but for her person. Rukeyser’s son, Bill Rukeyser, is a generous, thoughtful, and encouraging supporter of Rukeyser scholarship. His gift to me of his mother’s Willard Gibbs book collection bolstered both my research and my spirit.

Following Rukeyser I have found a community. This dissertation benefits particularly from the work of Elisabeth Daümer, Catherine Gander, and Rowena Kennedy-Epstein – all women at the

vanguard of what I believe is a signal moment in Rukeyser studies. Jan Heller Levi has shared her extensive biographical knowledge, most recently leading me to Rukeyser's former student Elaine Edelman, who became a generous interlocutor as I brought this project to a close.

Portions of Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation appeared in articles in *Jacket2* and in the Muriel Rukeyser Special Issue of *The Journal of Narrative Theory*. My thinking about Rukeyser began with my discovery of her "lost" essay, "Darwin and the Writers," published with my annotations in the first series of *Lost & Found* chapbooks. Pieces and precursors to the chapters that follow were also presented at the Northeast Modern Language Association Convention (Montreal 2010), the Muriel Rukeyser Tribute at the Century Club (2010), the "Poetry Communities & the Individual Talent" Conference at the University of Pennsylvania Kelly Writers House (2012), and the Modern Language Association Convention (Boston 2013). I am grateful to Aoibheann Sweeney, Executive Director of the Center for the Humanities at CUNY, for inviting me to have a public dialogue with Susan Howe in 2011, and for her innovative work bringing scholarship into the public sphere.

A commitment to archival research forms the backbone of this dissertation and I would like to thank those that have made this possible: Isaac Gerwitz, director of the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library; the staff of the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress; and the staff of the Archive for New Poetry, Mandeville Department of Special Collections, University of California, San Diego.

Institutional support from the Josephine de Karman Fellowship Trust and a Calder Dissertation Fellowship from the Graduate Center English Department provided time and space to write.

My students – in particular my “American Women Poets” class at Hunter College in spring 2011 and my “Thinking Like a Poet” class at Deep Springs College in winter 2014 – helped me remember why and how this work matters, pushing me to articulate and clarify my instincts and ideas as they inspired me with their own.

My friends at the Graduate Center have made this shared scholarly undertaking seem worthwhile and – even more urgently – *possible*. I am particularly thankful for the minds and hearts of Karinne Keithley Syers, Simone White, and Cecily Parks. Having my sister, Julia Heim, with me in all these CUNY halls has made absolutely everything much, much better. Katie Peterson swooped into my life as I was struggling to finish – gracing this dissertation, and me, with her bright lights.

My family: I cannot thank enough. To my parents – who have always modeled curiosity and committed teaching, and who still read everything I write – I am eternally and especially grateful.

Finally, truly thanking Peter Pihos for all that he has contributed to this work and to my life would take many more pages than I have already written and forever. As always, he understood my project long before I did. I never would have finished without his faith – or his pushing – and I wouldn’t have wanted to. I am ever thrilled by our joint adventure, grounded by our rock-solid edifice, and buoyed by his beautiful spirit. This dissertation is for him, and for Michela, who is already so patient and so full of wonderful surprises.

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Abbreviations

Texts by Susan Howe are abbreviated as follows:

The Birth-mark — BM

“Frame Structures” — FS

The Liberties — L

Pierce-Arrow — PA

THAT THIS — TT

Interviews with Susan Howe are abbreviated as follows:

Interview with Maureen McLane in the *Paris Review*: PR

Interview with Lynn Keller: LK

Texts by Muriel Rukeyser are abbreviated as follows:

Houdini — H

The Life of Poetry — LOP

Willard Gibbs — WG

Texts by Robert Duncan are abbreviated as follows:

The H.D. Book: HD

CHAPTER 1

Dark Matter: An Introduction

“I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate.” (Susan Howe)

“The only way one can see triumph among these imaginations is to link together, for our own moment, those men and women who in full consciousness knew they had failed. They make a sort of triumph, shining darkly down to us.” (Muriel Rukeyser)

The poet Muriel Rukeyser opens her 1942 biography of one of America’s great and largely forgotten 19th-century scientists with a richly imagined description of four anonymous individuals: “The man over his table, glass shine of the test-tubes reflected in the eyes; the woman staring into her thought of the child not yet born; the boy at his gun his face vulnerable and delicate under the iron cup of a helmet; the broad, many-ridged back over a lathe” (WG 1-2). These four, suspended mid-action or mid-contemplation, are not returned to, nor are they described further. The first may be Willard Gibbs, the scientist, subject of Rukeyser’s investigation, but we will never know who the others are, how they relate to him, or to her. However, if we linger upon these lines for a moment, upon these individuals conducting their ordinary, even possibly extraordinary, lives, the strangers become enveloped in a halo of significance. From them, from their specifics and their juxtaposition, arise ideas of work, war, creation, procreation, destruction, power, vulnerability, empathy, experience, exhaustion, potential, thought, and imagination. From them arise a set of concerns and values, an array of possible ways of meeting a time’s urgencies with action or with thought, judgments about the significance or potential of those possibilities. Rukeyser’s unmediated deployment of these figures doesn’t so much urge, as make it possible for us to consider lives and how they matter.

Attendant – as I open my own work – to the ways in which a text’s introduction signals, multiply, its situation in traditions of thought, in categories of investigation and meaning, in assumptions of value, I turn from *Willard Gibbs* to the first pages of Susan Howe’s hybrid poetic-scholarly works. I am struck, as I conduct this experiment, with how many of them begin either with the word “during” or the word “on.” *Pierre-Arrow*: “During the summer of 1997 I spent many hours in New Haven in the bowels of Sterling Library” (5). *Souls of the Labadie Tract*: “During his ministry in Northhampton, Jonathan Edwards traveled alone on horseback from parish to parish” (9). “A Bibliography of The King’s Book or, Eikon Basilike”: “On the morning of 30 January 1649, King Charles I of England walked under guard from St. James to Whitehall” (55). “Frame Structures”: “On Sunday, December 7, 1941, I went with my father to the zoo in Delaware Park” (3). Sometimes, this signal word is pushed a bit forward in the sentence, ceding primacy to a brief description of the scene, as in *THAT THIS*: “It was too quiet on the morning of January 3rd when I got up at eight after a good night’s sleep” (11). Howe roots her texts first and foremost in time and space. She gives us years, months, locations, proper nouns. Sometimes it is herself that she situates, mid-action, sometimes a ruler, a thinker, most frequently a forgotten or elided historical or literary figure. These characters will go on to encounter, or at least to abut each other in the terrain of her texts – meeting across the fact-fiction divide, across historical gaps, in books or papers that sit beside each other on library shelves, in the theater of her mind.

Different from Rukeyser’s in obvious ways, Howe’s introductions share a fundamental commitment to human lives as the place from which meanings, ideas, and possibilities are conceived, tested, and developed. Each poet underscores how knowledge – about ourselves, about each other, about the world, about history, about the universe – is rooted in the contours, events, accidents, and urgencies of particular lives conducted and undergone in particular places and times. This may seem obvious but I think that it is not. When Rukeyser wrote to Albert Einstein asking

him to contribute a preface to her biography of Willard Gibbs, she argued for her book's significance along these lines: "It has a great deal more to do, I think, with the human condition; with the need that today is felt everywhere ... for more information, to deal with all the parts of the universe, and closely and painfully, with human lives." For Einstein, however, Gibbs's significance was not his life – not even his "whole life" as Rukeyser phrased it – but his discoveries firmly and exclusively rooted in the history of science.

The whole lives of others do not hew to categories or disciplines; they direct us inward, outward, backward, and forward. I want to underscore this rootedness in lives – Howe's and Rukeyser's as well as my own – not as a narrow or rigid cordoning off, but its opposite. Lives are where disciplines and categories, history, the brute facts of existence, symbols, myths, feelings, religions, literatures, languages, ways of thinking about and being in the world, ways of understanding and talking about the world, ways of negotiating relationships and knowledge and other lives all meet, battle, and coexist. Howe and Rukeyser write lives as a way of writing everything else.

Here is Rukeyser: "Now the heroes of process / Not leaders but lives" (Poems 394). "Certain lives do that, so that the whole life becomes an image reaching backward and forward in history, illuminating all time" (LOP 35). "We look for ancestors as if the world were completed. It is constantly being torn away. Wars and suppression on every level tear it. The life of the world is in its living people, in those who express that life and the dynamic equilibrium which is its home." (WG 350). "My life is flying to your life" (Poems 508).

Here is Howe: "Voices I am following lead me to the margins. Anne Hutchinson's verbal expression is barely audible in the scanty second- or thirdhand records of her two trials. Dorothy Talbye, Mrs. Hopkins, Mary Dyer, Thomas Shepard, Mrs. Sparhawk, Brother Crackbone's wife, Mary Rowlandson, Barbary Cutter, Cotton Mather may have been searching for grace in the

wilderness of the world. They express to me a sense of unrevealedness. They walk in my imagination and I love them” (BM 4). “I thought one way to write about a loved author would be to follow what trails he follows through the words of others: what if these penciled single double and triple scorings arrows short phrases angry outbursts crosses cryptic ciphers sudden enthusiasms mysterious erasures have come to find you too, here again, now” (Melville 100).

Process. Following. Dynamic Equilibrium. Ancestors. Margins. Presence. Love.

I begin by following Rukeyser and Howe.

This is a dissertation about two poets.

Muriel Rukeyser was born in New York City on December 15, 1913 into a middle-class Jewish family. Her mother, Myra Lyons, was a sometime bookkeeper, and her father, Lawrence Rukeyser, was a “cement” man, president of the construction supply company, Colonial Sand & Stone, whose massive dealings in sand would literally undergird his daughter’s beloved city during its early 20th-century building boom (“City city city / O my delight / New York” (Poems 583)). The idea of foundations – of growth from foundations – would become central as form, metaphor, and process in her varied and genre-challenging works, as in this section of “Searching / Not Searching”: “They are pouring the city: / they tear down the towers, / grind their lives, / laughing tainted, the river / flows down to tomorrow. // They are setting the forms, / pouring the new buildings. / Our days pour down. / I am pouring my poems” (Poems 482).

Rukeyser’s public life began in 1933 when, having left Vassar College after just two years (because her father went bankrupt, pushed out of Colonial Sand & Stone by his partner, the Italian-American fascist sympathizer Generoso Pope), she went to Alabama to witness and report on the trial of the “Scottsboro boys” – nine young black men wrongfully accused of raping two white women. In Scottsboro, Rukeyser contracted typhoid fever and was arrested and held overnight. Her

public life *in poetry* began two years later, when just shy of her 21st birthday, she published her first collection of poems, the Yale Younger Poets Prize-winning *Theory of Flight* – a book that incorporated social critique (born from experiences like hers in Scottsboro) as well as what she had learned about flight mechanics at the Roosevelt School of Air in Long Island (where she enrolled when her parents wouldn't allow her to train to be a pilot). This first book already manifests the central braiding of avid curiosity across disciplines, intimate experience, and public engagement that would become her work's central feature – its genius as well as a source of difficulty and confusion for many readers. Her second collection, *U.S. 1* (1938), contains her long poem “The Book of the Dead,” an investigation into the Gauley Bridge industrial disaster in which almost 1,000 workers in West Virginia died of silicosis as a result of prolonged exposure to silica dust. In the poem, interviews with family members are interwoven with quotations from hearings, an accumulation of devastating facts, and lyrical passages drawing from the Egyptian Book of the Dead. It is currently Rukeyser's most celebrated and analyzed work, exemplary, for contemporary readers, of the force and potential of documentary poetry.

In a writing career that spanned five decades until her death in 1980, Rukeyser published fifteen collections of poems as well as a wide-ranging corpus of hybrid, category-challenging works. Here, a biography of Rukeyser inevitably gives way to a kaleidoscopic list of inquiries taken up in texts about which there is no body of scholarly engagement. Both because the staggering scope of Rukeyser's imagination *is* suggested by such a compilation and because these are the works with which this dissertation – in large part an act of scholarly reclamation – is most explicitly concerned, such a list is, in fact, necessary. Rukeyser wrote biographies of Willard Gibbs, the Renaissance explorer, mathematician, and astronomer Thomas Hariot, and a “story and song” about politician Wendell Willkie; a treatise on the uses and possibilities of poetry as a form of knowledge and encounter; plays including the musical *Houdini* (produced once in 1973 starring Christopher Walken);

and autobiographical novels (or non-fiction fantasies) about the Irish pagan festival Puck Fair and the Spanish Civil War; in addition to translations, essays, films, and children's books. As I will show over the course of this study, each of these works chafes against even these broad categories of description.

*

Susan Howe is a quarter of a century younger than Rukeyser, born in Boston, MA on June 10, 1937 into what George Butterick has called "one of America's more dynamic and dynastic families, like the Adamses" (313). Her mother was the Irish actor, playwright, director, and novelist Mary Manning – "a member of the Gate Theatre company in its early glory days," friend of Samuel Beckett, directed by W.B. Yeats when she was a student, and involved with the Poets' Theatre in Boston when Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Robert Lowell passed through (PR). Howe's father, Mark DeWolfe Howe, was a Harvard law school professor "known for lecturing in perfect sentences without using notes" and official biographer of Oliver Wendell Holmes – a project that Howe thinks "probably contributed to his early death" (PR). Both parents are influential – are, in fact, deeply present – in Howe's writing. In interviews, she recalls her childhood library as a material manifestation of her mother and father's separate worlds: "In my mind I divided them into sides. One was American-English – settled, true. The other was Irish-English – unsettled, secret" (PR). Many of Howe's critics have witnessed these conflicting pulls on Howe's imagination; as Lynn Keller writes in her introduction to a 1995 interview with Howe, she "combines in her writing, as in her genealogy, an (Irish) love of the word's rich music, its mystery and magic, its wealth of allusive and personal association, with a (New England intellectual's) passion for documentation, fascination with tradition, and quest for truth" (2).

"I was always going to be an artist though the art form changed," Howe told Janet Ruth Falon in 1986 (29). Instead of going to college Howe went to Dublin to follow her mother's

footsteps – a “rebellious act” but not “against [her] parents” (Falon 29). Apprenticing at the Gate Theatre, she painted sets and “began thinking of visual art”; two years later she returned to the U.S. and enrolled in the Boston Museum School (PR). In 1961 Howe moved to New York City with her first husband, the artist Harvey Quaytman, and their daughter Rebecca.¹ There, Howe began making artwork that featured lists of words: “It was as though I had a book of the wall.” As Howe tells the story, the poet Ted Greenwald, then running the St. Mark’s Poetry Project, visited her studio and said, “Why don’t you put these into a book? And so I did” (PR). *Hinge Picture*, Howe’s first chapbook, was published in 1974, followed quickly by several other chapbook-length poems, including “Chanting at the Crystal Sea,” “Secret History of the Dividing Line,” and “Cabbage Gardens” (re-collected in 1996’s *Frame Structures*), all published by small presses in limited editions, and all exhibiting an excitingly “porous border between the visual and the verbal” and an intense scrutiny of received narratives and forms (PR).

More than a dozen books have followed in the ensuing four decades, in which Howe has taken up figures from history, literature, legend, myth, and private life, frequently focusing on the silences left by erased and elided voices. Visually fractured and syntactically challenging, Howe’s pages often feature diagonal, upside-down, and curved lines of language, which can render illegible other language beneath. She includes facsimiles of archival treasures, such as, in 1999’s *Pierce-Arrow*, Charles Sanders Peirce’s scrawled notes, and, in 2007’s *Souls of the Labadie Tract* and on the cover of 2010’s *THAT THIS*, a photocopied scrap of Sarah Pierpont Edwards’s 17th-century wedding dress. In 1985’s *My Emily Dickinson*, she recast Dickinson studies with both an acute attention to Dickinson’s manuscripts and a commitment to understanding her writing as deeply embedded in both the literature and violence of her time. Along with *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history* (1993), *My Emily Dickinson* is considered a work of scholarship, though the

¹ Howe’s daughter, R.H. Quaytman, is now a celebrated visual artist in her own right. The two recently gave a joint keynote address for the Contemporary Artists’ Books Conference at the New York Art Book Fair (27 September 2014).

two collections break into lyrical fragments and feature the figurative language and quick leaps of contemporary verse, while Howe's "poetry" books also frequently house historical and personal explorations written in prose. Recently, Howe has continued to blur boundaries between forms, collaborating with the composer David Grubbs on musical and performance pieces growing from her books; and in 2013, staging her first solo show of visual art at Yale Union in Portland, Oregon. In 2011, Howe received the prestigious Bollingen Prize from Yale University, an award – presented to an American poet for "the best book published during the previous two years or for lifetime achievement in poetry" – that testifies to her position in the contemporary canon.

*

Rukeyser's reception has been as various as her list of disparate projects might suggest, involving the most prestigious of accolades (among them the Harriet Monroe Poetry Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Shelley Prize) as well as shockingly condescending dismissal. As her Yale Younger Poets Prize indicates, Rukeyser rose early to significant acclaim; Kate Daniels describes this first period in her 1996 essay "Muriel Rukeyser and her Literary Critics": "Throughout the 1930s, she was regarded as an important, if not a major, poet among the writers of her generation, which included Delmore Schwartz, John Berryman, and Elizabeth Bishop," celebrated primarily as a writer of social protest, "the best of the young 'revolutionist' poets" (248). In the 1940s, however, her reception took a sharp turn, when, as Daniels narrates, "she was subjected to a series of highly personal reviews that condemned her entire poetic endeavor and called into question her personal and poetic motives" (248). Daniels is referring, in part, to a self-described "imbroglio" launched by an unsigned editorial that appeared on the pages of the *Partisan Review* in 1943. The review's editors wrote condemning Rukeyser's poetics (her "lines of her verse often seemed to resemble a bathrobe ... she shifted back and forth between the orgiastic diction of D.H. Lawrence at his worst and a style suggesting that of *Time* magazine") as well as her politics (she "rode the

bandwagon of proletarian literature,” which she gave up first “in favor of Symbols,” and finally in order to wrap “herself in Old Glory, [sing] the Star Spangled Banner, and chase[] the Marines”) in personal language that, among other things, accused her of intellectual “promiscuity” (471-72). This piece, allegedly about Rukeyser’s “lack of ‘working-class allegiances” also constitutes, as various critics have pointed out, “an attack on the woman poet as intellectual,” as well as anxiety about the poet’s proper vocation and place (Bergman, 556, Lowney 41).

By the 1950s, with the Cold War in full freeze, New Criticism had become the dominant mode for analyzing and, importantly, for *judging* poetry. Aspects of Rukeyser’s work that were already difficult to classify – her range, scope, ambition, and, what she would call “presumption”² – were diametrically opposed to the growing “prestige of expertise” and the critically enforced separation between poetry and other areas of life and thought (Rasula 137). As Rowena Kennedy-Epstein, editor of Rukeyser’s lost Spanish Civil War novel *Savage Coast* (an experimental, elliptical and documentary-infused work not published until 2013) explains in her introduction, “The Cold War containment policies that permeated every aspect of American society found in New Criticism a powerful tool for excising certain kinds of writers from the canon and from history, successfully separating aesthetics from political and popular art forms, denigrating the latter and lauding the former” (xxviii). This all resulted, as Kate Daniels narrates, in “the very real decline of [Rukeyser’s] literary reputation,” a downturn that would persist for the greater part of two decades (256). The details of Rukeyser’s private life, too, likely contributed to this phase of her reception, as it was not only in her writing but in her very person that she seemed to attack decorum: she was, for example,

² “On Presumption” is the title of Rukeyser’s introduction to *Willard Gibbs*, a title I explore further in the following chapter.

the struggling single mother of a son, born in 1947, whose paternity she would not disclose, as well as the lover of both men and women.³

Finally, in the 1970s, so the narrative goes, Rukeyser (who had been writing steadily if a bit more slowly across genres all the while) was re-discovered. In 1974, Virginia Terris – who had previously relied on the judgment of critics like Randal Jarrell, “whose position [she] did not suspect” – turned to Rukeyser’s work, declaring, “I found that an almost complete re-assessment was in order” (15). For Daniels, Rukeyser’s recuperation came out of the period’s political and social unrest: “Her interest in the intersection of private experience and public politics surged into critical favor again as the Vietnam War entered the living rooms of millions of Americans” (257). And though Rukeyser suffered physically in the last decade of her life, in particular from a series of debilitating strokes, she did once more take up her public mantle: she became President of PEN and traveled to Hanoi and to South Korea where she attempted to visit poet Kim Chi Ha on death row.

The more widespread perception, however, is that it was the women’s movement that revived Rukeyser’s reputation. *No More Masks!*, the watershed feminist anthology of poetry, was published in 1973, proudly wearing as its title a line from Rukeyser’s “The Poem as Mask.” David Bergman describes Rukeyser’s “elevation as ‘our mother Muriel’ for a younger generation of feminist poets and critics,” referring to variations on a line attributed both to Erica Jong and Anne Sexton declaring Rukeyser “mother of us all” (553).⁴ And it is in this role that Rukeyser’s work was most visibly brought after her death into the turn of the new century. Renowned feminist writers including Adrienne Rich, Alicia Ostriker, and Alice Walker published tributes in venues like 1999’s

³ Daniels attributes the critical downturn as well to “Rukeyser’s own retreat from the scene, occasioned not only by the demands of motherhood, but also by her desire to avoid any publicity that might bring her to the attention of the House Un-American Activities Committee” (256). Here is David Bergman’s version of events: “Between these two phases – golden girl and mother Muriel – was a period in which she was severely battered by the left and right, and her literary reputation declined” (553).

⁴ Anne Sexton called Rukeyser “mother of everyone” in a November 1, 1967 letter to her and Erica Jong refers to Rukeyser as the strikingly similar “mother of us all” in an interview with Karen Alkalay-Gut that first appeared in *Jerusalem Review II* in 1997. Both phrasings are frequently referred to in writings about Rukeyser, sometimes interchangeably.

How Shall We Tell Each Other of the Poet?: The Life and Writing of Muriel Rukeyser, which includes a section titled “The Body, Feminist Critique, and the Poet as Mother” alongside others on “Activism and Teaching” and “Poetry of Witness.” The 1990s and early 2000s saw the reissue of *The Life of Poetry*, *The Orgy*, and *Houdini* all by Paris Press, a nonprofit publisher of “groundbreaking yet overlooked literature by women.” But, as I will explore, in aggressively foregrounding Rukeyser’s very real interests in women’s experiences, these otherwise laudable and necessary efforts obscure other significant aspects of her achievement, diminishing readers’ understanding of her scholarly complexity. The 2002 republication of *The Orgy*, for example, replaces Rukeyser’s interdisciplinary intertexts – essays by Irish revivalist playwright J.M. Synge and English anthropologist and folklorist Margaret A. Murray included in the original 1965 publication – with an ecstatic introduction by Sharon Olds.

Since the 1970s, Rukeyser’s critics have struggled both to understand her place in the history of American poetry – as Terris comments, “When a serious poet who is prolific does not elicit a body of critical comment, you wonder why” (10) – as well as to create a narrative that will encompass her relentless border-crossing and “stubbornly individualistic” range of endeavors (Daniels 250). Of course the reception history I have sketched here downplays the central fact that the rejection of narrow poetic, political, and personal expectations was woven into Rukeyser’s project from the start, even before the Cold War, during her early period of critical success; as Daniels describes, she “flung herself headfirst into the literary quarrels of the 1930s,” publishing “poems that were simultaneously tied to the apolitical and highly aesthetic tradition of high modernism and to a self-conscious left-wing political identity derived from Marxist theory” (250). But even Daniels, who is a sensitive and diligent reader of Rukeyser, keenly attentive to her breadth and the interdisciplinary roots of her poetics (she writes beautifully, for example, on Rukeyser’s use of the “principle of the expansion joint” as a basis for “her theories about form and structure in

poetry” (253)), describes Rukeyser’s forays beyond poetry as “promot[ing] and explain[ing] the conditions under which her poetry would be fully appreciated, fully interpretable” (250). This understanding of Rukeyser’s writing relegates her most hybrid, challenging, and voraciously investigative works – *Willard Gibbs*, *Houdini*, *The Orgy*, and *The Traces of Thomas Hariot* among them – to the role of supporting cast.⁵

How to make sense of these texts? How to fit them into the varied field of Rukeyser’s career or into narratives of writing by American poets of the 20th century? I will explore reviews of *Willard Gibbs*, *Houdini*, and *The Orgy* at length in the following chapters, but I offer a sampling here to provide a sense of the sheer strangeness of the critical grappling they have invited. Here is the opening of a generally positive review of the *The Traces of Thomas Hariot* (1970) in the *Los Angeles Times*: “Among the more curious obsessions are those of lady writers with some figures from the past. Like a vicarious love affair, or the dedication of a fan to a movie star, these fixations have the force of romance ... Such obsessions are usually harmless, merely a distortion in perception” (LOC I:23 folder 9). It is as though this reader cannot bear to face Rukeyser’s enormously serious undertaking. Her extensive and meticulous research into the life and impact of this (then) forgotten but hugely important Renaissance thinker is recast as an indulgence – not a serious work of scholarship but a harmless romantic fixation. (“There’s one thing you can say about Muriel,” Weldon Kees famously quipped in a one-sentence review of her collection *Wake Island*, “she’s not lazy” (qtd in Bergman 556).) At the same time, in a syndicated Associated Press review, Vincent Cronin received *Thomas Hariot* as an avant-garde experiment, calling it “an Elizabethan *Marienbad*” –

⁵ Louise Kertesz’s formidable 1980 study of Rukeyser’s work and reception explores every book Rukeyser published and is a notable exception to this trend, but it is a beginning stalled, now, for more than three decades. Kertesz observed of her experience researching her project, “Because scholars have not discussed Rukeyser’s work in books and articles, I turned to the reviews which appeared regularly in publications such as the *New Republic* and from time to time in academic journals such as *Yale Review*. In these often brief reviews I found a genuine response to her work, as opposed to categorizing mention in a scholarly book. Reviewers have been passionate in their response; some have loved or hated her, depending on their politics and their preconceptions of what poetry should be and what poetry by a woman should be” (3). This still, for the most part, describes the critical situation.

referring to Alain Resnais's elliptical 1961 film – “playing up the ambiguities and making the poetic most of every known detail” (LOC I:23 folder 9). Frequently readers of these texts accuse Rukeyser of (celebrate Rukeyser for?) writing “poetic prose,” by which they generally mean a prose not beholden to “restraints of grammar, logic, and order” – digressive instead of orderly, not even “writing” so much as “veritable collage” (Hurstfield). It is not so much that these books of Rukeyser's were scorned – though they sometimes were – it is that they could not comfortably be placed. Rukeyser herself explicitly poses the precise questions her critics cannot answer, asking on the first page of *The Orgy*, for example, “What kind of a book is this?” (1), and in her foreword to *One Life*, “What kind of book would you say it is?” (xiii). These are the same deceptively simple, deep-cutting questions whose honest probing she demanded of herself in the context of the works and lives she explored. She writes, for example, at the start of *Willard Gibbs*, “What was this man?” and “What was his impact on the world?” (13, 11); and in *Thomas Hariot*, “Was Hariot a great scientist? A great man?” and “Why is his name almost lost? And what in the present leads to him?” (11, 15).

Many of the qualities that have made Rukeyser's genre-challenging books so difficult to interpret and place – her poetic prose, her rejection of conventional grammatical structures, her collaging of documentary sources and lyrical response, her excursions into different fields – are the same characteristics that have secured for Susan Howe's works a preeminent position in contemporary poetry and poetics. This is true despite the fact that, as Will Montgomery has argued, Howe's writing makes “resistance of interpretive endeavor almost a condition of its existence” (xiii). Playing devil's advocate, the renowned poetry critic and long-time supporter of Howe, Marjorie Perloff, writes in 1989 what reads uncannily like a lampoon of criticism Rukeyser received – in order, in this case however, to tear it down: “Is this then Jabberwocky, nonsense verse? If Howe wants to talk about Hope Atherton's mission to the Indians or apply the ‘themes’ implicit in the tale

– Colonial greed, Puritan zeal, the fruits of imperialism, the loneliness of exile, the inability to communicate with the Other – to the contemporary situation, why doesn’t she just get on with it?” (Collusion 526).

A range of factors accounts for this significant difference in orientation – the critical perception that Rukeyser *should* probably have just gotten on with it, while Howe need not. Howe and Rukeyser’s publishing careers overlapped for only a few years. *Hinge Picture* was published in 1974, the year after Rukeyser’s *Breaking Open*; Howe’s *The Western Borders* appeared in 1976, the same year as Rukeyser’s final collection, *The Gates*. These works of Howe’s certainly look – with their columns and squares and narrow lines of language⁶ (Kaplan Harris has argued that “art still exercised a greater pull on [Howe’s] work in the mid-seventies than poetry” (469)) – and sound – with their breaking up of words and isolation of phonemes (“demon darkened intelle / ct mirror clear receiv / ing the mute vocables / of God” (Hinge 33)) – different from Rukeyser’s. But already in these titles from the 1970s, I see a shared concern with borders, barriers, and possible ways through – “hinge,” “gates,” “breaking open.” And Rukeyser’s “Poem white page white page poem” (from *The Gates*) shows an interest in the page-as-field that Howe’s writing continually probes and explodes (Poems 549).

These overlapping years – when Howe’s writing was first starting to appear – were the height of the “mimeo revolution”: as Steven Clay and Rodney Phillips describe it, “the unprecedented outpouring of poetry books and magazines that took place roughly between 1960 and 1980” (15). This “revolution” – a rejection of what Jerome Rothenberg has called the “unremittingly reactionary” decades prior (10) – was made possible by “[d]irect access to

⁶ In his essential study of Howe’s “word squares,” Brian Reed writes that Howe “has tended to repeat, with variations and refinements, a small set of characteristic layouts, citing Hannelore Möckel-Rieke’s schema of “four principle page designs”: “(1) ‘more or less compromised regions of text’ with assorted indentations and outtakes; (2) a form resembling that of ballads, often consisting of two-line stanzas; (3) a radicalized, ‘exploded’ style with obliquely positioned, intersecting fragments of text; and (4) sections consisting of words, partial words, nonce words, numbers, punctuation marks and/or letters arranged into more-or-less rectangular shapes.”

mimeograph machines, letterpress, and inexpensive offset ... putting the means of production in the hands of the poet” (Clay and Phillips 14). Howe’s first publications – printed by Maureen Owen’s Telephone (based out of The Poetry Project at St. Mark’s) and Lyn Hejinian’s Tuumba Press (out of Berkeley) – participated in these networks and intimate circuits of distribution, making her a member of the “galvanized [] literary groups” that grew up around the hands-on work of making and distributing books (Clay and Phillips 14). Though effort is sometimes made to classify Howe’s different works along generic or categorical lines, separating *My Emily Dickinson* and *The Birth-mark* out as “scholarship,” for example, for the most part, her prose, poetry, scholarship, visual experiment, and collage coexisted between the same covers of these small press books without complaint or much explanation – just one more manifestation of the radical aesthetics she shared with her compatriots. Rukeyser’s “other” work, on the other hand, the body of writing “parallel” to her poetry (Daniels 253), was kept separate, appearing (*when* it appeared – see the rejection history of *Savage Coast* or Rukeyser’s attempts to place *Houdini*, which I will discuss in the third chapter) with significant general interest houses. *The Traces of Thomas Hariot* was published by Random House, *The Orgy* by Coward-McCann (then an imprint of G.P. Putnam’s Son’s), and *Willard Gibbs* by Doubleday. It is not difficult to imagine that different expectations and strictures would attend these circumstances of publication. Critical responses to Rukeyser’s experiments reflect this in their discomfort as well as in their very existence – unlike Howe’s books, favorably reviewed but only in “little magazines” and scholarly venues, Rukeyser’s works received extensive notice in national daily and weekly publications.

From the beginning, Howe’s work has been perceived as participating in a different set of debates about poetry – its purpose; possibilities; place in literary, cultural, and public realms; and relationship to lived life – the contours and contexts of which have shaped her reception. Her first publications with Tuumba Press and in journals like *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* marked her as a

member of the Language Poets, an “amorphous grouping of experimental writers” who “drew on the classical avant-garde of the early twentieth century, Russian formalism, Marxism, and continental critical theory” (Montgomery ix).⁷ Perhaps the most defining feature of Language Poetry has been its antipathy toward confession and “the expressivist lyric” – in short, against the kind of expression that was so affirming and relieving to the feminist writers coming to Rukeyser’s work in the 1970s. It is not difficult to hear what Lorrie Goldensohn was celebrating, writing of Rukeyser’s “The Poem as Mask,” “[t]hrough memory, the mortally wounded psyche is healed and rescued with the child” (122), as being precisely what Perloff was countering when she wrote in 1989, “there is not ... so much as a trace in Howe’s work of the confessional mode so ubiquitous in the poetry of the early seventies” (Collusion 519-20).

This difference speaks less to the complex actualities of Rukeyser and Howe’s writing as to the lenses through which their formal and disciplinary experiments have been viewed and, as a result, what gets highlighted and described. Here are the positions: where some feminist readers sought portrayals of real lives of women with which they could identify, and experienced a distance from actual political concerns in overly “aestheticized” texts (a position lucidly delineated by Toril Moi in *Sexual/Textual Politics*), the very legibility of such resulting constructions rendered them false, manipulative and totalizing to post-structural thinkers. In other words, to the Language Poets, what is required to destroy the hegemony of the normative lyric is precisely the kind of radical formal experimentation Howe practices – such “aestheticization” is what makes a work more “real.” Perloff celebrates Howe’s work *both* because “the fragmentation of the universe is somehow mirrored in the fragmentary nature of the text” *and* because this fragmentary text functions, too, as “a response to the all too ordered, indeed formulaic syntax that characterizes the typical ‘workshop’ poem” (526).

⁷ As I will explore in Chapter Four, though very close with various Language Poets, Howe has always expressed discomfort with this categorization.

But just as Rukeyser's experiments in form are illegible to readers with particular expectations of realism, anxiety about the limitations or prescriptiveness of "identity" writing has caused some of Howe's readers to miss the multi-faceted negotiation of private and public life that her texts make possible. Perloff's own well-documented,⁸ deeply problematic conflations of the "workshop" poem – a common contemporary code-word for mainstream verse, a tracing of whose etymology is out of the scope of the present study – with, for example, the "one-dimensional and simplistic lyric outburst against injustice or racism to be praised because its author is a member of a minority group and hence not to be subjected to the literary norms of the dominant race and class," highlight the gross limitations of her perspective (War 220). As Dorothy Wang points out in her recent book, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry*, "the words 'identity,' 'identitarian,' and 'identity politics' are often automatically conflated," and used "as a reductive shorthand to refer to an essentializing and unthinking 'identity politics' – almost always regarded, explicitly or not, as the provenance of minorities with grievances" (12-13). Though my study deals with two white women poets who do not have to suffer the overt racism of these conflations, the nuanced mode of reading Wang puts forward highlights the multiple sites of interaction between life and writing, providing a relevant and vital model:

There is, as Edward Said reminds us in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, 'a connection between texts and the existential actualities of human life, politics, societies, and events' (these actualities also include, of course, literary and aesthetic engagements). I am not arguing for reading biographically in a simplistic manner but, rather, for taking into account all the factors and contexts – literary and extraliterary

⁸ The most recent site of this is Perloff's 2012 essay in the *Boston Review* in which she makes an example of Rita Dove's *Penguin Anthology of 20th Century American Poetry*. A poetry-world outcry followed in a forum of responses in the *Boston Review* as well as in other publications like the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

– that undergird and help to determine poetic subjectivity and that, consciously or unconsciously, manifest themselves in the language of poems. (xxi)

In general, Howe scholarship suffers from a related, if inverted, short-sightedness to Rukeyser criticism. Because, in 2014, Howe’s poems are easily seen through postmodern critical lenses and assimilated into avant-garde positions, because her forms don’t shock, because we can comfortably call her hybrid experiments “violent collisions” (Lennon), we have ceased really asking, “What is this book?” Above all else, that is the central question I bring to this dissertation.

My decision to join Rukeyser and Howe, to put their work into conversation, is rooted in a moment of intuition. More specifically, it began with my discovery that the two poets tell an identical story about the 19th-century American mathematician, philosopher, and conceiver of Pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce. In the story, Peirce, tasked with defining the word “university” for the *Century Dictionary*, calls it “an institution for the purposes of study.” The editors correct him, declaring that a university is, rather, “an institution for instruction.” Peirce, profound polemicist, responds that, “any such notion was grievously mistaken, that a university had not, never had had, anything to do with instruction.”⁹ In Peirce’s university, knowledge is to be sought, not imparted or dictated. It remains an institution, but it is one rooted in shared pursuit, not in hierarchical transmission. The fact that Rukeyser and Howe tell this same story about Peirce is an evocative coincidence. But it is not mere coincidence. In subject matter, it underscores both poets’ trenchant questioning of the systems and institutions by which our histories, our knowledge, our writings, and our lives are organized. As anecdote, it exemplifies the way in which they conduct that questioning on a human plane – through embodied actual, historical lives, their documents and detritus. Finally,

⁹ The anecdote appears in Rukeyser’s *Willard Gibbs* and in *Pierce-Arrow*, Susan Howe’s 1999 hybrid engagement with Peirce’s life and work, the two books that make up the focus of my second chapter, where I return to both Peirce and this episode.

in privileging study over instruction, they, like Peirce, seek out the independent, the antinomian, the forgotten.

Primed by my discovery of this important shared moment and interlocutor, I began to notice other surprising linkages and overlaps. Both Howe and Rukeyser, for example, describe the founding and construction of New Haven and Yale College upon the graves of the regicides Goffe and Whalley, “two of the judges who condemned Charles I to death, and fled England at the Restoration,” an example for each of them of the violence undergirding the establishment and development of the United States (WG 9). Both experiment with theatrical forms in texts that explore occult subjects – the possibility and danger of giving voice to the dead. Both incorporate documentary materials into their frequently intimate explorations. They don’t just report their discoveries, but convey their physical experiences, as women, researching in hallowed libraries and institutions. Rukeyser writes in *The Traces of Thomas Hariot*, “you are admitted to the room in which you have hoped to be, to start your hunt. You declare yourself, saying what you hope, what you want. The person on the other side of the desk slumps down a bit – one vertebra, say – and answers, ‘No.’ Many writers ... scholars ... Americans ... turn raspberry-color then, all their hopes blasted; or go very hostile; or go to the National Portrait Gallery and cry” (308). In her books, Howe stands in the stacks of Widener Library, she sits in the bowels of Sterling Library, she enters the neo-Georgian Houghton Library, and she worries, in the face of their architecture and power structures, about her appearance, her clothing, her credentials, her briefcase, her name.

These two poets respond to the same texts: *King Lear*, *Moby Dick*, the Bible. They share literary interlocutors: Peirce, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Robert Duncan, Charles Olson. Sometimes their language is almost identical, as in these lines from Rukeyser’s *Houdini* and Howe’s *The Liberties*: “I see a man. I cannot see his eyes – / I see a woman putting on a ring – / I see a gold key. I see a gold key – / I see fire. I see fire. It looks

like hell” (H 3) and “I see a flame / I see a ring / I see a globe / The room is empty / My chair is glass” (L 165).

These examples are varied and vivid, suggesting not just one common interest or area, but a ramifying confluence of shared themes, concerns, and methods. It would be correct and even essential to assert that Howe and Rukeyser are both interested in American history, that they are beholden to traditions of Transcendentalism and Pragmatism, that they write using “open” forms, and that they are women invested in histories, traditions, and lineages in which women’s experiences and perspectives have been elided, submerged, or ignored. Indeed, I explore each of these assertions within the pages of this dissertation. But what do these different interests and perspectives have to do with each other? What accounts for their range, or for the fact that they appear in the work of such markedly different writers?

In attempting to answer these questions – attempting to understand the stakes of Howe’s and Rukeyser’s investigations, the knowledge about the world they produce, how that knowledge relates to their lives and their readers’ lives, and how poetic forms and thinking make that knowledge possible – I locate three discrete but interrelated aspects of their poetic projects and practice. First, in their capacious imaginations, their interest in digging deeply into a variety of subjects and ideas, I identify what I call, following Ed Sanders, the investigative strain of their work: “poetry as history, or history-poesy,” a poetry, “using *every* bardic skill and meter and method of the last 5 or 6 generations, in order to describe *every* aspect (no more secret governments!) of the historical present” (10-11). Within this investigative rubric we can observe their interdisciplinary breadth as well as their consultation and incorporation of documents, scholarly evidence, and the materials of archival research. Secondly, both poets use explicitly autobiographical material: they describe the experience of researching, placing themselves within the physical structure of the archive; but, even further, they root their wide-ranging projects in their own *intimate* lives – details from childhood,

motherhood, the mourning of parents and lovers, quotidian events, emotional response. Finally, their formal innovation is rooted not in aesthetic trends but in the materials and thought-work of their investigations: the structures of their writings grow directly from the substance of their scholarship.

In itself, each of these elements would constitute an important aspect of a writer's poetics. Together, they present an original – even counterintuitive – matrix of approaches and concerns. The incorporation of documents, for example, might seem at odds with engagement of overtly personal material. But in fact, this is precisely what we see in works like *Houdini*, in which Rukeyser intertwines language from the 1926 Congressional Hearings on Fortune Telling as her play moves further toward her overtly subjective response to the magician's myth. In Howe's *Pierce-Arrow*, I will argue, both her grammatically open-ended sentences and her foregrounding of her private experience of grief constitute direct engagements with Peirce's pragmatism. The more these texts confront the world of ideas the more intimate and the more structurally original they become. Thus, instead of bullet-pointing a list of techniques and themes and mining Rukeyser and Howe's works for an accumulation of instances, I allow these methods and ideas to emerge from my intensive engagement with the texts themselves – interwoven strands encountered in their complexity and braided throughout my own work.

I have several precursors and guides in this inductive methodology – not least Rukeyser and Howe, who are constantly, in Howe's words, “discovering something, then following that lead to something else” (Falon 31). Both Ammiel Alcalay and Steve Evans have argued forcefully, if differently, for such a method in the particular context of contemporary poetry criticism. In his controversial essay “The Resistible Rise of Fence Enterprises” deriding the facile categories of 1990s verse culture, Evans writes, “Denied the shortcut of deduction – of letting the conceptual magnet draw to it what filings it may and calling that a ‘finding’ – criticism has no alternative but the long

march of induction, of reading in detail and arguing from particulars.” And Alcalay asserts in *a little history*, “[t]he idea that a method of interpretation might necessitate living with or through a work immediately puts us in the realm of the ‘classic,’ but not necessarily in the terms in which we’ve been taught to think about the ‘classics.’ The alternative is to remove a work or an author from their own life cycle, to label and categorize as a means of placing them into the kind of administrative detention our literary life is largely confined to” (216). Rooting Rukeyser and Howe in their rich and multifaceted life cycles, seeking out and delving into their many sources – literary, historical, mythological, documentary, and personal – and rejecting the crutch of categorical assumptions in interpreting their forms and structures, it is this “classic,” inductive model that I enact. The range of critical orientations and intertexts I engage in these pages grows organically from the particular urgencies of Howe and Rukeyser’s own questions and concerns.

I confess that a significant reason I continued to pursue the reverberations between the writing of these two poets is because linking them flies in the face of orthodoxies about poetic lineage and taxonomies of 20th and 21st-century writing. And here, again, I take my cue from Howe and Rukeyser, both of whom have been consistently skeptical about the categories into which they are placed. (“This has to do with changing order and abolishing categories,” Howe declares of her poetic method in her *Talisman* interview (BM 164).) The lineages in which Rukeyser and Howe are received are, of course, not universally theorized; there exist important disagreements and divisions immediately relevant to where the two poets fit in. Is Charles Olson, for example, a precursor to the Language Poets, inaugurator of the “open forms” they “extrapolated” (Green 83), or is projective verse, with its “appeal to perceptual experience as a means of renewing poetic language and restoring the ‘familiar’ – intimacy with nature and the body – to the human species,” implicitly countered by poststructuralist, deconstructionist, and Marxist critiques (Nichols 3)? What do these different interpretations say about Olson’s influence on Howe’s work, or his relationship with

Rukeyser? Does Olson's writing represent an instance of the "hidden feminine" for Howe and Rukeyser or is his an important though destructive "masculine energy base, a projective, ego-driven fervor" that they must struggle against? (Commander, Prevallet). Do Rukeyser's leftist politics and Howe's rejection of closure pit them against the finish of high modernism or are they working self-consciously in the tradition of Stevens, Eliot, and Pound? Though it is not my intention to dive into these taxonomic debates as such, I would like to insist that the approach we take to such lineages matters. As Alcalay writes,

Were it generally accepted, for example, that, to paraphrase Robert Duncan, while many thought we were in the age of Auden, we were actually living in the age of Olson, very different histories would get written; it would mean a consideration not only of 'poetry' but work in the world: the creation of institutions, of networks of ideas, perspectives, forms, relationships and energies that circulate far beyond the person. Nor should such designations be seen as a wrestling match between boys but a fundamental lens through which our whole cultural, political, and imaginative landscape would suddenly shift and begin looking radically different than it now does. (208-9)

The question I raise is: what would the "whole cultural, political, and imaginative landscape" look like if Rukeyser and Howe's projects were understood to be truly kindred?

Though my study is the first to imagine this joining, some recent scholarship has begun to clear the ground. As I mentioned earlier, the last two decades have seen a surge of critical interest in Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead," which is currently – and correctly, I think – read as a fundamental experiment in documentary poetics. Critic Stephen Burt's assertion in *The Nation* in January 2012 that the poem is "now undeniably influential" on contemporary experimental investigative work – with his "now" and "undeniably" gently indicating prior dismissal – underscore

this change in widespread reception. It is because of “The Book of the Dead” that poet Kristin Prevallet reads Rukeyser in an essay about investigative poetics that also mentions Howe, writing: “Looking back at Rukeyser reminds us how important it is to remember that the inclusion of ‘history’ in the poem was (and still is) practiced by many other poets unrelated to Olson’s Black Mountain School trajectory” (a trajectory, to reprise for a moment my subject of the last paragraph, with whose various members Rukeyser was actually in productive conversation, in particular Olson himself and Robert Duncan). The only scholarly book I have located in which Howe and Rukeyser are both treated at length is Michael Davidson’s engaging *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (1997), in which he explains, “Modern poets from Marianne Moore and Ezra Pound to Muriel Rukeyser, Charles Olson, Susan Howe, and Theresa Cha have constructed their poems quite literally out of the ghostly ‘marks’ of others, not to celebrate the triumph of aesthetic form over the quotidian but to foreground the ongoing historiographic project of poetry” (xii). Davidson also singles out “The Book of the Dead,” writing, “[a]lthough ‘The Book of the Dead’ is unique among Rukeyser’s poems in its direct quotation of nonliterary materials, it is consistent with her lifelong commitment to personal witness” (149).¹⁰

Such narrow attention to this one poem, important though it may be, displays a fundamental misunderstanding of Rukeyser’s ongoing, interdisciplinary, genre-bending project. As a group of

¹⁰ It is worth mentioning here Bernadette Mayer’s 1978 book-length poem *Midwinter Day*, in which both Howe and Rukeyser appear in a wide-ranging list of foremothers, separated only by a comma and linebreak:

There’s Anne Bradstreet and Tsai Wen Gi,
Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alice Notley and me,
Adrienne Rich, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton,
Elinor Wylie, Louise Bogan, Denise Levertov,
There’s Barbara Guest, H.D. and Harriet Beecher Stowe,
Murasaki Shikibu, Fanny Howe and Susan Howe,
Muriel Rukeyser, Mina Loy, Lorine Neidecker,
Gwendolyn Brooks, Marina Tsvetayeva and Anna Akhmatova,
There’s Rebecca Wright
And the saints

I read in the papers that women live longer
Because they don’t do all of this
And as they begin to become more like men
In all these ways they’ll die equally soon. (111)

contemporary Rukeyser scholars have begun to show, “The Book of the Dead” is not an aberration. Catherine Gander’s recent monograph *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary* traces “Rukeyser’s sustained involvement with documentary forms and ideologies throughout her working life,” examining the manifestations of these forms in her books “that have apparently never been analysed in print,” like *Thomas Hariot* and *Willard Gibbs* (17, 18). Kennedy-Epstein’s important work salvaging *Savage Coast* and assembling Rukeyser’s Spanish Civil War writings approaches an understanding of her “radical, avant-garde literary project ... [which] subverts the perceived separation between political and aesthetic poetry inculcated in mid-twentieth-century literary culture, while expanding the boundaries of gender and genre through formal experiment” (Fires 388-89). A recent issue of *The Journal of Narrative Theory* dedicated to Rukeyser and edited by Elisabeth Däumer has begun to make a movement of these new understandings: it includes essays by Gander, Kennedy-Epstein, Eric Keenaghan, and myself, all exploring works beyond “The Book of the Dead” within this expanded field.

Some recent readings of Howe, too, work toward the articulation of a place where she and Rukeyser might meet. Essays interpreting Howe in the context of Charles Sanders Peirce’s pragmatism have appeared, framing her philosophical encounters with questions like my own – “live questions” as Kristen Case articulates, “about our relationship to the world that we both constitute and inhabit, about how we come to what we call knowledge about that world” (xv). Several of these studies – chiefly Case’s *American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice: Crosscurrents from Emerson to Susan Howe* and Miriam Marty Clark’s “The Library and the Wilderness: Susan Howe’s Pragmatism” – make extensive use of Joan Richardson’s ground-breaking work on the “relation between fact and feeling” in the Pragmatist enterprise, which is essential to my own understanding.¹¹ Miriam Nichols’s

¹¹ See also Kimberly Lamm, “Within Hearing Distance of Philosophy: Susan Howe’s Textual Portrait of Charles S. Peirce” and John Harkey’s “Lattice-Glyphs: The Intensive ‘Small Poetry’ of Susan Howe’s Recent Work,” as well as

excellent “reframing of the New American poetry and its recent cognates” in *Radical Affections: Essays on the Poetics of Outside* as a “living” projective lineage providing “an adaptable, pragmatic poetic methodology and articulat[ing] a range of experience of ongoing significance” is also relevant (3). Nichols reads Howe in conjunction with Olson, Duncan, Robert Creeley, Jack Spicer, and Robin Blaser – but this constellation might easily encompass Rukeyser as well, providing a robust scaffolding for her poetic orientation and its stakes. My articulation in Chapter Two of poetry as a “way” finds an echo in Nichols’s description of her poets: each of whom, she writes, “suggests a *Tao*, created through personal traversal of his or her chosen field. By *Tao* I mean nothing more esoteric than ‘way,’ ‘path,’ ‘manner,’ ‘method,’ or ‘unfolding of a life’; a *Tao* suggests a focus on *knowing how* rather than *knowing that*” (6).

Nichols’s distinction between “knowing how” and “knowing that” is particularly salient. “That” is the realm of categorization, but “how” is the province of process, a distinction absolutely central to both of my poets, in particular to Rukeyser’s understanding of poetry – which she defines not by recourse to its traditions or particular formal strategies, but as a “*kind* of knowledge,” a mode of encountering our complex world (LOP 7, emphasis original). This understanding of poetry undergirds my dissertation. It is explored at length in my second chapter in particular, in which I investigate Rukeyser’s use of analogy as a *process* of making connections across different fields and, therefore, her biography of Willard Gibbs as a wager on the efficacy of the poetic leap outside of the narrowly construed field of poetry in which it is expected and therefore easy to dismiss. In that same chapter, I read Howe’s *Pierce-Arrow* – with its prose and poetry sections, as well as the facsimiles of “graphs, charts, prayers, and tables” that she also frees to be “even poems” – as confirming and extending this understanding, operating as an enactment of and investigation into poetry’s dynamic set of relations (ix). Taking poetry, with Rukeyser, as a “*kind* of knowledge,” I step around

Cecily Park’s “The Secret Swamps in Susan Howe’s *Secret History of the Dividing Line*, *Thoron*, and *Personal Narrative*” which reads Howe in an Edwardsian mode.

conventions of generic classification to engage what look on the surface to be non-poetic works. Once more my cue comes from my poets.¹² Howe has been asked repeatedly about such distinctions. Here is her response to Janet Ruth Falon in 1986: “I’m interested now in writing essays ... For me they are a kind of poetry. I have the same problem with meaning and sound when I write them that I do when I write a poem. I don’t like separating things into categories” (32). To Jon Thompson in 2005: “There is almost no difference to me even if I’m anxious not to make scholarly mistakes. I get so involved with the sound in my head of the words I am looking at on the page that the aural alchemy between them is the overarching force.” And to the Academy of American Poets in 2011: “One of my models for the ocular rhythm I am trying to explain is Emerson. Prose for Emerson is poetry. Almost always his verses seem to be composed at a less active pitch. For him, prose is where life is. Why am I even calling it prose?” Thus, I read Rukeyser and Howe’s various hybrid works as a whole with deep attention to sonic play; spatial acts structure; relation-making through metaphor, analogy, and juxtaposition; uncertainty and elision – the complex set of figurative, aural, and visual processes upon which any study of poetry insists.

Rukeyser and Howe frequently refuse the comforts of traditional or easily identifiable forms and genres. Their works, however, are in no way haphazard. The two poets build structures, as I mentioned earlier, directly from the substance of their scholarship – their engagements with physics, philosophy, engineering, history, psychology, politics, magic, myth, literature, and life – dealing, in a literal sense, in organic forms. In his essay, “The Truth and Life of Myth,” Robert Duncan writes:

¹² Not all Howe scholars draw sharp distinctions between her poetry and prose. I am particularly indebted to Stephen Collis’s brilliant and lyrical study *Through the Words of Others: Susan Howe and Anarcho-Scholasticism* which he begins, “‘Criticism turns poetry into prose that misremembers its source,’ writes John Taggart ... My desire here – in a little book on Susan Howe’s scholarly project – would be to turn prose into poetry that remembers its source. This may not be possible, in the end – genre has its fastenings that, no matter how loosened, continue to hold, and yet, the blurring of boundaries is the very essence of Howe’s work – whether as poet or critic – poetry is scholarship and scholarship, a poem. Complicit poet-critic – arguing *with* the archive – *within* the archive – is where Howe’s example leads” (5).

As the story told of stars and subatomic particles and the story told of living organisms continue to reorient our possible knowledge of what is, the poetic imagination faces the challenge of finding a structure that will be the complex story of all the stories felt to be true, a myth in which something like the variety of man's experience of what is real may be contained. (6)

Duncan understands that poetry must try to encompass this multiplicity of experience that constitutes our relationship with the world in all its registers. Metaphors are not just acts of comparison, they are ways of imagining, making possible what we can know and how we know it; they are the province – or obligation – not only of poets. This understanding has been articulated and supported across disciplines, again and again. In a review of Brian Greene's popular scientific book about contemporary cosmological research, *The Hidden Reality: Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos*, Timothy Ferris reminds us, "scientists of the past compared nature to a musical instrument, a clockwork or a steam engine (from which came, respectively, Pythagorean mathematics, Newtonian dynamics and thermodynamics)." Ways of imagining determine the structures we build to understand and describe our universe – this is true of scientific, social scientific, and philosophic structures, as well as artistic ones.

The title of this dissertation, "Dark Matter," refers to "the longest outstanding problem in all of modern physics" – the matter that we have not yet been able to observe, but which we know "provides the gravitational pull to hold together the galaxies and clusters we observe in the Universe today" (Freese 9, 83). My invocation of dark matter resonates with the "dark side of history" from which Howe works to "tenderly lift ... voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate," and with the dark "shining down to us" of Rukeyser's "men and women who in full consciousness knew they had failed" – her lineage of misunderstood heroes from the 19th century that includes Gibbs,

Whitman, and Melville (Leaves 14, Gibbs 405).¹³ The scientific pursuit of dark matter has been almost exactly contemporaneous with the poetic experiments this dissertation tracks, the combined writing careers of Rukeyser and Howe. The Swiss physicist Fritz Zwicky first postulated dark matter's existence in 1937, "although for 30 years after his proposal, it was largely unappreciated; astronomers did not see Zwicky's anomaly as a crisis leading to a possible paradigm shift. It took about 40 years for Zwicky's insight to be fully accepted" (Sanders 12). Dark matter is important to me, too, because it is a *structuring* force: "We see its gravitational effects everywhere – it bends light; it makes gas whizz around the centers of galaxies. Without it galaxies could never have formed" (Freese 83). And, finally, I have called my study "Dark Matter," because searching for this essential ingredient of the cosmos has necessitated the dismantling of previously conceived systems in order to account for the enormously complex truth of experience: "Dark matter, in an astronomical sense, is introduced to explain the difference between how objects in the sky ought to move, according to some preconceived notion, and how they are actually observed to move" (Sanders 11).

In 1955, Charles Olson wrote this in a letter to his friend and student Ed Dorn:

Best thing to do is to dig one thing or place or man until you yourself know more abt
that than is possible to any other man. It doesn't matter whether it's Barbed Wire or
Pemmican or Paterson or Iowa. But exhaust it. Saturate it. Beat it.

And then U KNOW everything else very fast: one saturation job (it
might take 14 years). And you're in, forever. (306-07)

¹³ I am not the first to use dark matter as a productive metaphor for interpreting artistic structures and practices. Scholar of Renaissance dramatic literature Andrew Sofer titled his 2013 study of "invisibility in drama, theater, and performance" "Dark Matter," explaining: "Translated into theatrical terms, dark matter refers to the invisible dimension of theater that escapes visual detection, even though its effects are felt everywhere in performance" (3).

The “saturation job” is the primary mode for both Howe and Rukeyser.¹⁴ This dissertation, too, is such an attempt. In each of the chapters that follows, I pair texts by Rukeyser and Howe in order to “dig” as deeply as possible into their works and lives and minds, and also to follow them into “everything else” – trampling across generic lines and trespassing into other disciplines – going as far as I can possibly go. I have done this, as Howe describes of her own study of Emily Dickinson, “not to explain the work, not to translate it, but to meet the work with writing – you know, to meet in time, not just from place to place but from writer to writer, mind to mind, friend to friend, from words to words ... I wanted to do that. Not just to write a tribute but to meet her in the tribute. And that’s a kind of fusion” (BM 158).

In her manuscript notes for *The Orgy*, Rukeyser writes, “nobody knows where an explorer is going. He is finding out for all of us by finding out for himself” (LOC I:30 folder 2).

And so on we go.

¹⁴ Stephen Collis grounds his work on Howe in this same Olson quote, writing, “Howe takes the idea of the ‘saturation job’ as her primary practice – weaving and unweaving multiple strands until words of others saturate and cross-pollinate each other” (6).

CHAPTER 2

As a Poet: *Willard Gibbs* and *Pierce-Arrow*

Opprobrium was not the only reaction that Muriel Rukeyser received for *Willard Gibbs*, her 1942 biography of the largely unknown if enormously influential 19th-century physical chemist, though the criticism was severe. As *The Kenyon Review* summarized by the spring of 1943, she had earned “a number of slaps on the wrist – and even, from a particularly malicious reviewer, one in the face” (Rice 310).¹⁵ The “malicious reviewer” was, most likely, Joseph Wood Krutch, writing in *The Nation* in January 1943, and his “Deep Waters” is certainly a *tour* of critical *force*. Krutch passes harsh judgment on the achievement of Rukeyser’s text, writing: “I am bound to confess, not only that I found her book very exceptionally hard going, but also that after I had finished I did not feel that I knew much more than I did before.” He insults her style – “equal portions” of “irrelevance and rhapsody” – and he dismisses her method as presenting “notions” that he suspects of being “quite a priori and also antecedent to her investigation of Gibbs.” Finally, cutting deep to the core, Krutch condemns Rukeyser’s very undertaking, asserting: “I am still not certain either that [Gibbs] deserves a popular biography or that, if he does, Miss Rukeyser was the person to write it.” (97).

Indeed, *Willard Gibbs* is a strange undertaking. It is a popular biography of a famously uninteresting individual. Rukeyser stretches the story of a life lived from February 1839 to April 1903 beyond its temporal and geographic contours, beginning with the Amistad slave-ship mutiny in spring 1839 and ending with the first stirrings of WWII and the discoveries of quantum physics. It is a book about an abstruse chemist and mathematician whose writings were difficult for other scientists to understand, written by a poet with no particular scientific training or background. It is a narrative assembled from meager sources and despite serious archival omissions. It is a project completely unsanctioned, even opposed, by the subject’s heirs (its first words are, “This is not an

¹⁵ See Kertesz for a compilation and description of critical responses in scientific, historical, and literary publications (181-98).

authorized biography” (v)). And, in the final chapter, Rukeyser admits, “Coming to these years to understand a life, one may come away with a failure richer than that narrow success might ever have been” (429). A rich failure.

Why does Rukeyser write a biography if her hope is not for readers to come away “understand[ing] a life”?¹⁶ What alternative substance or grounding can intense focus on a particular individual provide? What might a different reader than Krutch claim to “know” upon completing the journey across seas, years, and disciplines Rukeyser sets in motion in these pages? By what process is that knowledge communicated or activated? What balances and organizes the structure she has built? What *is* this book?¹⁷

On the most basic level, the book is concerned with Gibbs’s influences on American culture and American culture’s influences on Gibbs. It contains a chapter titled “Science and the Imagination” and another titled “The Civil War.” There is much on Gibbs’s life-long home, New Haven, as it develops and changes through his lifetime. One early critic took issue with the biographically promising “New Haven Childhood” chapter for containing “exactly two paragraphs and one sentence about Gibbs himself,” preferring instead “colorful details of early New Haven and ... a stimulating attempt to revive the forgotten poet James Gates Percival” (Dick 100). Some of the middle chapters follow Gibbs’s life more closely – “The Years Abroad,” “Return to America,” “The First Papers,” “A Chair in Mathematical Physics” – describing his theories, investigating his notebooks, relating some anecdotes and observations. But when Gibbs dies in chapter fifteen of

¹⁶ These questions are complicated by Rukeyser’s exploration of the same themes across various media. In addition to her biography, Rukeyser also wrote a poem about Gibbs, famously describing the long tome a “footnote to the Gibbs poem” (Craft 130).

¹⁷ Karen Veitch faces the same stumbling block of this seemingly basic question in a recent article using *Willard Gibbs* as an instantiation of Rukeyser’s own theory that science and literature are linked as sources of ‘energy’ through which the operations of cultural and political power are both revealed and changed (242). She writes: “It is impossible to read *Willard Gibbs* as a biography in any traditional sense of the genre. What, then, is *Willard Gibbs*?” (241). As I mentioned in my introduction, such earnest probing is also reflective of Rukeyser’s own methods. Rukeyser writes, for example, of Willard Gibbs: “What was this man? What impact? What restrictions? What gift?” (13)

twenty, Rukeyser turns in the same paragraph from him to the Wright Brothers, as they “watch[ed] sea gulls, their flights, their wings, the structure of their bodies” (348).

I would like to ask what happens if, in attempting comprehensively to answer questions about what *Willard Gibbs* is, we don’t just excuse, but instead take seriously its unorthodoxies and quirks – among which are its “irresponsible” technique, “centrifugal” form, and “inflated” style – and interrogate the literary and intellectual work that they do (Gabriel 751, Dick 99, Rice 311). At base, this would entail querying Rukeyser’s choice to write about Gibbs despite all of the obvious reasons not to. The most potentially damning objection to her book – articulated in a personal letter from Albert Einstein – would be that she lacked the “fundamental grasp” necessary for explicating Gibbs’s scientific discoveries, the sole legitimate basis for sustained attention to him. Rukeyser had reached out to Einstein in September 1942, asking him to reconsider writing a preface to the biography after he had refused a direct query from the publisher. Her letter movingly and humbly describes her undertaking and makes a sweeping case for its significance. “The book itself – as a book, as a personal production – is not the point,” she wrote to the great scientist, “It has a great deal more to do, I think, with the human condition; with the need that today is felt everywhere ... for more information, to deal with all the parts of the universe, and closely and painfully, with human lives.” Though courteous, Einstein’s response was steadfast; he argued that a text rooted in a scientist’s life and not in his work risks “banal hero-worship, based on emotion and not insight.” Truly engaging *Willard Gibbs* requires understanding Rukeyser’s conviction about the inextricable relationship between emotion and insight – neither of which, for her, could be chosen at the expense of the other.

Disregarding this obvious and basic strangeness, the publisher Doubleday, Doran & Company attempted to pitch the book along familiar, sensational lines. A glossy advertisement found among Rukeyser’s papers in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library declares:

Seventy years ago a quiet professor at Yale named Josiah Willard Gibbs made an amazing discovery which he called the Phase Rule. It proved to be key to the hidden secrets of nature and led to the great advances in all branches of science which have been made in the last half century ... But the quiet professor got little attention during his lifetime ... It has remained for Muriel Rukeyser to achieve a publishing 'scoop' by telling the story of this genuine giant whose greatness has never before been defined between the covers of a popular biography. (n.d., ms. annotation in margin)

The disjunction between this description of heroic journalistic trailblazing and Rukeyser's own vision of her project is encapsulated in Rukeyser's copy of the document. In the margin beside the continuation of this advertisement – "It is no exaggeration to say that motion pictures, the telephone, the gramophone, radio would not have been possible if Gibbs had not found the royal road to discovery" – Rukeyser's distinctive script counters, succinctly: "Yes, it is"

The primary set of difficulties with Rukeyser's text all have to do with its breaking of generic and disciplinary strictures. Her popular biography refuses to behave as a popular biography, refuses to reach for the ascribed aspirations of the genre: the publishing "scoop," the juicy tidbit. Rukeyser will not account for its importance along easily transmittable lines. At the same time, she refuses to remain within her field, stubbornly attaching her poetic gifts to a subject who was completely unromantic in his unwavering, myopic dedication to scientific work. The risk of speaking outside one's discipline is the risk of misunderstanding, of doing damage, of eliding depth, of ignoring difference. It is not a negligible danger. How could she possibly speak for the Phase Rule, or account for its reverberating significance? Why take those risks? "On Presumption," is how Rukeyser titles her introduction to *Willard Gibbs*. Not only does she presume to write about a figure about which she has no claim to obvious authority, she claims to be doing so *because* she is a poet. Understanding

concretely how she writes *as* a poet might shift the way in which we contextualize her particular choices of form and method.¹⁸

But what does that actually mean? Foregrounding an author's poet status *vis-à-vis* a prose work of biography is not to excuse inflations or flights of fancy; that would be to take poetry as nothing more than ornamental language. For Rukeyser, however, poetry is a way, a process, of thinking and making meaning, particularly valuable in situations of great complexity. At the start of the series of lectures published in 1949 as *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser describes poetry as "one *kind* of knowledge – infinitely precious, time-resistant more than monuments, here to be passed between the generations in any way it may be" (7, emphasis original). Poetry must not – can not – be cordoned off from other modes of thinking or fields of thought. As Syrian poet Adonis notes, it "is more than a means or a tool, like technology: it is, rather, like language itself, an innate quality. It is not a stage in the history of human consciousness, but a constituent of this consciousness" (qtd. in Alcalay 12). For Rukeyser, this constituency is both specific and open-ended; she continues, "Poetry is, above all, an approach to the truth of feeling, and what is the use of truth? How do we use feeling? How do we use truth?" (LOP 8). Poetry, as a *way* might provide access— even to science – if we are willing to interrogate how we use it.

In expounding on the title of the introduction to *Willard Gibbs*, Rukeyser is forthright about her project's contested status and, as a result, about the goals to which her book aspires; they are remarkably far from the achievement her publishers advertised. She writes:

It is by a long road of presumption that I come to Willard Gibbs. When one is a woman, when one is writing poems, when one is drawn through a passion to know people today and the web in which they, suffering, find themselves, to learn the

¹⁸ Kertesz makes a similar observation, writing: "A reader of *Willard Gibbs* must admit the validity of a prose that moves like poetry and has poetic coherence" (184). Countering criticism with an assertion of poetic authority, Kertesz does not, however, probe what constitutes poetic movement or coherence in terms of Rukeyser's structure or techniques.

people, to dissect the web, one deals with the processes themselves. To know the processes and the machines of process: plane and dynamo, gun and dam. To see and declare the full disaster that the people have brought on themselves by letting these processes slip out of the control of the people. To look for the sources of energy, sources that will enable us to find the strength for the leaps that must be made. (12)

A leap is a way of getting from one point to a distant, difficult other. Poetry traffics in leaps, highlighting the simultaneity of both connection and disjunction. Leaps can be a way of invoking and embodying comparison without glossing over the seeming insurmountability of difference – poetry and science, planes and suffering, dams and passion. But only if our eyes are open.

That Rukeyser breaks generic and disciplinary rules without an obvious, classifiable purpose is the second order of difficulty readers have with *Willard Gibbs*. Insofar as her purpose is articulated – “look[ing] for the sources of energy ... that will enable us to find the strength for the leaps that must be made” – it is an aspirational or a poetic one. What her purpose requires is profound empathy (“a passion to know people”) and the explosion of categories through the act of analogy. The text agitates for making leaps outside of the sphere of poetry, in which the act is acceptable, expected, and therefore easy to dismiss. As a result, *Willard Gibbs* is a wager on the broader efficacy of the poetic leap – a wager Rukeyser leverages by grafting it onto a different genre. “[A]nalogies are dangerous,” she writes, addressing the motley legacy of her subject’s discoveries as much as her own method, “but they are most dangerous when they are most usable” (365).

Rukeyser’s great insight is that analogy is “another form of life”: “delicate, vulnerable, precious,” and requiring constant shifting and vigilance (403). This argument is at once what the book is about – Gibbs’ discoveries about energy reverberating, sometimes to devastating effect, in linguistics, literature, history, agriculture, nuclear energy – and what makes the book possible, structurally. In pursuing this resonance of form and content, *Willard Gibbs* enacts what it seeks to

explore. Or, it explores by enacting. In this, it is once more illustrative of the method, or activity, of poetry as Rukeyser defines it in *The Life of Poetry*: “In poetry, form and content, relation and function, reach and merge” (40). *Willard Gibbs* is a book wrought of analogy about the dangers and possibilities of analogy. Rukeyser is not only asserting that we can and must move between disciplines – in itself a controversial enough point that her most sensitive readers have defended through the decades¹⁹ – but also performing *how* we have done and should do that connecting. Further, she is warning that this method is a risky, often doomed, affair, in part because of fear, misunderstanding, and small-mindedness: “War and after-war are filled with hatred, and this hatred turns against the imagination, against poetry, against structure of any kind. It wants detail, it wants the practical and concrete” (WG 7). But some of the danger is also inherent in the activity of connection: as Rukeyser knows from Gibbs, Charles Lyell, Charles Darwin, and others, growth and progress on our planet is often wrought from violence and destruction. That is “the violent axiom-breaking gesture of the imagination,” as well as of biological, geological, and chemical progress (LOP 7). The new grows from the soil of the decaying old. As Barbara Maria Stafford writes, the “imagination itself is analogous to biological evolution in that it requires the unpredictable generation of a rich diversity of alternatives and conjectures” (49). Gibbs himself toed this line. As Rukeyser describes in a 1949 article in *Physics Today*, Gibbs “is not stopped by the weakness inherent in analogy, he can use analogy’s strength and then throw away his model ... The most sensitive analogies are here, and they lead on” (12).

Analogy is the frequent focal point for literature and science. And here, analogically, I take “focal point” from its usage in physics: in the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, “the point at which rays or

¹⁹ Clive Bush argues in 1977 that *Willard Gibbs* and *The Traces of Thomas Harriot* “show a poet confronting achievement in the history of science and hence automatically challenging, in the very attempt, the assumption that these fields are mutually exclusive” (3). David S. Barber writes in 1982: “Central to her poetic esthetic is the belief that poetry and science are equally valid ways of seeing the world, both needing the other in order to attain their greatest force” (2). And in 2010 Catherine Gander calls for deeper scrutiny of this connectivity and the sort of formal analysis I attempt here: “Although several critics have acknowledged Rukeyser’s insistence upon the necessity of unhindered relations between all things, there seems to be no critical appreciation of her application of this theory in terms of formal method” (772).

waves meet after reflection or refraction, or the point from which diverging rays or waves appear to proceed.” Critics’ concern about Rukeyser’s lack of scientific credentials or expertise partially stems from a suspicion that poets and artists simply skim scientific phrases, images, and concepts for clever repurposing. This orientation assumes that the intersections between linguistic and scientific arts are neither substantive nor reciprocal. In “Like a metaphor,” the cheekily titled recent forum on the intersections of poetry and science in *Jacket2*, the online journal of modern and contemporary poetics, convener Gilbert Adair identifies that attitude as “seem[ing] to imply a world in which science entirely serves poetry by providing cool metaphors for ideas that have already otherwise been arrived at.” Taking on his call to describe a thicker and more complicated vision of the relationship between the two fields, Rae Armantrout reminds readers that “metaphor is ‘always already’ embedded in the language of science. The language of physics, in particular, is math. When a physicist tries to tell us about quantum mechanics, he/she has to use metaphor.”

This point about science’s reliance on metaphor is also important to *Willard Gibbs*. Yet rather than Rukeyser using it, as she might, to defend her undertaking – *somebody* has to use language to describe the physical chemist’s life and findings, so it might as well be a poet practiced in employing metaphor – she approaches the entanglement from an alternative direction. She does not assert that Gibbs’s science requires another order or form of communication beyond its insufficient native language of math, a necessity rooted in a lack. Instead, she emphasizes the fact that his work was already invested in communication. She underscores the similarities between the realms of words and mathematical symbols *as languages*. Rukeyser pulls this insight from Gibbs’s own mouth, setting it up as solemn speech after long silence:

A story is told of him, the one story that anyone remembers of Willard Gibbs at a faculty meeting. He would come to meetings – these faculty gatherings so full of

campus politics, scarcely veiled manoeuvres, and academic obstacle races – and leave without a word, staying politely enough, but never speaking.

Just this once, he spoke. It was during a long and tiring debate on elective courses, on whether there should be more or less English, more or less classics, more or less mathematics. And suddenly everything he had been doing stood up – and the past behind him, his father’s life, and behind that, the long effort and voyage that had been made in many lifetimes – and he stood up, looking down at the upturned faces, astonished to see that silent man talk at last. And he said, with emphasis, once and for all:

“Mathematics *is* a language.” (279-80)

“Mathematics *is* a language.” Blank space follows this assertion, after which Rukeyser moves on to describe a speech Gibbs gave on Multiple Algebra in Buffalo. She uses the phrase, complete with her added italics, as her title for the chapter.

As Rukeyser’s description of the recent and distant pasts rising up to give Gibbs voice suggests, her biography has also been building to this eruption. She establishes the potential for using analogy to move between different orders of language even before we get any information about Willard Gibbs himself, in a story that takes place during the season of his birth. The first chapter following the introduction, titled “The ‘Amistad’ Mutiny,” details the story of a group of enslaved Africans who rebelled against their Spanish captors near Havana, only to be held as prisoners in New Haven and made a *cause célèbre* for opposing sides of the American slavery question. Willard’s father Josiah Gibbs, a professor of theology, sacred literature, and languages at Yale, bemoaned his countrymen’s lack of ability to speak with the captives. This breach in communication made it impossible to understand what had taken place on the ship and therefore to defend them adequately. The elder Gibbs’s essential contribution to the eventual defense and return

of the survivors to their home in Africa was to use the language of mathematics as a bridge connecting their language, Mendi, to English. Holding up fingers, he transcribed the captives' pronunciation of the cardinal numbers, and then called out these strange, new words at the port of New York until he found someone who could translate them.

Building as it does from Josiah Gibbs's linguistic intervention, Rukeyser's account of the Amistad rebellion is idiosyncratic. It is also ground-breaking history. As Eben Wood notes in the recent article, "The Private Lives of Systems: Rukeyser, Hayden, Middle Passage,"

In a curious relationship that is often noted but never explicated, *Willard Gibbs* contained the most detailed available account of the 1839 rebellion on the slave-ship *Amistad*, an account that Rukeyser's fellow Left poet Robert Hayden utilized in constructing his landmark poem "Middle Passage." (204)

The originality of Rukeyser's historical research (uncovering the events of the rebellion and Josiah Gibbs's role in the ensuing trials) make history's interrelation with science possible (the connection between the work of father and son). This is true as much in her text as in her understanding of the significance of the lives and time she examines. In Wood's account, the "socio-historical lens" provided by the *Amistad* narrative allows Rukeyser to probe the "deeper historical implications of Gibbs's work in physical chemistry," assessing the real-world stakes of the meeting-place between these disciplines (207).

Rukeyser describes this event not just as a link between languages, and through those languages, people, but also as a link between epistemologies, and through those different ways of knowing, the possibility of *doing* in the world. She portrays Josiah Gibbs's act of analogy as leading to positive action:

But this was a combining occasion, one of those events that bring a life into focus, summoning qualities that until such a moment seem remote from each other, alien

and useless. It was the first and only moment in Josiah Gibbs's career that could call into play his religious belief in the value of the human being, his skill in language and the reconstruction, as from fossils, of a grammar from the broken phrases set down in travel books, in the letters of missionaries, or on such a visit as he had just made – and the wish to affirm truth as he saw it.” (34)

This vision of analogy as communicative action is also rooted in profound humanity (recall Rukeyser's own “passion to know people and the web in which they, suffering, find themselves”) and a vision of the future (“the sources of energy ... that will enable us to find the strength for the leaps that must be made”). By beginning here, Rukeyser suggests that the confluence of these elements is the soil in which both Gibbs the man and *Gibbs* the book are cultivated.

Josiah Gibbs wrote explicitly on metaphor, its nature and necessity. In “Language of the Intellectual World, or Faded Metaphors,” he makes a distinction between ornamental, rhetorical metaphors and those “employed from necessity, for the expression of intellectual objects, operations, and relations” (16). In naming the necessary kind “faded metaphors,” because “the literal or physical sense is lost in the mind of he who uses the term,” the elder Gibbs echoes Ralph Waldo Emerson's description in “The Poet”: “The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry. As the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin” (457). In the oft-quoted, “Language is fossil poetry,” as well as in his subsequent exposition of the geological analogy animating the phrase, Emerson poetically enacts the collision of fields in order to render this composite, literally, as the ground beneath our feet – a ground made from the carcasses of tiny living beings, on which we tread without examination. Rukeyser's examples of these faded metaphors adds to this confluence the register of religious understanding: “We do not think of *sin* in its root-

meaning, as a missing the mark; we forget that *heaven* is something *heaved* over the world” (106, emphasis original).

Committed to the link between the thinking of father and son, Rukeyser calls Josiah “a scientist of language” (106). She underscores less his dedication to abstraction than his dedication to the physical genesis of words and creativity’s role in bringing them to realm of symbol, where they can be traded and used: “He saw language in its literal and physical sense first; he saw imagination coming to the aid of man as he moved between worlds” (106). In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser articulates analogous stakes, albeit in starker and broader form: “The use of truth is its communication” (27). In Joan Richardson’s re-imagining of the history and legacy of Pragmatism as rooted in the premise “that both thinking and language are life forms, subject to the same laws as other life forms,” she describes Emerson’s understanding of the fact and importance of analogy in similar terms to Rukeyser’s (ix). Richardson writes that by 1836, Emerson had “fully realized the seminal role played by image, specifically as it is described here, as metaphor, in the development and success of an idea” (68), and goes on to link Emerson’s approach to late 20th-century science by quoting Donna Haraway’s *Crystals, Fabrics, and Fields* (1976): “Metaphoric systems are the core of structural coherence ... (A metaphor is an image that gives concrete coherence to even highly abstract thought.) ... Metaphor is a property of language that gives boundaries to worlds and helps scientists using real languages to push against these bounds” (qtd in Richardson 68).

Rukeyser calls Josiah Gibbs a scientist and Willard Gibbs a poet because “Father and son deal with two facets of one theme: words as symbols, symbols as words, and the system in which they live” (107). Gillian Beer, exploring the intersections of the sciences and humanities in the 19th century, describes the intellectual ground during both Josiah and Willard Gibbs’s lifetimes as generally composite. The hierarchy that she articulates between disciplines is based on proximity to the process of connecting words to the immediacy of experience through the act of analogy.

“[R]eluctant to allow writing on scientific issues to remain on the linguistic periphery,” Beer writes, scientists of the 19th-century “claimed congruity with poetry, perceived as the authoritative utterance within current language” (175). Emerson explains this authority as follows: “the poet names the thing because he sees it, or comes one step nearer to it than any other” (457).

However, by the time Rukeyser took on Willard Gibbs as a subject, the grounds for meting out authority to discourses and discoveries had shifted. These changes speak to shifting attitudes about both the content and systems of knowledge. Karen Veitch, writing about Rukeyser and British poet Hugh MacDiarmid and the use of science in leftist literature, cites Max Eastman’s *The Literary Mind – Its Place in an Age of Science* (1931) to convey the altered relationship of literature to science, which according to Eastman was “one of the most important changes that has ever occurred anywhere” (Eastman qtd in Veitch 239). In this new order, it is science, not literature, that lends credence to language: “During the economic turmoil of the 1930s, a range of American and British writers drew on scientific ideas in their work, lending authority to their writing at a time when science (particularly physics) enjoyed enhanced cultural prestige” (Veitch 238). But the mere presence of prestige doesn’t necessitate that poets will be able to employ it. With authority comes a policing of the gates. In “Strips: Scientific language in poetry,” Peter Middleton describes the “networks of legitimation on which the distributed production of knowledge in science depends” (953). Disconnected from those institutions and their regimented systems of knowledge production, poets like Rukeyser who engaged in scientific language, topics, metaphors, or methods were met with doubt and even ridicule. And in the mid-twentieth century, with the increasing polarization of disciplines that accompanied the Cold War and the rise of New Criticism, suspicion was multi-directional. As Jed Rasula observes, the New Critics “succumbed to their own fallacious notion that science dealt strictly with hard facts, in a language cleansed of ambiguities, and in the process they ended up producing a critical vocabulary that mirrored what they scorned” (77). In “Ideas of the

Meaning of Form,” Robert Duncan lampoons the era’s fears and rigidities: “Metaphor must be fumigated or avoided (thought of as displaying the author’s fancy or wit) to rid the mind of the poetic, where metaphor had led dangerously toward Paracelsus’ universe of psychic correspondences, toward a life where men and things were beginning to mix and cross boundaries of knowledge” (91). This was a climate not just suspicious of, but hostile to, Rukeyser’s combining work, as she trampled barriers, searching everywhere for “a possible kind of imagination with which to meet the world” (LOP 19).

Working to reclaim the “*method* of analogy” for our disciplinarily ghettoized times (Stafford xv, emphasis original) – what Daniel T. Rodgers refers to as the “age of fracture” (iv) – scholar of neuroscience and the visual arts Barbara Maria Stafford provides a model for reanimating an ideal and practice of communion across disjunction, in her words “intermedia communication” (8). She traces the meaning of analogy back to two divergent activities, on whose subsequent conflation she blames analogy’s perceived collapse into “mystical incoherence” (2). The first, mathematical significance of the term which refers “to proportion or the due ratio among numbers in a set,” “was extended by Aristotle, among others, to embrace non-mathematical relations in areas like justice, virtue, poetics” (2). The second, identified with Plato, is qualitative and participatory, and rather than being characterized by rigor or measurement, or frequently employed to allege error, emerges “as a form of dialectics attempting to bridge the seen and unseen, the known and unknown” (8). It is on this second type of analogy, which is both “a metaphysics and a logic, a vision and a form of reasoning,” that Stafford pins her hopes for the future (89).

Without specifically naming these two different registers of analogy or tracing their histories, Rukeyser invokes them in *Willard Gibbs*. Making an exception of her own project and method, she condemns “the deep error that so many great writers have made in their dealings with scientific thought” (80). She calls this shortcoming, “the error of a rigid analogy, of using the *discoveries* of

science instead of the *methods* themselves in dealing with other material. ... [T]he whole framework of one kind of thought cannot be brought over into another kind of thought without a terrible distortion and loss” (81, emphasis original). What Rukeyser warns against, for example, is taking Gibbs’s Phase Rule ($F=N+2-R$), where F is the degree of freedom in a system, N is the number of variable components in the system, and R is the number of coexistent phases in that system,²⁰ and asserting that the degree of freedom (the number of variables you can change without compromising equilibrium) in some non-chemical system is related directly by way of this ratio to its number of components. Or, asserting that the Phase Rule makes understanding other equilibriums a simple or straight-forward process. These would be errors because not all systems work in precisely the same way. Instead, a meaningful analogy could investigate the *process* by which another kind of system achieves equilibrium, how its conflicting elements achieve temporary balance. This process would demand intense scrutiny of the particular new system – according to Rukeyser, “any portion of the universe which we choose to separate in thought, in order to consider it” – and careful attention to the behaviors of *its* many moving parts (235).²¹

In her rejection of rigidity and understanding of analogy as process, Rukeyser foreshadows Stafford’s “restorative and enlivening analogy,” that “passionate process marked by fluid oscillations” (183, 2). An important element that these two thinkers also share is accounting for

²⁰ Rukeyser uses the example of salt sprinkled on ice to illustrate the rule: “Some of the salt dissolves, and some remains; some of the water evaporates, and some remains. We now have water and salt, our two components, in four phases – salt, salt water, water vapor, and ice. The Phase Rule gives us zero for number of degrees of freedom. That is, equilibrium is assumed, and held. It is that which we count on when we use this mixture for a freezing mixture. We know from experiment that the temperature of this combination will automatically go to -22 degrees centigrade, and stay there” (239).

²¹ Elizabeth Grosz (2005) presents a strong example of rigid vs. process-oriented scientific analogy in her call for feminists to reconsider the value of Darwin’s work “in rendering our conceptions of social, cultural, political, and sexual life more complex, more open to questions of materiality and biological organization, more nuanced in terms of understanding both the internal and external constraints on behavior as well as the impetus to new and creative activities” (14). The rigid analogy that Grosz condemns is the reduction of Darwinism “to a form of determinism, to a partial explanation, to be placed alongside of, or in parallel with, social and cultural accounts” (15). The process-oriented analogy she advocates would instead take from Darwin’s work, “a dynamic and open-ended understanding of the intermingling of history and biology ... and a complex account of the movements of difference, bifurcation, and becoming that characterize all forms of life” (17).

“distortion and loss” in the employment or conception of analogy as overzealousness, as a lack of moderation, an absence of consciousness of necessary limits. Analogy does not render a big, simple, encompassing union in either Rukeyser’s or Stafford’s visions. As Stafford puts it,

conceiving analogy as the subsumption of two inferior, dichotomous terms into a superior, third one ... is an elision that dangerously veers into the monism of allegory. In contrast, seeing analogy as analogy, that is, as a metamorphic and metaphoric practice for weaving *discordant* particulars into *partial* concordance, spurs the imagination to discover similarities in dissimilarities. (9, emphasis added)

Without dissimilarity, similarity is either meaningless or dangerous. Meaningless because it risks nothing, does not “reach[] toward alterity,” as Joan Retallack describes the “imaginative prosthetic” of metaphor (*Jackel*2). Dangerous because it risks too much: the elision of depth, the disregard of alterity. Rukeyser has her eye on the dangerous side. She writes: “the seductive glitter of analogy has destroyed many scientists, many historians, many human beings who have caught the resemblance between seemingly unrelated forms without keeping their awareness of the difference” (203).

Rukeyser’s warning is as much to herself as to anyone else: “We are machines of likeness. The brain is one; we spend most of our lives recognizing. We reason by the proportion of things. It is an easy step from recognition to seduction” (81-2). But she also makes it clear that in that slim, vertiginous space between recognition and seduction meaningful and productive connection and communication become possible; nothing can be gained without risk. As she writes: “the analogies are dangerous, again, but they are most dangerous when they are most usable. The danger has kept too many people away from these barriers ... There is no reason to make a fetish out of the barrier” (365). *Willard Gibbs*, a work that, in Beer’s words, “makes the activity of writing a topic as well as a medium” (182), enacts this dynamic principle. It is a dance of analogy: approaching, risking, retreating from, and returning to the barrier.

Despite its narrow publishing pitch and the critical wrist slapping that it suffered, *Willard Gibbs* received some fair responses in historical reviews in the early 1940s, which suggests that at least a handful of Rukeyser's first readers understood that she was not "just" writing a biography. Using the model provided by contemporary figures like Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford – both of whom Rukeyser read and cites – some proclaimed that *Willard Gibbs* was a cultural synthesis.²² In the *Pacific Historical Review*, Hugh G. Dick noted that Rukeyser "attempts a more ambitious task, to present Gibbs as an expression of his age and as a moulder of ours" (99), while Philip Blair Rice commented in *The Kenyon Review* that she "does not study the period to elucidate Gibbs, but Gibbs to elucidate the period" (310-11). Though Rukeyser's statements in *Willard Gibbs* nod in this direction, they do not suggest so linear a path as from particular to general, individual to era:

This life, that reaches unconsciously from the kidnapping of the African captives, whose slavery and struggle raised their lives to an image to bedevil fanatics and work upon prophecy, to the experimental trance of the Wright brothers, tracing the wingwork of gulls on the sky over Hatteras, is the lifespan of an age. (350)

Not a straight biography, with its arc and structure ready-made in the subject's birth and death, and neither a direct cultural analysis with one representative son standing synecdochically for his time, Rukeyser's reaching, spanning project requires a different sort of support apparatus. Committed, as I mentioned, to the correspondence of form and function, she builds her structure both analogically and of analogy.

²² Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturensky assessed the work in *A History of American Poetry 1900-1940*, published in 1946, "Not unlike Lewis Mumford's *Herman Melville* (1929) and *The Brown Decades* (1931), Miss Rukeyser's *Willard Gibbs* was an interpretation of nineteenth-century American reviewed in the light of social criticism. Quite as her book of poems, *A Turning Wind*, contained an indebtedness to the writings of Waldo Frank, in like measure, her *Willard Gibbs* shared the messianic insights and diversions of the elder writer's prose; in general, the book had the same flaws and merits that characterized Waldo Frank's *Virgin Spain* (1926) and *Dawn in Russia* (1932)." In 1982, Barber declared that in *Willard Gibbs*, Rukeyser "placed Gibbs in the cultural tradition of Walt Whitman and herself in that of Van Wyck Brooks" (1).

Particular figures, not immediately obvious in their connection to Gibbs, reappear regularly throughout *Willard Gibbs*, emerging as columns bolstering the whole. Herman Melville and Walt Whitman join Gibbs as “deep and powerful expression[s]” of the period, the “three masters of that terrible time, when continuity snapped” (365, 352). In her chapter entitled “Three Masters: Melville, Whitman, Gibbs,” she observes, “The enrichment of the world is the business of these three masters. That they happen to have emerged in the same region, at the same time, is more than compensated for by the fact that that region and that time could not understand the language they used or the meanings for which they created language” (367-8). They were men representative of an age that did not recognize itself, or much of anything else, in them. This failure is what *makes* them representative, makes them *valuable* – as Rukeyser’s use of the word “compensated” signals – and is their point of entry into the text. James Gates Percival is invited for similar reasons: he is Rukeyser’s chosen forefather of the imagination’s meeting place. Though he was known during his life for flat, imitative” verse, Percival composed other work, the “deep foreshadowing of poems and sciences to come,” which was “almost completely lost” (62). Emily Dickinson, with her “eager loneliness, the invitation to death and burial” is also “close to Gibbs” (175). Charles Sanders Peirce is there. And Abraham Lincoln.

Perhaps the most fundamental supports of *Willard Gibbs* are two families who appear again and again beside the Gibbs family, linked by time and circumstance, wars, discoveries, ways of thinking, and vacation spots, but, in important ways, never really intermingling: the Adams family and the James family. Rukeyser brings them together first in her chapter on the Amistad rebellion. Where Gibbs surmounted the problem of communication and made the defense of the Africans possible, John Quincy Adams was responsible for that defense. At this point in the text, no explicit connection is drawn between the two men, whose work bookends the practically stand-alone, narrative chapter. Later, the three families root Rukeyser’s discussions of the Civil War; of the

development of the new, “combining” sciences (like Gibbs’s physical chemistry and William James’s psychology); of the lives of the 19th-century’s silent women. By the time she asserts that “three families have made profound contributions to imagination, and in such a way as to illuminate many of the meanings of this country for imagination,” their central analogical position in shaping *Willard Gibbs* is clear (109).

The similarities and the correspondences between the families – for example, the fact that William James and Willard Gibbs both studied in Berlin in the winter of 1870 – take on their full significance only alongside accompanying misses: the fact that, despite proximity, similarity of situation, and overlapping interests, there is evidence that Gibbs and James never met, not in Berlin, not in “Heidelberg, or Keen Valley, or at last here,” in New Haven (326). This failure of a potentially momentous interaction recalls the 19th century’s blindness to the genius of Gibbs, Whitman, and Melville: an echo suggesting that such gaps are not merely poignant to Rukeyser, but central. *She* brings these individuals together in her text. Analogy is connection across rupture, similarity in dissimilarity.

The regular, almost rhythmic surfacing of Gibbs-Adams-James connections is not simply a colorful way for Rukeyser to fill out her descriptions of the period and compensate for the meagerness of biographical detail. It is a structuring tool. Throughout her work, Rukeyser rejects metaphors of rigidity and fixity in favor of those of flexibility and motion. “Motion was the key,” she writes in *Willard Gibbs*, “It was as clear in language as it was in science” (108). The way that Rukeyser is able to use principles of motion to move *between* language and science in her own work is particularly interesting here. Kate Daniels, describing Rukeyser’s long-standing interest in dynamic processes and the way in which her study of Gibbs directed and deepened that interest, convincingly turns to the example, or rather analogy, of the suspension bridge:

The real truth was the truth of the expansion joint, not the truth of appearances: the bridge was actually built to move, both vertically and laterally. No one might ever really perceive this movement with the human eye, but it existed nevertheless; *it had to*. Without this *movement within stasis*, the bridge would fall, relationships would wither and die, poems would fail. (254, emphasis original)

Thus, Rukeyser eschews received literary forms in favor of support structures she knows from the world, and in which she believes. For Daniels this propensity is evident in the poems; she cites Rukeyser's own explanation of her formal technique in "Ajanta," "of constructing an arch from the aural textures of the words," and underscores the understanding that "she took from mechanical engineering that an arch cannot maintain its form if it cannot move within that form" (254). But no mention is made of the strange form of the biography, the laboratory in which these theories were developed and tested. Too often, Rukeyser's prose is read as "a parallel body of ... work that promoted and explained the conditions under which her poetry would be fully appreciated, fully interpretable" (Daniels 250). We might also read *Willard Gibbs* as a suspension bridge reaching across the "lifespan of an age," its joints expanding and contracting to absorb our vibrations as we pass over it. "Rhythmic movement within stasis" describes the form of the experimental prose biography that Rukeyser writes *as* a poet, *because* she is a poet.

In asserting and negating the relationships and connections between the Adams, Gibbs, and James families and between their ideas through time, Rukeyser builds a structure for her book that she trusts will hold. In so doing, she also reinforces across various axes of resonance and significance her central argument about the danger and importance of analogy. Here "form and content, relation and function, reach and merge." She extends and generalizes, and then analogizes those acts:

The lines of families, like those of the culture of nations, mark the recurrence of energies, the lives of these daughters and sons curving response to their age in startling answers to their ancestors. These rises have been compared to the “faults” in geologic records; they are more like the many-based lines of those statues dictated by Gibbs’s formulas, the statues of form itself, which may by analogy apply to any natural form. (403)

Rukeyser’s Gibbs-Adams-James analogy reaches its apotheosis when Henry Adams, who “believed that history must be treated as a physical science,” discovered Gibbs’s Phase Rule (406). In keeping with the leitmotif of misses, Adams did not meet Gibbs when they were both in Washington, mistakenly assuming and writing in *The Education* that Gibbs had never come. But Adams’s Gibbs-inspired *The Rule of Phase Applied to History*, which analogized the search for equilibrium for historical forces, was in Rukeyser’s estimation, “the most daring use of Willard Gibbs that had yet been attempted. It laid Henry Adams open to all the charges, and he was at once called a crazy old man and a charlatan, by the specialists. It also made him the pioneer in scientific history” (410). Written in 1909 and rejected from publication until Adams’s brother included it in a volume of selected writings a decade later, that book, too, was a rich failure.

In his epigraph to *The Brown Decades: A Study of the Arts in America 1865-1895*, Rukeyser’s contemporary Lewis Mumford makes a list of “forgotten Americans who he believed had created a revolution in thought in the 1870s” – his list includes both Gibbs and Henry Adams (Brent 2). “The procession of American civilization divided and walked around these men,” declares Mumford. Joseph Brent turns to Mumford’s congregation in his biography of Charles Sanders Peirce – a work itself long deferred from publication – commenting, “The spectacle of great individuals spurned in their own times and rehabilitated in the next is one of the clichés of history. Each case exhibits an

open or suppressed threat to the dominant ideologies of its world, but each one is different in spirit and detail” (8). Simultaneously endorsing and minimizing this activity of categorization, he reminds readers that it was Peirce who topped Mumford’s list of outcasts. It is also on account of Peirce that Susan Howe quotes *The Brown Decades*, in a citation that invites another misread revolutionary: “Lewis Mumford noted ... that the publication of Peirce’s manuscripts had lagged for lack of a few thousand dollars to guarantee the initial expenses of his ‘Collected Works’ and compared the situation to the concealment of Emily Dickinson’s manuscripts by overzealous guardians” (PA 22). We know from physics that the act of observation alters the phenomenon observed; I see a cultural observer effect here – these webs describe their describers.

As Mumford yoked Gibbs and Adams, Peirce and Dickinson; as Rukeyser yoked Gibbs to Melville, Whitman, James, and Adams; as Howe finds Dickinson in Peirce, and moves to Swinburne and Pope; I continue this line and perform an analogous act, contextualizing Rukeyser not with her cultural historian contemporaries, but with a poet and fellow archive- and genre-wanderer who also investigates 19th-century America through the traces of its (not-so) representative characters.

Alongside Susan Howe’s works, elements of *Willard Gibbs* previously dismissed as arbitrary can be illuminated. For example, David S. Barber’s otherwise sensitive if overly sanguine 1982 analysis of the work reads: “*Willard Gibbs* concerns several in Gibbs’s time who became lost in their silences; in this book (for reasons that seem accidental) they are mostly women who are related to creative men – for example, Alice James, sister of Henry and William, and Marian Adams, wife of Henry” (4).²³ Accidental? Note his citations: a James and an Adams, two joints in the central analogy that supports the text and allows Rukeyser to span and investigate the age. Barber does not mention Rukeyser’s third representative: “Anna Gibbs was known as silent. It was said that she and Willard

²³ Marian “Clover” Adams committed suicide by drinking potassium cyanide in 1885. In a devastating example of the relationship between historical silence and the lives of women, Clover goes unmentioned by her husband in his autobiography. As Rukeyser describes: her “life with him is lost in the gap in his *Education* between the chapters ‘Failure’ and ‘Twenty Years After’” (WG 178).

could be silent together better than anyone else ... If Willard Gibbs's life is shadowy, Anna's life is spent in his shade" (176). If Rukeyser were only invested in Gibbs's life, the Anna Gibbs at the very least would be central: "And for the women who were devoted to that power? For Emily Dickinson, Alice James, Anna Gibbs?" (174). However, since she is exploring a time, ways of knowing and representing, possibilities and shapes for communicating, all of these women – their relationships and their silences – are essential. Mumford's procession of American history didn't walk only around men. Rukeyser writes: "When most respect is taken away from the life of woman, when she is contorted and misrepresented, you will always find the female principle inordinately large in the great men. Look at Whitman; or Lincoln" (173).²⁴ Now read her beside Howe's lines: "If you are a woman, archives hold perpetual ironies. Because the gaps and silences are where you find yourself" (BM 158). "Lawlessness seen as negligence is at first feminized and then restricted or banished" (1). "Voices I am following lead me to the margins" (4). Where Rukeyser asserts of Dickinson, "She was cut off; but she had made an image of that amputation," Howe returns, "Her demurral was a covenant of grace" (WG 174, BM 1).

Like *Willard Gibbs*, Howe's *Pierce-Arrow* (1999) is a text at once made of and about the act of connection across rupture. Its title alludes to common mispronunciations and spellings of Peirce's name while also, in an act of analogical accretion, calling forth violence, passion (Eros, cupid), and the 20th-century Buffalo-based auto manufacturer Pierce-Arrow Motor Car Company.²⁵ The book is

²⁴ This echoes William Carlos Williams's image of Abraham Lincoln as mother at the end of *In The American Grain*: "The age-old torture reached a disastrous climax in Lincoln. Failing of relief or expression, the place tormented itself into a convulsion of bewilderment and pain – with a woman, born somehow, aching over it, holding all fearfully together" (234). Howe's work also probes the idea of the feminine presence; as she writes on the work of Charles Olson: "But the feminine is very much in his poems in another way, a way similar to Melville. Its voice. ... It has to do with the presence of absence" (BM 180). These examples will become central in my concluding chapter.

²⁵ Thanks to Kathy Lou Schultz for pointing out that a Pierce-Arrow was also Rukeyser's childhood family car – another wonderful echo between the two writers. Jan Heller Levi's entry on Rukeyser in the *Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature* supports the reference. John Harkey adds an additional layer of signification: "one of the symbols in formal logic that Peirce invented has come to be known as the 'Pierce-Arrow'." Harkey's description of the title's function complements my exploration of analogical accretion. He writes: "The way tiny shifts or similarities among signs like this – names and terms, in this case – can create suggestive convergences reflects Howe's orientation to the 'secret affinities'

much shorter than *Willard Gibbs*, and though it contains biographical material (drawing particularly from Brent and often digesting large amounts of information into poetic assertion), it does not purport to be a biography itself. *Pierce-Arrow*'s first of three sections is called "Arisbe" after Peirce's Milford, Pennsylvania estate – the site of his death and the partial agent of his undoing, at least financially ("Arisbe mark of mortality" writes Howe (15)). In overtly exploring details of Peirce's life, particularly his controversial second marriage to the mysterious Juliette Froissy, this largely (though not entirely) prose section is the most conventionally biographical of the three. "The Leisure of the Theory Class" is the second and longest section, circling Peirce and Juliette, as well as George Meredith, Thomas Love Peacock, Charles Swinburne and others in short, narrow poems. The division between these first two sections is clear but not resolute: facsimiles of manuscript pages (mostly Peirce's but Swinburne's as well) dot both parts; and "Arisbe" flirts with occasional eruptions into poetic lines, in its last six pages breaking into poems indistinguishable from those of the second section.

The final and shortest section of *Pierce-Arrow* feels separate. "Rückenfigur" transforms the general symmetry of "The Leisure of the Theory Class" into formal rigidity – with sixteen fourteen-lined poems (carrying the suggestion of the sonnet form) that, should you hold the pages up to the light, fit almost entirely within each other's outline. Peirce's ideas ghost these pages (in "actual brute / predestined fact"), though the characters are other – Tristan and Iseult, Antigone (129). One reason Howe cites for linking Peirce and Swinburne is their absolute strictness of form in their chosen media (logic/philosophy and poetry – Swinburne's sonnets on the death of Robert Browning, for example) as against their personal wildness. This interplay between strictness and wildness – frequently a feature of formally metrical verse like sonnets – is enacted with the actual body of Howe's text, its increasing fixity of form and content that ranges widely in subject matter

she believes in, the method by which she attempts to 'spell out' evocatively the significance of someone like Peirce" (263).

and emotional valence. Even beyond this substantive manifestation, Peirce is everywhere in the book. Like Rukeyser, Howe immerses herself in long study of a thinker in order to adopt and adapt his structures and habits of mind in constructing her textual experiment.²⁶ As Howe declared to me, exploring the elusive structure of her text: Peirce's idea of the use of genius is the ability to make connections, "so I made connections."

In an explanatory note, Howe accounts for the facsimiles of Peirce's manuscripts dispersed throughout her text: "Putting thought *in motion* to define art in a way that includes science, these graphs, charts, prayers, and tables are free to be drawings, even poems" (ix, emphasis added). "Motion was the key," we know from Rukeyser. Motion rests beside definition in Howe's lines, does not oppose it, suggesting that her experiment in biography, history, philosophy, and poetry will enact the barrier-challenging project that Rukeyser demands. We might think of definition as an act of limitation, a cordoning off. The 1913 edition of *Webster's Dictionary* suggests as such, describing definition as a "determination of the limits," but in earlier editions of the dictionary published during Noah Webster's lifetime (editions relevant to the characters of Howe's and Rukeyser's texts), "definition" skews towards the freedom Howe imagines above.²⁷ "DEFINITION, n: 1. A brief description of a thing by its properties; as a definition of wit or of a circle. 2. In logic, the explication of the essence of a thing by its kind and difference. 3. In lexicography, an explication of the

²⁶ Kimberly Lamm has made a similar point about Howe's process of constructing *Pierce-Arrow*, though one that differs from my account because of its primary focus on textual tracking in place of a more pervasive engagement with Peirce's philosophy: "The texts Howe finds and encounters in Peirce's manuscripts inspire and give rise to the fragmentary, textual, investigative methodologies in *Pierce-Arrow*. In other words, Howe's own methods are an emulation of Peirce's texts" (26).

²⁷ In an excellent 2003 interview with Thomas Gardner, Howe speaks at length about the resonance and importance of Webster's early dictionaries in her work as well as in the work she studies. Her engagement with particular editions provides a basis for the distinctions I am making here. She explains: "One of the best purchase I ever made was this 1852 edition. [Dickinson's] was an 1844 reprint of the 1841 update. So the page layout was slightly different." (153). Howe goes on to describe the importance of chance conjunctions, how Dickinson's "poems open fields of connections in the same way a page in Webster does ... You have a primary definition ... and then in a dictionary there are the variant meanings provided not substituted. I think a list like this occurs, not only because it's a variant but because she likes what one word in a list does to the one beside it. / This is what happens in dictionaries" (160).

signification of a word or term, or of what a word is understood to express.” This definition, from which the word “limit” is notably absent, contains, instead, “circle,” “difference,” “understood.”

After Rukeyser writes in *Willard Gibbs*, “Motion was the key. It was as clear in language as it was in science,” she continues, “Noah Webster had made a list of the thirty-four primary or cardinal ideas, and all of them expressed motion” (108). Earlier, she compares Webster’s first American dictionary to “Willard Gibbs’s great papers in its effect on its users,” and in so doing, links the two men as builders of the structures undergirding 19th-century America, structures with profound effects on the frameworks and experiences of their contemporaries and successors (50). Howe comments in *The Birth-mark*, “I have come to believe that what is crucial when trying to understand what makes the literary expression of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Dickinson ... singularly North American is their use – and in Dickinson’s case, intentional misuse – of Noah Webster’s original *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828)” (xi). For both Rukeyser and Howe, Webster’s dictionary is not a monolithic authority, dictating the only and precise usage of language. It is a living, moving document, the project of an individual, himself a product of and contributor to his place and time. In looking at Webster’s dictionary, Rukeyser and Howe turn to this particular man and his ideas, as they do to Gibbs or Peirce. A biography is the story of a life and the story of a time. So is a dictionary. And a poem. And a silence. As Joseph L. Esposito describes Peirce’s understanding, “‘our concepts ... literally ‘participate’ in the reality of what is conceived” (qtd. in Brent 70).

Among Peirce’s fewer consistent sources of income were the definitions he wrote for the pioneering *Century Dictionary* from 1883 (the year Brent identifies as the start of “his descent into ruin and poverty”) to 1889 and, more urgently, for a 1906 supplement (139). What Peirce chose to define (interestingly, not ‘pragmatism’ until 1906) and how, provide, as much as any of his papers, a window into his concepts, beliefs, and modes of thinking. Tellingly, there is a single anecdote that

appears in both *Willard Gibbs* and *Pierce-Arrow*: it concerns an act of definition both simple and renegade. Among many specialist entries concerning logic, philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy, Peirce also defined “university.” But, the editors rejected his entry – “an institution for purposes of study” – in favor of “an institution for instruction.” The difference between the two definitions is not minor, and Peirce was outraged by the implications. He returned to the ideas underlying this disagreement in his late lecture series, “Reasoning and the Logic of Things.” American universities, he grumbled, are vastly inferior to their European counterparts precisely because “they were institutions of learning while ours are institutions for teaching” (170). Where teaching requires a rigid and absolute commitment to one’s own beliefs, what Peirce calls the “Will to Learn” requires the precise opposite: a child’s openness and an eagerness to change brought on by “dissatisfaction with one’s present state of opinion” (170).²⁸ This is another iteration of commitment to the potentiality of openness in the face of institutionally instrumented cordoning off.

Howe and Rukeyser use almost identical language in describing this defining incident, and neither comments on it; we are left to our own devices in determining its significance and interpreting each poet’s reasons for including it in her text. In Rukeyser’s retelling, it follows the lines: “How deeply these adventurers were cut away from each other! And, so divided, how far away they were kept from their own selves!” (378). And in Howe’s: “Peer/se pronounced Purr/se blamed most of his problems on his own left-handedness” (7). In both: authority, isolation, deviance, and defiance; the search for truth, for systems by which to navigate and delimit our experience. What is the purpose of a dictionary or an institution? What is the structure of a book or a lecture? What knowledge do they activate? What is our role in the process?

²⁸ Peirce’s 1897 “Concerning the Author” puts this conviction even more bluntly: “indeed the first step toward *finding out* is to acknowledge you do not satisfactorily know already; so that no blight can so surely arrest all intellectual growth as the blight of cocksureness; and ninety-nine out of every hundred good heads are reduced to impotence by that malady – of whose inroads they are most strangely unaware!” (Philosophy 4).

Peirce did not only define particular words; according to Brent, “Peirce also influenced the dictionary’s underlying rationale through his development of a systematic approach to terminology” (139). This experience likely planted the seed for the money-making scheme *cum* intellectual endeavor he proposed in 1894 but never undertook. *Peirce’s Logotheca* was conceived as a replacement for *Roget’s Thesaurus*. Brent quotes the prospectus submitted to potential funders:

“[My plan is] to begin with the simplest, most sensuous, most ordinary idea, for which we have generally direct names not reposing on any metaphor. I first take the names of sensations: colors, sounds, tastes, smells, feelings, etc. Then, simple actions, walk, strike, eat, etc. Then, common things, etc. I then take mathematical & physical ideas. Then the simplest relations of life. Finally, the fine and complex ideas which are only expressed by words originally metaphorical. Under each of these, besides the words peculiarly appropriated to them, I mention [...] metaphors that are usual; as, for instance, under *cunning*, a fox. Under *altruism*, *elevation*, *height*. Under *learning*, depth, etc.” (237-8)

In his proposal, Peirce calls for an activity of conception that is based not on an object or idea’s *properties* but on its *relationships*. In part, this is a result of the difference between the use value of a dictionary – clarifying definitions – and the use value of a thesaurus – making choices, connections, and distinctions. But Peirce’s desire to imagine a thesaurus, in particular, as a vehicle for categorizing and using language seems well rooted in two of his governing intellectual preoccupations: the law of relations and synechism, his term for the essential connectedness of all things.²⁹ His proposed

²⁹ In his 1898 lectures collected under the title *Reasoning and the Logic of Things*, Peirce makes a historically rooted and expansive argument for the importance of these organizing principles: “Endeavors to effectuate continuity have been the great task of the Nineteenth Century. To bind together ideas, to bind together facts, to bind together knowledge, to bind together sentiment, to bind together the purposes of men, to bind together industry, to bind together great works, to bind together power, to bind together nations into great natural, living, and enduring systems was the business that lay before our great grandfathers to commence and which we now see just about to pass into a second and more advanced stage of achievement. Such a work will not be aided by regarding continuity as an unreal figment, it cannot but be helped by regarding it as the really possible eternal order of things to which we are trying to make our arbitrariness conform.

systematic approach is to track a web of increasingly complicated and abstract relationships that ultimately and unavoidably result in metaphor. The words are the hinge: both the traces and the agents of comparison. In Peirce's system, metaphor is the marker of complexity and abstraction, both of which imply distance, but also of connectedness, which is a kind of proximity. (Connection across disjunction.) With proximity comes the possibility of use: Peirce concludes his prospectus, "The book would thus be useful to people of diverse ways of thinking" (Brent 238).

This same metaphorical paradox, rooted and manifest in each word, is at the heart of Howe's explorations. She suggests as much in her rich explanatory note: "Perhaps the Word, giving rise to all pictures and graphs, is at the center of Peirce's philosophy. There always was and always will be a secret affinity between symbolic logic and poetry" (ix). But what knowledge does poetry add to this equation of affinity? Does Howe's engagement with Peirce represent a turning away from the primacy of use, the subordination of the systematic delineation and description of relationships to the impressionistic, even accidental, pleasures of art? Is she just playing with Peirce? The answer depends both on what we (and she) take the purpose of poetry to be, and the "*kind* of knowledge" we understand it to enact (LOP 7). What does it mean – I ask again – to write as a poet?

In beginning to approach questions of this nature for his own part, Peirce, as a young man, turned hungrily to the German writer and thinker Friedrich Schiller, whose "triadic system of aesthetics" offered a way out of the rigid, lock-step of binaries and, later, a model for Peirce's own "three-term relation that is, moreover, dynamic"³⁰ (Freadman xxiv). In *The Play of Musement*, named for Peirce's shorthand for Schiller's concept of *Spieltrieb*, Thomas Sebeok describes Schiller's system:

As to detached ideas, they are of value only so far as directly or indirectly, they can be made conducive to the development of systems of ideas. There is no such thing as an absolutely detached idea. It would be no idea at all. For an idea is itself a continuous system. But of ideas those are most suggestive which detached though they seem are in fact fragments broken from great systems.

Generalization, the spilling out of continuous systems, in thought, in sentiment, in deed, is the true end of life" (163)
³⁰ Ultimately, Peirce's philosophy would become completely governed by triads. Brent describes, "By 1885 he had proposed, in what Hans Herzberger has called 'Peirce's remarkable theorem,' that there are only three fundamental kinds

an analysis of human nature as comprising three ‘impulses’: *Stofftrieb*, the drive for diversity, forever striving for change, contrasted with *Formtrieb*, the demand for ‘form’ in the abstract, alien to time, hence oppugnant to change (this pair corresponding to Kant’s well-known dualism), plus a third component he himself dubbed *Spieltrieb*, or play (*ein ernstes Spiel*) – the aesthetic tendency, mediating and harmoniously reconciling the twofold way of sense and reason. (1)

The play of *Spieltrieb* is where the accidents of reality are allowed in, the currents of chaos that Peirce called “tychism.” Musement, Pure Play, aesthetic contemplation – these “agreeable occupation[s] of mind” – become, in Peirce’s philosophy, the basis of the process by which thought tends toward “definite belief” – the essential link attaching chance to continuity, tychism to synechism (Sebeok 2-3, qting Peirce). Sebeok links Peirce’s “faculty of Musement” to what mathematician-poet-inventor Jacob Bronowski would later call, recalling Rukeyser and Gibbs, *imagination*: “the common root from which science and literature both spring and grow and flourish together” (Bronowski qtd in Sebeok 3). So, perhaps Howe *is* simply playing with that Peirce – where playing (poetry) is what makes things happen.

“In poetry all things seem to touch so they are,” Howe writes in “Arisbe,” seeming to revel in this “mediating, and harmoniously reconciling” aspect of the aesthetic (13; Sebeok 1). But just as Peirce’s work gestures in opposing, profoundly interrelated, directions – an encompassing system of the connectedness of all things, on the one hand, and an exact scientist’s punishing commitment to minutely describing the most basic relationships, on the other – Howe’s engagement with language is as fastidious as it is expansive. Extending the discussion about the uses of the dictionary begun above, Howe declared in her Gardner interview: “One thing I love about the idea of a dictionary is that you think you can define a word by reducing it to its essence, its structure, where it was used

of relations: monadic, dyadic, and triadic; that by combining triads, all relations of a greater number than three can be generated; and that all those of a greater number than three can be reduced to triads” (331).

and where it came from, all of those things, but in fact, the more you think about it, the more it ... completely opens up. Like a curtain” (141). It is essential to note that this openness is not achieved willy-nilly (in both its senses of compulsion and haphazardness), but through rigorous, devoted attention to those seemingly reductive (Howe uses the word “reducing”) elements: its structures and history. In Howe’s description of events, the curtain opens only after deep scrutiny. Obsessively attuned to the roots of language to the level of the phoneme, she instigates and grounds the wandering of her texts with etymological matter. As George Butterick articulates, “Etymology ... is her true genealogy. Howe favors etymologies in her work perhaps as much as feelings. She instinctively seeks to possess language to the roots, pre-family, pre-historical, even before language semanticizes itself” (313).

“In poetry all things seem to touch so they are” seems, at first, like a clear assertion. But what does it actually suggest? That all things *seem* to touch and so are, therefore, touching? Or, they seem to touch and so, in that act of aspiring to connection, they are made to exist? Is their existence at stake, or our perception of that existence? And if perception: is it our perception of their existence, or of their relationship? “Are” these things only inside the poem, or does the touching that goes on there constitute them as “being” in the outside world, too? Can poetic relations make things like that happen?

“To be” is, of course, the infinitive form of the English language’s substantive verb. The 1844 edition of Webster’s dictionary defines it thus:

BE, v.i. [substantive verb; The sense is, to stand, remain or be fixed; hence, to continue. This verb is defective, and its defects are supplied by verbs from other roots, *am, is, was, were*, which have no radical connection with be. The case is the same with the substantive verb in most languages.] 1. To be fixed; to exist; to have a real state or existence, for a longer or shorter time. Let this mind be in you, which

was in Christ Jesus. – Phil. ii. To be, contents his natural desire. – Pope. 2. To be made to be; to become. And they twain shall be one flesh. – Matth. xix. Jer. xxxii. 3. To remain. Let the garment be as it was made. 4. To be present in a place. Where was I at the time? When will you be at my house? 5. To have a particular manner of being or happening; as, how is this affair? how was it? what were the circumstances? This verb is used as an auxiliary in forming the tenses of other verbs, and particularly in giving to them the passive form; as, he has been disturbed. It forms, with the infinitive, a particular future tense, which often expresses duty, necessity or purpose; as, government is to be supported; we are to pay our just debts. *Let be* is to omit, or leave untouched; to let alone. Let be, said he, my prey. – Dryden.

The formally “defective” verb’s meanings simultaneously encompass change (becoming) and continuity (remaining), both the what and the how of existence. Much of the word’s definition is devoted not to what it “is,” but to what it makes happen, the forms it forms through relations with other words. These functions, practically (in practice) invisible, so often form the basis of our understanding of relationships between objects and states of being in the world. Peirce’s work uncovers the ways in which what we believe *to be* is constructed by the systems of language we inhabit, stemming, in our case, from “preconceptions we imbibe from the European languages.” We do not sufficiently keep in mind that, “These languages do not represent the nature of thought in general, nor even that of human thought” (Reasoning 127).

In particular, Peirce points out the extent to which the English language primes us to ascribe relations of identity to instances where our grammar is instead performing a relation of some other level of equivalence, like proximity. Though the words are the same, the relationship they perform need not be. His example, “Every man is a rational animal,” is a sentence that outside of Indo-European languages does not require “to be” to “show that the man and the rational animal refer to

the same object” (128). One implication of this is that as a result of our linguistic priming to consider “to be” as categorical, we attach that value to propositions that actually “express no inherence, no character of any object. They do not convey any definite idea of a *thing*” (128). We are not paying sufficient attention to the difference between registers of comparison – metaphors, metonyms, descriptions. This particular danger is not precisely the “error of rigid analogy” that Rukeyser warns against, but it shares the root cause of insufficient attention to the processes of particular systems and the same lack of moderation in the compulsion either to separate everything from everything else, or bind it all together with the same inattentively encompassing gesture.

With its lack of closure, Howe’s “are,” in “In poetry all things seem to touch so they are,” calls up the tension behind these tendencies. Instead of being left to use the “are,” comfortably, as essential connector, we are re-directed, backwards, to the language that precedes it. The sentence is misleadingly still, misleadingly singular, misleadingly encompassing. In initiating reconsideration, it captures the expanding motion of one Peirce’s language graphs, the same graphs Howe reproduces in her text, thereby setting them “free to be ... poems.” “Praises to” in Peirce’s figure 1 opens into “Somebody praises somebody to his face,” “Somebody does not praise everybody to his face,” “Somebody is not praised to his face by anybody,” and on and on, in the same way as we put pressure on the different hinges of Howe’s sentence to unfurl a similarly extensive series of possible valences. The sentence holds this action as potential; we must perform this expansion of possible significance if we are to understand or, better, experience what the sentence means. The embedded images of Peirce’s graphs throughout *Pierce-Arrow* prime and prepare us for this practice.

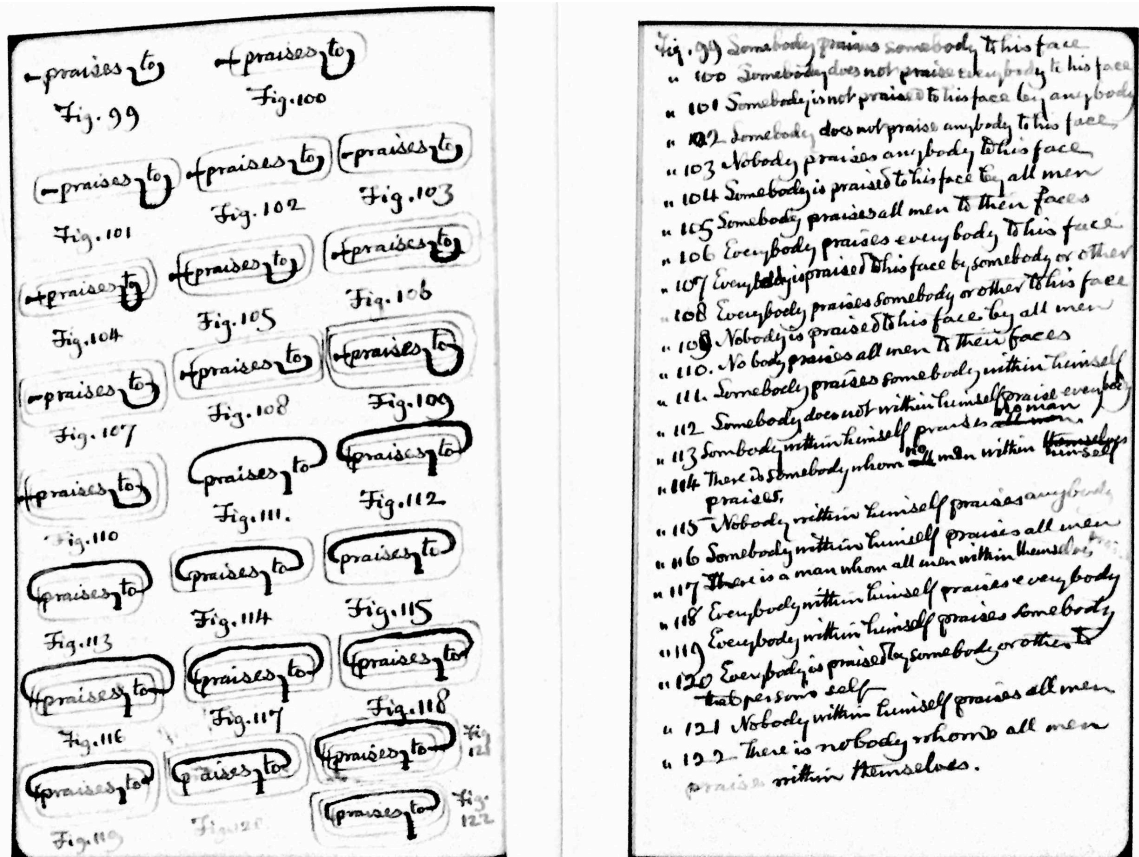


Figure 1

Freeing the graphs to be poems, Howe frees her own language to work like the graphs; Peirce's instructions for using them, therefore serve, by way of our copula, as a description of reading Howe's text:

Thereupon, we proceed attentively to observe the graph. It is just as much an operation of *Observation* as is the observation of bees. This observation leads us to make an *experiment* upon the Graph. Namely, we first, duplicate portions of it; and then we erase portions of it, that is, we put out of sight part of the assertion in order

to see what the rest of it is. We observe the result of this experiment, and that is our deductive conclusion. (Reasoning 168; emphasis original)

We observe the poem, that living thing. We experiment with its pieces. We make tentative meaning – our scientific hypothesis.

There are multiple instances throughout *Pierce-Arrow* where Howe engages this process as both topic and engine (in the sense of powering motion) of her writing. And lest we are still tempted to accept “is” for a simple, categorical marker of identity, she sometimes adds a layer of typographical pointing through underlining or italics, both of which recall visual aspects of Peirce’s language graphs. Here is an elliptical paragraph from “Arisbe” that moves from a manifestation of the physical process of writing (with crossing-out as the embodiment of thinking and re-thinking), through a questioning of fact and authority, to land on an underlined “is”:

Phenomenology asks what are the elements of appearance. In my nature (cross out with) it is a sort of instinct toward (slash to) a solid (cross out visible) instinctive attraction for living facts. Microreproduction gives the trace of someone or something. Pens are noisy pencils quiet. What is the secret nature of fact? What is the fact that is present to you now? Between the law of the market and the law of exchange handwriting as noise cannot be enacted. Let *y* be *y* you cannot gasp at blue. On the one hand academic and antiquarian tendencies with lattice work in open gables, on the other, Indianapolis. For most architects print modifications are silent. When I read an authorized edited Collected Work I read against original antiredness what ought to be seen, generally. Peirce calls secondness all naked feeling and raw life. Originality is in being such as thus this being is. (14)

The paragraph’s final, ten-word sentence has four instances of “to be.” With two different forms, reversed and repeated, it is an instance of antimetabole, a kind of inverted parallelism that differs

from chiasmus in that the precise words, not similes, reappear. So, Howe's sentence uses syntactical positioning to highlight the contextually embedded shifting of "being's" meaning. The meaning of the sentence as a whole turns (literally – antimetabole has a hinge) on the physically determined changing relationship between its words.

But how are we to understand "Originality is in being such as thus this being is"? Originality consists in the activity of enacting the properties of this particular mode of being? Originality emerges through the act of becoming manifest in a specific creature? The presence of originality persists in the substance of this entity? The definition of originality is having the qualities of this being? The sentence is another instance of captured expanding motion. Howe signals this potential through both antimetabole and the open-endedness of "is," as well as through "thus" and "this," the apparently stable components of her hinge. Peirce explains: "The demonstrative and personal pronouns, *this*, *that*, *I*, *you*, *we*, etc. have very peculiar powers. They enable us to convey meanings which words alone are quite incompetent to express; and this they do by stimulating the hearer to look about him" (Reasoning 128-9). (One cannot help thinking of the resonance, here, of the title of Howe's recent collection, *THAT THIS*, whose use of these words I will attend to more fully in Chapter Four.) "*Stimulants to looking*, like the bicyclist's bell, or the driver's 'hi! there,' or 'mind your eyes'" perfectly describes the responsibility with which Howe invests each word of her text (129).

Another complicating – or enriching – factor for understanding "Originality is in being such as thus this being is," is the number of registers of originality's meaning that are relevant to the set of ideas and subjects Howe has put in motion here. "Originality" corresponds to Peirce's category of Firstness: it is the spontaneous, the unmediated, "the mode in which anything would be for itself, irrespective of anything else, so that it would not make any difference though nothing else existed, or ever had existed, or could exist" (Reasoning 147). This sense of "being" is not linking. But "originality" is also something experienced, felt, perceived by an observer. In the line preceding this

sentence, Howe references not Firstness, but Secondness, “the conception of being relative to, the conception of reaction with, something else” (Peirce qtd. in Brent 333). She writes, “Peirce calls secondness all naked feeling and raw life” (PA 14). And we can go further. “Original” as an idea is also profoundly mediated, constructed, laden with culturally specific implications of value: authenticity, genuineness, freshness, invention. It might, therefore, stand in for Thirdness, “the conception of mediation, whereby a first and second are brought into relation” (Brent 207).

The idea of the “original” raises additional issues particular to textual scholarship. Peirce’s papers are just now being collected and published after a history of mishandling and neglect. But even as she bemoans the lack of access to Peirce’s work, Howe reads *against* the external, imposed authority that would (will) be implicit in any Collected Works, going, in her research process, to the original manuscripts. Though it is of central importance to Howe that the facsimiles in her book are made from Peirce’s papers themselves (as opposed to being copies of copies), what she views during her research process described at the start of “Arisbe” are not “originals,” but microform copies she “read[s] on a reading machine” in “the bowels of Sterling Library” (6, 5). Perversely, this mediation is what preserves the value of originality that directs her (and us) to seek the documents in the first place: “The original remains perfect by being perfectly what it is because you can’t touch it” (6). Describing “the impossible original her work pursues,” Kimberly Lamm quotes Howe’s remarks in her Talisman interview collected in *The Birth-mark*: “it’s about impossibility anyway. About the impossibility of putting in print what the mind really sees and the impossibility of finding the original in a bibliography” (28). The destruction of firstness is implicit in any attempt to describe it; Peirce explains: “It cannot be articulately thought: assert it, and it has already lost its characteristic innocence; for assertion always implies a denial of something else” (Riddle 248). This impossibility, the constantly fleeing original, does not, however, bring anything to a grinding halt. Quite the

contrary: the attempt to approach the inevitable impossible is where secondness, later thirdness, art-making and meaning-making happen: “the genuine second suffers and yet resists” (Riddle 249).

For Peirce, the process of *seeking* meaning is necessarily a process of *making* meaning. There is no authorized truth. Knowing is always rooted in supposing; in fact, knowledge is constituted by nothing more certain than a deeply considered, provisionally accepted, refined guess. In a frequently quoted passage from his manuscripts, Peirce describes this central tenet of his philosophy:

Looking out of my window this lovely spring morning I see an azalea in full bloom.

No, no! I do not see that; though that is the only way I can describe what I see. *That* is a proposition, a sentence, a fact; but what I perceive is not proposition, sentence, fact, but only an image, which I make intelligible in part by means of a statement of fact. This statement is abstract; but what I see is concrete. I perform an abduction [hypothesis] when I [do so much] as express in a sentence anything I see. The truth is that the whole fabric of our knowledge is one matted felt of pure hypothesis confirmed and refined by induction. (Brent 72, qting MS 692)

Knowledge is a tangled blanket of guesses. In one of “Arisbe’s” poem-eruptions, Howe puts this precise idea into motion, tossing it into the air like the stone of fact she mentions, landing on apparently straightforward language that she has marked for re-imagining. The poem both describes and enacts the idea, the experience of her text:

A person throws a stone
as fact through air not
fact but appearance of
fact floating in vacuua
Blind existential being
may possibly not occur

at all we know nothing
with absolute certainty
of existent things not even
the single “word” the (6-7)

Unlike critical responses to *Willard Gibbs*, which stumbled against assumptions rooted in the text’s categorization as popular biography and strained to account for the shape and strangeness of the text, readers of *Pierce-Arrow* are prepared – by jacket copy, by Howe’s earlier collections, by late-century’s shifting reading habits – for the “[p]art narrative, part lyric ... profound memory poem” at work in its pages (Perloff). Still, as Brian Lennon noted in his *Boston Review* assessment, “It’s difficult to write intelligently about Susan Howe, not least because her method – now a subtle blend, now a violent collision of poetry and scholarship – simply discards the vocational borders so often used to define the work of poetry” (Lennon). Despite greater comfort with such boundary-challenging, we are still – again – faced with the task of perceiving and articulating a support structure for a text that rejects the comfortable, tested solidity of generic and vocational bolsters.

Like *Willard Gibbs*, *Pierce-Arrow* holds the resurfacing of figures with no obvious connection to the purported purpose or subject matter of the text. Indeed, criticism of *Pierce-Arrow* is careful to describe Peirce and his manuscripts as “the point of departure” or “source” for the book, language that allows space for topical roving and roaming in a way that saying *Pierce-Arrow* is *about* Peirce wouldn’t (Lennon). Some critics have read Howe’s convenings of “seemingly unconnected things” as inviting a response one might give a choose-your-own-adventure story (book-jacket). As William Corbett describes in the *Harvard Review*: “This structure contains her ‘[unconnected] things’ within individual books, in which they shoot off toward whatever targets the reader is able and willing to pursue” (145). It is true that Howe invites readers to participate (for example, via the animation of

her sentences through the technique modeled by Peirce's language graphs) in the meaning-making process opened up by the pragmatist "theory of art-as-experiment" (Lennon). But saying that Howe is committed to the possibilities produced through chance contiguities and alignments is not to say that the people and things her book includes are randomly selected.³¹ As Butterick, early, noted, "Whatever is random about her language is secondary, subjected to her intense curiosity" (313).

Howe's commitment to the reaching and merging of "form and content, relation and function" has already been illuminated in her engagement with Peirce on the level of line and language (LOP 40). But as he contributed both individual definitions and a systematic, structural rationale to the Century Dictionary, Howe's study of Peirce extends beyond images, phrases, and moments to suggest a composition for the whole.³² His idiosyncratic imagining of the construction of systems prepares us for the possibility of such a structure:

where ordinary logic considers only a single, special kind of relation, that of similarity, – a relation, too, of a particularly featureless and insignificant kind, the logic of relatives imagines a relation in general to be placed. Consequently, in place of the *class*, – which is composed of a number of individual objects or facts brought together in ordinary logic by means of their relation of similarity, the logic of relatives considers the *system*, which is composed of objects brought together by any kind of relations whatsoever." (Reasoning 156)

³¹ In relation to Howe's choices, it is important to remember that the basis for Peirce's theory of synechism was not rosy metaphysical boundary-blurring, but precise technical detail; as he wrote to William James on December 26, 1897: "My philosophy ... is not an 'idea' with which I 'brim over'; it is a serious research to which there is no royal road ... People who cannot reason exactly (which alone *is* reasoning), simply cannot understand my philosophy, – neither the process, methods, nor results" (qtd in Reasoning 26).

³² My reading of *Pierre-Arrow* is in direct contrast with those that see Howe's engagement with and use of Peirce's thought as partial or uninvested in the substance or implications of his work in logic and philosophy. See for example, Peter Nicholls' assertion: "Howe's allusions to [Peirce's] theories are lapidary and often difficult to construe, and she seems generally less interested in Peirce as a logician than as a kind of phenomenologist" (445). Or Will Montgomery's more dismissive, "Howe's reading of Peirce is bold and idiosyncratic ... and it skirts the philosophical content of his thought" (132).

Peirce's philosophy is invested not in a theory of analogy, but in a theory of relations. Where the act of analogy is the search for similarity in dissimilarity (haughtily dismissed in the quotation above as "a particularly featureless and insignificant kind" of relation), Peirce – and by extension Howe in her use of him – proposes the value of pushing the limits of our comfort with comparison to imagine the development and significance of systems of knowledge and experience rooted in multiple kinds of associations. By Peirce's description, any congregation of items, objects, words, or ideas is conceivable – and conceivably meaningful. But these groupings are not to be merely accepted in an annihilating gesture of equivalence. What remains, is to investigate and interpret the resulting system, its particular connections and, most essentially, its consequences.

Shifting from a focus on analogy (in *Willard Gibbs*) to a theory of relations (in *Pierce-Arrow*) necessarily shifts the terms of our assessment and response, bringing a different set of dangers and risks. Our attention and, inevitably, our evaluation, rest less on the efficacy, resonance, or power of any discrete act of analogy (the relationship between the second law of thermodynamics and Melville's *White Whale*, to use Krutch's grumbling example from *Willard Gibbs*), than on the meaning-making mechanisms at work in a system of comparison as a whole. Peirce was invested in illuminating the processes of thought and language by which relationships – between objects, people, feelings, words, etc. – are enacted, defined, and continued. Quoting Peirce's late description of the scope of this project, Anne Freadman highlights the breadth of what he means by a sign:

every picture, diagram, natural cry, pointing finger, wink, knot in one's handkerchief, memory, dream, fancy, concept, indication, token, symptom, letter, numeral, word, sentence, chapter, book, library, and in short whatever, be it in the physical universe, be it in the world of thought ... causes something else, its interpreting sign, to be determined to a corresponding relation to the same idea, existing thing, or law.

(xxxiv)

Peirce's (ultimately unrealized) plan was, as he states in "A Guess at the Riddle," "to outline a theory so comprehensive that ... the entire work of human reason... shall appear as the filling up of its details" (247). As Brent describes, "For Peirce, logic, or semeiotic, was the *means to meaning* ... It was the structure of thought, since all thought is in signs, and all knowledge was represented by it, regardless of the field of inquiry" (Brent 325; emphasis added).

What is the process by which things are put into relation, and how is meaning extracted from or projected upon that activity? These are the questions demanded of Howe's gathering of "seemingly unconnected things." And, these are questions for which Peirce's thought provides, not answers (any answer is a wager, a temporary crystallization of moving parts), but avenues of approach. Peirce's classification of signs as based on the nature of their relationships, the *way* they connect (icons by analogical similarity, indices through contiguity or causality, and symbols through convention or law), is useful for exploring and unpacking the specific instances. But even more foundational and radical is his understanding of semiotics, the study of sign relations, as triadic: involving a relationship between sign, object, and – his important innovation – interpretant. Peirce's version differs from dyadic systems in that significance, here, is not arbitrary, implicit, and ultimately static, it is instead constantly *mediated* through that new, third, figure. In the shift from dyadic to triadic system, we enter a world of negotiation and articulation, of putting into relation and describing relation, of the reality of emotional and personal response, of interpretation. As Freadman describes, "Semiosis is the name of the process whereby, in practice, signs displace one another and are transformed. They do so through the interpretant, the point of mediation that orients them toward their consequences, entailing their upshot with their uptake" (xxvi). Howe imagines, "Between an interpretant and / its object in playspace the / heart's free interim" (25).

Basically, an interpretant is the effect of a sign on a person, her understanding of that sign. But Peirce's description of interpretants was not basic – nor was it static. In different accounts

through his life, he revisited, refined, and often complicated his definitions, focusing, for example on the different ways interpretants can be generated from the interaction of signs and objects, or, dividing interpretants into three gradations of understanding: the immediate, the dynamic, and the final. Two aspects of Peirce's dynamic system are of special import in connection with *Pierce-Arrow*. First, the room he makes for feeling, subjective experience, and belief in the process of negotiating and re-negotiating meaning. And second, in his conception of the "final interpretant" as "that which would finally be decided to be the true interpretation if consideration of the matter were carried so far that an ultimate opinion were reached," his faith in inquiry's potential to approach or aspire to some truth (qtd in Atkin).

How do we reconcile the suggestion of unadulterated openness suggested by "the heart's free interim," its signs seemingly shooting off toward whatever target we choose to follow, with the implications of Peirce's "final interpretant"? Well, how is a dictionary definition both closed and open? That same productive tension is at work in *Pierce-Arrow*. "I emphatically insist it does matter who's speaking" Howe parries in *The Birth-mark*, not about her own writing, but about Emily Dickinson, who "reveals her most profound self in the multiple multilayered scripts, sets, notes, and scraps she left us" (20). Of course! – a speaker's words, interpreting, making guesses, having feelings about prior signs, *are* our matter as we set about making meaning. We do not have direct access to an "original" truth or idea behind them; we do not have access to "Charles Sanders Peirce," or even, necessarily, to his actual decaying papers. The semiotic practice continues, continually mediated. What we read is a mediation. Points of mediation are the live nodes where meaning is made.³³

³³ Anne Freadman is useful here: "Mediation; taking the sign as sign; taking it as sign of something; taking the two signs as referring to the same object. Note, then that 'comparison' does not refer to a perceptual act of the unmediated data of the real; in particular, it does not refer to a Lockean account of the building up of inductive generalizations from the sense impressions made by individuals. 'Comparison' is what occurs when we interpret a sign, and to do so, produce another sign of the same object" (11).

What is the process by which things are put into relation? They are *put* into relation. To understand their relation we must remember that verb, the activity of it. In the collection of pages, signs, and objects that is called *Pierce-Arrow*, the central point of mediation is “Susan Howe.” She is not necessarily the subject of the book, but she is an interpretant.

Among these theses
are example ghosts
Now you see what
the word real means
After all we want
to get our thought
expressed in short
meter somehow but
I will write to you
when I can be more
definite by belief
I mean holding for true
Outside autography
body is my Body
C.S. Peirce “Arisbe”
Your “type” is better
ours sounds German³⁴ (82)

³⁴ The last two lines come from a December 1, 1903 letter from Peirce to Lady Welby: “We say ‘type-written’ here; but your ‘typed’ is better. Ours sounds like a German word. There is too much German influence in this country, in every way. Their subjectivism is detestable & antipragmatical” (*Charles S. Peirce’s Letters to Lady Welby*, 4; qtd. in Mladenov 109). Howe’s poem on the previous page begins the implicit quotation: “We say ‘type-written / here something about / printer’s copy modern telepathy” (81).

As Peirce describes, “The interpretant is nothing but another representation to which the torch of truth is handed along” (qtd in Freadman xxvi).

Pierce-Arrow does not claim to be a biography. Comparison with Rukeyser is productive, also, for this important difference in purported categorization. Much of *Willard Gibbs*’s power grows not from overt experimentation, but from the way in which it almost passes for a biography and then explodes the genre’s expectations from within. In the process, it calls attention to assumptions implicit in that project of classification. It also forces us to face the limits of our tolerance for analogizing, to consider what we really believe to be the purpose and possibilities of comparison, to confront how narrowly we might otherwise account for the significance and repercussions of lives and ideas. Though Rukeyser rejects many prescriptive elements of biography, the category is not irrelevant to the structure she creates; her structure is in conversation with those expectations, is a moving, mediated engagement with the significance that “biography” urges, with the project of “understand[ing] a life.”

We see that *Willard Gibbs* is in conversation with the genre of biography by looking in all the familiar places. The book’s title takes the man’s name, his “Portrait in middle life” is the frontispiece. It opens with a gesture of productive opposition, “This is not an authorized biography,” but the idea has been planted: perhaps it is some other kind. How does *Pierce-Arrow* engage similar guides for navigating content? I mentioned earlier that the title alludes to Peirce through misspellings and mispronunciations of his name as well as the suggestion of one of his diagrams. This interpretation is common³⁵ and feels sound. But the title also *is* the name of a Buffalo-based car manufacturer active from 1901 to 1938. Howe, who lived in Buffalo while writing the book, is pictured in her back-cover author photo in front of the factory – a fact we would likely never guess if it wasn’t

³⁵ Nicholls adds: “Charles S. Peirce, it happens, lived on Arrow Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for a time, and Joseph Brent opens his biography of Peirce with this sentence: ‘We are pierced by time’s barbed arrow, and from that irresistible outward clash we know that our universe is irreversible’ (1)” (442-443).

explicitly, and rather unusually (author photo credits don't generally include locations unless that information is of particular importance) pointed out in the credit: "*back cover photograph of the author outside the former Pierce-Arrow factory in Buffalo, 1998.*" Why is Buffalo important? Why are these old cars important?³⁶ What does Howe have to do with them? What do they have to do with Peirce? What, for that matter, does Howe have to do with Peirce?

The image on the front cover does not cast direct light on these questions, instead releasing a cascade of new ones. The black and white photograph features a robed, kneeling woman lightly embracing and looking into the eyes of a barefoot child. A wheel with Greek writing and the vanishing profile of some sort of sentry near the book's spine suggest stage craft, an interpretation borne out by the photo credit: "*Front cover photograph of Susan Howe as Astyanax bidding farewell to his mother, Andromache, in a production of The Trojan Women at the Buckingham School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1947.*" The cars, their factory and city of origin are nowhere to be found in this image or description, nor, apparently, is Peirce. Instead, we have Howe as a child, Howe acting, the tragedy of a son doomed to die, a brave and tender farewell. Stephen Collis articulates, "*Pierce-Arrow's* cover figures the drama of the passage of time's arrow (a ten-year old Howe on stage as Astyanax in *The Trojan Women*, inlaying her personal 'time' on literary and mythical time)" (43). Peter Nicholls describes Howe's author photo as "closing a temporal loop opened by the books' front cover ... A further set of associations cluster around these autobiographical allusions" (442).

In tracing a map of *Pierce-Arrow*, Howe described to me how the classicist Norman O. Brown directed her to the neglected and glorious mess of Peirce's manuscripts because of her work on Emily Dickinson. At the time of her research there were few theories about the name of Peirce's home, and her realization that "Arisbe" in the *Iliad* was a place of hospitality where all walks of man could gather resonated with Peirce's aspiration that his Arisbe be a free school attracting and

³⁶ See Montgomery: "The car is of no relevance to the text of the poem although a photo of Howe outside the former factory is displayed on the back cover of the book" (130).

convening an array of students and disciplines. Howe turned to Alexander Pope – the longest footnote in his translation of the *Iliad* describes this function of Arisbe. Peirce was a reader of Pope, loved his rigidity. “[P]aper-sparing Pope’s” manuscript of the *Iliad* is a chaos; in “Arisbe,” Howe quotes Thomas Wentworth Higginson’s “Advice to a young Contributor” describing the manuscript as what *not* to emulate (21). There is a break, and Howe jumps to Dickinson’s first letter to Higginson, her own manuscripts ghosting the connection. Then she jumps to Lewis Mumford, linking Dickinson to Peirce. We are back where we began but on thicker ground. “The fabric” of Howe’s manuscript is a “matted felt” of these connections – her hypotheses (Brent 72, qting Peirce). In that, it embodies Peirce’s description of all our knowledge. There is a thrill in uncovering these links, tracing our fingers along the shifting seams between the torn pieces. “Scraps of notepaper / Refusing to settle into / stable *Husserliana*” (99). Is that how they mean?

We can enter another way. After the requisite front matter, the title page with its copyright and acknowledgments, there is a dedication, “For David.” Below it, a meditative, intimate, and lyrical poem, untitled and in italics:

*Constellations fall across
late field hour toward the green
wood unknown quiet of you
Distance is here to go home
to visit the country early
Morning coming everything home
because love is in the mind*

Howe’s second husband David von Schlegell died in 1992. Devastated, grieving, she found comfort in Swinburne. She felt in his discipline a “wildness of mood” and that tension resonated with her own feelings (phone conversation). Linked to Peirce, as I mentioned earlier, for this contained

recklessness, Swinburne was also Peirce's contemporary. Each died in "semi-isolation" on his own side of the Atlantic (91). There is more; it is more tenuous: Theodore Watts-Dunton, Swinburne's close friend, minder, and housemate studied and wrote about gypsies, Peirce's wife Juliette was speculated to be of Roma origin. The connections proliferate, the "bleak north" of Howe's grief (Howe's Buffalo) her compass in navigating them (78). A poem mid-way through the book effectively merges her dark home and Peirce's, the word "here" in its third line is the portal: "C.O. Milford Pa. 1904 / The way bleak north / presents itself here / as Heraclitean error / driving and driving / thought and austerity / nearer to lyricism / Often as black ice" (78).

Nicholls has written of this strand of significance, convincingly illustrating how "Rückenfigur" – in his estimation, *Pierce-Arrow*'s "finest," most "darkly beautiful" section – is a meditation on our limited understanding of the past and time's passage, rooted in such personal mourning. He sees Howe writing "with an intensity of feeling that links the pain of personal loss to the poet's usual skepticism about the nature of historical knowledge" (443). The explicitly elegiac nature of this last section, the first written, is the magnet for Howe's accretion of figures and topics. In Nicholls' reading, her many references to ancient Greek literature signify, for example, because "Iliadic heroism" "leaves so many grieving women in its wake" (442). These are linked, in turn, to Peirce through his conception of secondness as "Brute Actuality," which Nicholls describes, citing Drucilla Cornell, as "the realm of existence and of death" (446).

This is a profound thematic reading. It offers depth and resonance to the cover photo, with its performance of loss a slant prefiguring of the poet's future grief. It highlights and explains the author photo's dark sunglasses and furrowed brow. It extends meaningfully throughout the collection – "Swinburne dying. Peirce dying. The wife of Meredith dying" (phone conversation). But what has gone unmentioned is that it also points to a practice of meaning seeking and making that is profoundly Peircian. The idea that in foregrounding her own image, writing from, through, and

beyond her experience and grief, Howe is following in Peirce's philosophical footsteps is, at first glance, counterintuitive. Peirce's pragmatism (or pragmaticism as he re-named it in 1905 "to keep it safe from kidnappers" (qtd in PA 19)) is frequently distinguished from other strains, like William James's, for its de-centering of individual experience. As Justus Buchler puts it in his Introduction to *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, Peirce's "view differs from others in stressing that pragmatic definition cannot be in terms of individual reaction or private sensation, which are incommunicable, but of that which is public and general – a habit of action" (xii). Freadman extends this observation, highlighting "reality" itself as a group project:

He objects to the 'individualism' of modern philosophy since Descartes and turns to a collective account. It is not that any particular judgment, made at any particular point of time, is 'true,' but that truth is arrived at over time, by people working together ... Reality is something essentially involving the notion of 'community'; true statements about it are arrived at gradually, in 'conversation.' (xxiv)

Joan Richardson provides a gorgeous figure for Peirce's move from an individual to a collective, on-going project of truth seeking, recalling that his term "synechism" comes etymologically "from the Greek meaning 'to have or hold together,' as the activity of rowers on a bi- or trireme" (American 80).

But, as the particularities of each rower's stroke will affect the movement of the entire vessel, to highlight the profoundly communal roots of Peirce's philosophy is not to reject the significance of any contribution or individual. As Buchler explains, "to say that a philosophy is anti-individualistic does not necessarily mean that it discounts the individual element in experience, as individualistic philosophies do the general" (xv). Defending his own biographical project, Brent brings this conversation squarely into the territory occupied by Howe's book, asserting, "what did Peirce philosophize about, if not his experience of living? As Peirce might have put it, his life and

thought were two intimately related aspects of the same sign, Peirce himself” (11-12). Howe’s “experience of living” is tangled up with her experience of reading, handling, thinking about Peirce – that “matted felt” is passed along. In his 1892 essay “Man’s Glassy Essence,” Peirce worked over this messy set of connections, returning feeling to the fold without reifying it as the precious cargo of individualism:

The consciousness of a general idea has a certain ‘unity of the ego’ in it, which is identical when it passes from one mind to another. It is, therefore, quite analogous to a person; and, indeed, a person is only a particular kind of general idea. Long ago, in the journal of *Speculative Philosophy*, I pointed out that a person is nothing but a symbol involving a general idea; but my views were, then, too nominalistic to enable me to see that every general idea has the *unified living feeling of a person*. (350, emphasis added)

Peirce is a sign; Howe is a sign; in the semiotic process they are points of mediation where meaning gets made and responded to. Riffing on Freadman’s description of what her analysis of the sign hypothesis is not, I *do* consider *Pierce-Arrow* “a book about a body of ideas called [Howe]” (xxii).

The model provided by Peirce’s philosophy offers one productive intervention into questions of autobiography that frequently buzz around Howe’s work. Many critics have struggled to describe the unusual position held by Howe’s own life in her texts – undeniably central (thus, it seems, in contrast to particular tenets of strands of experimental writing with which Howe is frequently affiliated) and yet not what we are in the habit of calling confessional. As Rachel Tzvia Back states, “the reader is alerted at the outset to the fact that the historical terrain Howe’s poetry traverses is at all times informed and propelled by the personal,” and later qualifies, “[a]nd yet Howe’s poetry is fundamentally different from the personally charged work of mainstream contemporary poetry whose lyric ‘I’ dominates the poems’ focus, obliterating all else” (2, 12). Or, as

George Butterick has described, “More usually, it is Howe’s remarkable ability to absent herself, to shed herself, from her lines that allows them to stand with such authority. At the same time, she redistributes herself throughout a book or series” (314).

If we understand Susan Howe as a sign, as an interpretant along the continuum of sign-relations she puts in motion here, we experience her as central, essential, to the various relations that together constitute *Pierce-Arrow*’s meaning. This highlights not just how the self is made through, in, and by relation, but also how connections are made through, by, and in selves. Howe is not a stand-in for anybody, her grief for anybody’s grief, her Peirce for anybody’s Peirce. And yet, she is our way in. As she writes:

... nerve-
fossils show relation
is singular singular a
sign for someone you
cannot put 2 and 2 to
gether no not even a
wielder of Ockham’s razor (44)

One cannot help noticing in this poem the sonic echo of “2 and 2” with “to,” even as the homonyms occupy a line that rejects such connection, starting with “cannot” and ending with a “to” that is actually a severed syllable separated from “together.” Similarly, but with an opposing valence, the word “singular” is not singular, but double (“singular singular”), on the line where it resides. (You cannot put 2 and 2 together? I just did – on the previous line! But, wait, together itself is separated, and so is not together after all. Relation is singular and also multiple.) This play enacts the tension implicit in the activity of learning – forming connections, attachments, feelings – through reading. It highlights our separateness (each of us alone with our oar of thought) and simultaneous

togetherness (as we connect and learn and further this joint activity of creating reality and truth, moving our vessel forward). We are together and apart.

Howe's "nerve- / fossils" in the poem above also return us to Emerson's "Language is fossil poetry." Her shift from the implicit "word" to its assonant "nerve" highlights the role of feeling in the equation. This is consonant with her focus on the creative potential of emotional response when she directly engages Emerson's essay elsewhere. "Bare lists of words" she quotes in "Arisbe" as well as in *The Midnight*, "are found suggestive, to an imaginative and excited mind" (PA 13). Indeed, Emerson begins "The Poet" decrying (among others) those who "write poems from the fancy, at a safe distance from their own experience" (447). (What do Howe and Rukeyser write about if not their own experience of living?) And his description of the poet's power – the poet's responsibility – "to receive and to impart" beautifully describes Peirce's, and Howe's, interpretant, passing along "the torch of truth" (Poet 448; Freadman xxvi). But it is Emerson's warnings elsewhere in the essay that truly bring us full-circle, linking the risks implicit and acknowledged in Howe's personal/impersonal project ("relation is singular / singular") with Rukeyser's warning about analogy, "It is an easy step from recognition to seduction" (82). "Mysticism," writes Emerson, "consists in the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for a universal one ... The history of hierarchies seems to show, that all religious error consisted in making the symbol too stark and solid, and, at last, nothing but an excess of the organ of language" (463-464).

"When one is a poet," one compares, connects, makes things touch. But she cannot allow that touching to go uninvestigated, to atrophy, to rust. We are responsible. Language is not a home, Emerson reminds us, it is a vessel "good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance" (463). We use ourselves, our experience, to get from here to there. "Separation requires an / other quest for union," writes Howe. "The continuity of mind, the spreading of ideas, generates a 'sympathy' by

means of which growth takes place,” Bechler explains of Peirce’s philosophy (xiv). “We are machines of likeness. The brain is one; we spend most of our lives recognizing” (WG 81). I hope it is in that slim, vertiginous space between recognition and seduction that Howe meets Rukeyser, Peirce meets Gibbs in these pages. They are the sources of energy, “sources that will enable us to find the strength for the leaps that must be made.”

CHAPTER 3
“The lives of the dead”: *Houdini* and *The Liberties*

“Men’s visions and fictions as well as their facts
move their histories and belong to the reality
principle. And facts, what men actually do, are, in the
lives of saints like Francis or poets like Dante or
Blake, not true in themselves but true in a Poetics
whose Poetry is the real world.” (Robert Duncan))

If there is anything that intense engagement with *Willard Gibbs* and *Pierce-Arrow* makes evident, it is the productive potential of seriously asking the simple question, *What is this book?* In engaging the works of Rukeyser and Howe, this means attention to their purported genres as well as the specific ways in which they render the expectations of genre insufficient. Rukeyser and Howe force us not only to imagine what particular genres look like at their limits, but also to interrogate the intellectual work taking place at the level of the sentence and line, the paragraph and line-break, the chapter and section, the book, the shelf the book sits on. Inherent in different categories are assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the world, of knowledge about the world. In *a little history*, Ammiel Alcalay repeats the following passage from a letter Charles Olson wrote to Ruth Benedict in 1946: “I think if you burn the facts long and hard enough in yourself as crucible, you’ll come to the few facts that matter, and then fact can be fable again” (qtd in Alcalay 69, 204). The questions Alcalay draws from Olson’s direct but enigmatic assertion, I think, are the same ones that Howe’s and Rukeyser’s texts require us to face: “How do you categorize information, how do you deal with knowledge, how do you find it, how do you transmit it, how do you make, as he says, ‘fact fable’? How do you turn fact into narrative so it can move somewhere? Where do you do this from?” (69).

One place both Rukeyser and Howe have chosen repeatedly to “do this from” is the field of life-writing – that is, the two have approached the categorization, transmission, and animation of information, knowledge, and stories by engaging their operation *in situ*, within the “whole lives” of

specific individuals. “Whole life” is a phrase that Rukeyser uses in her letter to Einstein, making a case for the necessity of her Gibbs biography and its relevance to individuals outside of the scientific community – “In many ways Gibbs’ work is his biography, as the life-work of any great scientist or artist is his whole life” – and it echoes Howe’s own pursuit of what she calls “the whole history of her story,” (qtd in DuPlessis 133) with “her” an open, unfixed pronoun encompassing the many lives she researches and pursues. In *Willard Gibbs* Rukeyser uses the category of biography to call attention to the ways in which value, significance, and meaning are attributed to particular lives, discoveries and experiences, theoretically and in practice, officially and in the private, intimate responses of individuals reading, researching, and thinking. Also trying to “turn fact into narrative so it can move somewhere,” different texts, considering different “whole lives,” must work differently (Alcalay 69). A pair of Rukeyser’s jotted notes on a torn scrap of paper speak to both the motivation behind, and the actuality of, this strain of her work: “Our symbols limited only by our lives,” she posits confidently near the top of the page, while across the bottom right corner she confesses her method in a slanting, much lighter script, “collecting the lives of the dead” (LOC II:12 folder 9).

Published in 1970, Rukeyser’s *The Traces of Thomas Hariot* is, among the rest of her works, the text closest in spirit to *Willard Gibbs*, as it follows the trail of a once largely forgotten 16th-century scientist and New World explorer through “fiery details, a stroke here and then an airy space, another stroke of what is now called fact, and then something obliterated, drowned, burned, lost” (4). It is more obviously experimental and self-referential than its predecessor, and Rukeyser’s process of organically and analogically drawing a form for her text from the ideas of the individual she is studying is now an overtly stated method. As she describes in her introduction (this one titled “The Questions”): “This book is built according to the nature of an interest in Hariot and the problems, not solved by him, but indicated by him” (4). Rukeyser asserts straightaway that her book is a built thing, one constructed on still shifting ground, on problems instead of on solutions. We

know enough about her ideas of engineering to anticipate that her literary structure will move within its stasis, spanning beyond the contours of Hariot's birth and death as it pursues the problems his life and thinking raised, their reverberations and significance. In fact, this book will follow those traces not just beyond the limits of the life in question, but beyond the purely factual and historical altogether, into literature and fantasy. The questions Rukeyser introduces include: "Was Hariot a great scientist?" and "Is there really a connection between tobacco and cancer?" as well as "How do you get from a prison to the moon?" and "Why did Prospero break his staff?" – Prospero being the exiled Duke of Milan in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, who ultimately renounces his magical powers after conjuring the storm that sets the play in motion (11). Rukeyser's inclusion of Prospero exceeds her earlier heretical correlation of Gibbs with Melville and Whitman. Here, she is not equating Hariot with writers, but crossing the line into literature itself, connecting the events of his life to events of a play. Implicitly, she asserts that Prospero's motivations might help us parse the historical explorer's legacy. Thus, the text attests that biography has as much to do with the life of the communal imagination, myth, and mind, as it does with the lived lives of the individuals in question; as much to do with the stories we make up and tell each other, as with what has taken place. Life-writing crosses into fiction, fact passes into narrative and is then burned back into fable.

The unstable and sometimes explosive marriage of fact and fable, the mythical and the personal is the central concern and feature of the life of another individual who preoccupied Rukeyser throughout her own: the American escape artist, Harry Houdini. Rukeyser's long-term, intensive, and multi-faceted engagement with Houdini shows her developing her understanding about the significance of this particular meeting-place (between fact and fable) well beyond the intuition that drew her to Houdini in the first place. In 1973, three years after *The Traces of Thomas*

Hariot was published, her *Houdini: A Musical* received its first and only stage production at the Lenox Center for the Performing Arts in Massachusetts, starring Christopher Walken in the title role.³⁷

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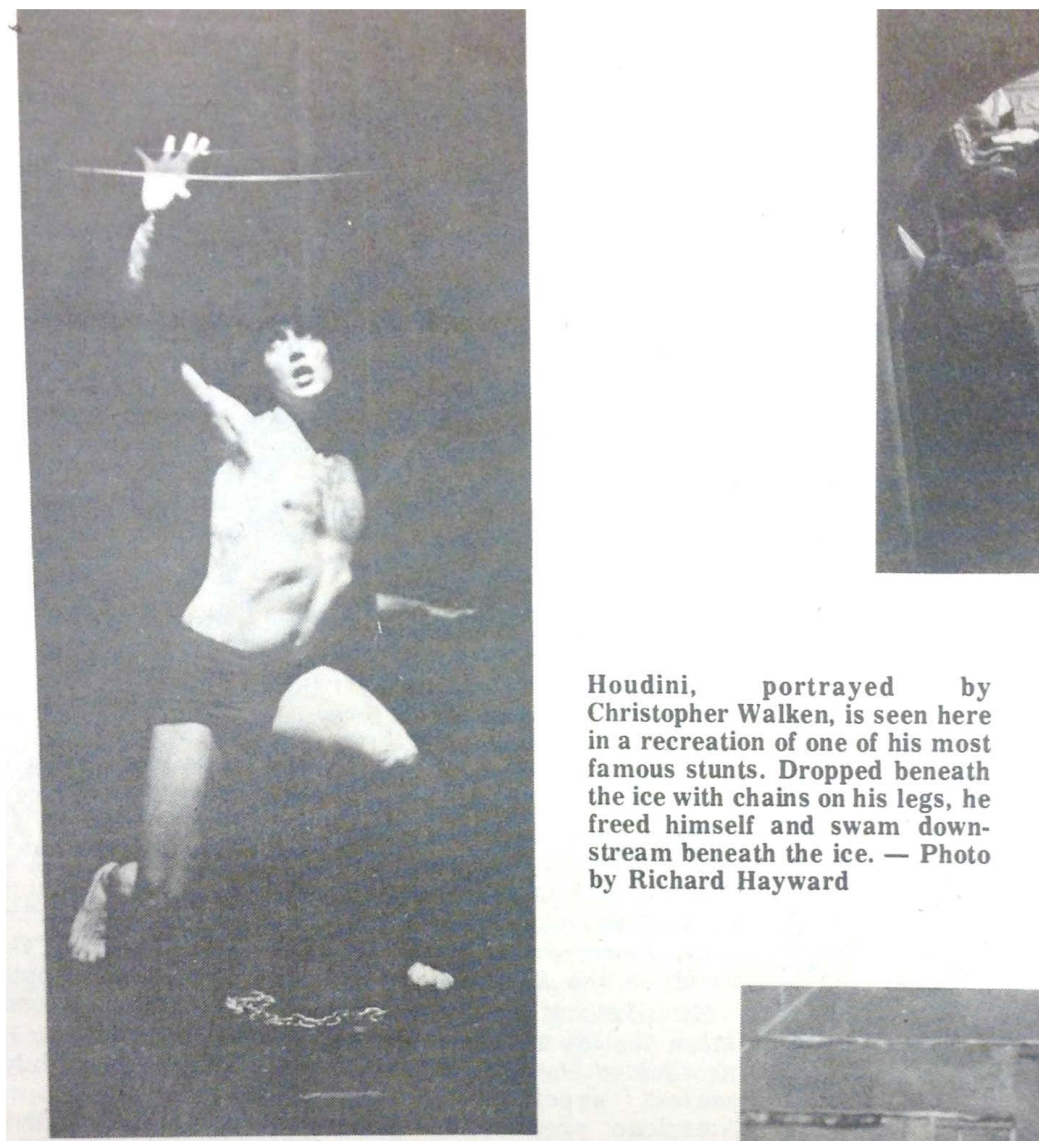


Figure 2

³⁷ Produced by Lyn Austin, *Houdini* ran at the Lenox Arts Center from July 3-8 and 11-15, 1973.

But Rukeyser had begun working on *Houdini* as early as the 1930s. Her 1939 collection, *A Turning Wind*, includes the poem “Speech for the Assistant, from *Houdini*,” which powerfully highlights the concerns and preoccupations that drew Rukeyser to the magician (“ghosts, boat-burial, a headless coat on the dancing clothesline. / ... magicians imagining rack and oubliette”) (Poems 178-79).

Though the “assistant” (later Marco Bone) remains a major figure, nothing from this poem survives intact in the final play manuscripts. As with *Willard Gibbs* the biography and “Willard Gibbs” the poem, Rukeyser probed her interest in Harry Houdini and pursued his symbolic, human, and narrative significance across different genres – an ongoing experiment that allowed her to view her subject through the lenses provided by each and to complicate the parameters of those lenses, helping to keep all of her writing open to the messy potential inherent in the meeting-places between forms.

Over the course of the 1940s, she submitted an outline for a 40-minute “stage presentation” of *Houdini* to Radio City Music Hall, a different outline to Doris Humphrey for consideration as a “Ballet-Play,” and another to the film production company RKO Radio Pictures (LOC I:38 folder 6, II:13 folder 11, I:36 folder 4). By the 1950s, she seems to have committed to creating a drama featuring musical numbers (or, as she describes it in one draft, “A musical with a ferocious play inside”), though the play itself continued to shift its shape profoundly, as evidenced by the dozens of drafts held with her papers at the Library of Congress (LOC I:38 folder 7). She worked in flurries of activity – intense periods in 1951 and 1952, an assertion in 1957 that she had “cleared [her] time to go ahead with the play now,” a return in 1968 and 1969, and a final sustained period of work in 1973 and 1974 (LOC I:36 folder 4). After almost a decade away she would return to editing and rewriting, soliciting feedback, doing research, submitting manuscripts to theaters and presses. Her notebooks and jottings suggest that even in the interims Houdini himself never disappeared from her thoughts.

Houdini: the Musical was not published during Rukeyser's lifetime, and though the bulk of her correspondence about the play concerns attempts to have it produced, a 1959 rejection letter from Robert MacGregor at New Directions Press suggests that Rukeyser hoped it would also appear in print. A printed version of the play first appeared posthumously in a 1985 special double issue of *Poetry East* dedicated to Rukeyser, which was edited by Kate Daniels, then at work on the poet's biography. Daniels' short introduction argues for the piece's significance in relation to Rukeyser's other "script work" on account of the duration of her preoccupation with Houdini as well as its resonance "with the major psychic centers of her work," such as freedom and the body. Her comments constitute the only scholarly response to this work to date (96).³⁸ A "definitive" and significantly different edition of the play was finally published by Paris Press in 2002. This version, with which this chapter is most directly concerned, incorporates Rukeyser's significant revisions following the Lenox preview performance, work that took her through the end of 1974.

Houdini – in all of its iterations – both fits well and sits uneasily under the general rubric of life-writing. Its plot follows the basic arc of Houdini's life: Houdini (born Erik, later Ehrich, Weisz) meets and marries Beatrice (Bess); they withstand the hardships of insecure early years doing "whatever it takes" for a seedy traveling circus (39). There is a scene dedicated to Houdini's first prison break and one to his perilous escape from a frozen river, during which Bess hears a newsboy report his death. In its final versions, the play's heavily edited second act focuses on Houdini's relationship to Spiritualism – his friendship with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and attempt, through Lady

³⁸ The only mention of *Houdini* that appears in more contemporary scholarship is David Bergman's tangential assessment in "Ajanta and the Rukeyser Imbroglio": "Playing with popular forms was nothing new for Rukeyser. In the *Life of Poetry*, she claims 'Never in our history have our popular arts offered more full or wide-ranging gifts; never have they been more direct in their vitality, more native in the assertion' (103). She studied to be a film editor, and in the 1930s, she began writing a musical, *Houdini*, which was not performed until 1973 (and not published until 2002) although an excerpt from it, 'Speech for the Assistant,' was published in *The Turning Wind* (1939). *Houdini* is her most sustained attempt at using a popular form, and it contains, as Jan Freeman notes, lines 'taken up again and again by the women's movement,' namely, "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open" (*Houdini* viii). Yet Rukeyser lacks the Brechtian touch to meld popular form and revolutionary content" (560).

Doyle, to contact his beloved mother after her death. The séance was a failure (according to Houdini) and he dedicated the rest of his life to the exposure of false mediums. Rukeyser's final scene interweaves Houdini's testimony at the 1926 Congressional Judiciary Subcommittee on Washington D.C. hearings on fortune telling (he attended at his own initiative to condemn fraudulent clairvoyants) and the punch in the stomach he received at the hands of a medical student, mythologized as a precipitating event in his death (which was in fact the result of peritonitis, an infection resulting from a ruptured appendix). Houdini dies and Bess drinks and waits for some supernatural sign from him, which the audience, at least, receives in the form of an elliptical closing monologue. "Incredible! But I believe the incredible" Houdini begins, possibly making a case for the link between art and speech from beyond the grave and certainly connecting his own art with the magic of human communication: "Open yourself, for we are locks, / Open each other, we are keys" (150). In her directions for the play's Lenox cast, Rukeyser provides this arc: "In the first act, his escapes deepen: his old life, the trunk, the jail, the frozen river. The second act is the challenges," which she describes elsewhere as "Total risk: fame, honesty, Bess, the hearing, coming through. Light" (LOC I:37 folder 2, I:37 folder 1).

Like *Willard Gibbs* and *Thomas Harriot*, Rukeyser's Houdini play compels us to ask what it means to make something of and from a particular person's life. It interrogates our attraction to Houdini, the implications of the analogies that grow so lushly around him. Like *Gibbs* and *Harriot*, it widens the field of biographical inquiry, incorporating peripheral events and evocations: each of these books connects the life in question to big ideas, seemingly distant stakes and implications. But in important ways, *Houdini* is also different. At first, Rukeyser did not conduct original research for the play; instead she worked from available published books, like Arnold Kellock's 1928 *Houdini: His Life Story*. In the 1940s, she acquired the rights to this biography, imagining her piece as an embellishment of its information. Her source (we now know) was filled with mistakes and partial

truths, many of which were the direct result of Houdini's own numerous misdirections about his history, and many others a result of his wife's. Biographer Ruth Brandon writes, "His life, which he never ceased to invent, was a Gothick fiction." She also quotes the opinion of Houdini enthusiasts that the Kellock biography was "over-romanticized, 'Bess's view of events'" (11, 44).

Issues of veracity, belief, skepticism, citation, access, secrecy, invention, and ecstatic truth are fundamentally and specifically woven into Rukeyser's choice of subject. Of course, with Houdini, she is not unearthing a wrongfully ignored figure (like Gibbs or Harriot), but engaging an individual firmly situated in the public imagination, one who is speculated about, written about, and exaggerated about extensively. As Houdini became rooted in Rukeyser's own imagination, her piece moved further from his facts (however invented they may have been) and toward her own overtly subjective response to them. She described edits she was making in a letter to Houdini's sister, Gladys Weiss, in 1951: "They are all in the same direction: away from the Kellock material and into the meanings of Houdini's life as I have seen it. The play is becoming freer, simpler in action, and more dramatic" (LOC I:36 folder 4). The figure of Houdini begins to take on resonance through the particulars of Rukeyser's response to him. She gambles on her own idea that his identity, like that of any biographical subject, "may be seen in relationship," in response and re-imagining, rather than through details and events (LOC I:30 folder 1).

The "meanings of Houdini's life" as Rukeyser saw them lay precisely in the collision of his myth and his personhood, the events of his life and how that life signified in the lives of others. Most readers of her drafts disagreed, however, and came independently to the same conclusion that the juxtaposition of these two registers was *Houdini's* chief drawback. Thornton Wilder wrote to Rukeyser in 1954:

As I see it, you have a choice before you: Either: a large play of symbolical intention
... in which Houdini is presented as the public sees him (mighty, theatric baffling

showman) ... Or: a far more immediate realistic biographical play with occasional presentation symbolically and (as they say) poetically of the implications of his life and genius. (LOC II:13 folder 11)

Eric Bentley – playwright, theater critic, and translator of Bertold Brecht – had rendered the same judgment more succinctly in 1952: “You have written a play on two levels – with no real stairway between them” (I:36 folder 4).³⁹ In his censure, Bentley went further than Wilder, questioning not just the junction of symbolism and biography, but the fundamental validity of the figurative resonance Rukeyser was pursuing. His language echoes the previous decade’s criticism of her mixing of registers in *Willard Gibbs*. “I find it hard,” Bentley admitted, “to see Houdini’s trickery as a symbol of the higher human impulses that you try to make it symbolize. After all a lockbreaker is not Sir Galahad, nor Jefferson, nor Freud” (LOC I:36 folder 4).

Bentley’s assertion apparently stuck with Rukeyser: she incorporated his critique directly into her play. Midway through Act Two, her character Marco Bone (who has already introduced and described Houdini multiple times) announces, “This man is no Galileo, no Einstein, no Freud. / This man is a lock breaker, name of Houdini” (115). Rukeyser’s edits are significant: from Bentley’s list, she retains only Freud, whose relevance to understanding Houdini is viscerally apparent – in Houdini’s frequent nudity as he was searched for hidden keys or tricks, his deep and performative devotion to his mother, and his obsession with staging, inviting and evading his own death. Both Freud and Houdini uncover dark currents coursing under the still façade of our lives. But Rukeyser replaces Sir Galahad, the legendary knight embodying purity and piety, and Jefferson, founding father, public figure, and polymath, with Galileo and Einstein – scientists and geniuses, thinkers

³⁹ Other responses suggest similar difficulties with Rukeyser’s juxtaposition of symbol and biography. A letter on Harvard Department of Music stationery dated Feb 1 1952 and signed “Aaron” (likely Aaron Copeland) reads: “I read the play and puzzled over it greatly. I’m not at all sure I get it – but it does seem to me you are trying to do a very difficult thing – the mixing of styles. You probably don’t realize the sharp contrast for the reader of straight talk and symbolic talk. I don’t see how – in the present state of the theatre – you could hope to get away with it in a big-time production” (LOC II:13 folder 11). And Morton Gould wrote on July 25 1952: “I would venture to say there is too much symbolism in both action and dialogue and not enough down to earth entertainment” (LOC II:13 folder 11).

associated with fundamental shifts in the popular understanding of how the world works, what our place in it is. In this way, Rukeyser's appropriation and revision of Bentley's assertion strikes a complicated tone: while accurate (Houdini *was* a lock breaker), we suspect, reading it, that it insufficiently describes either his work or its significance. Freud, Galileo, and Einstein all herald shifts in seeing, and Houdini's art, his magic, is predicated on how we see or fail to see – the connection between what we see and what we make of that seeing, how we extend that lesson and example to our continuing encounters with the world. Houdini's audiences must have been painfully aware of this negotiation as they watched his death-defying exploits with suspense and excitement, wonder and disbelief. In the play, Rukeyser's juxtaposition of an apparent negation of Houdini's significance ("This man is no Galileo, no Einstein, no Freud. / This man is a lock breaker, name of Houdini") with the grandly abstract lines that precede it – "He / met false hope. He fought false hope" – point to the complexities animating both the character and our interest in him. He is a lockbreaker and, in that, he is much more. He is both a man and a symbol.

"It's an American myth of the escape artist, a play of people fiercely involved in magic, denial, extreme physical life, attempts at communication, and the juggling of images of themselves. It is made in continual transformations, beginning with Coney Island." (H 8). This is how Marco Bone – self-invented man, Harry Houdini's manager, his "double," "not his father," and the play's caller, conscience, and master of ceremonies – introduces *Houdini* a few pages into Act One (71, 8). His advertisement raises myriad questions. In describing the American myth (is he referring to Rukeyser's play? to Houdini's life as elsewhere imagined, invented, and represented? to Houdini's actual life? And what differences would each of these make?), Bone does not use the singular, but plurals ("people," "attempts," "images"), suggesting that we are talking about more than the man Houdini, or that this individual is not singular, his pursuits and concerns reflecting variously. Further, Bone connects magic not to beauty, possibility, or even entertainment, but to denial (of

reality? of its purported limits? of pleasure? of the body's requirements?) and pain (physical? existential?). He also asserts that the myth and the play (which are linked, with the second functioning as a descriptor of the first) traffic in "attempts at communication" as opposed to misdirection, sleights of hand, and attempts at obfuscation, which we might otherwise think of as constituting the magician's work.

Immediately following this description, Rukeyser explains: "*This statement announces the transformations of our play, and wards off any charges that it is biographical. It allows for MARCO BONE's sense of wonder.*" (8). Who does this note defend Rukeyser against? Why would describing her play as a biography constitute a "charge"? Is she protecting herself against requirements of facticity? Is she alluding to debates around the facts of Houdini's life, and then refusing to enter that arena? Or is she suggesting that biography is anathema to wonder, and taking sides? Is she choosing to present "a large play of symbolical intention" instead of "a far more immediate realistic biographical play" in Wilder's taxonomy of her conceptual choices? These are live tensions. No single answer describes Rukeyser's play: instead the various possibilities raised and the negotiation of these possibilities are part of it, just as the text itself contains such instances of self-referential close reading.⁴⁰ Rukeyser is not proposing an answer to the relationship between a man's life and a myth, the relationship between a play, a biography, and a poem. She is working them out, trying to build some kind of "stairway" that acknowledges and pays homage to their confusing and compelling imbrications in her subjects' lives as well as in ours.

In his essay "The Truth and Life of Myth" Robert Duncan describes, traces a lineage of, and makes an argument for the profound value of myth: the "true things in fictions, and ... fictions in true things" I see deployed in Houdini's life and Rukeyser's life of Houdini, as well the work of

⁴⁰ I am referring specifically to this quotation from the 2002 Paris Press printed edition of the play, though the many different drafts in Rukeyser's archive are similarly pocked with stage descriptions, narrative descriptions, asides about both the language and staging of the play, suggesting that the practice was an ongoing and central part of her compositional strategy.

poets more generally (54). Turning to William James, who, “among the seven realms of reality that the philosopher must take into account, lists as the fifth a realm of fiction,” and Freud, who illustrated that “Men’s lies themselves told the truth about them,” as well as gnostic, theosophical, and Christian thinkers and traditions, Duncan describes the existence and value of myth within a variety of fields of inquiry and structures of belief (9, 47). He is theorizing the work of the poet (his own work), but not only. By exhibiting a profound openness to different epistemologies – one that reflects Rukeyser’s own openness – Duncan can show what these different approaches to understanding the world, our existence, and history share, as well as what can be gained by putting them together. His framing of fields of knowledge as different ways of both searching for and experiencing truth is both basic and profoundly revealing. He writes:

Each man in his seriousness is concerned, deeply concerned, to live in the truth of things. The man of religion to whom the truth has been revealed; the man of philosophy for whom the nature of the truth must ever be sought out and tried; the man of science for whom the truth of things is a lure in the universe exciting him to search and to make ever new imaginative pictures as the truth he cannot reach requires – how difficult it is for these serious men to believe in or respect or understand sympathetically the seriousness of the others. At heart each is like a cuckolded lover, who sees his beloved Truth at once violated and that, insincerely, by his rival. (53)

For the priest, the scientist, the poet, the magician, the historian, a conception of truth always dictates a way of doing, feeling, and making in the world. In other words, the pursuit of truth engenders creative and interpretive acts. In science as in magic, hypotheses about what-is frequently call our senses into question. Thus, what Duncan discovers, pushing further, is that “whatever realm of reality we seek out, we find it is woven of fictions” (10). It is for this reason that the poet, who

has been “converted by and ha[s] now taken [her] faith in a truth that is patently made-up,” approaches a meaning that is mythical, structural, larger than any individual self or moment. To pursue mythical or poetic truth, then, is to “testify to and in that to enter into the reality of a divine history within what men call history” (44). These are the grounds on which to begin to understand Houdini’s myth-making, Rukeyser’s myth-making, and Houdini’s pull on Rukeyser’s imagination. This is the staircase between the poets and the texts, the individuals and the magic.

In every iteration of her play, Rukeyser announces *Houdini*’s mythical-biographical hybridity immediately in descriptive language that sets the ground both *for* and *of* the text as an instance of a poet’s mythical truth-work through the occasion of an individual life. In the introductory matter of the *Poetry East* version, Rukeyser describes, “The action of the play covers forty years of Houdini’s life; but this is indicated as one span of the legendary past” (98). Through the semi-colon, Houdini’s particular life is grammatically hinged to the spanning, non-specific past of legend; at the same time the “but” holds them separate. The play keeps these approaches to framing time adjacent, but they are not coterminous. And the verbs Rukeyser uses are contrasting: “covers” implies reportage, verifiable and obviously relevant material facts, while “indicated” focuses on the artifice of performance. In an intermediary draft, she switches the order of her clauses and retains the semi-colon, although it no longer bears the burden of linking the different registers of past, which are now joined in the first part of the sentence: “The time of the play is one span of the legendary and recent past; the evidence comes from the ‘twenties” (LOC I:38 folder 2). Her use of the word “evidence” and her specific reference to the 1920s in this version suggest a struggle with the relationship between the two aspects of her pursuit, engaging Houdini’s life through its facts, and treating those facts as proof toward some idea, which is separate from and larger than the person. Biography and myth are separate here, the staircase between them constructed through historical

evidence and its sober interpretation. She is working out the relationship between the symbolic past and the actual past.

In the version published by Paris Press, Rukeyser finally eliminates all specific mention of Houdini, substituting the following expanded description: “The play is in two acts. The time is the legendary past of circuses, carnivals, and magic acts. Historically, the first quarter of the twentieth century, slides to the present time” (frontmatter). Here, she retains the original, ambiguous relationship between the play’s mythical and historical timeframes. It takes place simultaneously in the “*legendary* past of circuses” and in the *specific* past of the twentieth century. Lest we assume “legendary” is merely a description of that historical period, Rukeyser describes the play’s historical time as “sliding,” linking it back to theatrical time and artifice. Legend and history merge, meet, overlap, and diverge. Without specific reference to Houdini’s life, and with a more generously drawn timeframe, the terrain of these final versions of *Houdini* opens up and blurs.

By its nature, theater plays with time, fundamentally destabilizing our understanding of this abstraction as a regular, forward-marching, knowable entity. In his essay-manifestoes theorizing a poetics in opposition to conventional, “geezer theater,” American playwright Mac Wellman distinguishes “clock time” from the “Wild Time” whose potentiality is inherent in art (*Speculations* 21). He writes:

The Wild Time of poetic theater can bend, slow, break, or fork. Narrative is not destroyed by the nonlinear, it is merely disguised. Disguised as something else, which is where the poetry comes in. The new science of chaos with its use of fractal geometry, for instance, reveals some interesting things about narrative, about the way breaks in the shape and flow of a narrative event, breaks that disrupt the flow of energy or information and redistribute it elsewhere, confirm the presence of deep

structures we do not normally perceive, because they do not function in linear time.

(Chrestomathy 2-3)

Like Rukeyser and Duncan and Howe, Wellman roots his experiments in interdisciplinary knowledge. He presents theater as enacting scientific truths, and in the process uncovering the “deep structures” (like dark matter) that shape experience beneath surface or appearance. In our everyday lives, time *seems* linear, but science and theater (and magic) show us how it is not. As Wellman describes, the very nature of “theater narrative” consists in “the continuous fracturing of events, their dispersal, reintegration, and final, absolute disintegration in the medium of time” (Chrestomathy 4).

It is an obvious truth of our experience of theater that, as far as our normal perceptions go, time for characters on a stage passes differently (more quickly or slowly, in the opposite direction, more choppy, in clumps) than it does for people in an audience. We might even experience these differences without letting them get to us, accepting a leap or a flashback (for Wellman, “that odious figment of geezer wishful thinking”) as a necessity borne from narrative requirements of the art (Chrestomathy 5). In Wellman’s parlance, such sanctioned disjunctions are “safe,” they cause no “tear” “(as in ‘air’)” to appear, no subsequent crumbling of our structural understanding of ourselves as moving forward at a set pace, separate from the action we are witnessing (Speculations 17). In *Houdini*, time moves alongside the character Houdini’s life, but at an inconsistent pace – leaping and clustering thematically instead of in accordance with the clock or calendar. In Act One, Rukeyser moves from Houdini’s prison escape to his river ice escape, for example, making an argument about his increasingly performative, increasingly public, increasingly fearsome feats. But a strange thing happens midway through the play: Rukeyser explains at the bottom of her setting description, “No time passes between ACTS ONE and TWO, except, of course, for the audience.” You might skip over this last sentence of introductory matter without taking special note of it – Rukeyser is just

describing an intermission, the point in any play during which the dramatic world is paused and the real world reestablishes its hold over the audience – character time and audience time are unhooked. But why explain something so obvious? And why then repeat this precise description within the body of the play itself?

The space between Acts One and Two of *Houdini* – which consists for the audience, as Rukeyser describes, in an actual passage of time – is the only break in the play that is not accompanied by a corresponding shift in the location or time of the action. Where moving from scene to scene elsewhere means moving from Coney Island to New England, a jail to a river-bank, Act Two, Scene One picks up in the precise instant in which Act One, Scene Four ends – with Bess, having ridden the crest of her single phenomenal outburst of anger (“Put yourself in the goddamn crawling rivercunt – ” she shrieks, “They yell you dead – your riverwife rivermother”) and now warming and dressing her resurrected husband (81). We return to a frozen moment, a reminder that the scene we are watching is not *real* (in real life, we can’t return to suspended moments). So prompted, we realize that it remains for us to determine what register of “real-ness” describes the scene we have returned to, Houdini’s brush with death below the river. We might wonder if the scene, frozen and set apart for us, is true biographically – did Houdini really attempt an escape from below a frozen river? And if so, did he really almost die? Was his life really at stake in the trick, or was the risk part of the illusion? Is the veracity of Houdini’s exploit constituted by its actual danger? How then do we assess this scene we are watching in terms of Houdini’s life? In terms of our own lives?

Rukeyser’s description – “ACT TWO follows from ACT ONE with no passage of time, except, of course, for the audience” – forces us to account for her play as a constructed thing. Our return to the frozen scene reminds us that we are participating in a conjuring that requires, if not necessarily belief, then certainly the suspension of disbelief (86). In this moment we witness

ourselves being swayed by the apparatus, being tricked, persuaded, moved. We give ourselves over to it. This could be a description of watching one of Houdini's acts: the audience knows the apparatus is hidden before their eyes, but doesn't or can't or doesn't want to see it. Or, as Adam Phillips puts it in his psychoanalytic study, *Houdini's Box*, "if they believed what they perceived, then Houdini himself, his powers or his skills, were radically unintelligible. They saw, but didn't know what to believe about what they saw" (19). Rukeyser mimics, mines, and describes the power of Houdini's illusions and the audience's complicity, which is either a result of their limitations (they are not quick or clever enough to see what is going on in front of their eyes), their willed blindness, or their fervent desire to believe. At the same time, this frozen scene forces us to account for Houdini's *life* as a constructed thing. Where is the line between illusion and experience? Fable and fact? What is our responsibility to that divide? Her choice of subject is the embodiment of this struggle over the terrain of truth and its uses.

But perhaps this line of inquiry betrays a jaded response to Houdini, the privileging of "trick" over "magic," an "irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats 44), a refusal to be in wonder. In Rukeyser's play Houdini is, himself, conflicted over the relationship between these two orientations. Early on, Bess says to him, simply, "You do magic." Though his answer, "Not really magic," seems definitively to land on the side of purposeful, theatrical deception, it is not the end of their conversation. Bess's response to his refusal suggests a darker, more complicated truth: "Don't shield me. I'm not a child" (14). Houdini goes on to talk about fear and the control of fear, altogether more obscure matters and the basis of his phenomenal power. (In an earlier draft of the play, Bess tries to explain the sticky relationship between magic and Houdini's tricks more explicitly, in terms of her own experience: "They're not tricks. They start like tricks, and then they go dark, and quick; brilliant; like you. They make me afraid" (LOC I:38 folder 1)). A later dialogue with the beautiful fortune-telling high-wire dancer, Volonty, follows a similar pattern. To Volonty's "But

you're a magician," Houdini responds, "Come on. You know better. I'm an illusionist," again countering the occult with sleight-of-hand. But once more Houdini's word is not final. Volonty dismisses his neatly drawn distinctions: "Same difference" (52). Where an illusionist is an entertainer who produces effects through natural means, "magician" suggests access to paranormal, supernatural, and religious realms. Volonty's equation does not indicate which she is dismissing, the possibility of real magic, or the suggestion that there is any magic – illusion or not – that is not real.

Rukeyser's Houdini repeatedly describes his success in empirical terms and himself as a pragmatic and diligent man in control of information and therefore of perception: "What I do can be reasoned out, I work with the sciences and the limits of the watcher, who thinks he sees" (89). But he also betrays the continual pull – for himself and his thronging spectators – of something that defies rational explanation, that points to deeper desires and workings. As he describes, "Many people will tell you they see – whatever I've wanted them to see. They're not able to describe what has happened. They'll accept what you seem to show them, if they don't know the laws of science, or the laws of belief. True belief is a great thing, I care about that" (125). In this description, belief is placed on the same sound plane as science, governed by its own "laws" and also capable of combatting mere illusion. In Duncan's work, "belief" might refer to a gnostic tradition of not-knowing or the Romantic movement's "negative capability" (46). But belief for Houdini is a tortured arena. Here, the reference leads directly to his father: "My father wrote a book," he begins, suggesting that this anecdote will define belief, explain why he cares about it so much. In a transcribed exchange, the real-life Houdini similarly redirected the question "Have you any religious views?" away from himself and towards his father, toward a lineage of religious practice: "Yes sir; I am the son of a rabbi. For hundreds of years my forbears were rabbi [*siz*]" (US 14).

Houdini's father had been a rabbi before immigrating from Budapest to Appleton, Wisconsin, but as Brandon describes, "What Rabbi Weiss had to teach was irrelevant to Wisconsin –

even Jewish Wisconsin” (19). In the accepted narrative of Houdini’s life, his father’s inability to provide for the family in the United States led both to Houdini’s tremendous ambition (he ran away from home in Milwaukee as a young teenager in order to attempt to support himself) and his passionate devotion to his mother (Rukeyser opens her play with the oft-repeated story of 12-year old Houdini’s oath to protect her). Though he lacked formal education – the result not of lack of interest but of his father’s unemployment and the family’s resulting destitution – Houdini often described himself as a scholar in his family’s tradition: he cited his father as his favorite author and complained, “The public knows me as a magician, a mystifier, and a Cinema star ... It does not know that I possess one of the largest privately owned libraries on occult subjects in the world ... It does not realize that I am a student” (qtd in Brandon 219). Houdini’s self-styling as a scholar and his obsession with amassing an enormous library of magical and theatrical texts was, biographer Kenneth Silverman suggests, an act of filial homage and reparation: “The effort was linked in his mind with the past, with ‘my beloved father, selling his library in old age.’ He managed to buy back some of the Hebrew works his father was forced to sell, but did much more than restore what had been lost” (206).

In Rukeyser’s play, Houdini doesn’t so much grapple with this heritage of belief as remain, like a child, under its thrall. Rabbi Weiss appears in *Houdini* only as a specter of religious authority, and the terms, requirements, and psychological, intellectual, and spiritual ramifications of this authority for his son remain inconclusive. The exchanges in which he is invoked feed directly into the play’s oscillating themes of doubt, open-mindedness, and the conflicted desire to believe. “My father said we’re not magicians because of what Moses did,” Houdini tells Volotny, explaining:

you know when they were in the desert? No water, but there was the cloud by day.

And God told Moses to strike the rock with his staff. Water gushed forth. Moses let

them believe it was all his doing; he didn't give credit. That's why he wasn't allowed to go into the Promised Land. And we're not to be *magicians*. (52 emphasis original)

In Houdini's (in Rukeyser's) telling, Moses's sin – the magician's sin – is a kind of pride, a hunger, not so much for control, as for credit. But the story is confusing. Which would more awesomely constitute “magic” – God's ability to wrest water from rock through man, or the possibility that man might be able to transmute these elements on his own? According to some beliefs, wouldn't these amount to versions of the same thing? What is the relationship between humans and God? And how does this relationship matter and manifest in acts of magic? Why is “*magicians*” italicized in Houdini's speech, if not to suggest that Houdini believes his father to be mistaken – that he finds this story about Moses significant, because it is an injunction, not about magic but about something altogether else?

With Moses and magic, Rukeyser's play peers over the edge of a deep and complicated history. Just beginning to scratch the surface, Houdini's biographer Brandon explains, “in surviving fragments of ancient alchemical and magical literature, [Moses] figures as the author of secret magical texts. His activities while he was leading the Israelites through the wilderness suggest that he was familiar with, among other things, what became known as natural magic – the use of natural laws to apparently natural effects” (31-32). But *Houdini* does not follow this dark pathway. Any clear assertion about the significance or content of Houdini's father's work is cut short, as is any clear directive about Houdini's own beliefs. “My father wrote a book – ” is interrupted by the question, “Is Mr. Houdini a mystic?” “Mr. Houdini is one of the greatest mystics in the world” is the answer it enjoins (125). Again Houdini is deprived of the last word; his own beliefs are obscured by other people's beliefs *about* him.

This exchange takes place in Rukeyser's final scene, Houdini's testimony before the anti-fortune telling hearings. In her publisher's note preceding the Paris Press edition of *Houdini*, Jan

Freeman describes how Rukeyser used transcripts of the court proceedings to dramatize the scene, quoting her note to the play's director: "This seems to go off into the absurd here," Rukeyser confesses, "However, almost all of this scene is taken from the transcript of the actual hearing" (viii). That the most "absurd" section of Rukeyser's play about a conjurer and escape artist whose life was a continually written fiction is quoted from the theater of American politics is an irony that heightens the tension between the poles of fact and fable. Thus connected through investigative impulse and technique to Rukeyser's documentary poetics and her works that take on events and individuals of historical and political gravity, *Houdini's* purpose, its status as popular entertainment, is complicated. Moving, in her edits of the play, away from the Kellock biography of Houdini, Rukeyser sent multiple queries attempting to gain access to these hearing transcripts. Her search for this documentary evidence did not oppose, but rather corresponded to and tracked her turn toward personal response – these two impulses in her work are once again central and braided.

The Congressional Hearings on Fortune Telling are a truly strange episode, in Rukeyser's play as in American history. The star witness, Houdini traveled to defend the amendment (Bill 8989), which proposed adding fraudulent fortune-tellers to the roster of offenders of public policy in the District of Columbia:

Any person pretending to tell fortunes for reward or compensation where lost or stolen goods may be found; any person who, by game or device, sleight of hand, pretending, fortune telling, or by any trick or other means, by the use of cards or other implements or instruments, fraudulently obtains from another person money or property or reward, property of any description; any person pretending to remove spells, or to sell charms for protection, or to unite the separated, shall be considered a disorderly person. (US 1)

In the language of this bill (which despite Houdini's energetic efforts did not pass), infraction is constituted by the obviously objectionable, concrete acquisition of another's money or property through fraudulent means. But the bill also takes issue with more inchoate transgressions: *pretending* to remove a spell, to protect someone, to unite the separated. These actions are harmful not because of their relationship to property, but because of their relationship to the vulnerability and openness that attend belief. Such "disorderly persons" do not control the realms, actions, and eventualities they pretend control over; their harm is grave because of what it resembles.

Rukeyser culls from the 169-page transcript of the hearings approximately 20 pages of text, adding a staccato pace to the carnivalesque atmosphere already present in the historical record. Her most bizarre and surprising lines are quotations, including: "The original Houdini was a Hindu, wasn't he?", "Have you ever been to Allahabad?", and "I believe in Santa Claus" (H 120, 121, 123; also US 150, 10). As in the play, during the actual hearings, Houdini did analogize having one's fortune told to using "a tiny bit of dope or opium, just enough to make [you] happy" (US 26, qtd as "A little heroin, a little opium. Just enough to make him happy," H 131). And, calling his wife as a witness, he *did* ask, "Have I ever been crazy, unless it was about you?" (H 142, US 52). Rather than obscure the stakes of the event, these bizarre exchanges highlight the serious tension at its center – the tension between belief and manipulation, authority and appearance, narrative and fact. Scores of Spiritualists attended the hearings, claiming the amendment infringed on their right to religious practice: "Prophecy, spiritual guidance, and advice are the very foundation of our religion, and to deny a spiritual minister the right to advise his followers is to curtail their privileges as ministers of their religion" (US 15). In the hearing transcript, Houdini holds that he is not attacking "the practice of occultism" or of any religion, but at the same time asserts, "If there are any genuine mediums I have never met one" (8). These two positions are not, on their surface, compatible. In Rukeyser's play, the contradiction is exposed through Houdini's excising of spiritualism from the realm of

“genuine” belief. Houdini states: “I respect any genuine believer in any religion. But this thing they call spiritualism, talking with the dead, is a fraud. I have not seen one genuine medium. And it’s an American art, you know. It started here, we’re responsible for it” (123).

Houdini had first-hand experience with mediumship – in the early part of his career, he and Bess incorporated mind reading into their act, trolling graveyards, stores, and brothels in each new town for information about its residents. His intimacy with the process, combined with his grief following his mother’s death and his subsequently intense desire to believe in the possibility of communion with the dead, made his turn against false channeling extreme. In elevated, self-serious language, he describes his trajectory at the start of his famous book chronicling his crusade, *A Magician Among the Spirits*:

From my early career as a mystical entertainer I have been interested in Spiritualism as belonging to the category of mysticism, and as a side line to my own phase of mystery shows I have associated myself with mediums, joining the rank and file and held séances as an independent medium to fathom the truth of it all. At the time I appreciated the fact that I surprised my clients, but while aware of the fact that I was *deceiving* them I did not see or understand the seriousness of trifling with such sacred sentimentality ... To me it was a lark ... As I advanced to riper years of experience I was brought to a realization of the seriousness of trifling with the hallowed reverence which the average human being bestows on the departed, and when I personally became afflicted with similar grief I was chagrined that I should ever have been guilty of such frivolity and for the first time realized that it bordered on crime. (xi, emphasis original)

For Houdini, this is not a conversation about a harmless popular entertainment, but a struggle with the fathoming of truth, “sacred sentimentality,” “hallowed reverence,” “the affliction of grief,” a

“crime” committed against people’s deepest and most secret hopes as well as their larger schemes for understanding their place in the universe. But beyond these early, confessed, and renounced dabblings in mediumship, his work as a magician retained uncomfortable similarities to what he was seeking to discredit – as a “mystifier,” he, too earned and manipulated the confidence of his audiences, creating effects dependent on their willingness to be deceived. Many scholars of Houdini have attempted to articulate the intractable paradox at the heart of the magician’s position, a paradox centered on the precariousness of belief: “The spiritualists, [Houdini] believed, with their quasi-religious legitimacy, were exploiting the audiences’ credulity in *the wrong way*. It was a new twist to the old question of how true belief differs from false belief and why it matters” (Phillips 143, emphasis added). Perhaps on account of this uncomfortable resemblance, Houdini approached the work of exposure with the same urgency and seriousness he brought to his terrifying escapes.

Further highlighting the complicated entanglement between what Houdini did and what he hoped to expose, his *modus operandi* for revealing false mediums was not just to tear the curtain aside on their magic tricks (false chambers, loose coils of rope, normally imperceptible movements), but to replicate the effects they produced. Instead of causing the public to lose faith in séances and the practices of mediums, these performances of Houdini’s persuaded many, including his erstwhile friend Arthur Conan Doyle, that he could communicate with the dead. Thus, the Fortune Telling Hearings turn away from the amendment and toward Houdini himself, whether he can be trusted as uninterested, whether *he* possesses “special” or “supernatural powers” (H 124). Because Houdini cannot (is not willing to) give up his secrets – the basis of his fame, his livelihood, his identity – he must manipulate the terms of description. He must make language embody the open-endedness his work requires. Here is Houdini in the Congressional Hearing transcripts:

Mr. Houdini. Conan Doyle stated that I possess mediumistic powers, which I deny.

Mr. McLeod. How can you prove it?

Mr. Houdini. I admit that I do not possess mediumistic powers.” (23)

In this exchange, Houdini shifts the terms from a denial to an admission of a lack. What he offers in response to the request for proof is a move from defense to confession; from “I *did not* do it” to “I confess that I *can not* do it.” His gesture highlights the ambiguity of the subject at hand. For the myth of Houdini to work, his public needs to believe that there is something special about him. But it cannot be something *too* special – we also have to be able to conceive of his specialness, to locate it within our own experience.

In her play, Rukeyser zeroes in on the power of this rhetorical shift from the burden of proof toward the open-handedness of confession, revising the text of the hearing:

SPIRITUALIST: Conan Doyle says he has supernatural powers.

CONGRESSMAN: What do you say to that?

HOUDINI: I deny it.

CONGRESSMAN: Can you prove it?

HOUDINI: I *admit* that I am human. (124, emphasis original)

Rukeyser’s version highlights the vulnerability of Houdini’s response. Using italics for emphasis, she shifts the language from an admission of a lack to an admission of *being*. What Houdini can do is contained by what he is. What he is, is the same as us – at risk in the face of both death and the requirements of communication. The impact of this shift to admission is so great that Rukeyser uses it again a few pages later in an imagined dialogue between Houdini and Conan Doyle (who was not, in reality, present at the hearing):

HOUDINI: Help me stand up against this corrupt and fraudulent thing.

CONAN DOYLE: I know you want to do that, Harry. But help the mediums.

HOUDINI: You’re asking me to do the impossible.

CONAN DOYLE: Yes, but you do the impossible.

HOUDINI: I *admit* that I do not. (133-34)

Helping the mediums constitutes the impossible for Houdini not because he doesn't have the capacity to help them, but because he has experienced the work of the mediums as humanly false and therefore dangerous in the most profound way. Rukeyser's use of the word "impossible" is powerful because it plays on the rhetoric around Houdini and his feats. "Impossible" in these lines hovers between the realm of tricks (the knowing wink of the circus caller) and the realm of ethical objection – it would be impossible for Houdini to go against what he believes.

Houdini's forfeiture of the last word in this final scene is the play's most extreme and illuminating instance. Rukeyser has Marco Bone join the throng of believers who become Houdini's accusers, convinced of his supernatural powers. This is significant for two reasons: first, as alter ego, Bone's idea of Houdini reflects on Houdini himself, his own conflicting convictions and impulses; and secondly, because Bone bases his assertions on his personal feelings about his boss, Rukeyser's scene argues for the fundamental importance of human relationships in navigating truth and belief. Houdini calls Bone to testify in a scene that reads increasingly like a trial, prompting him with the details of their relationship and attempting to focus on the trickery and manipulation he has exhibited in his career—"In the jails, under the ice, with the circuses, where I ran séances myself in the tank towns – all 'fixed'." Bone, however, becomes immediately emotional, steering the conversation away from the track Houdini so carefully lays: "I heard the newsboys yell that you died in the river. I saw when the phone rang. Anybody can tell fortunes, but – ." His interest is the magician's humanity: where Houdini's avoidance of a drowning death, for example, might elsewhere be used as evidence of invincibility, here it is juxtaposed with his darkest and most intimate moment, hearing of his mother's death. As such, Bone highlights not Houdini's power, but his vulnerability. It is this vulnerability that leads to Bone's awe and, in turn, his assertions about Houdini's magic:

You do things I cannot understand. You have a gift, and you make your gift to us.
Maybe you don't understand it yourself ...

(To the chamber.)

This is a great man ...

(Carried away by his own talk.)

He performs extraordinary escapes. He can talk to the dead. He calls it duplicating,
but I say it's supernatural. He just does it, it's a form of saying it to us. He can
mystify the wisest judge and the believing child. I have seen their eyes. (139)

In Bone's description, Houdini's work is a "gift," something offered, a "form of saying it to us," (though neither Bone nor Rukeyser ever specifies what "it" is). As Bone foreshadowed in his early announcement, Houdini's magic is not deception, but communication. With no other way of expressing what Houdini means to him personally, he calls him supernatural: magic is born from facing human weakness, fear, the danger of opening ourselves up to others.

Their ensuing dialogue underscores the fluidity of these central ideas. "Marco! I'm trying to tell the truth!" exclaims Houdini. "Well." answers Bone, "This isn't a trial. I'm telling what I see" (139). The exchange is slippery – it is not clear how these speakers' terms correspond. What is the relationship between the truth and what Bone sees, what we see? – this is the central question the myth of Houdini raises. If Bone is not telling the truth, what is he telling and how are we to evaluate it? Through these implicit questions, Rukeyser asks us to consider what we want the relationship between truth and seeing to be. Bone suggests that experience – even or especially when it is connected to the potentially blurring effects of love, when it is undertaken in openness – takes precedence. The possibility of magic takes precedence. This isn't a trial, as Bone asserts, it is a play (Houdini is not Freud, he is a lockbreaker). And belief, however we define it, is frequently in open conflict with truth. As Rukeyser describes in *The Life of Poetry*, "Belief has its structures, and its

symbols change. Its tradition changes. All the relationships within these forms are interdependent. We look at the symbols, we hope to read them, we hope for sharing and communication” (91).

Resuming after an interruption from the crowd, Bone concludes his testimony, using the word “admit,” which has been such a central hinge in Rukeyser’s manipulation of the historical dialogue: “Open your eyes, Harry. Admit everything. They want to hear it” (139). Houdini has already admitted his humanity, his vulnerability, his inability – what is left? Chaos and confusion ensue, and a few pages later Houdini dies, punched in the stomach by a medical student while transfixed by Bess who “*in a burst that parallels her burst at the end of ACT ONE*” (though this time of pure passion unmixed with anger) chants a song of praise: “He’s the man on fire who walks out alive. He’s the rider of the death comet ... Stood against them when they called him Mystic, although, I don’t know, I don’t know, he’s a cascade of powers” (147). The indivisibility of Houdini’s vulnerability and his power is again signaled and sealed: rapt by Bess’s praise for him (which includes a repetition of a state of not-knowing), he lets his guard down and dies. What Houdini admits here is how he is beholden to, entangled with other people. As hero, “he voluntarily proceeds to the threshold of adventure,” as Rukeyser describes in her working notes (LOC I:37 folder 1). Only as man – vulnerable and proud – can he become myth.

Like Rukeyser, Susan Howe circles, stalks, and re-figures the project of life-writing, creating texts that perform her effort to comprehend and embody characters of compelling interest to her. She describes this aspect of her writing practice in a 2005 interview with Jon Thompson:

I need to ground my work in particulars. In my case this usually means a material object such as a book, or a manuscript, most recently lace. Often a historical moment, or a specific person. Not a made-up character – I could never be a novelist – but I try to understand all aspects of the person I am writing about the way a

playwright or an actor might. Esther Johnson, Emily Dickinson, Mary Rowlandson, Hope Atherton, Anne Hutchinson, Thomas Shepard, Clarence Mangan, Herman Melville, Charles and Juliet Peirce – the only way for me to reach them, or for them to reach me, is through the limited perspective of documents. This doesn't say much about my notion of self – because for something to work I need to be another self.

In this description, Howe's method appears to be straightforward: her subjects are comprised from the material and the historical, she could "never be a novelist." But beneath the register of the faithful adherence to documents and detritus, her comments belie a collision of the factual and the fantastic. Tellingly, she describes her orientation toward her subjects not as that of a biographer, but as that of a "playwright or an actor" – someone tasked with interpreting and embodying, exercises that flirt with invention. Her strict and disciplined commitment to historical particulars and documents finds its expression in artistic, dramatic processes. There is more: "For something to work," she writes, "I need to *be* another self" (emphasis added). What she is describing is not simple study, but haunting, mediumship, transmutation.

Rukeyser's lightly scrawled confession of "collecting the lives of the dead" speaks directly to this description of Howe's writing practice and process (LOC II:12 folder 9). But where do you find the dead? How do you know their lives? And what do you do with them once you collect them? "Go to the dead and love them": Howe quotes Creon's words to Antigone in her 1985 poetic manifesto delivered at the Vancouver New Poetics Colloquium (16). In these and other assertions, Howe extends Rukeyser's description – her project is to love the dead, and, "as a playwright or an actor might," to give them voice, extended life. This, in turn, reflects on Rukeyser's process and her choice of form: she literally makes Houdini sing. Faced with the magician who wanted so desperately and angrily to believe in the dissolution of the boundary between the living and the dead,

Rukeyser becomes a playwright. As playwright, she is medium, giving the dead Houdini a posthumous voice.

References to occult practices and concepts – in particular, telepathy and channeling – circulate both within and around Howe’s work, describing her process, her concern with the lives of the dead, and her resulting texts. As poet and scholar Norman Finkelstein articulates, for example, “In effect, her work is a latter-day version of spiritualism, and her poems may be read as ghostly textual enactments, stagings, literary equivalents of the spiritualist practice of the *séance*” (216). He goes on to describe more tangibly what this comparison suggests:

Traditionally, a *séance* is a carefully structured event intended to create a space, an environment in which the dead can manifest themselves, enter *materially* into the world of the living. The goal of the *séance* is communion between the present and the past, the living and the dead; it is a ritual designed to blur the boundary that orders time and nature, providing the participants with intimate psychic knowledge that is kept from them in the course of their daily lives. Through the person of the medium (usually a woman) who is capable of losing herself in a trance and opening herself to the spirit world, participants in the *séance* (they are not an audience in the passive sense) attempt to construct meaning from the array of sounds, voices, sensations, levitating objects, and visual materializations which present themselves to the group. (217)

The medium (the poet) loses (looses) her self and affords her community direct communion with concrete manifestations that are purported to come from another realm: ringing bells, ventriloquized messages, ectoplasm. What Howe’s “carefully structured” texts are in fact filled with are facsimiles of documents, manuscripts, and fragments of cloth, as well as quotations from unpublished writings, marginalia, and language with unfamiliar, idiosyncratic or antiquated spellings. It is thus the most

concrete aspect of Howe's texts, their documentary nature, that suggest alignment with the occult. As Gerald Bruns describes, "for Howe the texts that she reads and cites are pneumatic – inhabited by the ghosts of their authors" (28). It is in the library that she is called. She writes in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, "In Sterling's sleeping wilderness I felt the telepathic solicitation of innumerable phantoms" (14). By introducing documents and (always deceased) writers into her texts, she introduces ghosts. This is another way of accounting for the seemingly paradoxical twinning of documentary with variously subjective poetics. As such, it tracks Rukeyser's simultaneous moves toward quoting the Fortune Teller Hearings and following her own imaginative and personal response to Houdini – both of which steered her away from biography and otherwise mediated responses to his life, work, and significance. Fact and fantasy intersect in the search for direct knowledge and understanding.

Finkelstein uses the analogy of the séance to draw out and explain features of Howe's craft, in particular, the way she "synthesizes the postmodern indeterminacy of language with the volatile religious tradition of antinomianism" (216). But in other critical explorations of her use of "telepathy" – along with Howe's own engagement with the term – there is an urgency and immediacy that eclipses the intellectual and "theatrical distancing" that qualifies Finkelstein's remarks (221). Kathleen Crown's assertion in "'This unstable I-witnessing': Susan Howe's Lyric Iconoclasm and the Articulating Ghost" suggests this visceral power: "For Howe, historical inquiry is always a kind of invocation of and intimate communion with the dead" (491). The implication is that such intimacy is real communion, therefore dangerous and transformative. Writing of her own work on Emily Dickinson, Howe describes the process of giving voice to the dead as "a kind of fusion" (BM 158). In *The Birth-mark* she asks, "Can any words restore to me how you *felt*? / you are straying, seeking, scattering. Was it you or is it me? ... Who or what survives the work?" (4, emphasis original). In both of these instances, Howe becomes intertwined – emotionally and actually

– with the historical subject she pursues. Closely following the suggested confusion between selves (“Was it you or is it me”), the question “Who or what survives the work” suggests that the poet’s historical inquiry might have repercussions for her own safety.

In his book-length study of the relationship between contemporary poetry and occult practice, Devin Johnston provides context for this dangerous intersubjectivity in H.D.’s conception, developed through her occultism, of “*writing* as a mode of transcending the limits of the self” (25, emphasis added). William Butler Yeats, a figure central to Howe’s studies as well as her primal encounters with this subject (“Perhaps I’m obsessed with the spirits who inhabit a place,” she posited in an dialogue with Cole Swensen, “because my mother brought me up on Yeats”), aggregates the basis of these ideas and practices into his three doctrines of magical belief:

- (1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
- (2) That the borders of our memories are shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
- (3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols. (25)

In this context, “collecting the lives of the dead” is no sheer act of objective biography. Howe’s ongoing poetic project connects to Rukeyser’s as both attempt to understand how we can know about and communicate with the dead, how we are changed in the process, and how texts or symbols born from this process go on to change and affect others. Or, failing actual encounter, how we are changed by the pursuit and the intensity of our desire for communication. How we are changed by reading. “Sometimes while reading Stevens,” Howe writes in a recent essay, “I feel as if a soul has power to imagine nonexistent things and can pass from one body into another” (Choir 56). What was a battle in courts, séance chambers, and books for Houdini is one also waged performatively and earnestly by these two poets.

In multiple interviews, Howe has been called upon to vouch for the literalness of her references to telepathy, and her comments generally begin with a negation: “No, no. I don’t hear voices (though I’m always scared I might)” she told Lynn Keller in 1995; and more recently, describing to Maureen McLane her fortuitous discovery of Jonathan Edwards’s sister Hannah’s private writings, she clearly asserted, “I honestly don’t think that Hannah telepathically spoke to me” (LK 33, PR). But each of these instances is followed – much as statements about belief in magic in *Houdini* are followed – with an opening to a possibly darker, less containable version of events. Her comment to McLane, for example, is countered immediately with a “but”: “I honestly don’t think that Hannah telepathically spoke to me, but something is odd there. I mean, the material – the fragment, the piece of paper – is all we have to connect with the dead.” Howe’s certainty falters at the intersection of matter and ghost: the document carries spirit, perhaps, through surviving particles of the dead’s flesh. Something “odd” that Howe cannot or will not describe happened between her and Hannah Edwards, something that is manifest in “Frolic Architecture,” the resulting text. Her response to Keller is similarly hinged:

No, no. I don’t hear voices (though I’m always scared I might). You don’t hear voices, but yes, you’re hearing something. You’re hearing something you see. And there’s the mystery of the eye-hand connection: when it’s your work, it’s your hand writing. Your hand is receiving orders from somewhere. Yes, it could be your brain, your superego giving orders; on the other hand, they *are* orders. I guess it must seem strange that I say poetry is free when I also say I’m getting orders. It can become very frightening. (33)

In this statement, Howe’s shift from negation to partial admission is accompanied by a shift in pronouns, from “I” to “you”: “I don’t hear voices” becomes “*you’re* hearing something.” This is a subtle distancing move, which perhaps gives her permission to admit the stranger, less provable

parts of what she wants to convey. At the same time, the shift in pronoun automatically signals the “transcending [of] the limits of the self” that Johnston described (“Was it you or is it me?”). Howe returns to “I” to articulate the paradox (“I guess it must seem strange that I say poetry is free when I also say I’m getting orders”) and then makes no attempt to resolve it. Instead she confesses that she is frightened by this experience – a fear that speaks not to the controlled, knowing, and distanced deployment of occult metaphors but to awe, openness, and negative capability; it is much like Bess’s fear in the face of Houdini’s “tricks.”

Howe has frequently attempted to articulate both the magic and centrality of the relationship between the aural and the visual in her work, this “hearing something you see.” In multiple interviews and lectures, she cites and echoes versions of a line attributed to Joseph Beuys: “every mark on paper is an acoustic signal” (qtd in Grubbs). The alchemy by which a visual mark becomes sound necessitates Howe’s careful attention to gestures of script, marginalia, words “transplant[ed] ... onto paper with soil sticking to their roots” (Labadie 16). In her commitment to the “something” she hears while researching the lives of the dead she commits an act, not of theatrical distancing, but of theatrical *nearing*, giving voice both graphically and “as a playwright or actor” or medium might: “Font-voices summon a reader into visible earshot” (Labadie 15). Speaking of the radical, dis- and re-orienting potential of this compositional synesthesia, Howe told Thompson, “It’s there in early work like *The Liberties* where I have a short play called ‘God’s Spies.’ All the time I was writing it I was aware that it wouldn’t actually be produced on a stage (at least not in those days). And I didn’t care. To me the stage *was* the page itself. The voices of actors were letters in typeface.”

Howe’s work is profoundly influenced by the theater: her mother, Mary Manning Howe, was a celebrated Irish actor and playwright (she ran the Poets’ Theatre after she immigrated to Boston) and, following her footsteps, Howe apprenticed at the Gate Theater in Dublin after high school and later joined the Neighborhood Playhouse in New York before switching tracks to the visual arts. She

frequently refers to her mother's readings of Yeats as the genesis of both her theatrical poetics (her voiced typography, her stage-page) and her feeling for the occult. Despite this deep rooting, and the intense, multi-faceted voicing that animates many of her works (made manifest especially in her collaborations with the musician David Grubbs), "God's Spies" is the only self-described "play" in Howe's opus. It is on account of this simple gesture of generic classification that I was first moved to choose *The Liberties* – the longer work that contains the short play – to investigate beside *Houdini*.

First published in 1980 as a chapbook by Loon Books, *The Liberties* was reprinted in 1983 in *The Defenestration of Prague* and collected in 1990 with several other early poems as the final section of *The Europe of Trusts*. (Despite some limitations and the exclusion of images that appear in the original, this chapter will refer to this more readily accessible Sun & Moon Press addition.) The text unfolds in an introduction and three over-arching sections labeled with Roman Numerals, containing quotations, word squares, poetic columns, theatrical excerpts, and other, wilder lyrical forms.⁴¹ The sixteen-page "God's Spies" (a title taken from Act V of *King Lear*, in which the King, ill and abject but reunited with his daughter Cordelia, imagines being alone in prison with her, where they will "Take upon's the mystery of things / as if we were God's Spies") is the work's second and most self-contained portion (V, iii, 17).

Like *Houdini*, *The Liberties* takes liberties with its chosen subjects, who are – most overtly and centrally, as Howe's books are always ghosted by multiple ramifying influences and voices – Jonathan Swift and his companion Hester Johnson (born Esther and nicknamed "Stella" by Swift),

⁴¹ Clarity in articulating the text's structure is difficult to achieve. See Lynn Keller's comprehensive and engaging close-reading of *The Liberties* in "The Silences are Equal to the Sounds": Documentary History and Susan Howe's "The Liberties" for a thorough description of Howe's "confusing" "deployment of organizational cues" and the way in which the book's structure raises questions "about relations between parts and of parts to wholes, making it clear that Howe wishes to unsettle ordinary interpretive procedures" (207). Will Montgomery provides his own reading of the tripartite structure of the text, focusing on the "visual aspects of the text" and their thematic and symbolic significance: "Many poems are organized in bird shapes, and much use is made of word-grids. As with *Pythagorean Silence* and *Defenestration of Prague*, a relatively disarranged first section is followed by the appearance of greater order in the second part, and then again by more typographically disordered work" (4). Rachel Tzvia Back creates a full-page outline of the text in order to provide "a visible scaffolding" for her analysis, which moves methodically and progressively through Howe's text (62-63).

and Shakespeare's Cordelia. In a structural move that will go on to define much of her subsequent work (one found also in *Pierce-Arrow*), Howe begins the text with prose. In this case, under the title "Fragments of a Liquidation," she outlines what she can of the shrouded relationship between Swift and Stella, who was eight when Swift met her and the ward of Sir William Temple whose household Swift entered (aged 22) as a secretary. As she does with Peirce, and Rukeyser does with Houdini, Howe consults biographies of Swift for the story. But also like *Houdini*, *The Liberties* unfolds in a mix of history and legend – it mixes biography with mythology and pure invention. Its composite nature is central to its conception and to its significance. This fact is suggested immediately in the problematization of the act of biography inherent in the figure of Stella, whose experiences and feelings must be extrapolated from Swift's accounts of her: because "[n]one of Stella's letters have been saved," "[n]o authentic portrait exists" (151, 152). An inverted image of Houdini, the facts of whose life are warped by the attention and speculation of an abundance of ravaging gazes, Stella, "totally circumscribed by and through Swift's gaze," becomes "as much a fiction as Shakespeare's Cordelia" (Vickery 183). In her reading of *The Liberties*, Ann Vickery describes how the story of Swift and Stella – how he taught her to read and write, how she followed him to Ireland with no formal commitment and despite "rumors damaging to them both," how she "presided over his dinners twice a week at the Deanery," how they were never alone together, how he wrote to her in a secret language, how, for reasons of propriety, he did not want her to die in his home (L 150) – "took on the status of cultural myth for Howe's Irish mother," and Rachel Tzivvia Back deepens this insight, describing "the long tradition of Irish playwrights who retold the tale of Swift and Stella, in part, to unravel the mystery of that relationship" (Keller 183, Back 88).

Historical erasure, Swift's ventriloquism, public imagining, and the narrative institutionalization of these forces combined to place Stella and her life on the threshold between fact and fiction. This tension is present even in Howe's deployment of Stella's various names. She

begins her factual prose section switching between “Stella” and Esther”: “Swift was then twenty-two, Esther Johnson eight”; “Nothing is known of Stella’s feelings or what she suffered from”; “On the night of January 28th, 1727-8, news of Esther Johnson’s death was brought to the Deanery”; “Rumor said that Stella was Temple’s illegitimate daughter ... Certainly Sir William Temple showed special regard for both Swift and Esther Johnson” (149, 154, 155). Ultimately, however, “Stella,” the name by which the woman “is known to history,” becomes the character in Howe’s text. I am indebted to the critical readings of *The Liberties* (in particular those by Vickery, Back, Keller, and Montgomery) that have probed the resonances, roots, and implications of this act of violence, including the ways in which Howe connects Stella’s silencing to larger hegemonic and colonial forces and structures of power. As Keller articulates, “Stella emerges also as representative of western woman, whose position is partially analogous to that of Ireland and of colonized peoples more generally ... What justifies Howe’s seeming conflation of individual, national, and literary history in ‘The Liberties’ is her understanding of their common entanglements in systems of domination and oppression in which language plays a key role” (198).

In their compelling and merited focus on Howe’s “quest for a more authentic portrait of Stella,” however, several of these critics relegate Cordelia’s role in the text to that of the supporting actor (Keller 218). In including Cordelia – who was already a fictional element in Shakespeare’s reinterpretation of the Lir myth – Howe does not *turn* frustrated and defeated “in a fictional direction,” as these readings suggest (“At this point, rather than abandon the project,” interprets Back, “Howe abandons only the attempt to document the historical Stella and *The Liberties* veers instead in ‘a fictional direction’”) (Back 78). Instead, Howe is underscoring how fiction has been bound up with fact from the start of any attempt at narrating knowledge, history, or experience. Howe uses “returned,” not “turned,” on the page preceding Cordelia’s formal entrance into the text: “events now led to a region / *returned* in a fictional direction / I asked where the road to the left lay /

and they named the place / Predestination” (169, emphasis added). The figures of both Stella and Cordelia shift and contort in gossip, mythology, literature, and life: this is “the double nature [mythical and actual] within us all” as Howe described it in a 1981 letter to George Butterick (qtd in Collis 90). In my reading, Stella and Cordelia are, together, the tangled focus of this text, and the interweaving of their stories suggests something very messy about the relationship between myths and lives, fiction and truth – a messiness that connects directly to the tensions propelling Rukeyser’s *Houdini*.

Midway through the first section of *The Liberties*, Howe includes a lone italic exclamation – “*O cinders of Eve, what is my quest?*” – which seems to attest to the frustrated investigator’s turn toward the ultimate foremother in the increasing desperation of her search for Stella and for a more authentic women’s history (166). Keller reads into this sudden plea for guidance the possibility of a methodological crisis of conscience: “perhaps [Howe] fears she has lost sight of her quest, and that either the search for Stella itself or her methods of conducting it are off the mark” (217). In fact, the line contains a buried citation – a tactic central to Howe’s research and compositional methods – from another of her guides. With it come not doubts about, but additional support for Howe’s working approach. Howe pulls the “cinders of Eve” from Thomas Carlyle’s⁴² introduction to his 1845 collection of *Oliver Cromwell’s Letters and Speeches*, in which he despairs about the dreary state of contemporary historical writing (“a dull dismal labyrinth”) and calls for a returned attention to “Eternal Melodies” (6, 5). Much like Duncan’s conception, it is Carlyle’s conviction that history achieves, not color and entertainment, but *truth-value* – both “practical belief and understanding” – through the incorporation of myth (1). He writes:

⁴² Carlyle makes appearances elsewhere in Howe’s work – in *The Midnight*, Howe describes him finding a Richard Baxter sermon wrapped around a Christmas pie, and she includes his correspondence with Emerson on the 1999 syllabus for her course, “Poetics of Conversion,” available at <<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/howe/syllabi/conversion.html>>.

You will find fibrous roots of this day's Occurrences among the dust of Cadmus and Trismegistus, of Tubalcain and Triptolemus; the tap-roots of them are with Father Adam himself and the cinders of Eve's first fire! At bottom there is no perfect History; there is none such conceivable ... Histories are as perfect as the Historian is wise, and is gifted with an eye and a soul! (7)

In addition to Adam and Eve, the mythological figures Carlyle cites are associated with the origins of the written alphabet, astrology and magic, weapons forged from metal, and agricultural practices: they are credited with the primal discoveries of tools and methods that form the basis of both our positive and negative interactions with each other and our environment. Each of these contributes to how we understand ourselves, and how that process is always undertaken in negotiation and in relation. (Notably for this chapter, Carlyle includes magic on the same plane as writing and warfare.) These are the stories we must attend to, Carlyle suggests, if we are to fathom the significance of contemporary events; we must work to understand what remains alive in them (what still glows, maybe, in the embers of their discoveries) and what “reaches no longer to the surface” (7). This attending requires both imagination and a radically expanded (in the sense of radical both as new and reaching back to its roots) idea of what constitutes truth.

Carlyle's piece also reinforces Howe's project because of the way in which he underscores the role that the historian herself – “gifted” with *both* “an eye and a soul” – plays in making these histories alive, accessible, “perfect.” What the writer sees and feels in the “almost desperate enterprise” of researching is important information to be considered alongside the documents and pieces of evidence she presents (11). Also strikingly like Howe and Rukeyser, Carlyle pairs this search for historical works having the truth status of the “living *Iliad*” with something that might on first glance seem like its opposite (5). This myth-steeped historical treatise introduces Carlyle's own “very small enterprise, and solid dispatch of business in plain prose”: collecting Oliver Cromwell's

Letters and Speeches (12). In the search for a more resonant historical truth his first step is a documentary project, like Rukeyser's use of the senate hearings and Howe's transcriptions from Swift's journals to Stella. For Carlyle to sing Cromwell's story, his audience must have access to Cromwell's own "authentic utterances" (12). In its most direct form, fact meets and abuts fiction, approaches myth: "mystic documentary telepathy" Howe called it in her lecture "The Spontaneous Particulars of Sound," capturing the seeming paradox of this collision. Howe's text finally resounds with Carlyle's haunting description of entering the archive: "your human footstep, if you are still human, echoes bodeful through the gaunt solitude, peopled only by somnambulant Pedants, Dilettants, and doleful creatures, by Phantasms, errors, inconceivabilities, by Nightmares, pasteboard Norroys, griffins, wiverns, and chimeras dire!" (3). Research: a ghost's story, a terrifying encounter with the figures of myth.

The collision of fact and fantasy – as I argue, immediately and urgently present in *The Liberties* – becomes both overt and foundational in "God's Spies," which has only three characters, one of whom is a ghost. Jonathan Swift, "*fantastically dressed with wildflowers*" (recalling a mad King Lear in the heath), appears in St. Patrick's Cathedral (both his and Stella's place of burial) at 12 a.m. (their time of burial) suggesting a séance or invocation (189). This aspect recalls *Houdini's* séance scene in which Lady Doyle purports to channel Houdini's mother as well as Yeats's one-act play *The Words upon the Window-pane* – a play that takes Stella and Swift's relationship as its overt subject, in which the violently self-pitying spirit of Swift disrupts a series of Dublin séances by refusing to allow any other spirit a voice.⁴³ The majority of "God's Spies" (which unfolds starkly over the seven days of one week), however, consists of dialogue between Stella and Cordelia: Imagine Rukeyser's list of

⁴³ Rachel Tzvia Back points out the relationship of Howe's play to Yeats's in her chapter on *The Liberties*, emphasizing Howe's incorporation of the full text of Stella's "To Dr. Swift on His Birthday, Nov. 30, 1721," a poem central to the plot of *The Words upon the Window-Pane*. Back suggests a further connection, noting that Howe's mother "apprenticed at the Abbey Theater," where Yeats' play was produced, "approximately at the time of this premier" (201n33).

questions at the start of *Thomas Hariot* extending into a dialogue between the explorer and Prospero. The connections between Stella and Cordelia, and deeply moving, elliptical exchanges – “Stella: I am weary. / Cordelia: I am lame. / Stella: I have forgotten. / Cordelia: I must go back. / Stella: Don’t leave me. / Cordelia: I won’t” – make their separation into opposite sides of the “actual” divide seem a narrow and simplistic exercise (184).

“The heightened sense of myth versus history charges the poem with a moving counterpoint between what we see and what we do not see,” Duncan writes in “The Truth and Life of Myth,” providing a dynamic description of Stella and Cordelia’s dialogue that extends across Howe’s text (36). It is neither what we see nor what we do not see, but the moving counterpoint itself that illuminates the truth of our lived experience and the truth of our told history. The moving counterpoint includes the “gnostic and fictional elements in which man’s intuitions and imaginations of his relation to the cosmic myth are embedded,” the “actual times and actual objects,” as well as the moments and figures in which these two perspectives battle each other for eminence, and those in which they merge (6, 22). This gesture of search and oscillation links Howe and Rukeyser, and both of them with Duncan, as they oppose the drive, whose genesis Duncan locates in the seventeenth century’s religious wars and whose prevalence Carlyle bemoans, to “exorcise all the old stories” and “clear away the mythopoeic” (Myth 5). Instead they attempt to create a “theater of the most true” in place of the reigning “theater of the absurd” (Myth 5). Their “most true” *is* theater, and it puts fiction, myth, legend, and fantasy, into explicit conversation.

Duncan and Rukeyser knew each other and corresponded, and their letters attest to their mutual commitment to this aspect of their writing and imagining, as well as its attendant difficulties. On September 21, 1962 Duncan wrote a long response to Rukeyser’s *Waterlily Fire: Poems 1935-1962*, reflecting on the three-decade sweep of her work. He is full of praise and sympathetic reading: “These poems of what I calld [*sic*] your full tide are so close to my own full tides, I am in a kind of

‘writing’ reading them” (LOC II:1 folder 23). His criticism is built on this foundation of shared feeling and endeavor: “How at home you are in the eternal, folk world!” he exclaims, continuing, “It is where you really live. And then I feel that America, New York play your love false.” How can one make texts that stand *simultaneously* in the eternal, folk, mythical world and in America, in New York, in witnessed events and scenes, in the real lives of the dead, in the humble, “ebbing actual” (L 178)? That is the question Duncan understood both himself and Rukeyser to be pursuing. Those are the grounds on which he critiques her large published volume, treating it like an open text to enter and make his own, coaching her toward the “moving counterpoint.” Directed toward *Houdini*, such a perspective would be in clear opposition to the other responses Rukeyser received, which pitted mythology against biography as conflicting aspirations of her play.

The link Duncan creates from Rukeyser to Howe is direct. In a tribute to Duncan published in *American Poetry* after his death, Howe turns to him, “Because he was a kind, generous, mothering man. Because he is my precursor father” (56). Their relationship, in which Duncan supported and nurtured Howe’s early career, began “with his reading *The Liberties* in the first mimeo edition while he was at John Taggart’s” (email). But in place of a letter – Howe and Duncan did not correspond – we have the ghost of a letter. In her tribute, Howe describes walking, “tired and lonely” on a windy, wintery Buffalo afternoon when she experienced a sudden uncanny feeling that “What was far is suddenly here,” a feeling that made tangible the “history outside time where the first memories form. That other history ‘beyond what we ever were, where we no longer are’ (GWI.71). The history that always interested Robert Duncan” (56, 54). The particulars of the scene – the houses she sees and the weather – bring her own childhood violently back to her, collapsing registers of time. Unsettled and charged she “instantly thought of Robert Duncan”: “I decided to walk back and write him a letter – just to connect – I wanted to tell him I had discovered a magic place just like a paste-up by Jess. I felt as though they both already knew it. I wrote the words in my head as I went along”

(56). When Howe returns home she receives a phone call letting her know that Duncan had died suddenly that same morning. In her piece, grief (for Duncan but not only) merges with the acts of writing, remembering, and creating in a simultaneous collapse of personal and mystical experience. Duncan rises as an intellectual, creative, and emotional forefather to preside over this merging and its reverberating significance in her personal and intellectual life. He also becomes a literal ghost: “Since February 3,” Howe confesses, “I have wondered if Robert’s spirit stopped on its way to wherever it is we go; just for an instant, at this old summer colony, northeast, on the Canadian side of Lake Erie, to help my foreignness then” (56). As a figure, he joins the ghost of Swift in *The Liberties* and whatever manifestation of Houdini addresses Rukeyser’s audience after his death. Duncan presides over my joining of Howe with Rukeyser here.

I wrote earlier that the generic classification of “God’s Spies” as a play motivated me to place *The Liberties* beside *Houdini*. And that is true. But what compelled me to *keep* them side by side, to keep pursuing resonances between them, was my own uncanny feeling, an echo I kept hearing but couldn’t quite place. “The occultist’s imperative is to maintain an open channel or receptivity to hidden signs” (Johnston 157), and so, linking the subject of my inquiry to my process, I kept typing and retyping quotations, opening and closing the books, shifting pages, until I finally placed these two passages next to each other and with them, the ghost of an idea. Here are the first words of the Paris Press edition of *Houdini*:

I see a man. I cannot see his eyes –

I see a woman putting on a ring –

I see a gold key. I see a gold key –

I see fire. I see fire. It looks like hell –

Or is it ... the foundation ...

Of something (3)

And here is a passage from the first section of *The Liberties*. Practically flush with the top of the page, it leaps out, the only section of the entire text that does not respect the top margin:

I see a flame

I see a ring

I see a globe

The room is empty

My chair is glass (165)

The depth and completeness of this echo between the two texts is shocking. In each, the repeated “I” is significant and surprising: these are both theatrical texts and this voice is urgent and strong. But whose voice is it? In both Howe and Rukeyser’s passages, the accumulating “I see” suggests vision – a medium looking into a realm not immediately present – as well as understanding: I see, I get it. They point to the link between seeing and believing that Houdini’s magic calls into question. Rukeyser’s lines have fire, Howe’s flame. Each has a ring. In Rukeyser’s text a woman puts the ring on: perhaps she is Bess, perhaps it is a wedding ring, the symbol of her bond with Houdini. Howe’s text could accommodate an analogous significance: the wedding ring that Stella desired but did not – at least not publicly – receive from Swift, or the wedding ring symbolizing Cordelia’s bond with Paris and the subsequent severing of her bond with her father.

Placed beside fire and flame, the ring also accrues mystical resonance. The outer circle of the Tibetan mandala, for example, is comprised of a cleansing ring of fire, through which individuals must pass in their pursuit of enlightenment, of knowledge about the world uncontaminated by the false forms of things. The ring of fire is also a potent symbol in the Irish mystical tradition, a tradition relevant to Howe (“all Irish know there are ghosts” she wrote in a letter to Lyn Hejinian), particularly salient in this, one of her “Irish” texts (qtd in Vickery 182-83). In the Irish tradition,

“[f]ire is a great preventative against fairy magic, for fire is the most sacred of all created things, and man alone has power over it ... If a ring of fire is made round cattle or a child’s cradle, or if fire is placed under the churn, the fairies have no power to harm” (Wilde 39). This idea of the protection or loss of a child also resonates thematically with *The Liberties*, in its “retelling of the stories of Lir’s / Lear’s agonizing losses of their children,” in Swift’s feelings of abandonment as a child, in Stella’s status as Swift’s protégé, in their sibling-like relation on William Templeton’s estate (Montgomery 13).⁴⁴ “I knew a child” are the last words of “God’s Spies,” preceding the closing “*Darkness. Silence. Gunshot. Silence*” (199). The child protected by a ring of fire is a negative echo in *Houdini*, sounding back in Houdini’s and Bess’s childlessness, Rukeyser’s suggestion that in Houdini’s wish to “break from the after-life” was his desire “to be his own child,” “to rescue his 12-year-old self” (LOC I:37 folder 1). These resonances combine responsibility, loss, grief, secrecy, and shared fiction.

“I see a man, I cannot see his eyes ...”: this incantatory, introductory passage is a late addition to Rukeyser’s *Houdini*. A draft dated June 1973 begins, instead, with a circus-caller introduction from Marco Bone that collapses the performance of Rukeyser’s play into Houdini’s own historical performances (LOC I: 36 folder 6). (In the Paris Press edition, Bone intones the same lines – “Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, we are privileged to see the man who can melt chains ...” – but not until the third page, following a dreamlike entrance for Houdini). A draft dated September 1974, in which Rukeyser scrawls and then crosses out “Prologue to come” over Bone’s speech, suggests she is contemplating this addition of text (LOC I:36 folder 6). In the first drafts that include this “prologue,” it is longer and attributed not to the Ensemble, but to a group of “Mediums”:

⁴⁴ Howe describes this aspect of Swift and Stella’s relationship, highlighting it as a possible reason for the secrecy that persisted: “Rumor said that Stella was Temple’s illegitimate daughter. Swift, a posthumous son, had doubts about his own paternity. Relations between the Temple and Swift families were long and labyrinthine. Certainly Sir William Temple showed special regard for both Swift and Esther Johnson – perhaps they were closely related and knew it” (L 155).

The MEDIUMS drift past the windows, outside and inside the building. Their voices
(amplified)

-- I SEE A TREE HALF GREEN HALF BURNING.

-- I SEE A MAN, I CANNOT SEE HIS EYES.

-- I SEE A WOMAN PUTTING ON A RING.

-- I SEE A YOUNG BOY UNDER GREAT WHITE BRANCHES.

-- I SEE CITIES FIGHTING IN THE AIR.

-- I SEE A GOLD KEY, IT OPENS A GIANT FACE.

-- I SEE A PROCESSION OF ALL THE INDIAN TRIBES.

-- I SEE FIRE. I SEE FIRE. IT IS HELL.

OR IS IT THE FOUNDATION OF SOMETHING. (LOC I:36 folder 7)

On this draft, there are hand-written brackets around the lines referring to the young boy, the fighting cities, and the procession of Indian tribes, suggesting that as Rukeyser conceived of and sharpened this introductory language, she focused on making its vision more abstract and elemental.

Beginning this play – which is so intensely invested in animating rather than simplifying Houdini’s doubts, his and his audiences’ conflicting beliefs – with the direct, unmediated voices of mediums seems a strange choice, and Rukeyser’s archives suggest that the solution was determined through some combination of strife and collaboration. Among her colleagues in the 1973 Lenox production of *Houdini* was the choreographer Grover Dale; and a typed memo to the cast, signed with her initials and dated June 4 (1973), evidences the contentiousness of their working relationship, isolating this section of text as one site of disagreement: “But I remind everybody concerned that this is my script that is to be played, that I get approval of the changes made by anyone else, and that I will not have the songs tampered with. David Spangler is a competent composer, but a very bad poet; Grover is not a poet at all ... I do not want any scene to go before

the beginning of the play” (LOC I:37 folder 3). According to Rukeyser, Dale was overly committed to sensational aspects of the play and interested in conveying a “generalized BELIEF message for Houdini,” something she rejected as overly simplistic. Dale threatened, Rukeyser worried, to turn *Houdini* into “a play about séances,” and the proposed prologue seems to fall into this category of offense: “Grover insists that the first sentence of the play be about communication with the dead,” she repeats in handwriting and type in various notes and memos (LOC I:38 folder 3, I:37 folder 3, I:36 folder 7 and folder 9). They continued to collaborate after the Lenox performance (an August 1, 1973 note to Dale, David Spangler, and Lyn Austin ends, “I’ve missed you, and I’m glad we’re at this next step”); however, by the end of 1973 their perspectives became irreconcilable: “I received word of Grover’s withdrawl [*sic*] as choreographer-director of HOUDINI on December 13, 1973, and I accept his resignation,” Rukeyser recorded (LOC I:38 folder 1, I:36 folder 4).

Though the place and legitimacy of the séance and the tenor and significance of Houdini’s belief motivated this fundamental disagreement about the play, it is not obvious how the opening speech relates to or emerges from the conflict. During January and February 1974, Dale and Rukeyser corresponded through their lawyers, taking stock of Dale’s specific contributions to the script and making careful note of which elements Rukeyser could retain. Nothing resembling this passage is mentioned; the language, therefore, cannot be Dale’s (LOC I:36 folder 4). It seems likely that Rukeyser drafted the opening speech as a result of their dialogue, but that her edits to it reflected her own developing convictions about the place of mediums, magic, and belief in the play: her awareness that their centrality arose and could be represented not through the assertion of some established position (mediums are truth-seers or mediums are liars), but, instead, through the very act of interrogating their significance. Making the speakers of this overtly visionary passage an unspecified “ensemble” instead of “mediums” is a step toward incorporating this conflict as *part* of

the play.⁴⁵ The audience would be charged with taking the leap to attribute this speech to mediums, to decide what sort of interpretation to give the presented vision. The language that follows substantiates this interpretation. The opening vision is immediately tempered by Houdini's openness and doubts, making this dialectic foundational: "My mind is open" he confesses, "I want to believe, but nothing I have ever seen or heard, so far, can convince or prove to me ..." (4). Bone, establishing his role as double, adds his voice to Houdini's, as they repeat together: "Convince or prove to me ... / Convince or prove to me ..." (4). Grammatically, this is either a fragment attesting to doubt and hope, or it is a command leveled at the action that follows: convince me. Most likely, it is both. Through these edits, Rukeyser makes *Houdini* represent, participate in, and embody the struggle for belief.

The "I" who "sees" in *Houdini* is no singular entity, but a group, many voices coming together as one, possibly presenting a glimpse of another realm as represented by the figure of the medium. In *The Liberties*, the "I see" passage appears mid-way through the first section. The initial prose has fragmented into erratic poetic lines – now a column of text both left and right justified with caesura-like internal gaps, now a cascade of language flowing down the page with inconsistent margins, now extremely narrow lines of text, one word per line, with opposing lines arrayed across the page in a cross formation. Throughout this section, the primary pronouns shift between "I" and "she," sometimes in quick succession. One page contains only these two centered lines, "She must be traced through many dark paths / as a boy," suggesting Howe, the researcher's, investigation of Stella's life through the conflicting and spotty record (152). Though Cordelia has not yet been formally introduced (she enters with a transcribed excerpt from the famous "nothing" scene in Act I Scene I of *King Lear*, which precedes a subsection entitled "WHITE FOOLSCAP: *Book of Cordelia*)," her presence is suggested:

⁴⁵ This analysis of Rukeyser's edits treats the play as a written text; we can only imagine what difference this would have made in a performance of *Houdini*, as no production or production notes follow this version of the play.

there in me them in me I
halted I heard footsteps (160)

These paradoxical lines perform the occult merging of subjects (“them in me”) while literally isolating the “I” as separate: pulled out and flush with the poem’s right margin, this symbolic representation of self is like a rogue Roman numeral suggesting another division in the text. The eerie “I heard footsteps” – which feels pulled from a ghost story, Carlyle’s historian fending off ominous spirits – depends on the perception of a separate self who is in danger even while that same self feels herself to be merged and composite in her quest. (“You don’t hear voices, but yes, you’re hearing something ... It can become very frightening.”)

Who is the “I” who “sees” a flame, a ring, a globe, an empty room and a glass chair? Is it Howe the investigator? Is it Howe the scholarly medium? Is it a different medium, not in the occult sense, but in the sense of another point of access to Stella’s story, say Yeats? Is it Stella herself? Or Cordelia? Is it all of them together as one? We cannot know; we have to guess, change our minds, guess again. It is a process that recalls the reader’s conscious act of attributing Rukeyser’s prologue to a group of mediums, but given the level of elision that surrounds Howe’s language, it transpires even more urgently, without guiderails. Something about the tone of Howe’s “I see” passage sets it apart from everything that surrounds it: it is contained and assured, the words along its left margin all stately, poetic capitals in a section of the text that is otherwise teeming with lowercase letters and words cut in two by line breaks. The shifting trickle of language that follows from it might be a vision created by its clear directives: “flickering ... phantom forms” that she, no longer an I, calls up through the ritual structure of a séance (165). Represented on the page, this part of the vision blots out the reader’s present time, moving so far down into the bottom gutter as to require the erasure of the page number. We are back in lowercase and the images are less stately and more impressionistic. This more ephemeral emerging section seems to grow physically from the directness and stability of

what precedes it. With “a blaze,” “rippling gold / beam / the sun,” and “an assembly,” it is in clear conversation with the “flame,” “ring,” “globe,” and “empty room.”

The only other section of *The Liberties* that approaches this tone of composed, visionary directness takes place on “Thursday” of “God’s Spies,” the day before Swift appears. As Stella and Cordelia hurry around the stage collecting their discarded objects, they speak “Together (*Urgently*)”:

Space—room—gate—lid—
noise—ruin—heart—breast—years—family
souvenir—wedding ring—whatsoever—
clear as day—(*Pause*)
Hurdles. And stems of trees. (*Pause*)
Hearing at night when silence is deep—Unity—
something there—really nowhere—(*Pause*)
A path
into the light. (187-88)

The two women give the impression that the words they intone describe the scattered objects they are gathering. But these nouns – ruin, years, space – are, for the most part, not the kind that can be picked up and placed in a knapsack. And so the reader is invited once more to speculate about the connections between the words and the narratives from which they are pulled, a recursive process of witnessing oneself in the stumbling but also richly generative process, of interpreting, providing abstractions with physical characteristics, making ideas into things, and vice versa. The “room” and “wedding ring” tie directly to the previous vision, repeating its language. “Ruin” is what Stella risked coming to Ireland with Swift. “Heart” is what Cordelia “cannot heave into [her] mouth” (I, i, 89). Commitment to some idea of “family” compels and constrains these two women as it does Bess Houdini (whose life is in service of her husband’s myth), Howe (who starts writing *The Liberties*

hoping it will bridge the divide between her American self and Irish her mother while her mother is ill in a hospital in the Liberties section of Dublin), and Rukeyser (whose Houdini, as Jan Heller Levi points out, bears a biographical resemblance to her own father, another young Jewish boy in Milwaukee, just six years older). Years pass. These are impressionistic conclusions, their appearance is “clear as day,” though their meaning blurs:

Language becomes throughout a ground of suggestion and association, a magic ground, a weaving of phrases echoing in other phrases, a maze of sentences to bind us in its spell, so that we begin to be infected with the sense of other meanings and realms within those presented. The style is obsessional. We must come back and back to the same place and find it subtly altered in each return, like a traveler bewildered by lords of the fairy, until he is filled with a presence he would not otherwise have admitted. Here it is not past time or present time but the blur, the erasure itself, that is the magic ground in which the necessary image may occur.

(Duncan 109)

Howe’s text – weaving, returning, and suggesting – clears that ground. What is the image that emerges? What makes it necessary?

After the pauses and the hurdles, Howe’s passage concludes with a surprising note of suggested redemption: first, “unity,” then, “A path / into the light.” This is the same language Rukeyser uses in her notes describing the arc of *Houdini*’s final Act: “Total risk: fame, honesty, Bess, the hearing, coming through. Light” (LOC I:37 folder 1). This invocation of “light” – the light of truth, the light of day – feels in direct contrast to the obscurity under which Stella persists, as well as to the bleakness that permeates the last, apocalyptic scene of *King Lear*, where “All’s cheerless, dark, and deadly” (V, iii, 290). In what universe, by what mechanism, according to what laws of magic or meaning do these two women get to reach the light?

In a letter to the Charles Olson scholar George Butterick in 1980, Howe attests to Olson's deep and specific influence on her own work, which provides particular guidance here: "I go back and back to *Call Me Ishmael* and it even lurks there in *The Liberties* and my use of Lear (God's Spies)" (qtd in Collis 83). Among many other contributions to Melville scholarship, Olson's compressed and charged study of *Moby-Dick* uncovered the profound Shakespearean influence on Melville's masterpiece. If, as she suggests, Howe arrived at *King Lear* by following Olson who followed Melville, her "path / into the light" is in direct contrast to what Melville, and with him Olson, found there. As Olson writes, "Melville found answers in the *darkness* of *Lear*," expounding, "Madness, villainy and evil are called up out of the plays as though Melville's pencil were a wand of black magic. To use Swinburne's comment on *Lear*, it is not the light of revelation but the darkness of it that Melville finds most profound in Shakespeare" (Ishmael 48, 44 emphasis added). The darkness of revelation opposes the darkness that comes from blindness, but it is darkness nonetheless.

Surely, darkness is everywhere in *The Liberties*, in both literal and figurative forms: much of the action of "God's Spies" transpires in deep night, as night approaches, or as it fades; Cordelia spends a good portion of the play blindfolded, echoing the tragic Gloucester with his eyes gouged out and making a thematic link to Lear's failure to see; the dead lie in darkness, "Haphazardly ... on the bottom" (198). "No light for 2 full minutes" reads one stage directions, and then, "Lights up suddenly" (195). To reconcile *The Liberties*' darkness with its pursuit of light, we have to try to understand, as Olson did for *Moby-Dick*, the weight *King Lear* brings to Howe's text. Why Cordelia? What is she, in particular, doing here? Much of the scholarship on Howe's text focuses on Cordelia's "painful disempowerment," "the bind experienced by women in patriarchy who feel deep love for men," and, narratively, the fact that "she occupies the stage for the shortest time of any major character in *King Lear*" (Keller 219, Back 79). Indeed, Olson makes almost no mention of Cordelia, and one

would be hard-pressed to find a compelling analogue for her in *Moby-Dick*. Interpreting Melville's markings in his copy of Shakespeare's plays, Olson tells us: "What moves Melville is the stricken goodness of a Lear, a Gloucester, an Edgar, who in suffering feel and thus probe more closely to the truth" (49). Lear, Gloucester, and even Edgar are individuals of power and position who must be humbled to gain spiritual sight; madness and suffering are their path to God and truth. Unlike them, Cordelia and Stella *begin* in darkness. Olson is writing about Melville, who "makes little out of the love of man and woman. It is the friendship of men which is love" (46). Compelled by the same stories and myths but beginning from the female characters, Howe must negotiate a different path to truth.⁴⁶ In building her text in recursive relationship to Olson's, she doesn't remain, as Melville does not, with the love of man and woman; instead, she counters Melville's focus on the friendship of men with her own focus on the fellow feeling of women. To find these women and to bring them together, she must cross the fact-fiction divide.

Cordelia's presence in Howe's text cannot be a simple reparative one. Howe's statements about feminist interpretations of her work betray a generative ambiguity, a conflicted impulse, a connection, albeit a contested one, to the myths she engages. In the same 1980 letter to Butterick, she reflects on her concerns with such an approach: "This is something *way* beyond mere Feminist rhetoric which is *fatal* to poetry. But luckily there are Mysteries we will never crack and can only wander through their bordering territories" (qtd in Collis 84-85, emphasis original). The "something" that is, for her, "*way* beyond mere Feminist rhetoric" is the violence that confronts the female who enters the mystery of the "the history outside time" (as she calls it in her Tribute to Duncan), the violence reserved for the woman writer who faces myth, the history of stories and the stories of history we tell (Collis 84, Tribute 54). Howe reiterates for Butterick her connection to

⁴⁶ It must be noted that Howe's description in *My Emily Dickinson* also doesn't mention Cordelia. "*Lear* is a play charged with linguistic energy, dissimulation, consecration, invocation, quibble, sleight-of-hand, and illusion; constant reversals of meaning, constant wordplay on 'seeing' and 'nothing'. The good, Kent and Edgar, must resort to exile, disguise, and cunning, while Edmund, the villain, is witty, attractive, and beguiling. LEAR dark pastoral." (71)

Duncan: like him she travels in her writing and thinking, “from room to room, opening door after door ... The farther you go, the deeper the shadows, the more shadowy the Shades.” But she is firm about their difference:

But for [Duncan] it is a joyful [experience] – a reason his writing on writing is so uplifting. He welcomes the implications of the Cupid Psyche myth, for example. For me Psyche leads strangely to Persephone. And Persephone was dragged down to Darkness (as Cordelia was murdered and Ophelia drowned). The myth to a woman who is a writer is tied up with Violence, assault, “rape.” The Death-Threat implicit in Love is more *threat* to a woman. Maybe *this* is the area where Freud ceased to understand women ... Drowning is involved. (qtd in Collis 84, emphasis original)

Howe is not really *objecting* to the myths, *per se*, nor is she re-writing them. “Most of my models in poetry are male. And this is tragic in many ways,” she confesses to Butterick, “I adore Melville. He has been of inestimable importance to me ... I have learned from him, suffered with him” (qtd in Collis 88). She has already described her indebtedness to Olson. She feels kinship with Swift, too (“Oh words, words, words, how he loved and believed in the life of words”) (letter to Hejinian qtd in Montgomery 9). And Shakespeare (“He is in the room of rooms. He is the door of doors”) (letter to Butterick qtd in Collis 84).

Describing the paradox she faces in her deep reading and use of these texts and myths, Howe told Rachel Blau DuPlessis during a visit to her course at Temple University, “We’re back to the same puzzle. I mean it’s all male writers, and I love them very much. I love them passionately. They mean everything to me.” Howe sees a similar predicament in Emily Dickinson’s writing practice. In *My Emily Dickinson* – Howe’s book most directly indebted to *Call Me Ishmael* – she excavates Dickinson’s reading history: “I needed to find out that she didn’t just write all that stuff off the top of her head. That she used other writers and how she used them” (letter to Butterick qtd

in Collis 90). Howe returns to *King Lear* as the most baffling, difficult, paradoxical, and enticing site of Dickinson's usage of other writers, concluding in *My Emily Dickinson*, "If her favorite author at the height of his power demonstrated his volcanic loathing for women, constantly colliding with his own aversion, he revealed and reviled it in a play tender beyond comparison" (107). Tenderness *and* loathing. *Of* these writers and these stories, Howe, too, is struggling to give voice not only to her love but to the threat they represent, as she has felt it.

Howe brings Stella and Cordelia together in order to deal with the urgency of being violently moved by them. "I have always *been* Cordelia," she wrote in a 1991 letter to Norman O. Brown, going on to quote from *Lear*, "'The weight of this sad time we must obey; / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.' We are God's spies" (qtd in Montgomery 170 n23, emphasis added). At the close of *King Lear* "Melville is dumb with horror," Olson tells us, highlighting emotional response as writing's generative impulse (Ishmael 48). Suffering with Melville, with Shakespeare, with Cordelia, Howe writes her horror directly into the first section of *The Liberties*:

salute of armed men who continually remove their hats to make clear
their peaceful
intentions
 Murderers!
Cordelia dies
(heartrending)
 reclasp her hands into obscurity
(henceforth and fro)
I will go to my desk
I will sit quietly
(as if nothing
has happened
 what is eaten is gone. If I wasn't lucky I'd starve.)

This understated scene carries tremendous emotional force. In my reading, rather than underscoring Cordelia's "incidental status," the isolation of "heartrending" in parentheses heightens the horror of her death, renders it a silent scream, grotesque in its composure (Back 83). "Henceforth and fro" rocks the seesaw between what is seen – the writer sitting quietly at her desk – and what is unseen: her proximity to obliteration ("If [she] wasn't lucky [she'd] starve"). So it rocks between history and future, between myth and fact, between Cordelia and Howe. These are the moving counterpoints with their inherent danger. Recall Howe's questions: "Can any words restore to me how you *felt*? ... Who or what survives the work?" (BM 4). Howe makes her own question Cordelia's in "God's Spies": "Did we survive at all?" she asks Stella (184). The cry of "Murderers!" is taken from Lear's own mouth: "A plague upon you," he promises the remaining characters in the final scene, "murderers, traitors all." (V, iii, 269). The final lines of Howe's passage are similarly pronged: it is "as if nothing / has happened," so slight is the event of the youngest child's death, so minor the effect of literature on our lives. But "nothing" is Cordelia's word. "Nothing, my lord" she promises, or refuses, unleashing her father's fury and with it the tragedy that is the story of King Lear. This "nothing" *has* happened, *has* "come of nothing," has run its violent course (I, i, 88 and qtd in L 170). In saying nothing, Howe interprets, Cordelia "says what's true" (Duplessis class). "Nothing is our own!" Cordelia "*Cries out*," ambiguously, near the end of "God's Spies." There is no requirement that we read this line in the negative, as: we cannot claim any thing as our own. It is much more likely a cry of ownership – *this nothing is ours*. "'Nothing' is the force / That renovates the World –" writes Dickinson (590). Howe is staking claim to this nothing, this wild unsayable truth, its particular beauty.

"Love is more *threat* to a woman," Howe tells Butterick, and it is precisely love which is at the heart of the violence of both Cordelia's and Stella's lives and texts, as well as of this text that merges them. "The fleeing of absolute love beyond the borders of death into Myth is the progress of

King Lear,” Howe narrates in *My Emily Dickinson* (71). And so *her* text follows Cordelia there as well, past death, into myth. Is love’s path into the mythic realm, then, the threatened and threatening path into light? (Is this how Rukeyser means “light” in *Houdini*? – her play, unlike other accounts of Houdini’s life, approaches redemption and meaning in the relationship between the man and his wife, the path of *their* story into myth.) Is *The Liberties* (is *Houdini*?) a séance that raises love to speak from beyond death, from beyond the sketched border between fact and fable? That makes a story of that crossing?

In his moving and incisive reading of *King Lear*, “The Avoidance of Love,” Stanley Cavell asserts of Cordelia, “All her words are words of love; to love is all she knows how to do. That is her problem, and at the cause of the tragedy of *King Lear*” (292). Truly loving her father, Cordelia is utterly incapable (wish to though she might) of providing him with what he asks: a declaration of false love that will absolve him from the responsibility real love entails. A philosopher of ordinary language, Cavell knows and tells *King Lear*’s characters, their truth, through their words. (“How could any serious critic ever have forgotten that to care about a specific character is to care about the utterly specific words he says when and as he says them; or that we care about the utterly specific words of a play because certain men and women are having to give voice to them?” Cavell wonders (269).) His scrupulous attention to human voicing reveals simple and profound answers to the foundational questions surrounding *King Lear*, chiefly and most devastatingly: Why must Cordelia die? (Which requires asking why Lear makes the demands he does in the first Act, and why Cordelia says, or does not say, what she does – questions for which Cordelia’s love and Lear’s shame provide much of the way in to understanding).

In laying the groundwork for his reading, Cavell turns to Wittgenstein:

It is not, therefore, that I mean something *other* than those words would ordinarily mean, but rather that what they mean, and whether they mean anything, depends

solely upon whether I am using them so as to make my meaning. (An instance cited by Wittgenstein is Luther's remark that "Faith resides under the left nipple.") In general, Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations* moves into this region of meaning. It is a region habitually occupied by poetry. (271)

It is, I would add, a region occupied by Howe's poetic use of Shakespeare. "God's Spies" begins in fractured quotation, immediately highlighting as its subject the contested process of making sense both of texts and of life. First, reading from a "large book ... filled with fold-out maps, and pictures," Stella and Cordelia splice lines from *King Lear* ("unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / my heart into my mouth") with cliché, underscoring the distance between what we say and what we are understood to be saying:

STELLA (*Reading*): Her heart was in her throat –

CORDELIA (*Looking straight ahead*): Her words –

STELLA: – were unintelligible. (183)

In narrative terms, Cordelia's heart occupies the place through which her words (different words than nothing) are meant to flow. Or, in a territorial stand-off between emotion and language, communication itself is stalled. This exchange quickly brings Howe to the precise quotation Cavell references: "STELLA (*Turns pages of her book and reads again*): An instance quoted by W[ittgenstein]. L[uther]'s remark 'Faith resides under the left nipple.'" (183).

Both Howe and Cavell approach Luther's statement about belief through Wittgenstein's deployment of it: already our understanding (about how we understand) is mediated through the lens of reading, through the accumulating layers of contextual significance – Howe's Stella is, after all, not speaking off the cuff, but *reading*. Whether or not Howe's lines constitute a purposeful quotation of Cavell (I believe her quotation may very well be purposeful: Howe is indebted to Cavell's work on Emerson, his philosophical close-readings of American literature; and, more

mundanely, both Cavell and Howe use the same particular translation, “Faith *resides* under” instead of the more commonly found “is” or “is located”), it represents an important layer of significance. As in the case of her use of Carlyle, all of Howe’s quotations and references, both overt and embedded, scaffold her scholarly-poetic argument, providing context and support for her mode of thinking and understanding. As was so essential for her to demonstrate in the work of Dickinson, “she didn’t just write all that stuff off the top of her head” – she is carrying on an intertextual conversation about truth, belief, love, and communication. Toward this end, the disjunction between the physical smallness, the commonness of a nipple (Luther pointedly does not use “heart,” with its automatically symbolic significance), and the ineffability of faith is precisely the point. It is an analogous space to the one between document and ghost, between a stage effect and the experience of magic. How do we get from Luther’s sentence to the felt, violent truth of belief? How do we understand the meaning of words except through the shock or caress of their specific *use*? It matters that *King Lear* and “God’s Spies” are plays because they are carried across the treacherous terrain of attempted communication by voices. It matters that they use poetry because they participate in a particular – referential, abstract, felt – practice of making meaning.⁴⁷

Many of the quotations from *King Lear* that Howe borrows and bends come from moments in Shakespeare’s text to which Cavell also attends. Some of these are not immediately recognizable as quotations. Toward the close of “God’s Spies,” in seeming response to Cordelia’s description of the drowned, murdered dead (an image that Montgomery convincingly and quite beautifully links to another intertext, Henrik Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck*), Stella speaks:

STELLA (*Terrified*): When we find them, will we lose them?

⁴⁷ Working out the claims and implications of genre for *King Lear*, Cavell writes, “Clearly, as we are always told, its particular dramatic effect is a function of the fact that its words are poetry. Sometimes Shakespeare’s plays are said to be poems, but obviously they are not poems; they are made in a medium which knows how to use poetry dramatically. It is an accomplishment of the same magnitude, even of the same kind, as the discovery of perspective in painting and of tonality in music – and apparently, just as irretrievable, for artistic purposes now. The question is: How does the medium function which uses poetry in this way?” (320).

(*Pause, then clearly*): Who can tell me who I am?

Of course, the problem of discovering who Stella really is animates *The Liberties* from its first moments. But this line's provenance makes of it more than a reiteration of this originating question. In Act I, Scene 4 of *King Lear*, Lear is being cast out from his eldest daughter, Goneril's castle, against the stated stipulations of his divestiture of kingdom. The King's response – his tone and level of self-awareness perched on the border between tragic knowledge and ironic avoidance – foreshadows the violence that is to come. In Howe's text, Stella is asking *Lear's* question:

Does any here know me?

This is not Lear.

Does Lear walk thus, speak thus? Where are his eyes?

Either his notion weakens, his discernings

Are lethargied. Ha! Waking? 'Tis not so.

Who is it that can tell me who I am? (I, iv, 206).

Cavell's reading of Lear's utterance of "the old tragic question" leads to an articulation of the terror that always comes along with it: the answer "taunts the characters with their lack of wholeness, their separation from themselves, by loss or denial or opposition" (308). In arriving at this understanding, Cavell forces us to pay more precise attention to the specifics of Shakespeare's language: Lear (and with him Howe's Stella) is not asking *Who am I?* but, Who can *tell me* who I am? Thus, Cavell suggests, the Fool's answer ("Lear's shadow") does not mean that Lear has turned into his own shadow, but: "Lear's shadow can tell you who you are." In "God's Spies," Cordelia answers, "Swift" (Swift can tell you), but before finishing the sentence she puns, "you are swift." And over the duration of the comma between these two halves of an answer, Cordelia moves Stella deftly and quickly out of the sentence, foreclosing the possibility that she can be contained by it ("Who can tell me who I am?" "Swift, you are swift –"). Perhaps what Howe is suggesting through her recasting of

Shakespeare's lines is that only Lear's shadow, Cordelia's shadow, Swift's ghost can tell us who Stella is, who we are. This knowledge is available only on the other side of the threshold to myth. Perhaps this is the riddle of Cordelia's late lines: "Clinging close we come in couples – conversing at landmarks" (L 199). The truth is the shadow a self throws across landmark buildings and texts only once it has past.

With humility, Cavell also attends to the lines of *King Lear* that give Howe her middle section's title. He describes Lear at the start of the play's final Act as continuing to avoid the requirements of reciprocal love that his daughter embodies, the demand that he "put himself aside long enough to see through her, and be seen through":

He has come to accept his love, not by making room in the world for it, but by denying its relevance to the world. He does not renounce the world in going to prison, but flees from it, to earthly pleasure. The astonishing image of 'God's spies' (V, iii, 17) stays beyond me, but in part it contains the final emphasis upon looking without being seen; and it cites an intimacy which requires no reciprocity with real men. (297)

Cordelia – who is the absolute love that flees, from necessity and from violence, into myth – understands that her father is at all costs avoiding (from shame, from weakness, from fear, from inability), love's requirement that he be *seen*, and so is "cast down" not for her own fate, but for his (V, iii, 5). She does not speak again in Shakespeare's play. "Now, I would understand sin as Man's refusal of Love Itself, his refusal to love in his desire to have love," Duncan writes uncannily, though not explicitly, conjuring Lear's tragic failing (Myth 19). Olson quotes Melville, "The more we love the more we know; and so reversed" (Ishmael 53). In darkness and silence Cordelia began by loving, it was all she knew how to do. "Love is more threat to a woman." In fact it kills them again and again ("They murder each other," whispers Stella, "Of course. Always." answers Cordelia). This

vulnerable openness to love is knowledge, is magic, is the staircase into myth. We will never completely understand: “God’s spies” stays beyond us (“You don’t hear voices, but yes, you’re hearing something”). “We are God’s spies.”

On “July 22, 73 hot nite,” Richard Cox, the actor playing Marco Bone, passionately handwrote these production notes to Rukeyser:

it is a wonderfully rich play about real people, trying to find themselves, fighting for completeness, wanting love, coming to love, in love – and the confusion, the self questioning, the pain, the fight for that word to bring it all together – that hole in the ice ... The theme of completeness in coming to terms with the existence of another human being – becoming able to touch another, becoming able to love (I always felt a kinship of the play to King Lear). And about who? An archetypal figure if ever there was one – the Self Liberator! (LOC I:36 folder 4).

And so this intertext, too, hitches Rukeyser’s project directly to Howe’s. Like *King Lear*, Rukeyser’s main character becomes able to accept love, “able to touch another” only on the threshold of death. As Cordelia does her father, Bess accompanies Houdini to that threshold, seeming all along to know, much more than he does, how it will all, inevitably, end. She is open to the journey nonetheless.

In an unacknowledged irony, Bess speaks famous lines of Rukeyser’s frequently pulled out of context and “taken up by ... by the women’s movement”: “What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open” (Freeman viii, H 89). I say this is an irony because there is very little *of* Bess’s life in *Houdini*. Like Stella’s, her biography can only be coaxed out from between the world-worthy events of her partner’s. And these lines of Bess’s aren’t really dealt

with in Rukeyser's play. Houdini answers, "It has," but it's not clear whether he means that *it has* because *she has* told any kind of truth about her life. Or even what that sort of truth might look like.

Perhaps this is where *Houdini* and *The Liberties* most vitally meet, with Howe taking up Rukeyser's ghosts in the split-apart world. Not exactly telling the true story of the life of a dead woman, but going to her and loving her, making a space in the dark structures of myth where we try – really try – do not refuse – to see. "To conjure is nothing else than to observe rightly, to know and understand what is," as the poet Diane Di Prima paraphrases Renaissance occultist, Paracelus. And in that seeing, we must be willing not to make clear sense, we must be willing not to survive the work.

In a long page of notes written some time during the decades-long composition of *Houdini*, Rukeyser weaves these threads together:

This is myth, not biography.

To bring the images to life, seek illuminations.

To enter into this font is to plunge into the mythol. realm

To break the surface is to cross the threshold into the night-sea

Locked in the embrace of Power and Matter.

Through the blank wall, timelessness. There breaks and enters a shadowy creator-figure to shape the world of forms. His day is dreamlike in its duration, fluidity, and ambient power. Much remains to make the earth habitable for future people.

Raven in the whale and the beautiful woman {Campbell's God}

The realm of the gods is a forgotten dimension of the exploration of that / the world we know.

Dimension is the whole sense of the hero.

The two worlds pictured as distinct; there is adventure and return; but the two kingdoms are actually one.

The hero knits together the two worlds. (LOC I:37 folder 1)

In part, Rukeyser is finding evidence for her project in Joseph Campbell's excavation of our "monomyth," these lines referring to the "Belly of the Whale" chapter in his *Hero With a Thousand Faces* in which the hero passes the "magical threshold" and "instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, [s/he] is swallowed into the unknown, and would appear to have died" (90). Here is the blueprint for that staircase between the levels, the one that leads us to "the fiction of what Man is" as Duncan describes it ("Our work is to arouse in a contemporary consciousness reverberations of old myth ... The plot we are to follow, the great myth or work, is the fiction of what Man is") (HD 79). But even more, here, it is the fiction of what woman is that Howe and Rukeyser are stalking. This fiction that may once have been fact, but has been, of necessity, burned back into fable.

CHAPTER 4

“‘I’ for ‘i’ and ‘i’ for ‘I’”: *The Orgy* and *THAT THIS*

Susan Howe and Muriel Rukeyser don’t only write the “whole lives” of others, they frequently write their own. Scholarly and critical acknowledgement of the nature, significance, and effects of such personal investigation varies drastically in the case of these two poets. Though their autobiographical impulses and projects look, on the surface, quite different – differences that are amplified, as I describe in the introduction, by the orientations of the schools and lineages in which they are categorized – significant shared grounding and context for this element of their projects can be found in the work of mutual literary and philosophical guides and sources. In “The Poet,” as an orienting example, Ralph Waldo Emerson asserts that the true poet “will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune” (450). Emerson condemns those who write “poems from the fancy, at a safe distance from their own experience” (447). He posits that the “high sort of seeing” that constitutes *real* imagination consists not in wild invention, but in “the intellect being where and what it sees” (459).

But, how does this work? How do the events of one individual life, one act of seeing, one landscape, one horizon, become urgent or enriching for any other person? These are the questions raised by any autobiographical project. As Emerson articulates them – and as Rukeyser and Howe engage them – their answers flirt with contradiction. Further on in “The Poet,” Emerson seems to turn against the limiting self whose rootedness and specificity he earlier championed; he describes the poet’s need and desire to “escape the custody of that body in which he is pent up, and of that jailyard of individual relations in which he is enclosed” (460). It is in these apparent contradictions that the magic and difficulty of the poets’ work resides. For, Emerson is suggesting that the poet *must* do all of these things, must speak his self, and, at the same time, break free “the jailyard” of his experiences and relations. Indeed, it is by truly becoming “where and what he sees,” “turn[ing] the

world to glass,” that the poet becomes larger, takes on the arc and texture of his particular horizon, becomes what Emerson calls a “transparent eyeball.” (456).

By what alchemy – or by what diligence – does an individual and local fact or experience become a larger, general, or operative truth? This is the same question that initiates William Carlos Williams’ American epic, *Paterson*. “How will you find beauty when it is locked in the mind past all remonstrance?” he asks in the two prose lines that begin his Preface. In attempting an answer he breaks into verse:

To make a start,
out of particulars
and make them general, rolling
up the sum, by defective means
Sniffing the trees

The poet’s work begins from “particulars” – the “jailyard of individual relations” – and dilates or expands only “by defective means.” Susan Howe used these lines from *Paterson* to begin two recent talks: first, her contribution to a panel on the role of research in contemporary poetics at the 2011 Associated Writing Programs Conference and, shortly after, a public conversation with me in the James Gallery of the CUNY Graduate Center.⁴⁸ On her script for the first event, Howe had typed, “To make a start out of particulars,” adding in pencil William’s description of the difficult, imperfect, generalizing work that follows from that start. Instead of breaking off at abstraction, Howe chose in her revision to include “sniffing the trees,” suggesting both a connection to Emerson’s naturalist project of “re-attach[ing] things to nature and the Whole,” as well as the base, animal action of sniffing trees for the scent of others and adding one’s own bodily signature.

⁴⁸ Howe continued to work over these talks until her text morphed into *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives*, published by New Directions / Christine Burgin in October 2014. The book, which I will discuss further on in the chapter, retains some of the language from the talks I reference here, but significant changes include the fact that Howe’s final version engages only Book III (*The Library*) from *Paterson*.

In both scripts, Howe uses the Williams poem as a point of entry to talking about the research methods that went into the composition of her 2010 collection, *THAT THIS*. Howe's book quite literally "make[s] a start / out of particulars": it begins with a prose section in which she describes, with devastating emotion, finding her third husband, the philosopher Peter Hare, dead in his bed in January of 2008. Characteristically, in neither version of the talk does Howe comment directly on the lines from *Paterson* or how they illuminate her practice, experience, or concerns. Howe's method for "mak[ing] general" consists in parataxis and braiding. After turning briefly to Robert Duncan's *H.D. Book* and describing the physical experience of researching the Jonathan Edwards family papers in Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Howe's first draft turns quickly to her intimate experience. She writes: "My husband died very suddenly in his sleep on the 3rd of January 2008, and that fact is also behind the powerful effect these manuscripts had on the process of my work and the way I have now woven them into the body of *THAT THIS* my most recent book."

Similar to Rukeyser's increasing tethering of personal response to documentary evidence in the process of writing *Houdini*, Howe's deceptively simple, baldly emotional statement highlights the counterintuitive relationship she perceives between research and her own life. This particular connecting impulse – between the emotional and the scholarly – joins the two writers and constitutes their original and experimental handling of the personal. It is a fraught and painful negotiation. On her script for the first version of the talk, Howe used the same pencil to make three upward-slanting diagonal lines, striking out her private admission of grief. Above, she changes course once more, with the same pencil countering "Keep in" across the top right-hand corner of the page. Despite this, in her script for the James Gallery presentation these lines no longer appear.

It is impossible, of course, to know what accounts for Howe's vacillation about the necessity of these lines describing her husband's death. One can equally imagine them seeming too vulnerable

as seeming obvious or unnecessary. Perhaps it is in the tension between these different editorial impulses – the difficulty of distinguishing a strong risk (exposure) from the absence of risk (obviousness) – that the gravity of the lines’ relevance or import becomes clear. Categorical poetic assumptions about personal exposure and obviousness – in particular their role in contemporary poetry after the Confessional moment – obviate deep investigation into the way such confession works, in its particulars, in Howe’s writing, how it is linked to her research and scholarship. In her path-breaking study, *Radical Affections: Essay on the Poetics of Outside*, Miriam Nichols places Howe’s writing in a recuperated, “living” lineage of projective verse that doesn’t just insist on the relevance of a new trajectory of poetic practice, but shifts the common contemporary understanding of the relationship between figure and ground, poet and world. In articulating Howe’s particular contribution to this lineage, Nichols foregrounds the historical orientation of her project: “The trail of poems Howe leaves behind as she reads her way through American colonial history records her chosen *path* through time and space” (6). Nichols distinguishes Howe’s approach from, for example, Robert Creeley’s “autobiographical tracking of himself,” presenting them as related but distinct “*modes* of traversing their respective fields of attention” (6). Grateful for Nichols’ trenchant and deeply resonant articulation of Howe’s mode of traversal, here I grapple with the possibility of assigning different limits and contours to Howe’s field of attention. Though I share with Nichols a conviction that Howe’s orientation – her giving voice to archival stutters and handling language with its roots attached – “*brings to question the unavoidably perspectival nature of the real as such*,” I am less concerned with the fact that “Howe makes no effort to integrate the pasted scrap into a narrative,” than with the relentless way she surrounds and abuts those scraps with scraps from her own life (224, emphasis original). And so, I ask specifically: In what ways do the manuscripts of Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards and his family speak so viscerally and *privately* to Howe? How does her grief open her to the archival scrap? How are those experiential processes of thinking and feeling

enacted in her text? In what ways are Howe's archival traversals also autobiographical trackings of herself?

Assertions about the place and significance of personal response and intimate disclosure are what most differentiate Howe scholarship from Rukeyser scholarship, at least as practiced by the majority of critics or shaped into omnibus fields. Since the feminist movement's "rediscovery" of Rukeyser in the 1970s (Daniels 258), a preponderance of readers have reacted with overwhelming gratitude for the "real," "raw" images she presents of a woman's life (Kertesz 2), what Toril Moi, contextualizing the Anglo-American strain of "Images of Women" Criticism, describes as "nurturing personal growth and raising the individual consciousness by linking literature to life" (43). Many readers of Howe, on the other hand, have responded with equal gratitude for her decentering of a monolithic emoting, creating, poet-self. In service of this interpretation, critics point out how "rarely [she] speaks in her own person" and how the "poet herself appears only in the interstices of the text" (Perloff *Language* 430, 428-9).

Neither position is wrong: Rukeyser's confessional audacity and Howe's disruption of comfortable identity are urgent and important aspects of their work. But in their commitment to these literary and political positions, readers overlook the urgency with which "Susan Howe" *does* appear in her texts, as well as how mediated and fractured "Muriel Rukeyser" is in hers.⁴⁹ It is difficult to make a cogent narrative out of these divergences from type, or out of the strange tethering of the personal and the investigative, the self and the world, that these two poets share.

⁴⁹ One notable exception to this trend is Rachel Tzivvia Back, cited in Chapter Two, whose book-length study, *Led by Language: The Poetry and Poetics of Susan Howe*, explores the "highly autobiographical nature of [Howe's] work": "The charting of her own childhood and ancestral geographies, the uncovering of the points of convergence between biography and history, and the frank foregrounding of the intensely personal are foundation to Howe's poetry and poetics. The uncovering of each historical tale is propelled *also* by the wholly individual and idiosyncratic historical details of the poet's own life" (12). I differ from Back in the intellectual lineage I trace to substantiate and explore Howe's personal experiments, as Back continues to foreground the explicitly postmodern orientation of fallibility, conjecture, and instability. Further, Back places Howe's autobiographical project at the service of her historical explorations, which I find to be a productive intersection, though not an exhaustive locus or direction of inquiry. Finally, Back's book was written before the publication of Howe's most recent texts, like *THAT THIS*, which are indispensable in understanding the contours of Howe's autobiographical project.

In her 1999 article “Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman’s Albany, Susan Howe’s Buffalo,” Marjorie Perloff begins to interrogate this lacuna in Howe studies; she investigates what she perceives to be a mid-career turn toward autobiographical subjects by Howe and Ron Silliman, as well as the Language Poets more generally. In establishing the political and literary significance of this orientation as a shift, she lingers on one of postmodernism’s rallying cries, “What matter who’s speaking?”: “Beckett’s question, as recharged and transmitted by Foucault, [] historicized, along Marxist and specifically Althusserian lines, by Fredric Jameson” (408). This question has had enormous implications for the late 20th and early 21st century decentralization of authorial authority. Interestingly, as I began to trace in my examination of Howe’s Peircian use of herself as her texts’ interpretant, it has also held a central and *contested* place in Howe’s own writing and thinking – a position Perloff doesn’t mention despite her focus on Howe’s treatment of personal topics.

In Howe’s introduction to her 1993 collection of essays, *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history*, she responds directly to Foucault: “I cannot murmur indifferently: ‘What matter who’s speaking?’ I emphatically insist it does matter who’s speaking” (20).⁵⁰ The immediate subject of Howe’s counter-assertion is the manuscripts of Emily Dickinson, with their “layerings and fragile immediacies of her multifaceted visual and verbal productions” (19). For Howe, any poststructural stripping away of Dickinson’s life or time is premature, coming, in Howe’s own words, “before we have been allowed to even see what *she*, *Emily Dickinson*, reveals of her most

⁵⁰ Though the question, as Perloff points out, is originally Beckett’s, Howe’s engagement with it immediately follows a reference to Foucault’s recasting of it: “Foucault’s questions in ‘What Is an Author?’: ‘What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?’ are relevant here. New questions have been heard and new placements determined for poets who are men” (19). In her essay “Submarginalia,” which also appears in *The Birth-mark*, she states her relationship to Foucault even more directly: “‘What is an author?’ asks Michel Foucault in the essay that directly inspired and informed my writing about Anne Hutchinson, Thomas Shepard, John Winthrop, Anne Bradstreet, Mary Rowlandson, James Savage, and Emily Dickinson. Foucault’s influence is problematic. This wide-ranging philosopher and library cormorant’s eloquent, restless, passionate interrogation of how we have come to be the way we are remains inside the margins of an intellectual enclosure constructed from memories, meditations, delusions, and literary or philosophical speculations of European men” (37).

profound self in the multiple multilayered scripts, sets, notes, and scraps she left us” (BM 20). For Dickinson as well as the other female antinomians Howe champions (in *The Birth-mark*, the lineage traverses Anne Hutchinson, Sara Coleridge, and Mary Rowlandson; in *THAT THIS*, it extends to Sarah Edwards and Hannah Edwards Wetmore), academic deconstruction comes at the expense of a primary or basic understanding of the historical, social, political, and personal conditions of artistic creation and work.

Elsewhere Howe describes her debt to Foucault, especially in conceiving a way to redress decades of obfuscation in the editing and presentation of Dickinson’s work; but she makes it clear that she took what she needed from him only “in magpie fashion” (PR). Her indebtedness-with-reservation mirrors her statements about her relationship to the Language Poets. In 1995 she said to Lynn Keller: “I’m older than most of the people I consider to be Language poets ... I wasn’t reading the Russian formalist critics. I had no Marxist background, having never been to any university... Most of the Language poets were in universities during the late sixties, and their work is fueled by the political rage and the courage of that period. I can understand it and identify with it, but at a remove” (19-20). Almost two decades later, she echoed this sentiment in an interview with Maureen McLane in *The Paris Review*. Though the repeated fielding of this question has had a softening effect on her response, Howe’s reasons and their implications remain intact: “I’m not a hard-core Language poet. But some of the individuals involved in that group provided inspiration, encouragement, and even a readership for my work when I badly needed it ... I shared their distaste for certain aspects of American poetry, but being from an older generation, I have always been attracted by modernism rather than postmodernism and its anti-Romantic high theory.” Howe might call her ambivalent position vis-à-vis both of these camps “nervousness,” a word she explores in her 1991 contribution to “The Person” issue of the *Poetics Journal*, “Robert Creeley and the Politics of the Person.” In her first section, “American Nervousness,” she writes:

Post-Saussurean critical theorists have proclaimed the death of the author. They have shown in various ways that the transparency of language is an illusion. The subject or question the *I* started from is no longer possible. Away with kinship and contrast, angels and muses. Knowledge is discursive and subjectless, criticism a science ... When poems are being torn up by the roots for theoretical fuel, is it an ideological assertion to say that there are people who write what they know before they know what they write? (153)

Taking seriously both aspects of Howe's ambivalent position – the alliance with poststructural, postmodern perspectives as well as her experience of distance from them – requires patient attention to the specifics of the lineages she cites as well as her own methods of reading and studying these lineages. Howe's own work needs to be considered in the context of her emphatic insistence on the "profound self" revealed in the speaking voices of "multilayered scripts" like Dickinson's or Rowlandson's. These profound selves are not rigid, nor are they completely interior or personal. They are multilayered, like the texts from which they emerge. Indeed, the gorgeous and maddening intertwining of texts and selves is Howe's chief subject, the stutters and the nervousness that grow from her attempt to negotiate their interaction her central form.

To return briefly to the subject matter of the previous chapter, it is in the third and final section of *The Liberties* that Howe creates her most self-conscious exploration of the construction of her own selfhood and its relevance to her poetic project. The five previous pages consist of a series of "word-grids," each headed with either a "C" or an "S," suggesting that they are, in Lynn Keller's description, "reconceived experimental 'portraits' of either Cordelia or Stella" (233).⁵¹

⁵¹ The term word-grid is taken from the poetic quadrant form introduced by Robert Duncan in his 1968 collection *Bending the Bow*, which Kathleen Fraser describes as Duncan's attempt to manifest "one's *physical* alignment with the arrival of language in the mind," and whose influence she traces through the work of more contemporary female poets

C					
love	tongue	milk	pasture	words	
bare	arm	cause	cube	words	
inherit	cause	willow		words	
barbary	sister	glade	he	words	
say	nothing	verbatim	alarum	words	
dower	cause	pierce	willow	words	
<i>bolt.</i>					
<i>look.</i>					
leaves	sound	intonation	so	no	
rustling	benediction	stain		no	
broken	un	lips	here	look	no
stir	last	O	see	wal	no

Figure 3

including Howe (Fraser 186). Howe's critics have commented extensively and compellingly on the active and even uncomfortable practices of reading and biographical inquiry urged by these constructions: "individual identity or personal history nonetheless serve as only partially organizing forces, and some of the words refuse to 'fit'"; "The making of oblique and unexpected associations is implicitly encouraged ... At the same time, the grid resists assimilation into a meaningful pattern"; "In these grids, words are extirpated from any linguistic structure, and the reader is forced to engage with each word first as its own individual visual/aural/semantic entity, only then establishing links between words" (Keller 234, Montgomery 11, Back 99). See also Brian Reed's trenchant analysis of Howe's use of such forms.

With language drawn from the realms the women occupy, but no overt relationships established between those words, these grids point to the ways in which the construction of selves in Howe's work is necessarily active. The pursuit or understanding of individuals, these pages suggest, requires at least three separate and frequently conflicting activities: an identification of source materials (significant words; biographical, semantic, literary, and geographical facts); inquiry into the systems from which these materials have been pulled (history, literature, biography); and a constantly renewing process of interpretation and re-connection in the present.

Following this tutorial in alternative portraiture, Howe extends her text abruptly and explicitly outward to include "Susan Howe." Though Howe, the researcher, reader, and writer, has been a presence throughout *The Liberties* ("I will go to my desk / I will sit quietly"), here the *character* of Howe joins the characters of Stella and Cordelia as an object of investigation and scrutiny. As she tells Rachel Blau DuPlessis's class at Temple University, "I pull myself in at that point." The way she does this is *not* to create another word-grid – which might have cemented her relationship to Stella and Cordelia and extended the reading practice with which her readers had, perhaps, just become comfortable. Instead, she proposes a riddle whose answer is her own name:

I am composed of nine letters.

1 is the subject of a proposition in logic.

2 is a female sheep, or tree.

3 is equal to one.

4 is a beginning.

5 & 7 are nothing.

6 7 & 8 are a question, or salutation.

6 7 8 & 9 are deep, a depression.

THE KEY

e n i g m a s t i f e m i a t e d c r y p t o a t h

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y

z or zed

graphy

reland

I

In these lines, the numbers 1 through 9 refer to the nine letters spelling “Susan Howe.” Two, for example, is the second letter, “u”: its definitions encompassing both “ewe” the animal, and “yew” the tree. Six, seven, and eight together are “how,” “a question or salutation.” And “howe” (“6 7 8 & 9”) points to an obsolete usage last cited by the Oxford English Dictionary in 1893: “A hollow place or depression; esp. a hollow on the surface of the earth, a basin or valley.”

It is striking, shocking even, that “Susan Howe” constitutes what we might describe as a “solution” to these lines, since the idea of clear answers is something the text seems otherwise actively to contest. But, as solution, “Susan Howe” is neither simple nor stable: for starters, there is an essential distance between a name and a self. And when Howe begins, “I am composed of nine letters,” the word “composed” ricochets – very much like the individual letters of Howe’s name and their myriad, signifying combinations do – against all *its* components and definitions, creating a cacophony of meanings. “I am” (“I” *is*, “Howe” *is*, Howe *is*), therefore, “elaborately or well put together,” “artificially made up,” and “settled, established” (OED). Reading, we must interrogate what any “I” has to do – literally, figuratively, semantically, emotionally, historically – with the various pieces that go into its constitution: the letters, the words, the meanings of those words, their usages, their grammar, their impact.

I begin my explicit exploration of the autobiographical in Howe with this early riddle, in part because of the knowing, potentially critical, possibly even ironic distance it seems to cultivate around

the project of identity formation or description. Though the excerpt ends on a column-like “I,” bolstering the text that precedes it – an “I” that is, significantly, pulled from “Ireland,” suggesting Howe’s identity as a component product of her mother’s, which is reduced or at least changed by the loss of that “I” – such observations about the self’s central position are more academic and analytical than felt. Indeed, in “‘A Sounding of Uncertainty’: Susan Howe’s Poetic Gendering of History,” Krzysztof Ziarek asserts of Howe’s “anagrammic play” that it “contains no traces of personal experiences and desires, and reads ‘her’ identity, like the rest of the voices in ‘The Liberties,’ through the condensation of semantic, syntactical, and typographical identities” (281). As a result of his laudable investment in a complex and multiple vision of female identity, Ziarek ends up rejecting the poet’s personal experience as being a necessary inconvenience. He continues:

Even though several sections of ‘The Liberties’ invite a ‘personalizing’ reading of the poem in the context of the author’s visit to Dublin ... such a reading becomes refracted and complicated by the textual labor of reinventing femininity through the voices of Stella and Cordelia. The phrase ‘I am composed of nine letters’ works against the idea of a recognition or recovery of an already existing identity. (282-283)

It is in the murky and productive terrain of Ziarek’s “even though” that my own argument is situated. His language belies the unseemly presence of autobiographical experience as something that must be acknowledged before it can be cast aside. If Ziarek is correct, why would Howe invite a “personalizing” reading at all? Noticing the intense presence of the personal in Howe’s text is not the same as requiring that such experience be, also, consistent, smooth, or reifying. A great site of power in her work is the way in which it insists her own self, her own life, while insisting, at the same time, on its refraction and complication, as well as its bolstering, through the experiences, ideas, and language of others. How she ricochets, imperfectly, between her particulars, the particulars of others, and the general. Her books force us to consider how textual engagement with

the personal can be at once non-hegemonic, not privileged, not all-encompassing *and* urgent, interesting, entirely the point.

In his dismissal, Ziarek unwittingly points to the mechanism by which this seemingly paradoxical state of affairs becomes possible. Asserting that Howe “reads ‘her’ identity, like the rest of the voices in ‘The Liberties,’ through the condensation of semantic, syntactical, and typographical identities,” he proposes identity not as a set of facts, but as a set of interacting systems and processes. Condensation is an action, a conversion, a concentration. But Ziarek’s list is incomplete. What Howe does is enact, reference, and perform the “semantic,” “syntactical,” “typographical” processes, *as well as* the personal, mythical, social, mystical, and emotional ones, by which meaning is made of, from, and within individual lives, chiefly her own. These are the poet’s (and “The Poet’s”) abiding questions, her “deepest selves.” As I argued of her Peircian method in *Pierce-Arrow*, Susan Howe is, herself, the way in – to poetry, to knowledge and, with it, connection.

Though Howe’s employment of the anagrammatic form might at first seem symptomatic of critical distance from identity’s construction, the complicated history of similar forms, and the activities these forms engender, tells a different story. As Daniel Heller-Roazen – an important recent interlocutor and friend of Howe’s in whose work she has recognized her own longstanding concerns – delineates in his *Dark Tongues: The Art of Rogues and Riddlers*, a trajectory of “appropriations of language that set sound and sense against each other, simultaneously revealing and concealing what they suggest” can be traced backward and forward between various types of word play including beggars’ cant, Old Norse “kennings,” and Vedic and archaic Greek riddles from the gods (43). He describes practices or games that use existing, recognized language in alternative ways (a word deployed to signify something other than its commonly recognized definition), simultaneously obscuring, protecting, and transmitting their different meanings. Such practices are stunningly akin to Howe’s in these lines. Each of these language games works through activities of

simile-making; their import is not so much the value or proof of one side of the equation or another, but in “the structural bond that unites them” (78). In the Vedic hymns, the practice protected “precious words that poets wished to conceal,” for example, their own names and the names of God. Viewing Howe’s game as participating in this lineage links her practice to the protection – through disguise – of sacred information. It is not just what the self is, but how it is built in relation to this, to *its*, knowledge that her anagram interrogates.

Still, there is a rigidity to the technique. As a form of language play, anagrams work through replacement: a noun stands in for an object, in this case a letter. The nouns that make up the anagram are instrumental, a vehicle for arriving at a solution that does not retain the original materials. The act of replacement suggests a kind of relation-making based in erasure, not in accumulation. “ifor I” Howe repeats twice in the first section of *The Liberties*, suggesting, through capitalization and spacing, the exchange of identities: The authority or specificity of a proper noun gives way to the humility, rebellion, or informality of the lowercase. The starkness of this substitution is underscored by etymology: the idea of a letter’s “case” comes from hand typesetting, where choosing between “i” and “I” means, literally, replacing one sort, one letter tile, with another. As Ziarek interprets, “‘ifor I’ indicates an exchange of identity, of a de-emphasized and fractured ‘i’ for the model of ‘strong identity with capital ‘I,’ which seemingly guarantees closure and self-presence” (283).

Howe expands upon this precise act of linguistic replacement in her 1992 poem, “Melville’s Marginalia.” This time she removes the unconventional spacing between “i” and “for,” and in the process eliminates what felt raw, unfinished, hidden, or self-consciously puzzling about the thought: “I will dismember marginalia / ‘I’ for ‘i’ and ‘i’ for ‘I’ / Ophelia Juliet Cordelia” (155). Her return to the preoccupations that motivated *The Liberties* is signaled in her reference both to its language and to its characters – here Cordelia sits beside Shakespeare’s other dead heroines, evidentiary partners

in the threat love and myth hold for woman. But in this later text, “i” doesn’t always replace “I,” the exchange goes the other way as well. With the rhythm of this expanded line, Howe’s intertextual echo shifts from the punishing retributive message of “an eye for an eye” to the loyalty and fellow-feeling implicit in the Three Musketeers’ “All for one and one for all,” suggesting the development of a community in the place of replacement. Indeed, Howe’s essay on Creeley and the “Politics of the Person,” published just one year before “Melville’s Marginalia,” quotes Creeley quoting Duncan quoting this very line, suggesting that its structure as a possible solution for the negotiation of identities and relationships was very much on her mind: “*Republic* – dig it ... One for all and all for one” (157).

As this revisiting and editing of “ifor I” suggests, the mechanisms by which an individual – in particular, the individual Susan Howe – is related to the other “I’s” and “i’s” she researches, loves, and gives voice to through her texts is a site of inquiry and development across her work. Her books from the late 1980s forward incorporate explicitly personal information and material, frequently including a scene of encounter between herself and the subjects of her texts, describing her own position as writer and investigator in the landscape or the library.⁵² By *THAT THIS*, the variety of mechanisms, philosophies, and forms for how an individual is constructed through these relations and experiences becomes Howe’s main subject. This is partly because grief has rendered her need to navigate and comprehend these relations urgent.⁵³

⁵² In addition to the examples cited in my introduction, see also “Thorow,” published in the 1990 collection *Singularities*, which begins, “During the winter and spring of 1987 I had a writer-in-residency grant to teach a poetry workshop once a week at the Lake George Arts Project, in the town of Lake George, New York. I rented a cabin off the road to Bolton Landing, at the edge of the lake” (40). Midway through *Melville’s Marginalia*, too, Howe refers abruptly to her own process: “I began to write *Melville’s Marginalia* by pulling a phrase, sometimes just a word or a name, at random from Cowen’s alphabetically arranged *Melville’s Marginalia* and letting that lead me by free association to each separate poem in the series” (114). My exploration of *Pierce-Arrow* is also of immediate relevance here.

⁵³ Mourning has frequently provided an occasion for Howe’s writing and scholarship. In her Robert Duncan tribute she links her father’s death to her second husband’s: “I lost my father in Buffalo ... I have come back alone to this place, which for me, will go on infinitely signifying risk” (54). *The Midnight* is in part an elegy for her mother. And her essay on Chris Marker (recently re-published as a chapbook from New Directions) is rooted in her second husband’s death. These instances are explored further and put in the context of war in the following chapter. I read *THAT THIS* as the apotheosis of her experiment with this form.

As Susan Stewart points out in her 2011 essay on contemporary elegies by women poets, Howe's text doesn't only join company with Anne Carson's *Nox*, Gjertrud Schnackenberg's *Heavenly Questions*, and C.D. Wright's *One With Others* – all experimental poetic or hybrid works published in that same year – but in its incorporation of what could be described as a “narrative account[] of traumatic loss,” it is also linked to more mainstream texts like Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joyce Carol Oates's *A Widow's Story*, and Meghan O'Rourke's *The Long Goodbye* (Stewart 52). Though central to Stewart's argument is the distance of Howe's project from these “prose memoirs” on account of the fact that her work does “not rely on this kind of narrative form alone,” the comparison still obtains.

The relationship of *THAT THIS* to texts like Didion's or Oates's is apparent from the first lines of the book (the beginning of a prose narrative called “The Disappearance Approach,” which, unlike other, similar introductory prose sections in Howe's oeuvre, never fractures into broken lines): “It was too quiet on the morning of January 3rd when I got up at eight after a good night's sleep” (11).⁵⁴ This is straightforward narrative exposition mixed with symbolic foreshadowing and mood setting: an eerily quiet morning is not so different from a dark and stormy night. We can guess where this is going, but Howe still walks us through, step-by-step. She rehearses dread and dawning knowledge from the vantage point of hindsight's acuity: she sees the newspaper lying outside on the driveway, the absence of her husband's slippers by the door. Her self-awareness – manifested in the textual acknowledgment that she is risking banality – is, itself, no more surprising. Save the missing final period, this utterance which concludes her first paragraph, though filled with uncertainty, is still direct and familiar: “Starting from nothing with nothing when everything else has been said” (11).

⁵⁴ In a review of the book in the journal *Lana Turner*, Robert von Hallberg makes a similar observation about Howe's opening: “*That This* seems initially a piece not of experimental but of traditional elegiac writing, or even life-writing.” Note the telltale “even” preceding the description of “life-writing.”

With its three discrete sections, *THAT THIS* makes use of all of Howe's now hallmark set of techniques: in the "The Disappearance Approach" short prose paragraphs juxtapose personal statement, historical exploration, and lyrical assertion; the collages of "Frolic Architecture" cut-up, collate, obscure, and illuminate text from Hannah Wetmore Edwards (Jonathan Edwards' daughter) and others, frequently recalling fragments of lines and passages from the previous section; and in the shortest "That This," brief, abstract lyrics in couplets serve as small windows within her pages. But the divisions between these sections are starker than in Howe's other texts. With the exception of the first page of "Frolic Architecture" (a poem beginning "That this book," which previews the lyrics of the final section and provides the collection's title) and a single, isolated page at the end (a fragmented collage of text taken from a biography of Nicholas Poussin, an important figure in the book's first section, discussed further on in this chapter), Howe steadfastly adheres to the forms she establishes for each, as though these divisions provide a bulwark against her deepening knowledge of the messiness they contain.

And so, explicit acknowledgement of the risk that is born from straightforward assertion of less-than-beautiful, less-than-flattering, less-than-original confession remains within "The Disappearance Approach," though it is scattered through the section. We learn that Howe and her husband did not sleep in the same room and that he suffered from sleep apnea, that she did not hold his photography hobby in high regard, that she fears being cheated by vendors and forgot to pay her land tax, that she buys flowers at the plain old supermarket, that at the cemetery she is politely snubbed by the official who "insisted he knew Mr. Hare had a wife, but I wasn't her" (29). Unlike *The Liberties*, there is simply no way that this text can be read as containing "no traces of personal experiences and desires" (Ziarek). Howe's divulgence of personal experience is relentlessly specific, overwhelmingly and disconcertingly intimate.

However, what is more remarkable is that neither the first section nor the book as a whole marks a change in concern or in approach from her earlier work. Howe's chief subject of investigation remains the concrete and complex ways in which identity, experience, and knowledge are constructed, nurtured, navigated, and disrupted through relationships; how selves are built through intellectual *and* emotional experience, and how they survive both; how people, things, and ideas are connected and why that matters. This continuity is underscored by a literal return. Within "The Disappearance Approach," Howe reproduces a full poem from *Pierce-Arrow* – the piece explored in the second chapter of this dissertation as a portal merging Howe's grief with Peirce's: "C.O. Milford Pa. 1904 / The way bleak north / presents itself here / as Heraclitean error / driving and driving / thought and austerity / nearer to lyricism / Often as black ice" (PA 78, TT 24). In *THAT THIS*, Howe goes on to remember: "I wrote this poem on a winter day in 1998 when my mother was still alive, and I hadn't met Peter. I had been reading Xerox copies of the last journal pages from the microfilm edition of the manuscripts of Charles Sanders Peirce ... I remember the way the lines came to me suddenly, after reading the journal, and how quiet it seemed inside the room with soft snow falling outside" (24). The previous self who wrote in another moment of grief (Howe's previous husband's death) becomes another figure in this negotiation. The remembered writing scene foreshadows the second section's movement "Into the beautiful meteor of the snow," as announced in its epigraph from Emerson (37).

As opposed to the abstract and conclusive negotiation represented by the anagrammatic exploration of identity in *The Liberties*, *THAT THIS* presents relation-making as an increasingly partial, specific, contextual, frustrated, multiple, and ongoing activity. This is signaled immediately through the grammar of the title, *THAT THIS*. As Susan Stewart notices, both words of the title are deictic: their grammatical function is to *point*; their significance is neither intrinsic nor understood, but dependent on the context in which "that" and "this" are found. The workings of such forms of

language have long been a preoccupation for Howe, as I began to explore in the second chapter, quoting Charles Sanders Peirce's "The demonstrative and personal pronouns, *this, that, I, you, we*, etc. have very peculiar powers. They enable us to convey meanings which words alone are quite incompetent to express; and this they do by stimulating the hearer to look about him" (Reasoning 128-9). In Howe's title, no mark of punctuation links or separates the two words. Elsewhere in the book, however, Howe imagines a physical cord spanning, in Stewart's description, between "'that,' the unknowable world of the dead, and 'this,' the world of the living" (54).

Throughout *THAT THIS*, Howe continually brings the cord *between* – that and this, life and death, self and other – into sharp focus. She does this in part because the dream of satisfactory substitution (i for I) has been rendered ephemeral. In this text it is precisely that: a dream. It is, more precisely, an "early morning half-waking dream" of Howe's husband, dressed in a dark suit and lying, alive, beside her (18). As the material has always provided Howe's link to the dead and to the occult, her psychic investigation into the roots of this illusion – her husband lying beside her – lead to an object, a particular jacket of his hanging in their closet: "Maybe the jacket was in my mind as distant dream knowledge of the way one figure can substitute for another *with a cord attached* so what is false gives life to what is fair" (19, emphasis added). Though not deictic like "that" and "this," "false" and "fair" are adjectives and, as such, also contextually bound. In these lines, Howe does not make explicit either what they modify or what they point to. Which is "false," the fact of her husband's death or the dream-image of him lying on the bed? Is the jacket – tangible conveyance to that fantasized other world – the connection between the once-living man and his ghost? Between Howe's memories and her current experience? She imagines the cord-between as umbilical in its ability to give and maintain, at least the appearance of, life.

Elsewhere, the cord reappears as the silk of a spider's web, complicating any of the life-giving properties her dream bestows:

Somewhere I read that relations between sounds and objects, feelings and thoughts, develop by association; language attaches to and envelopes its referent without destroying or changing it – the way a cobweb catches a fly. (13)

Here, Howe's frequent concern with originals re-surfaces. Where relationship-making figured through the type-setter's task requires substitution and singularity (if i then not I), the metaphor of the spider's web lets her have it both ways: The original, the living husband, the referent, the manuscript, the self is not destroyed or changed, it is merely encompassed by an accumulating apparatus of experience, of language, of poetry. But these lines are not benign. Though the cobweb itself doesn't destroy the fly, its envelopment is a prelude to the destruction that follows once the spider arrives. As soon as the fly is surrounded, it becomes prey.

Putting aside for a moment this issue of the fly's impending destruction, a spider's silk is an elusive figure for the cord of relation. Frequently invisible as we go about our daily business, a web will suddenly be made manifest, illuminated by a particular slant of light. In his 1720 manuscript "Of Insects," Jonathan Edwards provides this stunning description:

I know I have several times seen, in a very calm and serene day at that time of year, standing behind some opaque body that shall just hide the disk of the sun and keep off his dazzling rays from my eye, multitudes of little shining webs and glistening strings of a great length, and at such a height as that one would think they were tacked to the sky by one end, were it not that they were moving and floating. (154-55)

As Howe is compelled by the essential connectivity of all things pursued by Charles Sanders Peirce, Edwards' description provides a shimmering physical image for that state of connection. Such improbable cords are everywhere.

Edwards is an explicit interlocutor and source for Howe throughout her work. In 1985's *My Emily Dickinson*, she presents Edwards as presaging Dickinson in his "negativity, his disciplined journey through conscious despair, humiliation, and the joy of submission to an arbitrary and absent ordering of the Universe"; and though in that text she emphasizes his "humorlessness" and apocalyptic sermons, she draws from him the central concept of the "immediate *feeling* of understanding," (51, 49). Howe's 2007 *Souls of the Labadie Tract* is her first long-form engagement with Edwards: in the opening "Errand," she imagines him riding through the New England countryside, pinning slips of paper to his clothing in order to trace an association between the landscape and his ideas; the following "Personal Narrative" nods to his own similarly titled text; and a photograph of a small square of fabric from his wife's wedding dress opens the last, most visually fragmented section of the book – the immediate precursor to the collages of "Frolic Architecture" – which is titled "Fragment of the Wedding Dress of Sarah Pierpont Edwards."

That very same scrap appears again on the cover of *THAT THIS*, this time its indigo color just barely discernible against the stark white background and beneath the title's black print. It is the blueness of this existing "love relic," a blueness visible only (and barely) on this later book, that links it to Howe's own life and experience (32). The dress's blue echoes the blue sleeve sheathing *The New York Times* in the driveway, that early clue for Howe that her husband will not wake again. The color flashes up again on the book jacket of *Richard Rorty: the Making of an American Philosopher*, a complimentary copy of which is sent to Peter, but which he will not receive. These connections – methodically traced in Howe's text and, in that tracing, made visible – are extremely personal, are not translatable, are a kind of magical thinking ("an illusory correlation") through which she attempts to understand herself in relation to the increasingly hostile and illegible world (32). This scrap of a wedding dress, Howe contends in her opening section, "says nothing at all to an outsider who can look at it without being seen" (32). The sentence is typically Howeian in its apparent

simplicity. It would be easy enough to interpret that the scrap says nothing to us outsiders because the links are “merely” personal. Reading more closely, however, it becomes clear that what exempts an “outsider” from participation in this web of meaning making is not that it doesn’t pertain to her, it is that she can look without being *seen*. By tracing personal connections, Howe makes herself visible. Her grief is seen by the scrap, and as a result it is seen by us.⁵⁵ Visible, she becomes the vehicle for another possible register of relation transcending the limits of the self: these are the stakes of writing personal connections.

Sarah Edwards’s is the first voice housed by *THAT THIS* outside of Howe’s own. Immediately following the devastatingly intimate and straightforward opening – with the final sentence’s lack of punctuation and the ensuing white space – Sarah interrupts: “O My Very Dear Child. What shall I say? A holy and good God has covered us with a dark cloud” (11). In this “furiously calm” letter to her daughter Esther, Sarah is announcing and grieving “Jonathan’s sudden death in Princeton” (13, 12). The parallels are explicit: Sarah for Susan, Susan for Sarah; Jonathan for Peter, Peter for Jonathan – grieving wives, dead husbands. But the relations are not simple. As is the case with her engagement with Jonathan Swift and his Stella in *The Liberties*, Howe places herself in the woman’s position while feeling, at the same time, a forceful, writerly kinship with the man. Sarah’s language moves her immediately, and not at all seamlessly, to Jonathan’s: “For Sarah all works of God are a kind of language or voice to instruct us in things pertaining to calling and confusion. I love to read her husband’s analogies, metaphors, and similes” (12).

This abrupt shift between Sarah’s and Jonathan’s language carries significance. Howe turns away at the moment in which Sarah attempts to read meaning into her husband’s death. In the next paragraph Howe will go on to confess her own difference: “I read words but don’t hear God in

⁵⁵ Seeing, for Jonathan Edwards, was “the supreme act of humanity.” “To see is to apprehend,” Perry Miller explains, contextualizing the originality of Edwards’s perspective; in “a post-Newtonian, post-Lockean world, it is the highest possible form of *communication*” (Images Intro 33, emphasis added).

them” (12). Her relationship to Sarah and Jonathan is created and sustained along a cord spun of their language. It is therefore mediated by the uses to which that language is put: pleasure, solace, knowledge, or instruction. What the Edwards’ family texts and manuscripts have to do with Howe’s grief – what pleasure, solace, knowledge, instruction they offer to Howe in her grief – is precisely the question this text *opens*. She reads and writes to establish and probe that relationship, and then to extend it outward. Readers are caught in the cobweb, surrounded by its glistening cords. If these manuscripts and scraps say something to us as well, then we, too, are made visible, seeable, legible, known.

Like Peirce, Jonathan Edwards spent his life working on a never-published set of manuscripts that articulated a system for understanding the world and our place in it, a comprehensive account of the relations between things on this earth and their deepest significance. His imagined “Rational Account of the Main Doctrines of the Christian Religion Attempted,” intended, in his words “to show how all arts and sciences, the more they are perfected, the more they issue in divinity, and coincide with it, and appear to be as parts of it” (qtd in Miller 1). The folio of 212 entries entitled *Images or Shadows of Divine Things* was developed as a significant, albeit separate, part of that project, in Perry Miller’s description, “a secret and sustained effort to work out a new sense of the divinity of nature and the naturalness of divinity” (18). Where Peirce endeavored to identify and represent – via his existential graphs – *every possible relation*, Edwards, working to recuperate the religious science of typology for an age whose contours Newton and Locke and profoundly altered, meticulously observed and delineated – created a language for delineating – as many as he could perceive from where he walked and read, sat and looked, heard and felt.

A system developed for Bible interpretation, typology holds that “particular events in biblical history were ‘types’ or direct rehearsals of the ultimate act. ... Types were not allegories or emblems or fictitious narratives, the spirit of which might be that of Christ, but they were preliminary, factual

prefigurations of what Christ finally did” (Miller 6). Unlike similes and metaphors, “made according to the fancy of men,” types were thought to be truth, “the very ‘images’ of divinity” (Miller 6, 19). In Edwards’s own words:

Types are a certain sort of language, as it were, in which God is wont to speak to us. And there is, as it were, a certain idiom in that language which is to be learnt the same that the idiom of any language is, viz. by good acquaintance with the language, either by being naturally trained upon it, learning it by education (but that is not the way in which corrupt mankind learned divine language), or by much use and acquaintance together with a good taste or judgment, by comparing one thing with another and having our senses as it were exercised to discern it (which is the way that adult persons must come to speak any language, and in its true idiom, that is not their native tongue). (Types 150-51)

Edwards’s undertaking was not remarkable in the fact of its employment of this science of comparison – typology was widely practiced by Protestant theologians and ubiquitous in Puritan sermons – but it was utterly original in its manner, method, and scope. In his description, Edwards underscores both the sensation and the activity of comparison (“comparing one thing with another and having our senses as it were exercised to discern it”). His own perception was the laboratory through which religious meanings were tested. His compendium, his life’s work, is not a closed set with some massive but achievable imagined completed state. It is a physical and emotional practice.

Edwards fundamentally altered typology by extending the range of what might be considered from the Bible to everything around him. His explanation continues: “I expect by very ridicule and contempt to be called a man of a very fruitful brain and copious fancy, but they are welcome to it. I am not ashamed to own that I believe that the whole universe, heaven and earth, air and seas, and the divine constitution and history of the holy Scriptures, be full of images of divine things, as full as

a language is of words” (Types 152). As Edwards looked out into the “whole universe,” he also peered much closer in: these are the twin repercussions of the same gesture of expansion. As Joan Richardson explains, “for him the habit extended to almost everything in his perceptual field, so that even the homeliest intimate detail, like ‘clothes put off in sleep,’ one of the everyday actions he interprets in *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, became a sign prompting a reflective search through the texts that had become the scrim through which he regarded the world and himself” (27).

Edwards’s types were intensely and admittedly personal: both individual and intimate. Richardson’s reading of this fact underscores the attraction and urgency his method holds centuries later for Howe: “Edwards understood that true conversion could only be an individual, idiosyncratic experience, *dependent*, like the myriad varieties, shades, hues and tones of color perceived, on the accidental composition of each being” (25, emphasis original). The true convert, like the true poet, would not be able to write outside of his being’s accidental composition any more than he would be able to write outside of his time or place. Richardson will go on to call *Images or Shadows* not an encyclopedia of types (as per Edwards’s proposed project) but an encyclopedia of being. Like the poetic project as imagined by Emerson, Edwards’s encyclopedia of the specifics of one man’s being and seeing opens up as a way, or process – not as fact or mandate – to others. Such process, indeed, is the only possible way. In this, it provides an essential model for Howe’s excavation of personal grief. Howe extends Edwards’s work just as she extends Peirce’s – another rower on the “bi- or trireme” toward truth.

Howe takes up the activity of Edwards’s typology directly. Her final section, “That This,” begins with a poem that condenses his entry number 118 from *Images or Shadows*, a rare entry in which Edwards generalizes, making a type of his project as a whole: “Images of divine things. It is with many of these images as it was with the sacrifices of old: they are often repeated whereas the

antitype⁵⁶ is continual and never comes to pass but once. Thus sleep is an image of death that is repeated every night; so the morning is the image of resurrection” (94). Here is Howe’s corresponding poem in its entirety:

Day is a type when visible

objects change then put

on form but the anti-type

That thing not shadowed (99)

With the “visible” in her first line, Howe emphasizes the importance for the typological project (her own as well as Edwards’s) of seeing or perceiving. Howe has taken from Edwards the belief that types make meaning – make *truth* – through the intense attention of particular, idiosyncratic minds. Objects *become* types – become meaningful, become cords of connection (think of her husband’s suit) – through that activity. Day can be a type only when it is visible; that is, through the act of being seen and interpreted. But these terse lines of Howe’s lack a human actor, and her objects become types by way of a ghostly agency, perhaps a testament to her feelings of dislocation and powerlessness (“I read words but don’t hear God in them”).

The poem concludes with “That thing not shadowed,” and the capitalization of “That” (which, though it follows no mark of punctuation, suggests a new sentence) works against a clear narrative reading of the poem in which this final line is a description of “the anti-type” mentioned in the line prior. In such a reading Howe would be explaining Edwards, as opposed to enacting a kindred activity of the mind. “That” points irresistibly to the book’s title, an echo that is only partially fulfilled by the following “thing” (which shares, of course, its first three letters with “this”).

⁵⁶ In typology, “antitype” refers not to the opposite of the type but to its fulfillment.

The chord opened by “That” is closed three pages later with a poem in which its partner “this” is set off in scare quotes: “non-being cannot be ‘this’” (102).

<p>Day is a type when visible objects change then put</p> <p>on form but the anti-type That thing not shadowed</p>	<p>A secular arietta variation Grass angels perish in this</p> <p>harmonic collision because non-being cannot be ‘this’</p>
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Figure 4

What is the difference between a “thing” and “this”? Unlike “this,” a “thing” supplies its own reference. But if a “thing” is to function as a type, it, like “this” or “that,” *does* require pointing: to the anti-type it signifies. Indeed, Edwards’s text makes a list of “things” into gestures toward “this” and “this” and “this.” Turning a “thing” into a “this” makes it personal. “That thing” *is* “that this.” In this book, it is Howe’s.

But even while her text performs this knowledge, Howe rejects the situation her own “this” points to: the fact of her husband’s death. “non-being cannot be ‘this’,” she argues. And in the final lines of the section, the second to last printed page of the entire collection, she returns her attention to the verb “to be,” which was so essential to her embodiment and enactment of Peirce’s activities of relation-making. The work of “being” takes on an added register of urgency when its subject is a person who no longer *is*. And so once more Howe sets off “is” typographically, in a poem that opens with yet another “That”:

That a solitary person bears
witness to law in the ark to

an altar of snow and every
age or century for a day *is* (105)

Reading rapidly we might insert or assume an absent “type” at the end of this final line: “every age or century for a day is” a type. But as is true throughout her work, any such closure is imposed by the reader, representing both our own need and our own activity. What “*is*” – and what it (what that, what this) *means* – is something to which only “a solitary person” – a person made solitary by the cessation of another’s being – can “bear[] / witness.” As always, its definition *is* – and is *only* – an ongoing activity. We can, we must, “wonder how things are, in relation to how they appear” (34). We can also (with Edwards, with Peirce, with Howe) diligently and imaginatively sketch out a system of those perceived and experienced relations – the cords between. They are, of course, necessarily personal.

Howe directly cites one particular type from *Images or Shadows of Divine Things*, in lines that condense Edwards’s entry number 69: “For Jonathan Edwards, snakes represent the venomous nature of the speech of wicked men. Tongues are weapons. “They have sharpened their tongue like a serpent”” (27).⁵⁷ She arrives at the image of a snake through the 17th-century Baroque landscape painter Nicolas Poussin, whose show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, on view during Howe’s early period of bereavement, offered “solace and pardon” on her several visits (26). As with the Edwards family manuscripts, Howe does not explain what it is about these paintings that speaks so

⁵⁷ Edwards’s entry reads: “Some of the most poisonous kinds of serpents have their tongues for their weapon, wherewith they naturally sting others, and serpents commonly therefore with their tongues do represent the venomous nature of the tongues of wicked men, and how much the corruption of the heart flows out by that member, and in how venomous and deadly a manner it is put forth thereby. And therefore it is said of wicked men that the poison of asps is under their tongues, and the Apostle James says the tongue is full of deadly poison, Jas. 3.6, and that it is a fire, a world of iniquity, and setteth on fire the course of nature and is set on fire of hell, etc. And the Ps. 140.3: They have sharpened their tongue like a serpent” (69).

insistently to her private experience. As an implicit answer, however, she turns to T.J. Clark's *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*. Clark's "experiment" is the use of an intimate, diary form to engage Poussin's *Landscape with a Snake* and *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice*. The two paintings were on view during a residency Clark held at the Getty Museum, and his daily, open-ended encounters with them became the substance of his exploration of how our acts of looking constitute the objects we look at, which, in turn, constitute us.

Clark's experiment narrows Edwards's practice of attention extravagantly (to two canvases), possibly as a counter to the sensory overload that qualifies our own time. His commitment to tracking and writing his personal response speaks immediately to the elements of Howe's work that I have been exploring here. But even more than this, as the single quotation from *The Sight of Death* included in *THAT THIS* underscores, what is important to Howe about Clark's project is his simultaneous acknowledgement of the erroneous though enduring dream that our objects persist in some "original," real, and ongoing form outside of our attention to them. In this pervasive and romantic fiction, the painting – the archival scrap, the husband – *exists*, surrounded but unchanged, like Howe's fly enveloped in the cobweb of relations and associations:

In *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* [Clark] describes his process as 'writing pictures to death, which is what most writing on art inevitably ends up doing, to have always embedded in the *form* of the narrative the (false) suggestion that once upon a time, back there and in the present, at the end and the beginning, the picture lived everlastingly here and now. Among many other things *Landscape with a Snake* ... puts that fiction of visibility to the test.' (26-27, elision in Howe's quotation of Clark)

By both describing and performing it, Clark's experiment revels in, even as it rejects, that fiction, the (false) suggestion of the everlasting picture. Howe's experiment does the same. An object, so

wrapped, is as enduring as the fly in the web – the disaster of death figured but imagined to be eternally deferred.

When the “snake” next appears it has been transfigured by the context of the archive, Howe’s own regular scene of looking. She is in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library examining Hannah Edwards’ diary: “One or two stuffed oblong cloth containers, known in the trade as snakes, hold the volume open. Facing pages are held down flat with transparent plastic straps” (30). If the return to “snake” – the single explicit type from *Images or Shadows* included in *THAT THIS* – is intentional, that link goes unstated. In Edwards’s manuscript, the snake or serpent appears several times among the 212 entries, and through this recurrence, the type accrues a robust relational significance: “He that is bitten with a poisonous serpent is exceedingly inclined to sleep ... but if he sleeps in such circumstances, it is very mortal to him”; “Serpents gradually swallow many of those animals that are their prey; they are too big for them to swallow at once, but they draw them down by little and little, till they are wholly swallowed and are past recovery” (85, 124). These instances describe how we must remain awake and vigilant against the wiles of the Devil (that “old serpent”) and how Satan destroys good men by increments.

If we use the same method of reading to link Howe’s snakes, what holds the archival volume open – according to textual clues, Hannah Edwards’s description of a 1736 illness – is speech. And, indeed, Howe’s text *gives voice* to Hannah as it does to Jonathan and Sarah. Perhaps in calling our attention to the “snake” that holds Hannah’s “private writings” open (21), Howe is expressing anxiety about her project, which makes public, published use of intimate moments: here, Hannah declaring “... & when I was out of my head, & thought myself sick & lost, or at a River Side & among strangers that would not direct me home” (31). Worrying about this same issue a few years earlier in *Souls of the Labadie Tract*, Howe anticipates the serpent’s venomous tongue with an image of venomous teeth, linking her archival work to the ventriloquism I explored in the previous chapter:

“This may suggest vampirism because while I like to think I write for the dead, I also take my life as a poet from their lips, their vocalisms, their breath” (16). As Howe longs, self-consciously, for an everlasting “original,” province of the dead she likes to think she writes for, she also worries over the conditions under which that original would have to be kept – closed in an archive or trapped in a spider’s web. Returning to the scene of research in *Spontaneous Particulars*, she describes the Beinecke in terms that underscore this tension: “The structure displays and contains acquisitive violence, the rapacious ‘fetching’ involved in collecting, and, on the other hand, it radiates a sense of peace” (43).

Howe uses a “snake” because she is not permitted for reasons of preservation to touch Hannah’s personal and “raggedy scraps” (*Spontaneous* 45). It is, finally, in the sense of “touch,” that the archival and intimate registers of Howe’s worry and her art meet. Her books exhibit an abiding preoccupation with the status of documents – their feminization and relegation to dingy and/or inaccessible zones⁵⁸ – but it is only in her more recent works that she focuses on touching. Whereas, for example, “touch” only appears in *My Emily Dickinson* when used by Dickinson herself (“Whose Bonnets touch the firmament – / Whose sandals touch the town” and “Touch Shakespeare for me” (qtd. 18, 106)), it is a repeated motif in Howe’s writings on Peirce: Peirce’s concept of firstness combines with Howe’s experiences viewing his astonishing manuscripts to render the possibility or necessity of touch central. In *The Midnight*, she describes doing research for *Pierce-Arrow*: “Most of my contact with Peirce manuscripts has been via microfilm ... The original is untouchable, what I see before me, incorporeal” (136-37). In *Pierce-Arrow* itself, the idea of touching and the desire to touch link the experience of archival research and the art of poetry, providing the hinge for some of the collection’s most important lines: “The original remains perfect by being perfectly what it is because you can’t touch it” and “In poetry all things seem to touch so they are” (6, 13). It is only

⁵⁸ For one of many rich examples, see “Frame Structures”: “Documentary histories, registers, and catalogues, often lovingly gathered by local amateurs, tend to be filed, boxed, sheltered: shut up. What is it about *documents* that seems to require their relegation to the bedroom (a private place) as if they were bourgeois Victorian women?” (18).

through the dream of poetry that we may touch the deferred, non-existent, long-lost, or imagined original.

In *THAT THIS*, these ideas take on a radically personal urgency, the urgency of touching one's dead husband. I have been suggesting that a link between Howe's dead husband and the archival scrap is manifested and enacted by parataxis, through the cobweb metaphor, and within her preoccupation with originals. In *Spontaneous Particulars*, a self-described "collaged swan song to the old ways," Howe returns with a clarion call to the library: "The nature of archival research is in flux; *we need to see and touch objects and documents ...*" (9, emphasis added). But in *THAT THIS*, "touch" is reserved for what goes on – or fails to go on – between humans: "I've been reading some of W.H. Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*. One beautiful sentence about the way we all reach and reach but never touch" (18). Finally, Howe arrives at the terrifying question that is her collection's genesis, its raw heart and thesis: "Do we communicate in mirror languages, through some inherent sense of form, in every respect but touch? Do we ever know each other; know who we really are?" (34).

When Jonathan Edwards investigates, with awe and wonder, the "mystery" of how the spider constructs his seemingly impossible webs, he observes how the insect lets the wind carry its lighter-than-air silk: "And the spider immediately perceives it and feels when it touches, much after the same manner as the soul in the brain immediately perceives when any of those little nervous strings that proceed from it are in the least jarred by external things" (Insects 156). In Edwards's system, "feeling" and "touching" are essential to any being's navigation or knowledge of the world. The spider's silk makes visible the "little nervous strings" of relation with which we humans try to negotiate and comprehend both our intimate and ordinary surroundings, to make from them and about them systems of belief. In his Miscellany 782, "Ideas, Sense of the Heart, Spiritual Knowledge or Conviction. Faith," Edwards argues that all real knowledge must be accompanied by such feeling. Too often, he observes, our words for things do not call forth any accompanying sensation; "[h]ence

we do not stand at all on the clearness and distinctness of that external idea, that we thus make use of, but commonly it is very dim and transient, and exceedingly confused, and indistinct” (132). The spider “*feels* when it *touches*” – that is how it *knows*, that is how it may go on to move and to act. To thread this conviction back through Howe’s sensitive incorporation and use of it, that feeling becomes the necessary condition, as well, for us to “really know each other.” How can you feel without touch?

In my public conversation with Howe at the Graduate Center’s James Gallery, she began the question and answer portion of the evening by reading a passage from “Experience,” a text that is, among many other things, a seminal American performance of grief – Emerson’s response to his beloved five-year-old son’s death:

People grieve and bemoan themselves, but it is not half so bad with them as they say. There are moods in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth. But it turns out to be scene-painting and counterfeit. The only thing grief has taught me, is to know how shallow it is. That, like all the rest, plays about the surface, and never introduces me into the reality, for contact with which, we would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers. Was it Boscovich who found out that bodies never come in contact? Well, souls never touch their objects. An innavigable sea washes with silent waves between us and the things we aim at and converse with. (472-73)

When Howe read the passage aloud, she stopped at “scene-painting and counterfeit,” saying that though she couldn’t really articulate why, Emerson’s word choice felt especially brilliant to her there. I note now that Emerson is making a distinction between what is man-made, forged, or wrought and “reality,” which is nothing other than Howe’s same longed-for original. We use “counterfeit” commonly for the false and spurious, definitions that are responsive mostly to end results. But we

may also think of as counterfeit any writer's attempt to capture life – that which is “Made in imitation of that which is genuine” (OED). Probing her response to “Experience” in our talk, Howe critically considered such attempts at and instincts toward making, explaining, “I think one of the things he’s saying in ‘Experience’ is this is the worst thing that could happen to him yet he made a composition of it.” Which could be – as is of course her point – a description of *THAT THIS*.

Our relationship to “reality” or “truth” – even the reality and truth of the most devastating variety – is “counterfeit” because it is mediated; we cannot touch because “an innavigable sea” separates us from everything around us and from each other. Of the attempt not so much to ford as to give ourselves up to the motion and direction of this sea between us through writing, Howe continued: “There’s that awful sort of sense of counterfeit but at the same time, words are the only thing that are going to *carry you across*.” “I go to libraries because they are the ocean,” Howe writes in *The Birth-mark*, anticipating these metaphors, showing the library – as ocean – to be the place where connection and feeling become possible and representing archival work as personal work (18). When Emerson describes our objects across the sea as things we “aim at,” it calls forth once more the spider’s action as he lets fly his silk, re-tracing and making indelible the intertextual echo between these different efforts of knowing and communicating through feeling. Howe’s text, like Edwards’s and like Emerson’s, is both a vessel cast into and a silk strung across the windy, tumultuous, *particular* abyss. However it travels, it arrives by being open to the weather, by feeling when it touches.

The question of whether or not we can ever know each other is also brought to the fore in the circumstances surrounding the writing and publication of Muriel Rukeyser’s 1965 book *The Orgy*. I use the simple word “book” here because this is the term that Rukeyser preferred. In an exchange so perfectly representative of the readerly challenges faced by Rukeyser’s category-defying works as

to seem apocryphal, she wrote a letter that appeared in the June 3, 1965, issue of *The New York Review of Books*, protesting the magazine's classification and subsequent dismissal of *The Orgy* as a novel:

The Orgy is not a novel, and I hate the non-word "non-fiction." I have written other work grounded in fact: poems, biographies, films. *The Orgy* is entirely factual – even the dolphin – except that I drank the Irish before and after Puck Fair, which I was reporting on assignment for a documentary film director. *The Orgy* is a book – whatever happened to that category? – and it is a pity your reviewer did not read it as a book.

Like many responses to *The Orgy* – and there are many: Rukeyser's papers in the Library of Congress are filled with clippings from dailies and weeklies, a wealth of response in a range of venues that would be unthinkable today – Bernard Bergonzi's in the *NYRB* focuses on the text's brief introductory disclaimer. The page preceding Rukeyser's narrative reads, "*The goat is real; Puck Fair is real; the orgy is real. All the characters and the acts of this book, however, are—of course—a free fantasy on the event.*" It is the only passage from the book that Bergonzi reads closely, and he does so in order to bolster first his confession that "it is a book whose ambiguous status makes me very uncertain about how to handle it," and then to support his conclusion, that Rukeyser, "assuredly, is playing both ends against the middle in fine style." Ironically, as Rukeyser goes on to explain in her letter, the disclaimer is the only portion of her book for which she is not responsible.

The general rationale for such an addition, as Rukeyser snidely points out, should be obvious to any reader and at the very least to "any lawyer." But the concrete impetus for this particular disclaimer concerns this problem of whether we can know others – in this case the handful of others whose likenesses appear in Rukeyser's text. Before I pursue these individuals, it is necessary to clarify some facts about the book. The occasion for and of *The Orgy* is Puck Fair, a pagan festival *cum* horse

and cattle sale held yearly in Killorglin, County Kerry, Ireland, during which a horned goat (“Puck”) is caught from the surrounding hills, raised on a scaffold and crowned “the only King of Ireland.” Puck presides over the Fair’s three-day duration. Margaret A. Murray – in a piece excerpted at the end of Rukeyser’s original edition – calls the Fair “[t]he most interesting modern survival of the Horned God” (43). Though largely a commercial event by the mid 20th-century, important mythological ties and overtones persist as Murray’s description attests. Rukeyser attended the Fair in the summer of 1958 to do research for a film she planned to make with the British documentary filmmaker Paul Rotha. Rotha’s failure to meet Rukeyser in Ireland is documented in their correspondence as well as in the text that emerges, in which he is described by name: “Perhaps Paul will still arrive in time, although I very much doubt it ... Let him bring his cameras, I am not going to be an American woman carrying a camera. I have a small blue notebook that will fit in my pocket, or in a pocket of my bag” (6-7). Thus, instead of a filmic treatment of Rukeyser’s days in Killorglin, we have *The Orgy*.

For this project, Rukeyser rejected the camera (the visual image) for the notebook (language), for good as it turns out; though, as in the case of her work on Houdini, she continued long after the *The Orgy*’s publication to imagine and try to find support for approaches to the subject using the lenses offered by different media.⁵⁹ The choice of mode of documentation (camera vs. notebook here) – its effect on our experiences and the particular ways in which we make sense of them – relates to Rukeyser’s ongoing interrogation of forms of art and structures of knowledge. Indeed, *The Orgy* begins with a characteristic, characteristically open-ended, juxtaposition of fact and form, experience and articulation. Rukeyser’s central question is cast in the very first sentences as interruption:

⁵⁹ Among her papers in the Library of Congress is a preliminary film treatment for her book written by Jim Doyle and sent to Rukeyser on August 3, 1977. I have been unable to find evidence for the final severing of her working relationship with Paul Rotha on the project. (LOC II:23 folder 1).

I came to that coast. –

But what kind of a book is this?

What follows are three sections, one for each day of the festival – Gathering Day, The Day of the Fair, and Scattering Day – made up of brief chapters that intermingle narration of the fair’s events; impressionistic description; private reverie; facts about county Kerry; dreams; dialogue; passages of quotation from psychoanalyst Jonathan Hanaghan’s *Society, Evolution & Revelation*; some politically charged encounters with tinkers (Rukeyser’s preferred term for Travellers, the itinerant Irish ethnic group) and I.R.A. affiliates; and a small dose of interpersonal intrigue consisting primarily of flirtation. But Rukeyser’s question – what kind of a book is this? – also a unifying question of this dissertation, raises some other questions that must be attended to immediately if we are to talk about it at all.

Though Rukeyser preferred the broad category of “book,” the *kind* of book unavoidably determines, among other things, the critical conventions a writer engaging this piece of literature follows, a fact that is not merely procedural but has enormous implications for the politics of reading. Writing about a work of fiction, one refers to its narrator as “the narrator,” or by a name explicitly provided in the text itself; in the case of autobiography, one uses the last name of the author. The category of “free fantasy,” as articulated in the book’s introductory material, provides markedly less guidance for naming. And after the rash of confused criticism *The Orgy* first received, Rukeyser seems to have turned more and more against the phrase’s un-generative ambiguity: as we have seen it was frequently this stumbling block that forestalled engagement with the text following. In a letter that provides the most insightful reading of *The Orgy* I have encountered, Rukeyser’s former student Elaine Edelman considers the available options: “I think the non-fiction aspect of it should be emphasized ... don’t let them call it a fantasy. ... Has Capote totally possessed the

category ‘non-fiction novel’? Can you do something with the ‘Autobiography’ category? ... the term ‘record’?” (LOC I:22 folder 3).⁶⁰

One of the most important legacies of the poststructuralist moment is the undoing of the thrall of authorial intention, and here we must once more grapple with the question, “what matter who’s speaking,” as it accompanies the question of whether it matters how Rukeyser intended the category or form. According to postmodern fields of theoretical interrogation, “whatever counts for reality at a given moment is to be regarded as a heavily mediated sociolinguistic construct rather than a spontaneous experience” (Nichols 3). By this conviction, regardless of its status, *The Oryg*, like Rukeyser herself, is simply a function of language and must be treated as such. What matter what I call the narrator? Her function is narration. But even more than in the case of Howe, whose work has been productively, if not conclusively, examined through poststructural lenses, what is complicated or interesting about Rukeyser’s project chafes against or simply disappears beneath that same glass. Though not examined by Miriam Nichols in *Radical Affections*, Rukeyser’s work seems to me to be an integral node in “the living countertradition” of the projective constellation she traces (1). Articulating the limitations of postmodern theoretical approaches in explicating this countertradition, Nichols argues: “These various ways of reading cultural works and framing the world offer needed critiques of unsustainable claims to universality and correctives to the blindnesses experience can give rise to because it *is* situated, but none of them offer [*sic*] access to the world as it must be *undergone* as opposed to the world as it can be *known*” (Nichols 4). Whatever else it is, *The Oryg* is the document of an undergoing.

⁶⁰ I am grateful to Jan Heller Levi for suggesting that the writer of these notes, identified on the document simply as “lanie,” might be Rukeyser’s former student Elaine Edelman. Edelman has become a thoughtful interlocutor about this text, continuing via email correspondence her interrogation of the book’s form. She points out that Rukeyser published *The Oryg* in the precise moment the “New Journalists” were “creating ‘subjective’ journalism.” Though Rukeyser’s text is contemporaneous with this movement – Tom Wolfe’s *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* was published in 1965 and Joan Didion’s *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* in 1968 – it is never discussed under this rubric, another possible future direction for interpretation and contextualization.

How do I signal in my word choice both an awareness of the correctives offered by the death of the author as well as an openness to this author's particular project of documenting an undergoing? How do I draw out and not eliminate the tension between constructed text and lived, felt life that Rukeyser subtly probes? One potential solution – at least as far as describing *The Orgy's* narrator is concerned – resides within the text. We learn just pages from the end, through an irruption of dialogue, that her name, like the author's, is Muriel: "Owen puts his head around the door, and the moment cracks. 'Ah!' he barks sharply. 'Muriel! Just a word'" (129). To call the narrator Muriel, then, might be to have it both ways – maintaining a connection to the real with an opening to an acknowledgment of constructedness: Muriel and Muriel both born simultaneously with the text.

The Orgy is not Rukeyser's only text in which "Muriel" appears. In negotiating related questions, Laura Passin points to the two-line poem "Not to Be Printed, Not to Be Said, Not to Be Thought," which reads in its entirety, "I'd rather be Muriel / than be dead and be Ariel" (Poems 554). Passin reads Rukeyser's use of "Muriel" as a choice in favor of lived experience and against mythologization, an active continuation of her famous line "No more masks! No more mythologies!" and the regret that precedes it: "when I wrote of the god, / fragmented, exiled from himself, his life, the love gone down with song / it was myself, split open, unable to speak, in exile from myself" (Poems 413). In choosing to mend the split with the self, it follows, Rukeyser chooses "Muriel." But as Passin points out, she doesn't choose the same for Sylvia Plath, whose tragic end is subsumed under the title of her posthumous book. Where Passin sees disturbing ambivalence in Rukeyser's lopsided scale, I see a more complicated negotiation. As the devastating rhyme underscores sonically, "Muriel" is actually not so different from "Ariel." A woman author's first name, even with its implied immediacy and informality, is its own kind of myth-making. It is after all

as “Muriel” (not as “Rukeyser”) that the “poetess” inhabited her most mythic role, that of “mother of us all.” Muriel for Rukeyser and Rukeyser for Muriel: i for I and I for i.

This problem of naming and calling extends, in *The Orgy*, beyond Muriel, bleeding into the question of whether we can “really know” anyone. What we call them, it seems obvious, depends on how and whether we know them. “They,” in this case, are the three individuals, strangers until the first day of the festival, who replace Paul Rotha as Fair companions. In *The Orgy*, Nicholas Hilliard is that “mythological beast,” an English psychoanalyst, practicing in Dublin; Liadain Hilliard is his “jaunty,” Irish wife – “Liadain’s Irish, of course” Nicholas announces upon their introduction, “That’s the marriage that’ll save us” – mother of their five children (21). The third member of the group – ““And Mr. Chris Dermot!’ said Katy, remembering in time” – though present for some important scenes, is something of an accessory, as his textual introduction makes evident (20).

The couple that *Rukeyser* met in Ireland in the summer of 1958 was Rupert and Eithne Strong. Like Nicholas Hilliard, Rupert Strong was a well-known, Dublin-based British analyst, a member of Jonathan Hanaghan’s Irish Psychoanalytical Society (hence the occasion for the passages from Hanaghan’s work), an affiliation that is not disguised in *The Orgy*. Eithne Strong was, herself, a well-known, primarily Irish-language poet, publishing the bulk of her work after that fateful August: between the 1960s and her death in 1999. Though *The Orgy*’s Liadain is not identified as a poet, she shares her name with a 7th-century Irish poet of legend, remembered in the 9th-century tragic love story *Liadain and Curithir*. Liadain is, as Heather Feldmeth Larson points out in “The Veiled Poet: *Líadain and Curithir* and the Role of the Woman-Poet,” “the *only* woman-poet who is the subject of a tale” in medieval Irish literature (264, emphasis added). The strange story, in which the two poets’ love is doomed by both religion (at some point unbeknownst to Curithir, Liadain “takes the veil”) and writing (she will not marry Curithir until she finishes her poetry tour), ends with Liadain’s tragic

death. It is as though the woman-poet's life cannot encompass all of these registers of belief and activity at once: the attempted negotiation destroys her living self and turns her into narrative.

Like Pyramus and Thisbe in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Liadain and Curithir must speak "through the wall" (qtd in Larson 265). Given the choice between seeing each other and talking, Curithir chooses the later. In *THAT THIS*, Howe turns to Pyramus and Thisbe – as they are painted into *Landscape with a Storm* by Poussin – as a tragic example of even the most intense love's necessary mediation, of "the narrative of love turning to misfortune" (27) invading the contemplation of nature. But where Howe's text grapples with the problem of reaching and not touching, the possibility of not-knowing *within* the intimacy a marriage, Rukeyser looks in from outside. Still, the two poets circle remarkably similar ground. Howe writes: "This still eye reflects a neutral 'you' that is me; and yet secret. Who can hold such mirroring cheap? It's a vital aspect of marriage and deep friendship" (28). Rukeyser witnesses a mirror-exchange between Nicholas and Liadain; though she is not reflected, she recognizes that vital negotiation: "The glass of the car gave him sight forward and back, windshield of perception, mirror of memory, and it was very tense between him and his wife. He knew, as the married know" (77). In a sheath of notes for *The Orgy*, Rukeyser highlights "marriage" as representing of one her text's three central registers of relation: "The fair (orgy) (people in release) / The marriage (people related) / The animal(s) (children)" (LOC I:30 folder 2).

Liadain's name reverberates with significance, signaling her importance and connection to Rukeyser via myth and the concrete realities of the working woman-poet, as well as her difference from Rukeyser in the particular relation represented by marriage. These resonances – the *fact* of these resonances – erupt into *The Orgy*. In a moment of crisis in which her emotional response to the experience slams up against the potential of art, the narrator is moved to ask about Liadain's name:

Nicholas was saying to me, ‘And you think you can bring in movie people! Or what? Write about it? The love, the shouting, the frustration? The sordid commercial breakdown of an ancient wildness?’

What did I answer him? No, I thought. I can do nothing with it, nothing with my own storm of feeling, or my speechlessness. Or my own desire that looks at him, looks at Chris, looks at the wife of the gynecologist with her well-cut cheeks, opening her mouth for another drink of Power’s down the bar.

What is the meaning of ‘Liadain’?

‘What does ‘Liadain’—What is that name?’ I asked.

Nicholas hooted. He took my arm. ‘I’m driving her down to Knocknadober,’ he said. ‘Do you want to go to the Stream of Chastisement?’ I had no idea what he was talking about; the words fell away as I heard them.” (86-87)

This important passage moves from the Fair to Rukeyser’s desire to the Irish myth of the famed female poet: a microcosm of the elements of the whole as they are put into relation and negotiation. The first time the question appears – “What is the meaning of ‘Liadain’” – it is unspoken, internal. It is a particularly strange moment if we are reading *The Orgy* as fact, because it is Rukeyser, our author, our potential speaker, who has *chosen* this name. The second, spoken version of the question, cut-off and almost stuttered, is strange as well: “What *does* ‘Liadain,’” *mean* we insert, though Rukeyser doesn’t include the word. Her exclusion forces us to think of the name as a kind of action – a doing as opposed to a being. “What is that name?” she finishes, refusing, still, notably, to frame her question in the explicit terms of definition.

The crisis escalates, with the narrator leaving her companions in a fugue and declaring, “It was my death I was facing, through weakness, through inability to act, through ignorance. I was

completely inadequate to deal with what was going through me” (87). When she is finally calmed and reunited with her friends, the name’s significance returns as her most urgent concern:

In Nicholas’ car – What’s Liadain? I asked.

You have no right to speak of Kerry and not know, he said, in a generous rasping voice, and told me. That is the name of the great woman-poet of Kerry. (89)

Knowing the story of Liadain and Curithir, we can move between the realms the citation invokes, experiencing how the mythological and historical significance of this identity that Rukeyser has chosen for her character relates immediately to her own difficulty navigating experience and desire, art-making and belief. Nicholas’ answer also speaks to the tension between the intimate and historical or factual aspects of Rukeyser’s project, in particular to the kind of authority each requires: she has “no right to speak of Kerry and not know” about its legendary female poet. How much *else* do we need to know in order to know others or, for that matter, to understand texts? From whence does creative or scholarly authority derive? Arrived at through different means, this is a remarkably similar assertion about the construction and significance of selves to the one Howe insists upon in *The Liberties*. Through her deployment of Liadain’s name, Rukeyser suggests that the pursuit or understanding of individuals requires a negotiation of the conflicting activities of identifying source materials, inquiring into the various systems from which they are pulled, and continually interpreting and re-connecting to them in the present. The personal register shadows, follows, precedes – cannot be pulled from the scholarly one.

As mythical and historical woman poet, the character of Liadain is linked to narrator and author. But it is because of Rupert Strong – more specifically, Strong’s response to his characterization by Rukeyser – that he and Eithne required new names at all. In June of 1964, Strong replied by letter to a package from Rukeyser containing two books of her poems and a manuscript of *The Orgy*. His letter purports to be a critique of the manuscript on literary grounds. It is, in fact, a

virtuoso performance of the dizzying entanglements between literary and personal response, each editorial suggestion bleeding into protest of another sort. Here is a lengthy portion, which illustrates his cresting emotion:

As regards the manuscript 'The Orgy' – which you will want to hear about first: I do not think this can be published in its present form. I think it falls far below your potentials as a writer. Certainly the Eithne, Stephen and Rupert of the journey through Puck Fair are utterly unlike any of us in character. I am not the sardonic type of person you make me out to be at all. I think it is too long, that the subject matter is too trivial, that the dialogue is weak and not living, that you would have done better perhaps to have made a poem or two out of some of the material, that it is neither a good description of the Puck Fair – nor does it provide any adequate insight into the symbolism or hidden meaning of such a spectacle ... The dialogue and characterization seems [*sic*] to me to be the weakest parts. I think you could have got something out of it but have missed it as far as we are concerned. Therefore it could not be published using our names. I am truly sorry – also that in our 4 days together we did not get through to you better than that. It needs to be condensed, tightened up – the dialogue re-written, poetry and life breathed into it – is it worth doing – so much work and labour – for what? Leave us out of it – and then it is up to yourself. (LOC II:6 folder 8)

"I am not the sardonic type of person" transitions immediately to "I think it is too long"; "I am truly sorry ... we did not get through to you better than that" to "It needs to be condensed." No doubt the psychoanalyst would have much to say about the battle between emotion and objectivity waged in the construction of this note. Strong's suggestion that Rukeyser salvage "a poem or two out of the material" is remarkably like her one-time editor Pascal Covici's response to *Savage Coast*, Rukeyser's

first attempt at a long-form prose text melding fiction and autobiographical experience. As editor Rowena Kennedy-Epstein narrates in her introduction to the 2013 Feminist Press edition, “Rukeyser was strongly encouraged to abandon the novel for a ‘brief impressionistic sketch’ of her experience in Spain and to continue working on her poetry” – personal impression being considered, no doubt, more properly the material for the “gender-appropriate” lyric (x).

By Strong’s logic, Rukeyser’s failure as a writer consists in a failure to see him and therefore to write him as he wished to be seen by others. The fact that the Strong’s did not sufficiently “get through” to Rukeyser, that she did not know them better – this crisis of intimate knowledge – means a crisis of category for Rukeyser’s book, became a public crisis. In Edelman’s “notes on *THE ORGY*,” she cites Strong’s response as her occasion for brainstorming “the form”: “(but I remember what you said about the English analyst – a refusal on his part that seems terribly strange and twisted to me: obviously he must have reacted to the extreme clarity of the book – which, not being harsh on him in the least, must have omitted the idealized thing people want: i.e. the people in the book are too real, and ‘most people cannot stand very much reality’)” (LOC I:22 folder 3).

The Orgy’s crisis of category is not something that may be simply explained away through biographical fact; it would be insufficient to determine that *The Orgy* could not be called “non-fiction” because Rupert Strong objected to his characterization, and to leave it at that. This fact might explain the publisher’s disclaimer, but it does not encompass the book that follows, a book in which, to pause on just one component of its complex scaffolding, the mythological resonance of Ireland’s great woman poet is interwoven with the identity of a significant character. Stopping at this discovery about Rupert Strong would be to make the same mistake those early reviewers made. No: The crisis itself is embedded in the subject matter, in the effort, of the book. That subject and that effort reside in the tension between experience, artistic creation, and knowledge (as the book’s first two lines announce), or, perhaps more accurately, in the truth of a life lived at their intersection. “[I]t

reads as an experience,” wrote Edelman to her teacher, “The main tension – the main overstructure of the action – seems to me to be between the ‘I’ and the events, people, landscapes in which or thru which ‘I’ moves: a dialectic between the self-consciously awake ‘I’ who is aware of herself to be struggling to shape received material into perceived – and the matter, the substance, of what she is moving thru and struggling with.” *The Orgy* is the document of its *own* undergoing; it is a struggle to see, to shape experience into an act of seeing, the prerequisite of making.

Rukeyser’s response to Strong’s letter is surprising because she doesn’t take his (personal) criticism *personally*. Though Strong tangles intimate with literary response, Rukeyser – whose ego might easily be wrapped up in this risky, intimate book that has so much of Muriel in it – maintains a clear-headed separation. She expresses security regarding the foundation of their relationship, beginning, “Your letter was extremely moving to receive: I believe in what you say of the Fair and its meanings, and of the meeting that was central to what was found.” Then she addresses his practical concerns, promising that she will change the Strong’s names and those of related characters – anything needed to cloak this particular register of the actual. Finally she turns to a more substantive reaction. Rukeyser is saddened not so much by Strong’s accuracy or mistakenness, but by what he has missed. Her letter suggests that she will not see her book as a failure on Strong’s terms, as such an idea of failure has little to do with her project. She will not attempt to rewrite her faulty perception in order to try and approach a more “objective” reality, a reality that seamlessly encompasses, also, Strong’s version of himself. Instead she will write the faultiness, the failure – which is nothing other than the *particularity* of her perception – into the text. This is, of course, the point. What she learns from Strong’s response is that she must make that position even more explicit. She tells him: “In the long passage not written when I sent the manuscript to you, my limitations as I see them – and as you see them – are set out. Part of what you gave me was to let me see them, in the context of that ruin of wildness and the splendor of the meeting” (LOC II:6 folder

8). Though the draft Rukeyser sent Strong is not included in the archive along with their correspondence, it seems reasonable to imagine that this passage Rukeyser refers to is the one preceding the narrator's first query about Liadain's significance (Nicholas heckling her, "And you think you can bring in movie people! Or what? Write about it?" and her response, "No, I thought. I can do nothing with it, nothing with my own storm of feeling, or my speechlessness"). Strong helped Rukeyser not to so much to see *him*, but to see herself seeing. He helped highlight the specificity of the place from which she wrote, as well as a literary, historical, and mythological context for that position.

To probe the significance of intimate experience in Susan Howe's work, to trace an alternative artistic and intellectual lineage for her practice of the personal, it is necessary to begin from a book, like *THAT THIS*, in which the affective and intellectual resonances of the autobiographical are insisted upon, and to insist upon them alongside Howe. But with Rukeyser, perceiving and taking seriously the intimate elements of her writing has never been the problem – as a reviewer for *TIME* magazine noticed of *The Oryg*, "The author's reporting of the color and confusion of this Celtic barcarolle is vivid and poetically evocative, but it is interrupted by personal references that seem indulgent." The greater critical difficulties have been in trying to reconcile these "indulgent" personal elements with the intellectual, historical, or public stakes and contexts she imagines; attempting to understand how she puts the personal to work in texts that are stubbornly *not* lyric poems (though she writes them "as a poet"); and working to incorporate those personal elements into a larger and, therefore, more fitting description of her project. In the case of both writers these challenges mean interrogating how the self engages something larger than the self, but how it is not rendered smaller or less significant in that process; how the self is made, instead,

meaningful through that act of relation and then embodied through the formal, textual negotiation of relationship making and tracing.

One thing to interrogate further, then, is how *The Orgy* is about anything *other* than Rukeyser's intimate experience. The pieces that accompanied the original, 1965 printing of the book – excerpts of “The Horned God” and John Millington Synge's “In West Kerry, which includes John Purcell's “A New Song on the Great Puck Fair” – provide guidance toward imagining this broader scope. As Amy Hildreth Chen points out, the exclusion of these texts from the necessary and laudable 1997 Paris Press reissue obscures *The Orgy*'s situation “in terms of Irish legend.” Further, the replacement of Rukeyser's intertexts with Sharon Olds's preface skews the balance of Rukeyser's construction, floodlighting her evocative personal disclosures, her experiential merging and melding, her vatic ambition, without, also, highlighting the corresponding contextualization, the historical and mythical knowledge-building and documentary impulse – obscuring this twinning of the personal and the public which is so central to Rukeyser's work. Though Olds suggests the scope of Rukeyser's ambition – “She wants, in one short book, to answer basic questions about war and sex, female and male, American and Irish, Jew and Gentile, artist and analyst, joy and depression, the fear of and the lust for people, the short life and the long art, the ordinary and sublime, shit and the sacred individual, happenstance and cause, purposiveness and stymied momentum” (xii) – her capacious framing glosses over the specificity of Rukeyser's inquiry, and therefore its impact.

The only contemporary scholarly engagement with *The Orgy* is Jack Morgan's chapter “The Celtic Carnavalesque and Muriel Rukeyser's Irish Journey of Passion and Transformation” in *New World Irish*, his meandering and admittedly partial study of American and Irish “interinvolvement” in the 19th and 20th centuries (which, incidentally, begins with an epigraph from Howe: “Clairvoyant Ireland / Eras and eras encircled by sea / The barrows of my ancestors have spilled their bones / Across the singing ear in hear of shell”) (xii). Rooting his discussion in both the history of Irish

carnivals and Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque (as expounded in *Rabelais and His World*, published three years after *The Orgy*), Morgan provides important context for the personal dimensions of Rukeyser's experiment. He illustrates the extent to which carnival life is, by definition, "outside the habitual order" for *all* participants, not just tourists, and thus represents the emergent possibilities and "liberating energy" of a "redefined life of bodiliness," an opportunity for the *collective* slipping out of the bonds of official identity and definition (209, 210). Rukeyser's experience is, by these descriptions, a particularly *Irish* transformation, one experienced within a community – not incidental to Puck Fair but *of* it. Morgan also illustrates how in Ireland, in particular, such revelry has always been linked to commerce: the livestock market providing the "impure" impetus for the gathering as well as its fragrant atmosphere of ubiquitous animal waste.

Because of this sordidness and commercialism – because of the ways in which these intermingle to constitute the actual ground on which the festival takes place (a ground, that is, covered in shit) – *The Orgy*'s narrator faces multiple attempts to dissuade her from participation. Killorglin is "[a]n uninviting little market town," her guidebook tells her; "You'll forgive me if I can't see why you want to go to Puck Fair," "You won't like it. It's so materialistic. It's all about the drinking," her various Irish guides and acquaintances warn and grumble (4, 9). These warnings – the elements within these warnings suggestive of Rukeyser's thrall to sensationalism or at least to facilely materialist entertainment – are reminiscent of ambivalence concerning her Houdini project, in particular Eric Bentley's assertion, "I find it hard to see Houdini's trickery as a symbol of the higher human impulses that you try to make it symbolize" (LOC I:36 folder 4). Once more with her interest in the Fair, Rukeyser's impulse toward connection – her search for "higher human impulses" in the ordinary and vulgar – is imagined to be the work of an overly enthusiastic symbolic imagination. This is a possibility she makes ample room for within her own text: "I suppose you

think the goat is a symbol?” an Irish filmmaker sputters to Nicholas in his single brief scene, “The goat’s no symbol” (114).

As in her incorporation of Bentley’s criticism directly into the dialogue of *Houdini*, Rukeyser weaves into *The Orgy* self-awareness about her desire for symbols and the attendant potential for mistaking myth and mere commerce. In a caricature of sensual response, the narrator – standing below the just-crowned goat who has “begun to take on his new life” – catches sight of a truck painted with a phoenix: “I feel myself start, hard against Hilliard’s arm, and the points of my breasts stand up: I can see the big word below the red creature. It says PHOENIX, below the painted bird. It is all there: king, queen, and resurrection” (38). The bird’s symbolic potential turns the narrator on. But then the truck “swerves,” revealing its bird to be nothing other than the logo for Phoenix Ale: a brand of beer, the ultimate punch-line. The narrator “laugh[s] at [her]self,” though not, it seems, in embarrassment (39). Rukeyser’s exaggerated openness is the cause and substance of this mistake. But not only does she admit to it, writing it into her narrative, she refuses, even when corrected, to disavow it: the chapter concludes, “[T]he phoenix is still there, red and eternal” (39). We bring our myths to our advertising – the symbol-seeking impulse need not be “high” to be significant. Rukeyser concludes her *NYRB* apologia, “There seemed to me to be a certain value in recording the personal response to the invasion of myth, to which each of us at Puck Fair reacted in accordance with his own nature.”

In the earliest years of the 20th century, the Irish Literary Revival playwright J.M. Synge also attended Puck Fair, reacting according to *his* own nature. His friend W.B. Yeats had directed him toward the poor, rural countryside of Ireland, as Yeats recollects, urging: “Give up Paris. ... Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression” (qtd. in “Synge”). Through immersion in the life of the Islands and, later, travels in Wicklow, West Kerry, and Connemara, Synge found both an idiom and a subject for that

expression. More than his plays, his posthumously published travel writings are an important precursor for *The Orgy*, linking detailed, intimate, accurate observation of peasant life, an awareness and interrogation and of his own position, and a willingness to be moved, to *feel* significance. He wanders through the landscape, from interaction to interaction, writing an impressionistic, elliptical prose that shares much with Rukeyser's. Observing a group of men and women on their way to a countryside chapel, he muses: "This procession along the olive bogs, between the mountains and the sea, on this grey day of autumn seemed to wring me with the pang of emotion one meets everywhere in Ireland – an emotion that is partly local and patriotic, and partly a share of the desolation that is mixed everywhere with the supreme beauty of the world" (240).

Rukeyser suggests Synge as an interlocutor both through her reproduction in the book's first edition of a brief passage from his "In West Kerry" as well as in the action of *The Orgy* itself. Like Liadain the poet, Synge operates as legend: as a writer he is not just a man but a character in the creation of the ongoing myth of the place and the event, part of the history of encounter and attempted understanding in which the locals Rukeyser meets are invested. Driving the narrator home late on the Fair's first night, Kevin Foley, keeper of the railroad crossing, introduces Synge in this way: 'You speak of the writings,' he said. 'My dad told me of one who stayed at Mountain Stage, at Philly Harris,' long ago. Eyes of gentleness, a down-drooping moustache. He made plays and listened to stories. He went to Puck Fair one year, though he came later in the summer, the other Kerry times. Synge, his name was.'" (56). Rukeyser attends to this literary tradition as a component of her experience. She learns "the dead Kerry poets" and writers in order to earn the right to speak herself, in order to become part of this ongoing life and tradition (88).

Synge, too, is frequently warned away from participating in some of the more sordid aspects of local Irish entertainment. In "In West Kerry" he considers attending a sporting event in nearby Ballyferriter, but his host cautions, "you'd do better to stay quiet in this place where you are; the

men will be all drunk coming back, fighting and kicking in the canoes, and a man the like of you, who aren't used to us, would be frightened" (251). Like Rukeyser, Synge understands his position to be that of an outside observer. Also like her, he interrogates, self-consciously, the intensity of his desire for more immediate connection: "Yet I know even while I was there I was an interloper only, a refugee in a garden between four seas. It is curious I have a jealousy for that Island – the whole island and its people – like the jealousy of men in love" (258). Such awareness is personal – it is *about* Synge or *about* Rukeyser, more than it is about county Kerry or its people, outside of what they are understood to represent. Rukeyser and Synge seem to know this as well as their readers do. The ways in which they respect but also manage to overcome this distance – how it is negotiated, reflected upon, and enacted in their texts – is where and how their public and private aspects and purposes meet.

When Rukeyser's local acquaintances warn her away from attending Puck Fair it is not because *they* are judging it, it is because they do not think *she* will understand. They do not endorse her ability to see them or her authority to write them. This implication is made clear in a cameo by the actual Irish writer Bryan MacMahon, who refuses, pointblank, to meet the narrator: his reason, as conveyed by the character Chris, is that she is "just another American to say things derogatory to the Irish people" (46). But it is through Rukeyser's complex perception of relations (her relations to the people of the town as well as to the lineage of authors she traces) and of authority (a kind of authority foreshadowed in her correspondence with Strong, in which she doesn't assert that she got his character right, but she also doesn't back down from the legitimacy of her textual description of him) that finally work in concert to grant her access.

Throughout the first dozen pages of the narrative, attempts to keep the narrator away from the Fair are interwoven with her repeated admissions of ignorance: the narrator is "Alone, lit up by newness, ignorant"; "I wanted to be open to it; I had ignorance" (3, 5). It is precisely this ignorance,

more specifically Rukeyser's understanding of ignorance as a basis for openness, that creates an avenue for potential access and relation. Once they believe Rukeyser's protestations, the people of Kerry are willing, literally, to let her in:

She knows she's ignorant, said Owen. That's a change, isn't it, Katy?

I'd like to use my ignorance.

They looked at me. Well, said Katy Evans, I don't have a thing. But you'll be heading back, will you, after a look at Killorglin? Then stop here on your way to the ferry, and have a cup of tea or something with me. (13)

Across her work, Rukeyser's rejection of the closed, inaccessible circuits of specialized authority translates into an avid curiosity about a range of experiences and an intellectual approach predicated on the humility of accepting both the specificity and the limitations of her own human position. By rejecting the assumptions of the expert but being at the same time radically open to knowledge, Rukeyser moves from particular to general, expands the limits of her self. In order to do this she must accept and convey her ignorance and then construct an alternative groundwork for permission in presumption.

This is the precise dynamic at work in *Willard Gibbs*. A poet, not a scientist, Rukeyser had no authority to consider Gibbs's achievement and legacy; a Jewish American, she also had no claim to an understanding of Irish history, myth, and the actual exigencies of daily peasant life. However it was *as a poet* and *as a woman* – as Muriel Rukeyser – that she attempted, *presumed*, to write the significance of the scientist's life. As a poet, a woman, and an American – not just as an outsider, but, again, as Muriel Rukeyser – she attempted and presumed, also, to write the orgiastic significance of the pagan Fair. Integral to the structure of *Willard Gibbs* is the risk and the awareness of risk behind its acts of analogy. Such risk is present, as well, in *The Orgy*. Ignorance isn't *only* openness, of course, it is also the want of knowledge: "I know nothing of this country," the narrator admits more

than halfway through (86). Rukeyser acknowledges her ignorance as potential even as she struggles against its real, dangerous obscuring effects: she has “no right to speak of Kerry and not know,” for example, about the story of Liadain. But there are other things she struggles and largely fails to know, as well – things with more obvious worldly consequences than the mistaking of beer ads for myths. She doesn’t wholly understand the social context in which the tinkers move, for example, giving too many valuable coins to the tinker children and conflating them with gypsies; she encounters individuals seeking “help for the families of the I.R.A. prisoners” with a similarly emotional but uninformed response (63). And, too, Puck Fair generates real violence: bloody group fights, a tinker woman violently kicked, a “lying-down man, flung down as if from a height and surely dead; the mistreated vicious horse held by four men, frothing, trembling, his quarters twitching” (121). The book is Rukeyser’s particular effort to see all of this, to experience, to learn, and to know. She very well may fail despite her efforts. Strong certainly thought she had failed, and she herself acknowledges the possibility. But, again, rich failures were much more interesting and urgent to her than the possibilities of narrow success.

Rukeyser doesn’t make reference to *Willard Gibbs* within *The Orgy*, but she does describe another experience researching a book for which she has no institutional or disciplinary endorsement. In recounting this narrative, she puts forward her ordinary humanity, in particular the fact that she is a parent, as an alternative foundation for the granting of authority. She describes being “on the north of Vancouver Island with my small son, not yet two years old; on the track of Franz Boas,” the “Father of American Anthropology” about whom she worked for years on an ultimately uncompleted and unpublished biography:

The informant said to me, It is good that you brought your child with you; you know, none of these white scientists bring any family with them ... no children, nothing; they just appear here, one white man, another white man, asking us silly

questions and mispronouncing. You know what our chief amusement in the summer at Port Hardy is? Telling lies to white scientists. (15, ellipses in original)

Research, Rukeyser and Howe repeatedly show us, is not just borne from our loves and our griefs, it is also made possible because of them. Rukeyser seems to be reminding herself as much as she is reminding us of her belief in this foundation. This memory of this research trip bolsters the narrator as she courts her local guides, attempting to find the human way in to this new experience: “I thought of what I had seen in the train, and of my son and the men and women I loved. I know your lying, I said to Sergeant Nolan. I know it here and I know it in myself. I think your people say one thing, and then they say another thing, but they are acting out the truth all along, you have only to look at them and you will see the truth. He looked at me – Anything we can do for you, we’ll be glad to” (15).

More than titillation, the title of *The Orgy* suggests such negotiations of relation. Though the narrator does eventually kiss both a “tall tinker” (“The big man in the Irish sweater was like a wall before me. His mouth was on my mouth” (49)) and Nicholas Hilliard (“We kiss, it is he that I am kissing and he kisses me, constellating a scene ... in love that now belongs to him as I belong to love” (127)) and tussle with some sleep-waking fantasies, there isn’t much in the way of explicit or indiscriminate sexual activity in the book. Rukeyser’s “orgy” is, instead, the communal negotiation through which real relation becomes possible: Bakhtin’s carnivalesque as the site of collective potential experience. “How to express the orgiastic in the ‘I,’” Rukeyser asks in her notes (LOC I:30 folder 2). And in the book itself: “What the orgy says: ‘Look at the world;’” “The orgy is experience, I thought. The sacred feast. ‘The orgy is the meeting,’ he said, in answer to my thought” (128, 129). What comes *after* the orgy, what is made from it, from its encounters and searches, that is Rukeyser’s final question. It is a question she ultimately cannot answer: “Isolation orgy and the single creature held in a square, a diagram of the world. In the texture of reality. Until it is reconciled and made

relation, made marriage” (129). *If* it is made “marriage,” that is. And here again is Howe: “Do we ever know each other; know who we really are?”

Howe’s cords of relation are relevant here, too. In *The Orgy*, an actual cord appears, tethering the goat to his symbolic significance, making him into the king: “As he approaches dominion, his white head is held up; the white man curls forward over his forehead; a cord of great round bells stretches in a curve from horn to horn” (38). At the end of the festival, this connection is severed and, with it, the communal spell allowing for encounters and transformations outside of the limiting bounds of the habitual or actual: “But the Puck, set on his hoofs on the ground, the cord at last cut away from his horns, steps, steps over the stream of the ditch beside the road” (86). In Rukeyser’s book, these cords must be agreed upon – they are in themselves a sort of spell, a frequently beautiful communal fiction.

But not *always* beautiful. The cord reappears as a rope in a citation from an important intertext linking Rukeyser and Howe once more: Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. The narrator finds herself attempting to counter Nicholas’s sneering dismissal of the tinkers, his assertion that they are no more than an expression of the societal “death wish” (74). For her, however, the tinkers she meets are both valued as individuals and as a necessary component in the negotiation of relation represented and enacted by the orgy. Observing their line of caravans along the river, she struggles to articulate this significance: “‘Or might it not be might it not be like *Waiting for Godot*?’ I asked Nicholas as he wiped my ankles and my shoes” clean from the animal waste they had traversed:

“Many people have talked about that as a suicidal play. It’s very clearly not.

It’s altogether Irish, isn’t it? Look: they talk about suicide a great deal, talk about hanging themselves – remember? it will give you an erection; if only I had a rope – ”

Nicholas nodded, and looked in my eyes.

“They long for a rope. Well, during about half the action of the play, there *is* a rope onstage – a long, fine, strong, new-looking rope. The rope that connects Pozzo and Lucky. A lot of the time, that rope is stretched clear across the front of the stage. All that time, nobody mentions suicide or thinks of wanting a rope. As soon as it’s gone, they begin again.” (73)

Beckett’s rope is at once a mode of connection – the literal yoking of Lucky to Pozzo – and a mode of communication. Rukeyser is not concerned with the rope as a symbol, though it *is* one, of course, both of man’s dominance over man and of death as a desired, deferred action, that which might put an end to the play’s interminable waiting. Instead, Rukeyser brings up the rope to Nicholas because it is a *sign*. The rope sits at the edge of the stage communicating: pointing to death and cruelty and impotence, alluding also to the way these resonances blur and bleed into each other. As sign the rope is not one, but the simultaneous, seemingly contradictory possibility of them all.

“Commonwealth of woe” she calls *Godot* – or perhaps the tinker community – in her notes for the book. What Rukeyser finds most important about the rope is that it is never used.

More than as symbol, this rope functions for Rukeyser as a patteran: the markers of stone, grass, leaves, or twigs, traditionally left by Travellers to let others know that they have passed and where they have gone. “Patteran” is a word that recurs throughout in *The Oryx*: the narrator sees a tinker reading a patteran in a fire’s burning embers and returns to the idea as a touchstone for her own experience and argument. Before she arrives at the example from *Godot* as a retort to Hilliard’s nihilism, she fumbles to make this connection: “And the tribes, tribes of Indians cut off from the ways and still aware of the tribe. As these tinkers, even when they put cars before the caravans instead of horses, even when it’s plastics and not tin ... They still have their signs, their patterans, a broken branch by the road, a sign of leaves and ashes, a way they are ...” (72-73, ellipses in original). In linking the rope with the patteran (as something they “still have” regardless of other erosions of

value or dignity) Rukeyser counters nihilism with traditions of communication, with secret signs.

The tinkers were originally itinerant tinsmiths, Rukeyser notes, and though now they sell plastic trinkets, their name – itself a sign – holds this lineage, they are “called by what they do ” (LOC I:30 folder 2).

Like Heller-Roazen’s lineage of riddles and rogue languages, paterans communicate as they obscure. In the countryside, Liadain teaches the narrator to look for the etched markings of another such language, Ogham, the medieval Irish cryptic alphabet designed in order not to be understood by readers of Roman letters. Together they meditate on a related history of practices:

In the wanderings and the famines, bands were on the roads, protecting themselves by any means, including their language, thieves’ jargon, like Negro slang in America which has passed into white language and is written down. These tongues – Shelta, The Masons’ Language, and the others, that have nothing to do with the vagrants or with a craft: Bog-Latin, Hisperic, and all the Oghams, have come down to us, from stones, theology, the vernacular poets, and the slum taverns of Liverpool where, in 1890, John Sampson learned Shelta and wrote it down. (82)

From Hisperic’s intentional obscurity through the secret argot of Bog-Latin, Shelta, or tinker’s cant, Rukeyser builds a lineage of necessary difficulty and equates it with a poetic lineage. Though these languages work to exclude as much as to communicate, somehow the narrator understands beyond the boundaries of that to which she should have access. “It’s somehow very easy to read,” Liadain comments about the stones, “*Very easy*” the narrator agrees (82, emphasis original). And earlier, kissing the tinker, she finds his language “perfectly clear”: “ ‘They don’t know what we’re saying.’ Neither do I, I started to answer. But it was not true” (53, 54). He is surprised by her ability: “ ‘Can you bug Shelta? Have you traveled with tinkers?’ ‘No – ’ I began, and at that moment I wished I had” (54). Rukeyser’s ignorance – she doesn’t, shouldn’t understand Shelta – can become radical

openness because she assumes and attempts to learn the utter specificity of the experience of those she encounters at the same time as she insists upon and writes her own. That awareness about others, that willingness to listen and research, is the corollary of her insistence on the personal.

Finally, Rukeyser finds in the patteran a figure for her own project; she “leaves” her pages as this kind of sign: “If I had the patience of that fisherman, I thought, to stand and cast again and again, like trying to write one thing all my life. It may be that, I thought. I could never tell any of this except in what I do, except in what I am, leaving something behind me like a patteran” (111).⁶¹ The “one thing” Rukeyser “tr[ies] to write” all her life is her encounter with the world – casting her line again and again from and of the place where she is, the place of herself. She makes, necessarily, this start out of particulars – one could call them, following Howe, the “spontaneous particulars of sound.” It is up to kindred travelers, those who come to her works in ownership of their own ignorance, to read and attempt to travel also in the direction in which her patteran points. Like the narrator with her tinker lover, we must understand more than we are given to.

Like patterans themselves – temporary, contextual combinations of organic materials – Rukeyser’s symbol of the patteran is only temporary. She has had an experience in the orgy: “As for myself. There had been a revelation. Of what? I began to know; and I saw how the temptation was to go back to the moment *before* revelation, to go on with one’s old life” (130). Attempting to hold on to the revelation’s particular constellation, she makes plans and promises, to “try to avoid everything I might interpose between myself and what was in me, what I was in. No myth, no mask, no legendary figure” (131). (Here is the same language, repurposed, from her famous poem.) But the

⁶¹ Rukeyser returns to the patteran as a structuring principle in *The Traces of Thomas Hariot* (published a few years later), naming two different chapters “The Patteran.” The concept becomes significant for Rukeyser as she describes the paucity of extant sources. She writes: “But very much may be deduced, projected backwards from the loose papers that have come down to us, part of the traces in his own hand, in many hands, in notes and fragments, signals for which the best term perhaps is that word used by the travelling people for the signs which tell where they have been and in what direction they are moving – ‘patterans.’ By these inscriptions and objects, the diagrams covering this folio, the writing this-side-up on half the sheet, that-side-up on the other, that lets us know that here the master sat and there the students, by deaths and forgettings, tortures and instruments, the little pit where the foot of a compass was planted long ago, silk-grass waving near Hatteras – by these we guess, and ourselves move leaving our patterans” (54).

self is ordinary and changing and the present intervenes, “But now it is now, and I look out the window ... Coughing. Footsteps” (131). She realizes,

No, I cannot stay here ... restlessness possesses me beyond any lovely theoretical question of proceeding from revelation. And how will I, anyway? What is it?

Something like the fisherman doing his long endless casts over the Laune, a river that is before one, and the endless attempt at art, or life How do I do it? (131)

The river is not before *her*, it is before “one.” After the orgy, what she has discovered, her “lovely” theories, become general. The cords of connection are cut, the goat steps over the ditch, the cobwebs are brushed aside, the dream ended. She returns to the ordinary evening in an unfamiliar place: “I would like to go downstairs and find somebody” (132).

The movement from individual felt perception to general, operable, larger-than-self truth remains a struggle, a paradox. Emerson’s warnings in “The Poet” return in their relevance: we must not mistake “an accidental and individual symbol for a universal one”; language, symbols are “good ... for conveyance” (463). So it is for the “conveyance,” for the *moving*, the being moved, that we must look. Toward the end of her notes to *The Orgy*, Edelman attests to having had such an experience:

Rereading what I’ve just written, I’m embarrassed. I don’t know whether I’ve been able to express what I wanted ... I found reading THE ORGY an exhilarating experience – emphasis on the word ‘experience’ because, as a matter of fact, contrary to what I mostly feel when I read, this had the quality of a primary experiencing: I mean, to read this book was very close to having one’s own experience in daily life – to be out swimming and close to drowning in the details of some usual daily encounter – to find oneself working very hard to pull the details and the overall blur of the context which accompanies attention to details, to pull these into

consciousness, sort them, try to see their relationships, try to comprehend oneself-in-the-situation – to be trying to both feel and see at the same time and still be able to respond and hold one's inward self in tact. (LOC I:22 folder 3)

Here again is Emerson's sea, Howe's sea. Here is an individual *feeling* and *seeing*. Edelman is "embarrassed" because in the depth and struggle of her encounter, she, too, has allowed herself to be seen. Do we ever really know *ourselves*?

Toward the end of her 1990 interview with *Talisman* magazine, Howe describes a scene in Herman Melville's *Journal*, in which a woman, a stranger to him, wails over a new grave: "The woman is wailing, 'My God, it is I,' but Melville is saying, 'My God, it is I.' He is the woman. There is everything in that to me. She's calling to the dead. Who has been buried? Is it her husband, a parent, a child? Melville doesn't know her. He doesn't name her. There is no naming and no answer. She is herself, and he sees himself in her. I think that detail holds everything" (179). Melville's woman is wholly specific, *necessarily* specific, though he doesn't know, can't tell or describe that specificity. He doesn't really know her, but he *is* her. And perhaps this is the only answer to Howe's question, the answer that both Howe's and Rukeyser's personal poetics perform: An other cannot be *known*, but she can, at least for a moment, be *felt*.

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CHAPTER 5

Darkest Matters: Toward an Experimental Feminine Poetics of War

Muriel Rukeyser's *Willard Gibbs* launches with a description of two ships. In Rukeyser's pursuit of a formal structure that might activate and embody the complex balancing of forces her book explores, these ships, "unconscious of each other, sailing different seas, and carrying vastly different cargoes[, b]ut closely interlocked for us now, rocking on their oceans a hundred years ago," become vessels – carriers and instances – of her own analogy (13). 1840: the first ship, "the *Java*, a three-master, sailing from Rotterdam to Surabaya" holds the twenty-seven year old German physician Robert Mayer, and with him, the brewing intuition that would get articulated as the First Law of Thermodynamics – the understanding that energy can neither be created nor destroyed (14). As Rukeyser narrates, "He wants to make a law out of this. Nothing is lost, there are correspondences, he writes. The nature of these energies is the same; they have equivalents; they change, they are reciprocal, they dance and seem to disappear, but they are not lost. The connections are there" (14-15). 1839: the second ship is the "long, low, black schooner [that] set sail from Havana with a cargo of assorted merchandise and fifty-three kidnapped Africans, its crew, and the two Spanish owners who had bought the slaves, against all the treaties then in existence" – the *Amistad* (16).

Each of these ships is foundational for Rukeyser's subject: conservation of energy forms the ground for Gibbs's *Equilibrium of Heterogeneous Substances*; and, as I discussed in the second chapter, the *Amistad* slave-ship rebellion provides the occasion for Josiah Gibbs's act of linguistic-mathematical analogy and his connection to John Quincy Adams in the long work of defending the enslaved Africans. Each ship carries an image of an idea that contributes to the expanding significance of Rukeyser's inquiry: the processes by which temporary balances are achieved in our physical world and in our political / historical / human one. But, with Rukeyser's form and function

reaching and merging, the *figure* of these two ships, “rocking on their [separate] oceans” is, itself, foundational, linking images, concepts, and processes that I have pursued throughout these pages. Here is the “innavigable sea” between us. Here is a journey of traversal “marked by fluid oscillations” (Stafford 2). Here is a miss, a failure of connection (*like ships passing*). Here is Rukeyser bringing these ships together across rupture, shooting her poet-spider’s silk as a glistening, temporary cord between them. The earth on which these ships sail is marked by divisions; it is a world, Rukeyser would say, in need of its poets.

As Rukeyser begins, I end: with two different ships, also “unconscious of each other” and also “interlocked for us now.” They sail different oceans and carry different cargoes, but for one – again, astonishing – connection: each holds one of our poets in a moment of poetic becoming, a moment that also links the multiple registers explored here. July, 1936: the twenty-two year old Muriel Rukeyser voyages away from Spain “on a small ship, five times past our capacity in refugees, sailing for the first port at peace,” heading toward France at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (LOP 2). October, 1938: the sixteen-month old Susan Howe boards the Anchor Liner *Transylvania* in Ireland, sailing, with her mother “home on a ship crowded with refugees fleeing various countries in Europe” (Ether 9). Howe has just learned to walk, and all of Europe – Mary Manning Howe told the Boston newspaper Howe quotes in her essay “Ether Either” – “bears the odor of death, [] the young people there are destined to be so much cannon fodder, [] she fears the worst is yet to come in Europe” (113). These ships flee two different erupting 20th-century wars almost exactly one hundred years after the two ships sailed in *Willard Gibbs*. We are three-quarters of the way to another hundred years as I sit and read and write, engaging in an imaginative act of bringing together that is kindred with Rukeyser’s: “The round blurred earth, a hundred years ago to our presumption ... two ships visible on the curve of its blue oceans” (WG 13).

Rukeyser had traveled to Spain to cover the antifascist People's Olympiad, an alternative to and protest of Hitler's Berlin Games. As the games were set to begin, civil war plunged the country into violence and Rukeyser, along with a diverse international community of athletes and delegates, witnessed, instead, the beginnings of revolutionary response to military coup.⁶² "We had seen the parts of our lives in a new arrangement," she says of herself and her fellow travelers (LOP 3). Though Rukeyser was, even before her trip to Spain, an active and known poet – *Theory of Flight* had been published the year before and she had already traveled to West Virginia to undertake the research she would incorporate into "The Book of the Dead" – the violence and the "new arrangement" she witnessed gave her an understanding of her own life (both public and private) *in* poetry. Rukeyser returns to this night on the ship again and again. She first writes the scene at the end of her unpublished *Savage Coast*. There, it is the opening to her ongoing process of discovery: "All night toward France. We stayed on the dark crowded deck and talked. The Hungarian printer from Paris said to me, 'And in all this – where is the place for poetry?' 'Ladis,' I answered, 'I know some of it now, but it will take me a lifetime to find it'" (295). By *The Life of Poetry* – published in 1949, but based on lectures she gave in 1940, 1945, 1946, and 1948 – the moment is both the frame and the occasion for all that follows: "Suddenly" she concludes her introduction to this thorough and fundamental presentation of her poetics, "throwing his question into talk not at all leading up to it – not seeming to – a man – a printer, several times a refugee – asked, 'And poetry – among all this – where is there a place for poetry?' Then I began to say what I believe" (3). As Kennedy-Epstein points out, Spain – the war in Spain – is where Rukeyser – where *the poet* – "is born."⁶³ Precisely "in

⁶² In her introduction to *Savage Coast*, "the most complete rendering of Rukeyser's experience during the first days of the war," editor Rowena Kennedy-Epstein provides a thorough history of Rukeyser's involvement in the games, her trip to Spain, and her ongoing literary exploration of what she witnessed there.

⁶³ Kennedy-Epstein points out: "In *Savage Coast*, Helen calls Spain her 'birthday,' and in the poem 'Letter to the Front' Rukeyser calls Barcelona the 'city of water and stone where I was born'" (xxxix n.1).

the midst of war” comes the need for poetry, an understanding of the *work* that poetry may do (WG 1).

Howe, too, returns to her ship. An early articulation of poetics, her “STATEMENT for the New Poetics Colloquium, Vancouver, 1985” begins like this:

For me there was no silence before armies.

I was born in Boston Massachusetts on June 10th, 1937, to an Irish mother and an American father ... By 1937 the Nazi dictatorship was well established in Germany. All dissenting political parties had been liquidated and Concentration camps had already been set up to hold political prisoners. The Berlin-Rome axis was a year old. So was the Spanish Civil War...

In the summer of 1938 my mother and I were staying with my grandmother, uncle, aunt, great aunts, cousins, and friends in Ireland, and I had just learned to walk, when Czechoslovakia was dismembered by Hitler, Ribbentrop, Mussolini, Chamberlin, and Daladier, during the Conference and Agreement at Munich. That October we sailed home on a ship crowded with refugees fleeing various countries in Europe. (13)

These lines situate Howe’s actual birth in its geopolitical context. But for the strange first line – in which the silence that is such a central feature of Howe’s writing is paradoxically engendered by the whirring, booming, and screeching of warfare – the passage might read as straight, historically minded autobiography. The lines reappear as “There Are Not Leaves Enough to Crown to Cover to Crown to Cover” – the identical essay renamed and functioning as an opening to *Europe of Trusts* (1990), Howe’s collection of pieces from the 1980s. In 1998’s “Ether Either,” Howe includes a photograph clipped from a Boston newspaper of her toddler self and her mother aboard the *Transylvania*. In her 2012 *Paris Review* interview with Maureen McLane, she responds to a question

about whether she spent time as a child in Ireland by remembering the ship once more: “I was born in 1937. My mother and I spent the summer of 1938 in Dublin. I have only shadow memories under the surface of family photographs of that first visit. We returned to Boston on a ship called the *Transylvania* packed with refugees fleeing various European countries. She said you could hear weeping at night from the cabins around us.”

It is easy to understand why the ship might exert such a powerful pull on Howe’s memory – its mix of security and trauma glimpsed but not understood, this first severing from family she would not be able to see again for almost a decade. But Howe insists on this moment not just as a significant personal memory, but as a poetics. Shortly after writing her “STATEMENT,” in a visit to Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s class at Temple University, Howe reflected on her articulation of this primal scene: “I had to write something about my poetics, which I thought I could never do. And I found it was very easy. It came very fast to me. It was running through all my work ... I was born right – *bang* – into WWII. ... The time I came into consciousness – you come into consciousness as a small child, that time that you never forget – you’re formed – and *that* you never ever lose.” The genesis of Howe’s poetic project is the forging of her consciousness in the furnace of violent international conflict. “Try being a child in WWII” Howe jotted on notes toward a 1996 lecture on Poetry and War she gave at Susan Stewart’s invitation at the Philadelphia Free Library, “not looking back but in it.” For Howe, a war poetics is constituted by this orientation, this necessary angle of approach.

In *a little history*, Ammiel Alcalay quotes Robert Duncan’s observation that Charles Olson’s “1910 birth meant that he was born in a ‘pre-World-War-world.’ He writes that Olson was ‘initiated into childhood – learned to walk and talk “before the war” the last possible member of a creative family that we now sketch as having its *time* from 1882-1914.’ Duncan then goes on to characterize 1945-on, in this generational mapping, as ‘the state of War economy with the idea of world

destruction” (92).⁶⁴ For Rukeyser, with her 1913 birth, it was already too late. As she writes in “War and Poetry,” a brief prose statement she contributed to Oscar Williams’s 1945 anthology *The War Poets*, “For myself, war has been in my writing since I began. The first public day that I remember was the False Armistice of 1918” (25). A child’s private memory of a “public day”: Rukeyser’s consciousness, too, was born along with her consciousness of herself-within-a-world-at-war, as constituted by and in that public scene. If poetry – as Rukeyser describes it in her introductory “Note” to *The Life of Poetry* – allows people to feel “the meeting of their consciousness and the world,” then 20th-century poetry must be war poetry (x). War is not something one writes *about*, it is the condition of writing. “There is no way to speak of war as a *subject* for poetry,” Rukeyser asserts in Williams’s anthology, a book whose readers might expect such a neat categorization of subject, “War enters all our lives, but even that horror is only a beginning. The war is in our poetry only so far as it is in our imaginations, as a meaning, as a relationship, or simply as a fact” (25). Here we see once more the essential intertwining of imagination, fact, and relationships. War-poetry is not the description of a “genre,” it is structural, a mode of encounter.

For Howe, a pair of accompanying consciousness-forging scenes are seared alongside the fleeing ship, recurrent in her explorations of poetics and frequently providing an entry into her texts. One is multiple and public: the relentless newsreels and photographic images of war:

From 1939 until 1946 in news photographs,⁶⁵ day after day I saw signs of culture
exploding into murder. Shots of children being herded into trucks by hideous

⁶⁴ In *The Birth-mark*, Howe’s description of her birth moment resonates with Duncan’s description: “I am a North American author. I was born in 1937. Into World War II and the rotten sin of man-made mass murder” (38). Rukeyser’s “Poem” from *The Speed of Darkness* reverberates with the relentless daily effects of war in this time: “I lived in the first century of world wars. / Most mornings I would be more or less insane, / The newspapers would arrive with their careless stories, / The news would pour out of various devices / Interrupted by attempts to sell products to the unseen” (Poems 430).

⁶⁵ Howe revisits the same memory in her *Talisman* interview, collected in *The Birth-mark*: “The photographs of children during the war in Europe, when I was a small child and the Holocaust was in progress – not only the Holocaust but the deaths of millions of people in Europe and Asia – prevented me from ever being able to believe history is only a series of justifications or that tragedy and savagery can be theorized away” (164).

helmeted conquerors – shots of children who were orphaned and lost – shots of emaciated bodies of Jews dumped into mass graves on top of more emaciated bodies – nameless numberless men women and children, uprooted in a world almost demented. (Leaves 11)

She reflects on her encounters with these horrific images in her visit to DuPlessis's class: "It is one thing to look at those pictures now, it's another to *live* in them coming out in newsreels and to see them when you really feel that there is no geographical space, that they're right there with you, and that any minute *you* could be torn away from your family. That it's possible to tear children from their parents and throw them away." The fact of war, the experience of war, necessitates another central, shared feature of Howe's and Rukeyser's poetics: the integration of documentary material. "A newspaper is a negative copy halfway between fact and correspondence" (Ether 113).

It is in a 1996 essay about French nonfiction filmmaker and multimedia artist Chris Marker,⁶⁶ that Howe first describes her project as "documentary," reflecting, "I am an American poet writing in the English language. I have loved watching films all my life. I work in the poetic documentary form, but didn't realize it until I tried to find a way to write an essay about two films by Chris Marker" (11). What she is trying to describe is Marker's *La Jetée*, a film that "imagines a third world war" (8). The reason she is trying to describe this film, the occasion for this particular act of trespass across disciplinary boundaries, collapses (*as we have seen before*) intimate and public registers. She wants to memorialize her recently deceased second husband, the war veteran, David von Schlegell: "I was drawn to the project because of the fact of my husband's death and my wish to find a way to document his life and work" (5). "David NEVER TALKED About it [*sic*]," she wrote on that first page of notes toward her "Poetry and War" lecture, this war that wounded him physically ("he was

⁶⁶ Howe's piece was first published in the collection of essays *Beyond Document: Essays on Nonfiction Film*, which featured an introduction by Stanley Cavell, one of this dissertation's interlocutors (Wesleyan UP 1996). Its 2013 republication by New Directions as the first title in their new poetry pamphlet series suggests the contemporary – war-time – interest in this register of engagement.

shot while piloting a B-17 in the fiery skies over Emden in Germany”) and in other, deeper “ways he could never recover” (Marker 6). “These are only some facts,” she seems to demur in her Marker essay, when in fact she is collecting facts for dear life, and, also, for dear life, mixing them with fiction. This intertwining of fact and fiction is, as Elaine Scarry points out in *The Body in Pain*, an intrinsic feature of war: “as is quietly registered in the language of theatres of battle, international dialogues, scenarios and stages [war] has within it a large element of the symbolic and is ultimately, like torture, based on a simple and startling blend of the real and the fictional” (62). While David was fighting, the much younger Howe was a child, sitting each week in the theater: “In fact authentic documentary material blighted the hearts of children all over the world who came to consciousness enveloped by threatened futurity, during the non-nuclear and then nuclear 1940s. We were alert to the subliminal disjunction between actual and fictional cinematographic realism shown in theaters” (Marker 34). Actual and fictional realism. This 20th-century experience of viewing “fact” turns Jonathan Edwards’s “seeing” into searing, a collapsing of the stable position of the observer, a meeting place that takes on more than is actually possible: “If to see is to *have* at a distance, I had so many dead innocents distance was abolished ... I became part of the ruin. In the blank skies over Europe I was strife represented” (Leaves 12).

The final scene in the triptych of Howe’s war-forged poetics is her experience of being torn from her father, who “put on a soldier suit and disappeared with the others into the thick of the threat to the east called West” (Leaves 10). Though utterly personal, this memory is, in its tragic typicality, in the father’s disappearance “with the others,” also unavoidably public. The poet Anne Waldman – in her 2012 Charles Olson Memorial Lecture, whose title, “Duncan’s Dream,” reinscribes our networks of connection, referring to his dream of Rukeyser, “the poetess,” in *The H.D. Book* – puts forward a rhyming image, projecting a photograph of her own father in uniform holding an eight-month-old Waldman. The baby plays with the soldier-father’s button – that trinket

of war – and Waldman asks what it means for a child to come into consciousness in this relation. You stand facing war, “*avant*” and “*derrier*” – both too early and too late. Howe’s “Frame Structures” – the essay she created as a doorway into her 1996 collection of poems from the 1970s – begins with a “treasured memory of togetherness before [her father] enlisted in the army and went away to Europe”: they are at the Buffalo zoo, and the bears, sensitive, Howe imagines, to the war in the air that “everyone [is] talking of,” “run[] around rocks as if to show how modern rationalism springs from barbarism” (3). The bears, like the newspaper, are “restless with signs and portents” (Ether 115). A child’s toys, trinkets, excursions, all so encompassed. This is reality, if that is what we mean by lens. “The child I was, before the War, can never find her place in history. What was far is suddenly here.” (Tribute 56).

Even more than the ship, Howe’s separation from her father is generally recognized as poetically formative. In her essay on Howe and Robert Duncan, Catherine Martin points to another iteration of this moment,⁶⁷ arguing that Howe’s recursive return to a scene that cannot be comfortably integrated into coherent narrative but also cannot be dismissed becomes, as a result, the root of both her disjunctive style and her repetition, the way she returns to the same moments, the same places: “Readers of Howe will be familiar with this incident, which has the status of a primal scene in her writing, being reworked from book to book, as if its convergence of private pain with the experience of history as felt affect can neither be satisfyingly articulated nor definitively resolved” (178). And it is precisely this – the braiding of public event and intimate life, fact and

⁶⁷ The text Martin references is Howe’s *American Poetry* tribute to Robert Duncan in which she writes: “I lost my father in Buffalo. He enlisted in the army just after Pearl Harbor was attacked and was stationed in Europe until WWII was over. When he left we moved somewhere else. When he came back he was a stranger. We thought he was the postman delivering a letter. My husband was an air force pilot in the same war. That was a long time ago. Of course I didn’t know him then. Forty-five years later he has cancer, and I have come back alone to this place, which for me, will go on infinitely signifying risk” (54). Here the loss of her father joins the loss of her second husband in her mourning of her “precursor father,” Duncan. Howe’s primal scene of loss reverberates in the echo of these other beloved men, and, as such, provides the genesis of several other texts: David von Schlegell’s death here, in the final section of *Pierre-Arrow*, and in the Marker essay; and Peter Hare’s death in *THAT THIS* and her related talks and essays (as discussed in the previous chapter).

fantasy, document and felt response, history and myth – that emerges again and again as a central feature linking both Howe’s and Rukeyser’s writing.

The expression of the primal experience of war implicates personal experience; it necessitates historical investigation; it has tremendous repercussions for poetic form: “The fact that I was born in 1937 into what became World War II to a mother who was born in Dublin in 1905, and didn’t come to the United States until 1934, who was cut off from returning home during the world war years, and then, for the rest of her life, moved restlessly between Ireland and New England, has profoundly affected all of my writing,” Howe told Cole Swensen in a 2000 dialogue, “There is conflict and displacement in everything I write – in the way I arrange words on the page, in the way I hear and react to other languages – that I can’t edit out” (381).⁶⁸ The experience of war requires understanding that these concerns and approaches be undertaken as intertwined. “It isn’t that one brings life together” Rukeyser articulated in a craft interview with *The New York Quarterly*, “it’s that one will not allow it to be torn apart. And not only the wars but the thing that wars are images of, the tearing apart of life entire in ourselves and in our relations with each other. It isn’t a question of making them come together. They are together. It’s a fighting that they not be torn apart and killed that way” (171).

War in Howe’s and Rukeyser’s works is a relentless presence; different battles and conflicts become ways of orienting and connecting not just the poets’ own lives, but all the lives they trace. Howe’s “Frame Structures,” as one example, references World War II; World War I; the American Revolutionary War; the British “scramble for Africa” and skirmishes for colonial occupation in the 1880s; the Civil War, the Spanish-American War; and King Philip’s War. Each is introduced through

⁶⁸ In Howe’s recent essay “Choir Answers Choir, war’s aesthetic “inheritance” is sonic: “Some fathers, uncles, and brothers were away overseas, or just returned from the war. Can there by an original rhythmic nature of intuition ... Split from the pressing social and political concerns – the fissures and rifts – that surround and control us – children coming into their aesthetic inheritance can’t forsee how accidentally scattered experiences become synthesized in memory. Apocalypses and last judgments take hold as shadows, or distant associations of sound and sense” (55).

the lives of individuals. World War II means that Howe's father leaves. Howe's Irish grandfather and uncles pack off in August 1914 as a result of telegrams "delivered by donkey cart" (12).

Weetamoo, "squaw-sachem of the Wampanoags" and King Philip's sister-in-law, "escaped the murderous Christian soldiers again and again until on August 6, 1676, she was drowned while trying to float by raft to her kingdom of Pocasset. The tide washed her body up on land that eventually became the Howe farm" (22). This last example is just one instance of Howe's extended family's culpability from whose intimate and historical horrors she does not shy. "When this murderous ancestor" – she writes of a great uncle named James d'Wolf – "could finally afford to buy his own slave ship he christened her *Sukey*. Sukey is my nickname" (FS 21).

When Howe engages in literary history, too, she insists on rooting the writing life in the moment's combat. Here is part of her account of Olson's radical study of Herman Melville in her 1987 essay, "Where Should the Commander Be":

Americans exploded the first atomic bomb at Alamogordo, New Mexico, July 16th, 1945, at sunrise. Heat from the blast fused the surrounding desert sand to glass. On August 6th (Japanese time), members of the crew of the ENOLA GAY dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. In one second a 650 foot fireball seared the earth and utterly destroyed every building within a mile. In the city of 343,000 people, 66,000 were killed outright. 66,000 were wounded, burned, or maimed. Three days later America dropped another bomb on Nagasaki.

This was the same week Charles Olson finished writing *Call Me Ishmael*. The same week, one hundred and twenty-three years earlier, Herman Melville was born in New York City, and the *Essex* sailed from Nantucket to hunt whales. (10)

Howe's linkage of the moment of writing with the scene of war is a gesture to the one Rukeyser frequently makes, related to the idea of interconnection that powers, for example, *Willard Gibbs*, the

two ships that launch Rukeyser's telling of Gibbs's story, which extends long past his death, casting its shadow into the nuclear age.

Traditionally theorized, the success or significance of "War poetry" has been seen as dependent on that poetry's rootedness "in the original ground of men's literal combat experience" (Schweik 534). Of course, the 20th century saw drastic technological changes to warfare, changes in fighting that brought "new conjunctions between civilians and soldiers, front and home front, and men and women, focusing on their shared morale or effort as well as on their common deprivation and vulnerability" (534). As Susan Schweik describes in the context of her analysis of Marianne Moore's "paradigmatic, exemplary war poem," "In Distrust of Merits": "In World War II ... that lonely masculine authority of experience – the bitter authority derived from direct exposure to violence, injury, and mechanized terror – was rapidly dispersing among general populations" (532, 534). This was, of course, more immediately true in Europe and the U.K. than in the U.S. (which had seen some of this "dispersal" in its own Civil War). But Schweik insists, and Oscar Williams's 1945 "War Poets" anthology to which Rukeyser contributed seems to confirm, that "public discussions of war and literature in the United States dwel[t] frequently on" the changing situation (in particular the potential of wide-spread civilian vulnerability) and the tensions these changes provoked. In turn, this led to questions about who might write poems about war, how those poems should be written, and to what end. Williams's anthology's offerings are divided into sections: first, "The Poetry of World War I"; then "Poems by the Men in the Armed Forces of England and America"; and, finally, "War Poems by the Civilian Poets," in which Rukeyser shares space with, among others, W.B. Yeats, John Berryman, e.e. Cummings, Marianne Moore, and Wallace Stevens. (Rukeyser and Moore, it should be noted, together make up precisely half of the female voices represented in the anthology – there are just four women among the 42 poets in the "Civilian"

section and the more than 100 in the book as a whole. I will explore the role of gender in relationship to war writing more explicitly below.)

It is an obvious truth, a cliché, to say that war has effects on actual, everyday lives. It is also a necessary truth that war affects different lives differently, providing them with meanings or violently ripping those meanings away. Neither Rukeyser nor Howe saw combat. Neither permanently lost immediate loved ones to the violence of battle. The fact of war raises specific and urgent questions about the way we move between particular and general; it puts up ethical “caution” signs. Though Howe felt herself to be “strife represented” in the “blank skies over Europe,” her actual body was safe in the American Northeast. There can be great danger in mistaking our private experiences for universal ones, as Emerson warns in “The Poet” – either in imposing our experience on others or in assuming, even with the best empathic intentions, theirs as our own. Beyond experiences, not all *feelings* are or should be shared. “Abstraction of the particular from the universal is the entrance into evil,” writes Howe in *My Emily Dickinson* (117). And, in “Frame Structures”: “In the cold drama of moral lucidity there is primitive reason just as in the calm dicta of moral lucidity there is personal reason” (6). Howe’s parallelism suggests that the “personal” can be “primitive” in its narrowness of focus: beware of the moral dicta that emerge via abstraction. Evil can and does grow from private suffering.

By what authority or hubris, therefore, do Howe and Rukeyser attend to their personal experiences in these contexts? How should their efforts be judged or understood? How should we interpret their projects of writing war not just in relationship to their lives, but in relationship to history, literary history, global politics, and the politics of representation? These questions have at their heart convictions about poetry, its responsibilities, and its relationship to the world. One significant 20th-century eruption of the tension between them – particularly significant for understanding the work of Howe and Rukeyser – resides in the correspondence between Robert

Duncan and his close friend and fellow poet Denise Levertov; a friendship and correspondence that disintegrated in the 1970s over their differing convictions about how to write war, or, as Albert Gelpi, co-editor of their collected letters, articulates: “how the imagination can and should address violence, how poetry can and should engage politics” (xv).

The argument between Duncan and Levertov hinged, I believe, on the nature and processes of the relationship between individual experience, private suffering and the structural mechanisms and public performance of war; in particular how they are, or should be, enacted through poetry. As Marjorie Perloff describes, the two shared much in their orientation toward the actual struggle: “Both poets were outraged by U.S. policy toward Vietnam, both deplored the bombing of Hanoi, the duplicity of the Johnson and later the Nixon administrations, and so on. Both,” she goes on to say, even “read their poetry at antiwar rallies” (209). But their disagreement was rooted in longstanding differences in their poetics, differences previously held in balance and rendered enormous under the stress, or magnifying glass, of war. As Gelpi describes the negotiation of their earlier correspondence, “Repeatedly, Levertov noted Duncan’s wide reading and eclectic learning, his intellectual energy and his power of abstraction as resources she needed and drew upon. On his side, Duncan again and again tells her that she gives him a sense of the concrete particular, the intense emptiness of embodied existence that he lacks and yearns for” (xv). Their “perceptual” and “conceptual” imaginations, Duncan called them, drawing on Pound: Levertov wrote an immersive, situated, “real,” whereas Duncan wrote a broad, mythological one. But during the Vietnam War, as Levertov struggled mightily to hold on to her faith in the speaking, feeling self as a political agent, she perceived Duncan’s position as constituting an elitist distance from actual struggles. For his part, Duncan saw Levertov’s protesting and protest poems as “so engaged with the war that they were partaking of war themselves,” sublimating her own voice and experience beneath someone else’s fight (Mlinko). Within these profound differences of orientation, the craft critiques they launched at

each other's war poems were strikingly similar, consisting mostly of allegations of slackness and generality. This final fact suggests that what actually *constitutes* the specific or particular, how it is performed in poetry, may not be so easy to define.

I do not invoke this sad controversy to make an explicit parallel between Duncan-Levertov and Rukeyser-Howe, positing the public-minded Rukeyser – with her formidable acts of conscience, from her arrest at age eighteen at the Scottsboro trial through her trip to Korea to protest the death row imprisonment of poet Kim Chi Ha five years before her death – as against the private Howe, whose own protests are literary, uncovering silences in the historical record and the power structures dictating the grammar of sentences. For one thing, as Alcalay points out, Rukeyser herself “provides the link between Duncan and poet and activist Denise Levertov, through a review of Duncan's first book, *Heavenly City, Earthly City*, that caught Levertov's attention in 1948. It was Rukeyser who would accompany Levertov to Hanoi in 1972, when Levertov's relationship with Duncan was strained to the breaking point” (93). This bridge is political and poetic as it is circumstantial: Rukeyser shares as much with Duncan's mythologies as she does with Levertov's embodied politics. And Duncan, too, has provided a link between Rukeyser and Howe in these pages, on aesthetic, emotional, and epistemological grounds. Indeed, much of my work here has been to complicate views of interiority and exteriority, myths, politics, and selves that entrench categorical battlegrounds between poets whose bringing together tells us much more about the work poetry does in the world, and the struggles to keep that work honest and relevant.

Instead, I point to this debate to underscore its status as real, urgent, and *ongoing* – in the context of lives and of poetics. As the continuing, shifting scholarly and critical conversation around the Duncan-Levertov rupture attests,⁶⁹ neither side represents an obviously “correct” position on the

⁶⁹ Perloff's essay (published in 1998) comes out on the side of Duncan, eloquently defending his “stringent, learned, and brilliant technique,” though she takes an alarming turn in her use of Duncan to condemn outright so-called identity poetics, asking “Is what seems like a one-dimensional and simplistic lyric outburst against injustice or racism to be

intersections of poems and politics. Debates like this call into question how we move from particular to general – What particular? Which general? They complicate our understanding of the relationship between internal and external suffering. These are questions that cannot and should not be answered once and for all. Again, Rukeyser’s central understanding in *Willard Gibbs* provides both warning and guidance: “the error of a rigid analogy” she tells us, is of using “the *discoveries* ... instead of the *methods* themselves in dealing with other material” (81).

Of course, some common convictions about poetry – about poetry’s relationship and responsibility to violence in the world, about the forms that poetry in a time of war might and should take – undergird interpretations of the Duncan-Levertov disagreement, providing significant implications and context for interpreting the work of our own two poets. The idea that a poetry attendant to interior truths and private experience cannot have external or political stakes – what Jacqueline Vaught Brogan in her study of Wallace Stevens calls the “faulty or at least overly restrictive traditional distinction between poets of the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds” (5) – is one of these. The attitude links, for example, traditions of Stevens and Dickinson scholarship, both of whose ghosts also hover above these pages. As Richard Sewall points out, Dickinson was long perceived as having “all but ignored the stirring events of the time” (535) – in particular, the Civil War – a perception that Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson* has done tremendous work to explode.⁷⁰ Of Dickinson’s Letter 280, for example, Howe writes, “When she fired off this eloquent and bitterly

praised because its author is a member of a minority group and hence not to be subjected to the literary norms of the dominant race and class?” (22). This is a line of questioning that has generated particular and welcome controversy and discussion of late, including scholarly treatment in texts including Dorothy Wang’s *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford UP 2014). The correspondence between Duncan and Levertov was published by Stanford in 2005. In a 2005 essay in *Jacket*, Robert J. Bertholf presents “Duncan’s side of the correspondence and account[s], from his point of view, for the break between the two poets” to balance his co-editor of the collected letters, Albert Gelpi’s introduction. The two collaborated again in 2006 to edit *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, the Politics of Poetry* (Stanford), a collection of essays exploring these issues.

⁷⁰ Among shocking statements toward this end is Thomas H. Johnson’s in his 1958 introduction to *The Letters of Emily Dickinson*, which Howe quotes in *The Birth-mark*: “Since Emily Dickinson’s full maturity as a dedicated artist occurred during the span of the Civil War, the most convulsive era of the nation’s history, one of course turns to the letters of 1861-1865, and the years that follow, for her interpretation of events. But the fact is that she did not live in history and held no view of it past or current” (132).

ironic letter – a terse cry of paralysis from a northern woman’s consciousness in wartime; left with her dog, her parents, children, and other women; left with information indirectly supplied by newspapers, and her own improbable position in a hieratic patriarchal system; left with these things; and over-weening ambition – she enclosed a poem” (128). Shira Wolosky, too, in her 1984 *Emily Dickinson: A Voice of War*, points to the ways in which, as war poetry, Dickinson’s writing necessarily mixes fields: “Her poetry, when approached without the assumption of her complete isolation, can be seen as profoundly engaged in the problems of the external world and aggressively so. It presents a point of intersection of literary, cultural, and metaphysical concerns, an arena in which conceptual structures and historical pressures implicate and generate linguistic configuration” (xiii).

Stevens’ writings are another locus of such negotiations. In his 1941 poetics essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” he insists upon the “universal interdependence” of the imagination and reality, as well as upon poetry as the place where these tangled forces interact (657). When he asks how the imagination – how poetry – should confront the “pressure” of reality (“not,” he emphasizes, “that external scene but the life that is lived in it”), he makes it clear that he is thinking about contemporary “life in a state of violence, not physically violent, as yet, for us in America, but physically violent for millions of our friends and for still more millions of our enemies and spiritually violent, it may be said, for everyone alive” (650, 658, 659). Though Stevens’s temporary solution⁷¹ for his own art is “resisting or evading the pressure of reality in this last degree, with the knowledge that the degree of today may become a deadlier degree tomorrow,” his relentless presentation of these inner and outer forces as intertwined and interdependent – “Reality is life and life is society and the imagination and reality, that is to say, the imagination and society are

⁷¹ Brogan, in particular, makes the case for viewing this orientation as temporary, a stop in Stevens’s evolving poetics of war. Though I don’t read his position in “Noble Rider” as offering a “consoling” or ameliorative aesthetics, Brogan’s thorough attention to Stevens’s writings on war is compelling. She argues, for example, “by the time he wrote ‘Esthétique du Mal,’ Stevens no longer believed in the same way in the consoling power of poetic and formal ‘resistance’ offered in ‘The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words’ and ‘Notes toward a Supreme Fiction.’ Instead, he was struggling with developing a different aesthetic relation to war, one that would accurately address the reality of pain and poetry’s place within it” (73).

inseparable” – underscores not solutions, but the process and urgency of *negotiation* (659, 660). (“On the other hand,” he writes, sounding very much like both Howe and Rukeyser, “I am evading a definition. If it is defined, it will be fixed and it must not be fixed” (664)). “The conflict here,” Rukeyser writes on the same subject, “is a neurotic one, a false conflict based on a supposed antithesis of fact and relationship, of inner and outer effectiveness” (LOP 44). In his investigation, Stevens probes the blocked channels between interior and exterior, concluding “It is not artifice that the mind has added to human nature. The mind has added nothing to human nature. It is a violence from within that protects us from a violence from without” (665). “The war” Stevens reminds us, chillingly, “is only a part of the war-like whole” (655).

An unavoidable aspect of the interdependent relationship between reality and imagination, inner and outer, is the potential (opportunity) for slips, obfuscations, and confluences at their meeting places. The relationship between the imagination and the world – in particular the world’s unmaking and making in violence – is also a subject of Elaine Scarry’s devastating and virtuosic investigation of pain. Pain is not only interior (“experienced within, ‘happen[ing] within the body of the individual” (65)), it is incommunicable to others (it cannot be made exterior). Scarry argues, famously, that pain “does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned” (4). (Here, one cannot help but think of Howe’s sonic and visual textual effacements and their engagement with silenced histories.) Pain is, therefore, a particular problem for poetry, and, Scarry, the literary scholar, argues that the “rarity with which physical pain is represented in literature is most striking when seen within the framing fact of how consistently art confers visibility on other forms of distress” (11). War poses a severely heightened version of this communicative problem. Injuring, the causing of (inexpressible) pain, is war’s (frequently obscured) content. At the same time, the purposeful large-scale obscuring of injuring is one of its chief

methods; among other techniques, “the movement and actions of the armies are emptied of human content and occur as a rarefied choreography of disembodied events” (70).

Scarry goes on to assert that “the central question that is asked here – what is the relation between the obsessive act of injuring and the issue on behalf of which that act is performed – is a question about the relation between the interior content of war and what stands outside it” (63). She shows how the “radical unanchoredness of the language of war” brings with it “the incredible potential to rewrite or reconstitute the real” – such reconstitutions being the devastating political consequences of pain’s inexpressibility, among them propaganda and debased power (137). The negotiation between inner and outer is therefore a problem of meaning. In her study of King Philip’s War (also central to Howe’s historical investigations, particularly in “The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson”), historian Jill Lepore asserts, “war is perhaps best understood as a violent contest for territory, resources, and political allegiances, and, no less fiercely, a contest for meaning” (x). She continues, “wounds and words – the injuries and their interpretation – cannot be separated, that acts of war generate acts of narration, and that both types of acts are often joined in a common purpose: defining the geographical, political, cultural, and sometimes racial and national boundaries between people” (x).

But as the struggle for meaning in war is potentially – likely – devastating, destructive, and divisive, attention to its mechanisms is also potentially generative. Rukeyser points to this fact repeatedly: “During war the policy was to win the war first and work out the meanings afterward. The result was, of course, that the meanings were lost. You cannot put these things off” (LOP 20). She counters this immediately with poetry: “One of the invitations of poetry is to come to the emotional meanings at every moment” (21). Also attempting to revive one of Rukeyser’s signal words, “imagination” (“usually described,” in her estimation, “as an ethically neutral or amoral phenomenon”), Scarry asks if the act of creation – “the mental, verbal, or material process of

making the world” – is “held to be bound up with justice in the way [war and torture] are bound up with injustice,” why it is that it “is not held to be centrally entailed in the elimination of pain as the unmaking of the world is held to be entailed in pain’s affliction” (22). “It is not the valorization of making but its *accurate description* that is crucial,” she concludes (22). This, I think, is what Rukeyser and Howe strive to achieve. But the multiplicity of their attempts is as crucial as their pursuit of accuracy. Movement toward the “health” of both the individual and “the whole society,” comes, Rukeyser tells us, “when we go beyond forms to an organic structure which we can in conscience claim and use. Then the multiplicities sing, each in his own voice. Then we understand that there is not meaning, but meanings; not liberty, but liberties” (LOP 211).

With all of this in mind, we must return to the actual, particular positions from which Howe and Rukeyser undertake their ongoing, multiple investigations of the meeting place between the imagination and the world in times of war. As Rukeyser wrote her biography of the physical chemist both *as* a poet, *because* she was a poet, Rukeyser and Howe write their war poetry *as* women, *because* they are women. Far from compromising authority, the feminine becomes for both a formally and theoretically rich site and aspect of their poetic investigations.⁷² “Women and children experience war and its nightmare,” writes Howe in “Frame Structures,” demanding acknowledgment of their embeddedness in and vulnerability to the horrors of violence. “Women and poets see the truth arrive,” begins Rukeyser’s astonishing 1944 poem “Letter to the Front” (her contribution to the *War Poets* anthology), asserting that these identities carry even more than proximity to the raw facts of

⁷² Interestingly, in making an argument about Stevens’s increasingly “politically responsive” poetics, Brogan also frames this change as a turn toward the feminine: “in his response to the Second World War, we also find the beginnings of Stevens’s change from a rather posturing ‘masculine’ or ‘virile’ poet, quite full of the ‘rage to order,’ to a poet increasingly open to what we might metaphorically call the ‘feminine’ or ‘other,’ including racial ‘others’ – an important change I regard as critical even now” (7).

experience. What “women and poets” have access to is prior to, and far more profound than, what is “acted out” in the pageantry of the “theater of war”:

Women and poets see the truth arrive.
Then it is acted out,
The lives are lost, and all the newsboys shout.

Horror of cities follows, and the maze
Of compromise and grief.
The feeble cry Defeat be my belief.

All the strong agonized men
Wear the hard clothes of war,
Try to remember what they are fighting for.

But in dark weeping helpless moments of peace
Women and poets believe and resist forever:
The blind inventor finds the underground river. (Poems 239)

The third of the section’s four end-rhymes (lines eight and nine’s “war” and “for”) intertwines combat with the frustrated search for significance. Rukeyser immediately cuts against any possible end to this search or compelling purpose for war with the next stanza’s “But,” catapulting the poem, instead, toward darkness and subterraneity. The concluding rhyme (“forever” and “river”) extends in both time and space. Different from a darkness of not-knowing or confusion (the “maze / Of compromise”), this darkness is generative, the darkness of blind prophets, leading to an unlikely source of nourishment, the “underground river.”

This movement of the feminine underground prefigures Alice Notley's 1992 "feminine epic" and great book-length war poem, *The Descent of Alette*, in which the heroine – trapped with the rest of humanity in a vast subway system controlled by a male "tyrant," goes on a quest through deeper and deeper subterranean levels, where she meets the headless "First Woman" and an owl guide, travels back up to a dark river, and ultimately kills the tyrant, freeing her fellow sufferers and bringing them back to the light. Notley's poem – its narrative, its form, its measure, and its intention – was developed out of a collision of public and private forces, each of which, and their combination, directly relate to being a woman in a time of war. In her essay "The 'Feminine' Epic," Notley locates her authority in this combination; from this position, she equates her authority with a soldier's: "my poem comes out of what I know that's communal knowledge and that I've suffered privately. Like a soldier, like anyone touched by political madness" (171). But the particular suffering that leads to her poem is not "anyone's" – it is expressly woman's. The poem is, in part, a response to her brother's death: a sniper in the Vietnam War, he returned home traumatized and an addict, eventually dying of an overdose:

Suddenly I, and more than myself, my sister-in-law and my mother, were being used, mangled, by the forces which produced epic, and we had no say in the matter, never had, and worse had no story ourselves. We hadn't acted. We hadn't gone to war. We certainly hadn't been 'at court' (in the regal sense), weren't involved in governmental power structures, didn't have voices which participated in public political discussion. We got to suffer, but without a trajectory. (172)

Forms of narrative, Notley suggests, are forms of participation. When one does not have access to the comforts of a story arc – exposition, climax, resolution – one must construct alternative "frame" structures. Notley makes her "feminine epic" subterranean as a direct and purposeful contrast to enlightenment, that "male luxury" (177). Her innovative measure – which "has been called, in effect,

feminine” – consists of poetic feet enclosed in quotation marks, suggesting the oral tradition, the primacy of breath, and, inevitably, the condition of mediation, interpolation, distance (174).⁷³

I linger on *The Descent of Alette* to provide a clear example of a 20th-century female poetics of war, and the ways in which structure, measure, and narrative are all born from the specific personal and political position of access to public events and equally public forms. Of course, as the philosophically minded poet and essayist Joan Retallack makes clear in her exposition of an experimental feminine poetics – one that is “pliant, forgiving, polylogical” – defining an “improbably feminine swerve that can shift the scene from one logic to others whose path is less obvious,” does not mean defining a poetics that is only practiced by women (92). Howe suggests as much, too, but from an alternative direction – the world’s response to such polylogical forms. She writes at the start of *The Birth-mark*, “Lawlessness seen as negligence is at first feminized and then restricted or banished” (1). This relates as well to Rukeyser’s exploration of the “feminine principle” in some of America’s great men – Gibbs, Whitman, Lincoln (see page 53 of this dissertation). Retallack theorizes the “feminine” as a quality of approach, an opposition to dualistic and rigid structures and narratives in the world. She writes: “The arguments of terror have followed an inexorable internal logic century after century for millennia. They would seem as incontrovertible as

⁷³ Here is the first page of the poem, to provide a sense of its form and measure:

“One day, I awoke” “& found myself on” “a subway, endlessly”
“I didn’t know” “how I’d arrived there or” “who I was” “exactly”
“But I knew the train” “knew riding it” “knew the look of”
“those about me” “I gradually become aware –” “though it seemed

as that happened” “that I’d always” “known it too --” “that there was”
“a tyrant” “a man in charge of” “the fact” “that we were”
“below the ground” “endlessly riding” “our trains, never surfacing”
“A man who” “would make you pay” “so much” “to leave the subway”

“that you don’t” “ever ask” “how much it is” “It is, in effect,”
“all of you, & more” “Most of which you already” “pay to
live below” “But he would literally” “take your soul” “Which is
what you are” “below the ground” “Your soul” “your soul rides”

“this subway” “I saw” “on the subway a” “world of souls” (3)

the direction of history itself were it not for the feminine swerve that can shift the scene from logic to others whose path is less obvious" (92). Her description of "the experimental feminine shaping history ... not as fateful adumbration, but as dynamic coastline, where past and present meet in the transformative rim of our recombinatory poesis" is strikingly like Rukeyser's own tracing of historical swerves in *The Traces of Thomas Hariot*. Rukeyser puts forward a (feminine?) lineage, "going through Empedocles, Heraclitus, Bruno, Hariot, the recurrent imaging work for the unifying process that sees *Est* and *Non est*, joins them, sees the point around which they turn, and lives, in history and imagination, from that pivotal place" (281).

“This age thought in terms of opposites – as did the ancients, as do we,” writes Rukeyser in *Thomas Hariot*, “The banner of this thought was “To be or not to be”” (237). But Hariot heralds a different orientation, one in which Rukeyser participates, one in which a “dynamic coastline” exists not just between past and present, male and female, but between the most opposed of opposing poles. Rukeyser finds a small diagram among Hariot’s “loose papers” in which he has drawn a straight line with three dots arrayed: “in his way of dealing with them, not either/or but... To be *and* not to be, with life at the center” (237).

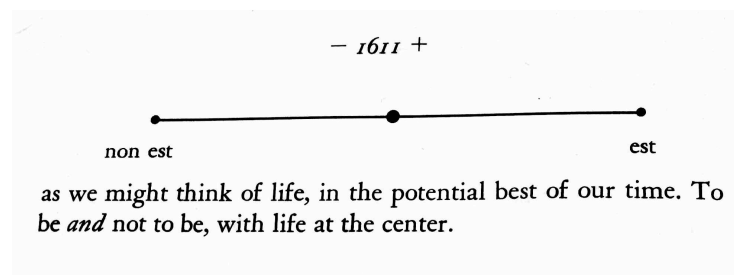


Figure 5

Hariot's diagram recalls Howe's own persistent attention to ramifying significance of "to be" – her typographical underscoring of its various conjugations linking all of her works. "Things that are not *are*," she writes in *Pierce Arrow* positioning us in the middle of Hariot's spectrum of being (100).

But in "There Are Not Leaves Enough to Crown to Cover to Crown to Cover," in the explicit context of war's senseless devastation, Howe brings a different pressure to being's multivalence. Within Howe's short essay is a brief scene, in which two characters invoke Herod's massacre of the innocents as told in the Gospel of Matthew:

Buffalo

12. 7. 41

(Late afternoon light.)

(Going to meet him in snow.)

HE

(Comes through the hall door.)

The research of scholars, lawyers, investigators, judges Demands!

SHE

(With her arms around his neck whispers.)

Herod had all the little children murdered!

It is dark

The floor is ice

they stand on the edge of a hole singing –

In Rama Rachel weeping for her children

refuses

to be comforted

because they *are* not. (11)

In Howe's text, her own parents, specifically situated in place and time – Buffalo, late afternoon, the 7th of December 1941 (if the identity of the characters is not made entirely clear by the time and location, it is underscored by the preceding passage: "Our law-professor father, a man of pure principles, quickly included violence in his principles") – take their societally dictated, gendered positions vis-à-vis the war. Situated in historical time and place they are also "on the edge of a hole," and, thus, mythological, ventriloquizing and participating in a much longer trajectory of historical suffering. The last few lines of this scene are lifted almost verbatim from Matthew 2:18: "Rachel weeping for her children ... would not be comforted, because they are not" (King James).⁷⁴ Howe's use of italics here – her one significant alteration to the passage – emphasizes the annihilation of the children's *being*. It underscores the ways in which, in human terms, "being" is not simply a theoretical construct. Rachel's lamentation joins with Howe's mother's and her own (one recalls Notley's "Suddenly I, and more than myself, my sister-in-law and my mother, were being used, mangled, by the forces which produced epic"), cutting across space and time, collapsing orders.

The dynamic dance of negotiation and joining – the feminine poetics of war – need not be smooth or lovely; it has at its roots terrible violence and devastation. As Howe writes of Olson's *Call Me Ishmael*, "Real events that are Facts, are interconnected by ties and links to a deep inner theme of composition as *conflict*" (5). She continues, "The beauty of irregularity and counterpoint (conflict) envelops documentation, definition, and culture's closed reason" (6). Rukeyser knows that "American poetry has been part of a culture in conflict" (LOP 61), but she sees our response as potentially multifaceted: "We are people tending toward democracy at the level of hope; on another level, the economy of the nation, the empire of business within the republic, both include in their basic premise the concept of perpetual warfare. It is the history of the idea of war that is beneath our

⁷⁴ Different translations of "Matthew" present the verb of refusal differently. The New Oxford Annotated, for example, reads, "Rachel weeping for her children; /she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

other histories” (LOP 61). For Howe, American violence is simply primary: “Why are we such a violent nation? Why do we have such contempt for powerlessness? I feel compelled in my work to go back, not to the Hittites but to the invasion or settling, or whatever current practice calls it, of *this* place. I am trying to understand what went wrong when the first Europeans stepped on shore here” (BM 164). Reading *Call Me Ishmael*, Howe reminds us that Olson’s “short, fragmented montage of a book takes cannibalism to be the first American fact” (Commander 7).

This important difference, not of approach or motion or orientation, but of attitude and emotion, can be felt in Howe and Rukeyser’s engagement with another scene memorializing violence, one more surprising overlap in their writings. Each attends to the construction of New Haven’s Center Church, “a beautiful traditional building modeled after St. Martin’s-in-the-Fields, in London,” upon the graves of Goffe and Whalley, “the Regicides – two of the judges who condemned Charles I to death, and fled England at the Restoration” (WG 9). “Regicide,” declares Howe in her *Talisman* interview, “I love that word. It’s of the devils’ party. Kings and crosses, blasphemy, and homicide are all packed into it ... In Guilford there is a cellar where two of the regicides were hidden. Whalley Avenue in New Haven is named for a regicide. In America the regicides were heroes – in England, villains. ... Under the ivy and civility there is the instinct for murder, erasure, and authoritarianism” (BM 175, 176). Unlike Howe, Rukeyser sees this literal foundation in violent “axiom-breaking” as a metaphorically (and actually) underlying the possibility (the necessity) of new construction and growth: “There is a necessity, when an action has been taken which shocks the past life and must be justified, to set up another image as great as the murdered one, and stronger, and beyond the threats of killers. In the small instance, a church was set up. In the large instance, in our country which turned from the slaughter of Indians and the unremitting work of breaking land to the rationalism of Newton, Lock, and Montesquieu, it was the Constitution” (LOP 63). “Their graves are in the church’s cornerstones,” Rukeyser admits, “But it is high explosive

that is buried in that gesture: violence, and daring, and the promise of new freedoms” (WG 9).

It is in the work and example of two shared war-poet predecessors that this difference is rendered clearest and, also, where it is negotiated: Melville, “the poet of outrage,” and Whitman, “the poet of possibility” (LOP 83). As Rukeyser links both poets to Gibbs as the “three masters of that terrible time, when continuity snapped,” she again turns to the two in the fifth chapter of *The Life of Poetry*, articulating these descriptions that I have quoted (WG 352). Melville and Whitman were exact contemporaries, as Howe points out in her notes toward her lecture on Poetry and War, in an act of tracing that echoes her attentiveness to the superimposition of scenes of writing upon scenes of battle: “Walt Whitman born May 31 1819 same year as Herman Melville died one year after he died 1892.” Rukeyser sees in their co-incident lives another instance of the failure of connection that was so central to her construction of *Willard Gibbs*: “The gifts of Whitman were as much at variance with the time as were those of Melville; and the two never met” (WG 357). In their near-misses, in their rejection by their contemporaries, and in their experiences of war, the two re-inscribe, once more, our webs of connection, relation-making, and investigation. Each also manifests the experimental feminine in their orientation toward their century’s struggles. Howe subtitles *Where Should The Commander Be* “a preliminary exploration of the hidden feminine in Melville and Olson,” and returns to this intuition in her *Talisman* interview, saying, “A subject I would truly love to write on ... is the feminine in Melville. There has to be a reason why his writing speaks so directly to me” (180). Of Whitman, Howe writes in her notes on “Poetry and War,” “His compassion is motherly in these poems and he constantly in his notes jotted down at the time refers to the boys missing their homes and mothers. All this time he was writing to his mother.” Associating Melville with the action of Retallack’s moving coastline, Rukeyser writes, “he knew reality for a wave in motion” (WG 353). Whitman, she sees as bringing that dynamic and transformative negotiation within: “I venture to suggest that the inclusive personality which

Whitman created from his own conflict is heroic proof of a life in which apparent antagonisms have been reconciled and purified into art” (LOP 76).

In negotiating inner and outer violence, *both* Whitman and Melville bring the battles from the external world radically into their own persons. Howe writes, “Melville lived our people’s wrong. He knew our history and wrote our myth and methodology” (Commander 8). And Rukeyser: “Whitman from the beginning felt himself to be deeply evil and deeply good ... It is in the remaking of himself that Whitman speaks for the general conflict in our culture. For, in the poems, his discovery of himself is a discovery of America; he is able to give it to anyone who reaches his lines” (LOP 72, 75). In each poet, ultimately, the negotiation – that radical, necessary, and difficult dance – moves not toward more conflict (as our world has seemed to trend), but toward its resolution. For Melville the struggle feels personal, hard won: “Melville found in himself conflicting wishes that would in anyone, however small, tear at each other like wild beasts, until the person – the cage of such wishes – could understand that it was not the animals themselves, but the relationship, that could give him life or death” (WG 353). Both Howe and Rukeyser experience the depth of his pursuit: “I think [Melville’s] late work is a going toward peace, like Dickinson, and he had to go that way,” declares Howe in the same interview (180). And Rukeyser investigates the mechanisms: “If there is evil in whalehood; if there is evil in the chase; if darkness leaps from light; even so, there is redemption, and it lies in sympathy with another human being, in the arrival of a touch, and beyond that touch, of ‘the centre and circumference of all democracy,’ God our divine equality” (LOP 73).

“The arrival of touch” is important for Whitman as well; though he – expansive, obsessive connector – seeks out a more populated, more future-oriented, generative peace: the “peace toward which his poems tended was not simply a lack of war,” Rukeyser argues (LOP 78). Howe turns to his poem “Reconciliation,” annotating Whitman’s echoing of the Gospel of John, his beginning with the word:

Word over all, beautiful as the sky,
 Beautiful that war and all its deeds of carnage must in time be utterly lost,
 That the hands of the sisters Death and Night incessantly softly was again, and ever
 again, this soil'd world;
 For my enemy is dead, a man divine as myself is dead,
 I look where he lies white-faced and still in the coffin – I draw near,
 Bend down and touch lightly with my lips the white face in the coffin. (453)

In Whitman's poem we experience touch as a registration of the (too late) collapsing of the world's false and tragic binaries – here between enemy and dear friend. "Reconciliation," Howe notices, typing out the word's definition from Webster's 1852 dictionary, has as its "literal sense" "to call back into union." "Calling back" being, unavoidably, another way of describing death – Dickinson's words in her letter to her cousins: "Called Back." Union is Whitman's idealized identification, a community of touch, in which "the range" and integrity of each individual is never lost (LOP 78).

"Reconciliation" leads us, finally, to both of our poets' search for peace. In Howe's work, it is a palpable struggle: "I'm concerned that so much of my work carries violence in it. I don't want to be of Ahab's party. I want to find peace. Anyway you balance in the edge in poetry" (BM 177). For her, as for Melville and Whitman, peace is imagined in the moment of touch – in that ultimate "sympathy with another human being," whether he is alive or dead, like Whitman's white-faced enemy. But as I explored in the previous chapter, the question of whether we can ever really touch others is a vexed and emotional subject for Howe: "In poetry all things *seem* to touch" in *Pierce-Arrow* (13), but in *THAT THIS*, "we all reach and reach and never touch" (18). Howe does locate her peace, finally, in the library – that ocean – surrounded by the voices of all the many dead, experiencing, "a sense of self-identification and trust, or the granting of grace in an ordinary room, in a secular time" (Telepathy 63). "To reach," she concludes, "is to touch" (60).

For Rukeyser, “[i]n a time of long war, surrounded by images of war,” to imagine peace is to imagine poetry (209). “For the last time here, I wish to say that we will not be saved by poetry,” she writes at the end of *The Life of Poetry*, immediately adding, “But poetry is the type of creation in which we may live and which will save us” (LOP 213). The difference between these two sentences – which seem identical if we do not read them closely – is in the activity of their verbs. We will not *be* saved by poetry, not in the passive voice. The search – the life – must be active and ongoing: “peace is not a lack of war” – it is not a negative – “but a drive toward unity” (211). This is her conclusion: “Until the peace makes its people, its forests, and its living cities; in that burning central life, and wherever we live, there is the place for poetry. And then we will create another peace” (214).

And now we must return our poets to their ships.

Howe, the small child, just sixteen-months old, looks backwards, trying to find a “place in history” for the “child [she] was” (RD 56). A Rückenfigur (her image in the final section of *Pierre-Arrow*), her back is to us. “The past” always “present when [she] write[s]” (Beckett 20).

Rukeyser, the young woman, on the opposite side of our ship, perched like Neptune’s wooden angle, looking ever forward: “the world of this creation, and its poetry, is not yet born. The possibility before us is that now we enter upon another time, again to choose. Its birth is tragic but the process is ahead. We must be able to turn a time of war into a time of building” (LOP 213).

Together, they steer us through this ocean, its tumultuous waves, its mystery. They *are* a meeting place.

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