Facing the Fact: Word and Image in Muriel Rukeyser's "Worlds Alongside"[1]

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In 1939, the small format picture magazine, *Coronet*, featured two photo-textual experiments. These were arranged as a "portfolio of photographs" supported by a poetic prose "narrative" by Muriel Rukeyser. They were published in the September and October issues, and were titled, respectively, "Adventures of Children" and "Worlds Alongside." The photo-narratives were experimental not least in the fact that they did not adhere to established contemporary formulae regarding the presentation of word-image pairings in magazine reports, such as those featured in *Life* and *Time* since the height of the Great Depression, as well as those featured previously in the more arts-orientated *Coronet*. Hailed by the editors of *Coronet* as "infinitely superior to the usual picture-gallery treatment" (*Coronet* 120) of photographs and descriptive captions in the publication, Rukeyser's photo-narratives nevertheless puzzled several readers, offended some, and remain an intriguing and, I argue, vital part of her oeuvre. For the purposes of this essay, which will attempt to unravel the complexity of Rukeyser's use of word and image, tracing the aesthetic, ideological and poetic implications of her photo-narrative work, I will dedicate my analysis to the second of the pieces, "Worlds Alongside." Although both photo-narratives utilise the format of the picture magazine to explore dual aspects of modern life--the separate yet parallel social spheres of wealth and poverty, of civilised sophistication and primitive simplicity, for example—"Worlds Alongside," as its title would indicate, provides a richer text through which to interrogate these themes, as well as Rukeyser's management of them.

Sixteen pages in length, the photo-narratives each contain six image pairings, in which two photographs are arranged to face each other on the verso and recto of the double page spread; one combination of four images, organised in double pairings on the same format; and two single images, one beginning and one ending the photo-narrative, the text of which runs

beneath each photograph in neat, centred font. The theme of duality in "Worlds Alongside,"

then, begins in its formal presentation. "Worlds living now!" opens the narrative (**figure 1**),

an exclamatory sentence that seems at odds with the silent tranquillity of the image of verdant

landscape above it. The prosperous fecundity of this portion of American existence[2] is

highlighted by Rukeyser's choice of descriptors: "rich" and "fertility" (83), which further

enhance the effect of the image directly overleaf: a larger documentary photograph by

Dorothea Lange of dustbowl desolation, in which the twin rudimentary and disused post-

boxes indicate that this part of "the same country's" (84) landscape cannot sustain life of any

kind (**figure 2**). The ornate city "tower" (85) to the right of the dustbowl image, doubled

through the window pane of the tower in which the photographer obviously stands, serves to

cement the established theme of duality and difference visible in the "same" world.

Exploiting what Edwin Rosskam in the same year had termed the "new unit" of

communication, "the double-paged spread in which word and image complemented each

other" (Rosskam 7), Rukeyser stages encounters between representative images of ostensibly

social, cultural or ethnic opposites. The potential for communication between these worlds

resides in the ocular dialectic that Rukeyser highlights as symptomatic of the Depression era's

dependency on visuality: a self-other relation bound up in the introspection and objectification

generated by the documentary gaze.

For example, appearing two thirds of the way through "Worlds Alongside," **figure 3**

demonstrates the layers of meaning constructed in Rukeyser's use of image, text and format;

more precisely: Depression era documentary photographs (Farm Security Administration

images by Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein respectively), a textual narrative that both

reflects and complicates the images to which it responds, and the double page configuration

that contrives the words and images to face each other. As I will explore later in this essay,

Rukeyser is both participating in and challenging the thirties' documentary rhetoric of social

signification in this pairing. The narrative use of the first person plural ("We have that range in our own country . . ." [92]) indicates an atmosphere of inclusivity that is quickly dissipated by the objective categorisation of the nameless subjects of the photographs, who appear to be treated as little more than indexes of social types: the poverty-stricken "migrant" (92), the affluent "postmaster" (whose affluence also stands in opposition and relation to the poverty implied in Lange's image of the isolated post-boxes). Keep looking (as, this essay will hopefully demonstrate, is the least Rukeyser intends us to do), and it appears increasingly doubtful whether the gap between these worlds of instability and security can be bridged via such means as the magazine picture essay. The face to face nature of the layout is complicated by the fact that the people in the photographs are in very different states of visual awareness. While the migrant worker, one of many who "pile their house in a Ford" (92), stands facing away from us, demonstrating no concern for whether or not his image is captured by the camera, the Virginian postmaster sits rigidly posed, aware of, but avoiding looking at the camera lens, as he supposedly relaxes "at home in the evening" (93). Although their images are contrived to face each other on the pages, Rukeyser has chosen to position the two men with their backs to one another, foregrounding the ultimately unknowable nature of their separate subjectivities. Furthermore, by not returning the gaze of the spectator/reader, the subjects of the photographs appear even more objectified, consumed and spoken for than the narrative beneath their images might imply. Considered in this way, then, Rukeyser's use of "we" can be read as both inclusive and reproachful of the reader.

"Reader" is an apt word here. Scattered in a somewhat unnatural pattern across his table are the postmaster's books, one of which he holds open in his hand and is apparently reading. Apart from reflecting the action of the reader of *Coronet*, whose appreciation of the photo-narrative is not simply visual but haptic, (and who therefore holds the postmaster in her/his own hands), this visual *punctum*, as Roland Barthes might have it, opens consideration

of the way we read pictures.[3] Instead of providing an indexical series of images of the dispossessed and privileged, accompanied by an explanatory text, Rukeyser is demonstrating that pictures make us think--make us question our own ways of reading, or looking at them, and the people they apparently represent. I will return to this subject, and to each of the image pairings discussed above and immediately below, in more detail later in the essay. For now, however, I would like to foreground the unusual and complex visual dialectic of "Worlds Alongside," complicated further in our understanding when we consider that the migrant-postmaster spread is situated between the central pairing of the photo-narrative: the twinned faces of a young African tribal woman and the American dancer, Margaret Graham (**figure 4**), and the pairing of a large, blind face and a whirlpool (**figure 5**). These pairings serve to illustrate at the outset of this essay not only the multiplicity of the "worlds" Rukeyser is setting alongside each other (and by extension, the connections she is attempting to make between them), but the ideological risks involved in making what at first glance appear rather strange or superficial connections. There are obvious perils in categorising the African subject in **figure 4** as "primitive" and "receptive" (90); a passive spectacle in formal and social opposition to the "finished face" (90) of Graham, who is referred to by name on a later page of the photo-narrative, and whose active choice of self-presentation as performative spectacle serves to highlight the lack of aesthetic autonomy in the photograph of the young African. "Worlds Alongside" in this way consistently raises and challenges issues of agency and appropriation, categorisation and ambiguity. The difference between aesthetic autonomy and subjugation is not resolved in the photo-narrative, and the fact that the only face to stare straight forward out of the magazine is apparently blind might leave the reader uneasy, if it were not for the fact that Rukeyser is persistent in her emphasis on the variety of perspectives needed to understand difference and thus build connections in the world based on its heterogeneity.

It is ethical, aesthetic, and ideological concerns such as these that Rukeyser's "Worlds Alongside" continually confronts and unpicks, and while the brief examples above indicate the complexity of the image-text dialectic in the photo-narrative, they also point to the irreducibility of its particulars. Produced at a time when several American picture magazines were engaging in the combination of visual and verbal reportage in order to communicate both the effects of the Depression and the New Deal reform projects initiated to appease them, Rukeyser's photo-narratives for *Coronet* both participated in and radically altered the conservative, documentary mode of the magazine photo-essay. In the sections that follow, I will contextually ground Rukeyser's photo-narratives as well as her engagement in photo-textual and documentary forms, relating them to her lifelong poetics of connection. I will then provide closer readings of "Worlds Alongside," exploring the ethical, aesthetic and ideological implications of the photo-narrative for its contemporary readership, its place in Rukeyser's oeuvre, and its contribution to visual-verbal practices.

Rukeyser's poetics and documentary aesthetics

Rukeyser was celebrated by Kenneth Rexroth as "by far the best poet of her exact generation."[4] As this essay will indicate, her work was shaped particularly by the wide-ranging aesthetic and ideological concerns that developed contemporaneously with this "exact generation"--one that came of age during a period in which the documentary genre represented the principle means of communicating cultural values and reporting social and personal realities. Coined in 1926 by filmmaker John Grierson to mean "the creative treatment of actuality" (Hardy 11), the intertextual innovation of documentary as it reflected and defined 1930s America coincided with Rukeyser's own imaginative, relational, and responsible way of looking at the world.

Throughout her life, Rukeyser wrote with the conviction that there are "two kinds of poems: the poems of unverifiable facts, based in dreams, in sex, in everything that can be given to other people only through the skill and strength by which it is given; and the other kind being the document, the poem that rests on material evidence" (*Education of a Poet* 226). This inherent "doubleness" in her work, as Rukeyser termed it, allowed her writing to become the "meeting-place" of ostensibly opposed disciplines, practices, and cultures. Rukeyser's lasting passion for and unremitting promotion of a poetics of connection is something that every Rukeyser scholar will instantly recognise as the guiding force behind her life and work. For Rukeyser, who admitted to being "deeply concerned with the evidence of the world," the "facts" of human existence could be "reported" via the confluence of subjective and objective, "artistic" and "scientific" ways of experiencing reality.[5] Developing her career in a literary environment dominated by documentary discourse, Rukeyser found a method by which to articulate her conviction: the duality of the document and the unverifiable fact found natural expression in the combinative form of the photo-narrative.

Before Rukeyser's work for *Coronet*, documentary, photo-textual magazine essays were primarily to be found in larger scale picture publications such as *Survey Graphic*, *Life*, *Time*, and *Fortune*, which set striking photographs depicting the state of the nation (supplied mostly by the federally-funded Farm Security Administration [FSA][6]) alongside descriptive and sociological text. These reports, which became known as "picture stories" or "photographic essays," relied on the intersecting discourses of reportage, government propaganda, and aesthetics to create "stories told in pictures, organised so that the communication of ideas and emotions became most effective" (Stange 81). *Coronet*'s partaking in this emergent form of journalism was consciously more intellectual. The magazine would regularly feature an illustrated profile of a leading artist or photographer (including the documentary photographers Margaret Bourke-White and Lewis Hine in

January and February 1939 respectively).[7] John Raeburn observed that *Coronet* presented its "portfolios" of images to approximate "a gallery show," distinguishing itself from *Life* and *Look* "by making a lavish display of artful photographs rather than photojournalism its cornerstone" (196). During its run under David Smart between November 1936 and October 1961, *Coronet* proved to be a popular women's magazine; one quarter of a million copies of its inaugural issue sold out in two days, and by 1940, although its circulation had begun to decline, it was still competing with *Esquire*, *Life*, and *Look*, selling in the region of 100,000 copies (Raeburn 196).

It is unclear how Rukeyser came to provide the photo-narratives for *Coronet*, although it is likely that she approached the publication with her idea for a more poetic portfolio format. Archival evidence indicates her wish to become deeply involved in the production of photo-textual articles and stories for popular consumption in the magazines *Life* and *Holiday* also, the latter of which Rukeyser approached as late as 1951 with suggestions for "a story of picture sequences'" informed by her work "with documentaries and exhibitions," and emphasising that "the excitement and strength" of "writing with pictures" had "hardly been discovered" (qtd. in Gander 34). What is clear, however, is that Rukeyser selected the photographs for her 1939 photo-narratives from the freely available FSA file (from which one third of the images in "Worlds Alongside" are taken), and from *Coronet*'s archives, which held a variety of American and European photographs, including those from respected agencies such as Black Star (Gander 33).

Rukeyser's use of both artistic and documentary photographs situates "Worlds Alongside" in a growing documentary sub-genre that connected the subjective and objective reading of images by taking Grierson's definition of "the creative treatment of actuality" to different extremes. *Life* staff photographer Bourke-White and writer Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), for example, extended the photo-essay format in the first

collaborative American documentary photo-book of the 1930s. As William Stott has noted, Caldwell's text, typical of the sociological journalese of the time, is both sentimental and detached (Stott 218), and the captions to the photographs reinforce the pitying and often condescending tone of the prose. The authors explain in the introduction: "The legends under the pictures are intended to express the authors' own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed; they do not pretend to reproduce the actual sentiments of [the] persons" (Bourke-White and Caldwell, intro. n.p.). By installing their own persuasive rhetoric in place of their subjects' voices, the authors created a work which leaned heavily towards the subjective, artistic element in documentary. Bourke-White's photographic style also led to her subjects being visually portrayed often from dramatic, creative viewpoints. The artistry of the pictures complicates their status as documents of recorded fact, and their intended unification with fabricated "quotations" compounds this dilemma.

Bourke-White and Caldwell's attention to human, facial encounter was symptomatic of the era's documentary aesthetic. Roy E. Stryker, head of the Photographic Division of the FSA, and responsible to a large extent for its ideological construction (Trachtenberg 57-8), noted after its closure: "the faces to me were the most significant part of the file" (Wood 14). Consistently seeking portrait shots due to their perceived capacity to humanly involve the viewer as witness to the events depicted, Stryker believed that "a good documentary should tell not only what a place or a thing or a person *looks* like, but it must also tell the audience what it would *feel* like to be an actual witness to the scene" ("Documentary photography" 1364). Lange's "Migrant Mother" image was perhaps the most singularly effective photograph of the era, reproduced numerous times in books, magazines, exhibitions and posters. For Stryker, it was "*the* picture of Farm Security . . . . She has all the suffering of mankind in her but all of the perseverance too . . . . She is immortal" (Wood 19). Paula Rabinowitz has written that Lange's "attention to the individual face" allowed the

photographer to connect a single person's story with a national, historical narrative, in turn enabling a face such as the Migrant Mother's to transcend imagery to iconicity (Rabinowitz 87). Yet the facility of an image of a face to speak *for* a collective stems from its ability to speak *to* another: in the introduction to their 1939 documentary photo-book *An American Exodus*, Lange and sociologist Paul Taylor wrote in apparent opposition to Bourke-White and Caldwell, asserting their belief that by providing captions conveying their subjects' words verbatim, they had tried to "so far as possible . . . let them speak to you *face-to-face*" (Lange and Taylor 15). By bringing a middle class audience "*face-to-face*" with the dispossessed, documentary photographers hoped to contrive a direct correlation between the "lens of the camera" and "the eye of the person looking at the print" (Rothstein 1357). However, since the dispossessed were frequently figured as representative types, it remains contentious whether those involved in documentary image production did much to narrow the social and existential gap between the two "worlds" of those depicted in photo-books and those who read them.

Returning to "Worlds Alongside," whose qualities of captivation and ambiguity I outlined above, we are therefore able to embed Rukeyser's photo-narrative in a documentary tradition. Rukeyser's use of the double-page spread, which contrives images to come face to face with each other as well as with the reader, coupled with her repeated employment of the human face to critically address our ways of looking, corresponds with the thirties' emphasis on facial confrontation. Yet Rukeyser's use of the human face is far from straightforward or conventional. Additionally, the manner in which she writes the human face, aside from (or alongside) how she images it, requires closer examination. Before analysing Rukeyser's aesthetic practice of the face to face, it is important to note that her experiments for *Coronet* were in response to another attempt, made in 1938 by American poet Archibald MacLeish, to tell the story of Depression era America in words that faced pictures.

Land of the Free

In April 1938, Rukeyser reviewed MacLeish's *Land of the Free* for the *New Masses*. A

hybrid text of documentary photographs and poetic social comment, the book featured eighty-

eight photographs, almost all of which were from the FSA file. Appreciating MacLeish's

intentions, but faulting him on his execution, Rukeyser utilised her review to proffer her own

ideas on the creative potential and social use-value of the new image-text form.

Rukeyser felt profoundly that MacLeish's endeavour was "adventurous and right."

She lauded the "strong dramatic sense" of his image arrangement, and commented favourably

on his extensive use of RA (FSA) images, extolling them as "excellent," "pure" and

"brilliant." She specifically celebrated the narrative quality of "individual portraits" among

the selection, which allowed the reader to see, along with the "story of America spoiling

itself, the people this waste affects," as well as "what happens to these people's lives and

faces" ("Review" 26). However, Rukeyser lamented the fact that the book fell short of its

aspirations towards cinematic simultaneity and balance. MacLeish had admitted that his initial

intention to write a Depression-era poem to which the photographs "would serve as

commentary" was soon reversed, "so great was the power and stubborn inward livingness of

these vivid American documents" (89). Instead, MacLeish positioned his text on the verso,

under a horizontal blue line, labelled at the beginning of the book as "the sound track," in an

apparent effort to award it filmic fluidity. The poetic text is sparse and small; often, a single,

short line faces a full-page photograph of a frowning or unsmiling face, a child in rags, an

over-ploughed field, a migrating family, or a barren landscape. Underlining what he saw as

the people's bewilderment and suffering, MacLeish employs a refrain of uncertainty, repeated

twenty times in variant form throughout the book. "We don't know," states the first page;

"We aren't sure" comprises the second. Jefferson Hunter has commented that MacLeish's

words render the photographs more melancholy than they had previously been read: "Faces of ordinary Americans which in other contexts might seem heroic here seem full of doubt" (83). The principal reason for this is that the juxtaposition of each photograph with a fragment of poetic commentary presents the words as captions to the images. Lange's "Migrant Mother," for example, faces the line "Now we don't know," draining her image of the strength and stoicism with which it had elsewhere been imbued. Furthermore, through the repetitive use of the pronoun "we," MacLeish not only imagines all Americans to think in a similar manner, but attempts, like Bourke-White and Caldwell, to speak for individuals who may not have shared his sentiments. By purporting to express the collective confusion and anxiety of the people photographed, MacLeish assumed knowledge of their plight, and authority to speak on their behalf. The repeated refrain throughout *Land of the Free* of "we're not talking" serves as an ironic reminder that MacLeish's peroration does not include the voices of those pictured.

Rukeyser recognised that the problem with MacLeish's book resided in the style, structure, and presentation of the poem, arguing that the poetic image-text form "deserved a new *kind* of poetry if it was really to carry itself along" ("Review" 27). The poem must therefore not rely on the photographs for message or movement, but, through a meeting of textual forms and styles, collaborate with the images to create a new, communicative art form: "Here we need something like a poem, something like movie titles, something like news in lights around the *Times* building" (27). Ultimately then, *Land of the Free* fails, in Rukeyser's opinion, to confront the issues it raises, and in so doing, fails to bring the reader face-to-face with an immediate social problem. This is in part due to MacLeish's somewhat clumsy handling of the dilemma of the artistic and equal presentation of image and text. Believing that MacLeish's work demonstrated "a great lack of balance" between the two, Rukeyser argued for "the cleanest, sharpest, most alive words we know to meet these faces and these scenes." MacLeish had admittedly recognised the "stubborn inward livingness" of the

photographs, but had not responded with words that matched their visual vigour. Rukeyser objected to the book's puzzled, unsure refrain, stressing the need for "direct questions put after the 'we wonder,'" rather than continued uncertainty. For Rukeyser, inquiring after the direction of the country allowed the population to "ask all the questions we like, but to carry in our questions our wish; to show continually the lives of our own people under the times they carry" (28). That "Worlds Alongside" contains exclamatory statements of fact and vitality—"Worlds living now!" features twice--would indicate Rukeyser's solution to the pervading feelings of doubt and dislocation in MacLeish's text. Further, her decision to provide dual interpretations of contemporary existence connects to her wish for a more robust response to "these people's lives and faces"; a more "balanced" representation of the "story of America spoiling itself" to combat MacLeish's univocal perspective.

Dual faces of American existence

Rukeyser's method of picture juxtaposition was unusual for the time; other photo-texts had not utilised paired, contrasting images on the double page (*An American Exodus* was published just after the photo-narratives). Like many photo-essays of the Depression era, Rukeyser's presentation evokes concern for those regions of the country battered by drought and poverty. Unlike many photo-essays of the time, however, it does so by repeatedly highlighting difference and implying the relative wealth of the *Coronet* reader. Returning to **figure 2**, for example, under Lange's photograph of dry, barren landscape, Rukeyser evokes an American "sun" that "whips more flat the flat lands that have no features, no water, no grace, no reflections…" (84). Opposite, under the photograph of the ornate gothic spire runs the line, "as the rich city has, racing tower against tower" (85). Rukeyser's text alludes to the "reflections" of the two towers on the window's glass as well as the photographs' capacity, in collaboration with the text, to provoke contemplation. In simple terms, the images are

ideological and aesthetical inversions of each other, opposite yet the same, and each needing the other to reinforce its meaning. Additionally, Rukeyser's observation that the "flat lands" have "no reflections" indicates both the lack of attention given to the poor by the "rich," and the former's relatively uncivilised state in terms of technological advancement and architectural construction.

This dialectic is extended in the next pairing of a carefully composed Brassaï photograph of a waiter pouring rows of glasses full of red wine, and the less artful portrait of a rural worker, pouring water from a metal beaker into his mouth. Visual symmetry rests in the long, L-shaped table in the first image and the raised crook of the worker's arm in the second. They are contrasted in their representation of two different responses to the same human need: "we make cities out of the need for four walls and a door . . . and the two values live alongside each other, the elaborate gesture and the simplest motion" (86-87). In contrast to MacLeish, Rukeyser does not "wonder" what has happened to America, but asserts that the American people as a nation have made choices resulting in its present state; the parallel "worlds" of wealth and poverty are living proof of the nation's impulse to segregate and discriminate. New Deal ideology, exemplified by the FSA file, sought to collectively reform society towards a national community (Pells 114). However, in "Worlds Alongside," Rukeyser highlights America's internal alterity ("we have that range in our own country"), encouraging her reader to confront both visually and morally an inherent, national duality.

Toward the end of the photo-narrative, after Rukeyser has given the reader time to "reflect" upon her topic, she reinforces this poverty-privilege dialectic with another photograph of Lange's, alongside a stock image of a man skiing at speed over a snow dune (**figure 6**). Lange's large photograph is itself an image-text: the "Next time try the train— relax" roadside billboard stands in ironic juxtaposition to the weary migrant workers walking along the long dirt road. Positioned at the same height as the billboard, the photograph of the

skier on the recto emphasises the gulf between the states of the American economy pre-and mid-Depression, as well as the widening gap between the country's wealthy and poor citizens. Rukeyser's text underscores both the perseverance and lack of social mobility of the dispossessed: "Many try, and inquire. The roads do not help them" (96). Beneath the skier, she provides a summation of her photo-narrative, beginning with the sentence "Some are lucky" (97). These fortunate people "speed across one world while the other world waits, a man in the road waiting for the other car to move, a man drinking from a dipper while glasses of wine are poured . . ." (97). American existence, then, is split decisively in two: one "world" seems unfortunate, expectant, still; the other mobile, "rich" and "lucky."

During the 1930s, a strong dichotomy arose between national perceptions of "culture" and "civilisation" in America. Significant studies were given to the fact that "culture" was no longer considered to be "the highest achievements of men of intellect and art through history," but rather, as Robert Lynd phrased it at the time, "all the things that a group of people inhabiting a common geographical area do, the ways they do things and the ways they think and feel about things" (Susman 184; Lynd 19). In ideological opposition to "culture," "civilisation" grew as a term to be equated by thirties critics and writers with urban-industrial growth, and was often considered "the enemy" (Susman 188). The documentary turn towards the country's agrarian victims of capitalism focused upon and romanticised American "folk" in accordance with their perceived honesty and lack of culpability in either capitalism or its collapse. FSA photographers helped to perpetuate the idea that such folk represented a more accurate portrait of American reality; the file, as Stryker was later to admit, was "more than a little bit sociology" ("The FSA Collection" 8).

Rukeyser's discussion of "worlds alongside" is therefore fairly typical of the dialectical ideology characterising documentary expression at the time. Her use of an anthropological photograph of an African tribal woman would also seem to correspond to the

era's rhetoric; however, by contrasting two human faces, one "primitive," one "civilised," on the central pages of the photo-narrative (**figure 4**), Rukeyser reiterates her belief in the communicative and connective power of word and image to unite these supposed opposites:

> These worlds alongside bring together faces:
>
> the primitive waiting face that is ready to
>
> receive history upon itself, a dark genesis for
>
> us all. It lies beautiful and receptive, a living
>
> rock . . .
>
> and the finished face of the dancer turning
>
> to her audience. (90)

This text appears on the verso, under a photograph of the upturned head of the young African woman, and opposite the full-page head and shoulders photograph of the dancer Graham. The photographs are positioned so that the women's chins almost touch; indeed, as the reader closes the magazine, the women's faces are brought closer to each other until they eventually merge, while remaining separate. As Graham's lips, nose, eyes and forehead blend into those of the African woman, the reader may physically "bring together faces," a witness and a participant in the meeting of opposites that Rukeyser has staged.

By emphasising the act of coming face-to-face, Rukeyser was responding to documentary's somewhat contradictory relationship with the human face as ethical and phenomenological figure. This central pairing reveals Rukeyser's understanding of the importance of the face in the dynamic of difference, and as such, both contributes to and challenges notions of alterity and sameness. It is an attempt to create a dialogue without assimilation, between representatives of different "worlds." Rukeyser's terminology and

approach bear striking correspondence to the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, whose

theory of the "face to face" can further illuminate Rukeyser's construction and examination of

national and personal selfhood and otherness.

Rukeyser's "Worlds Alongside" and Emmanuel Levinas' "face to face"

Although I can find no record of Rukeyser having read the work of Levinas, the terms she

employs to expound her theory of the poetic confluence of opposites are in many cases

identical to those used by Levinas to explain his interpretation of phenomenological ethics.

Rukeyser did, however, read extensively the work of the philosopher and Zionist leader

Martin Buber, whose writings Levinas listed as among his greatest influences (*Totality and

Infinity* 68-9; *Outside the Subject* 4-19).[8] Buber's (1878-1965) religious and social philosophy

is structured upon a belief in the potential for intersubjective creativity within relationship and

dialogue. Calling this transcendent dialogue a "meeting" between consciousnesses (*I and

Thou* 43-62), Buber highlights his belief in the necessity of self-reflection to develop a

"philosophical anthropology" in which "everything that is discovered about historical and

modern man . . . must be built up and crystallised round what the philosopher discovers by

reflecting about himself" (*Between Man and Man* 34). Positing that the "fundamental fact of

human existence is man with man," Buber states that this relation is "rooted in one being

turning to another." This communication is not reducible to the spoken word and exists in

what Buber terms "the sphere of the 'between'": a sphere in which "an 'outer' event and an

'inner' impression" come together to create a "third alternative" (39). Levinas was to carry

Buber's theory of intersubjective meeting into the philosophy of ethical relation.

Levinas' *Totality and Infinity* (*TI*) explores the ethical position of the other as a

precondition for self-knowledge. According to Levinas, the "notion of the face" opens a

number of "perspectives" on the self and the other, whose ethical and phenomenological co-

existence depends upon a relationship of irreducible difference (51). Similar to Buber's fully participatory "philosophical anthropology," Levinas' theory of the face stresses the dangers of a purely observational approach to the other. Both modes of thought help us to understand that documentary discourses that tended to objectify and possess the other under a voyeuristic gaze--for example, *You Have Seen Their Faces*--subsequently denied the self any reciprocal relation with alterity. They thus contributed to what Levinas terms "thematisation and conceptualisation": inseparable modes of regarding that "are not peace with the other but suppression or possession of the other" (*TI* 46). Levinas argues instead for a comprehension of being that is commanded by the self's relationship with the other. If we are to understand "the face" as "the way in which the other presents himself" (50), it follows that we are to understand the self within the general economy of the "face to face"; a meeting or "conversation" of immediacy, enacted at the level of reception. The other must not and cannot be reduced to the self-same, but must be met with an "openness" to alterity, "possible only starting from *me*" (39, 40).

When Rukeyser contrives the primitive and the sophisticated to meet face to face on the printed page, she appears to highlight alterity by means of proximity. The anonymous African woman is Graham's literal and metaphorical neighbour, and through the face, the otherness of each is reinforced and better appreciated in a reciprocal dialogue of being. However, there exists in Rukeyser's hybrid text a critical third element: that of the reader. The faces attest to what Levinas terms "the presence of a third party, the whole of humanity . . . the eyes that look at me," for "the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity" (213). This "third party" must partake in the experience of the face to face, fulfilling the requirements of both observer and participant. In so doing, the "third party" experiences a selfhood that cannot be reached solely through the self, but only via the responsive and responsible witness of an Other. Rukeyser's theory of poetic relation and Levinas' theory of ethical relation are

comparable in terms of their irreducibility to two components, and their dependence on the presence of a "third party," referred to by Rukeyser as the "witness."

In *The Life of Poetry* (1949), Rukeyser explains her preference for the term "witness" over "reader" or "audience" to express the tripartite relationship she hoped to achieve in the poetic act of bringing together:

> I suggest the old word "witness," which includes the act of seeing or knowing
> by personal experience, as well as the act of giving evidence. The overtone of
> responsibility in this word is not present in the others; and the tension of the
> law makes a climate here which is that climate of excitement and revelation
> giving air to the work of art, announcing with the poem that we are about to
> change, that work is being done on the self. (175)

Rukeyser theorizes that "work" may be "done on the self" via the assumption of "responsibility" for something outside the self. This "responsibility" in turn results from a visual and cognitive personal experience of the other. By positing that "these worlds alongside bring together faces," Rukeyser encourages her reader/witness to engage in the visual (and haptic) dialogue played out on the pages of her photo-narrative. Similar to Buber's and Levinas' hopes for "a transformed understanding of the person and . . . of community," and an expression of ethical "justice" respectively, Rukeyser's hope is to create a "meeting-place" of supposed opposites in which self and other are face to face and viewed by each other and by a third party as equal but necessarily different (Buber, *Between Man and Man* 41; Levinas, *TI* 72).

Levinas also employs the word "witness," applying it to a being experiencing an immediate relation with another's vulnerability. This vulnerability is recognised through proximity: one is involved in the other before one could have chosen to be, and in so being, is bound to the other at a level of response and responsibility: "Proximity, difference which is

non-indifference, is responsibility. It is a response without a question . . . . It is the passivity of exposure, a passivity itself exposed" (*Otherwise then Being* [*OB*[139). According to Levinas, one is claimed by the face of the other, and articulated as a responsible individual before one can articulate oneself. The vulnerability of the other is explicit in the nakedness of the face, which "presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger." However, this stranger "presents himself as an equal" (*TI* 213). Such equality arises from the face to face encounter. It begins with the ego "bearing witness of itself to the other" (*OB* 119). The proximity of the other therefore calls forth its authority in the articulation of my own subjectivity. The other is irreducible to the self-same, but remains alongside me visibly and ethically: "It is my responsibility before a face looking at me as absolutely foreign . . . that constitutes the original fact of fraternity." The face to face is thus "an ethical relation"; for both Rukeyser and Levinas, it is rooted in a dynamic of "witness" and "responsibility" (*TI* 214, 202).

Six of the photographs used by Rukeyser in "Worlds Alongside" are facial shots, and Rukeyser makes explicit reference in her narrative to the human face on five occasions. Directly after the central facial combination, Rukeyser pairs Lange's candid image of a migrant family's arrested car journey with Rothstein's more posed composition (**figure 3**). The text layout under the latter image is as follows:

<div style="text-align:center">

to the Virginia postmaster

</div>

at home in the evening. Crowded into his

corner is the record of effort that ends in

some buildings, a ritual of business, belief in

a god in the room, a few household objects,

<div style="text-align:center">

and his face. (93)

</div>

In what appears to be the only piece of critical writing hitherto to address "Worlds Alongside," Jefferson Hunter condemns Rukeyser's use of documentary photographs as reinforcing the genre's objectivising ethos, asserting that the only observation that can confidently be made about her photo-narrative "is that it denies individuality to dwellers in the poor, simple world" by situating them as "fully interpreted and thus fully categorized" (143). However, in light of the photo-narrative's central dilemma, highlighted at the beginning of this essay, we can more fully understand Rukeyser's employment of image and text as both engaging in and questioning methods of categorisation common to the period. For example, Rukeyser recognises that the postmaster's life may be documented and summarized as a collection of fragments, all of them objects, and all of them in some way perpetuating documentary photography's aesthetic of recorded objectification and mimetic reproductivity: "a few household objects" are a mirror and two lamps, figures of reflection and illumination essential to photographic technology and central metaphors in the aesthetics of representation; "some buildings" are pictures of monuments hanging on the wall; "belief in a god in the room" is another wall hanging, with an image of a family meal (connoting the last supper), accompanied by a brief text reminding us of Christ's invisible omnipresence. By drawing attention to "belief in a god in the room," Rukeyser underlines the pluralisation of god afforded by the mechanical reproduction of an iconic image that takes the place of the referent. The last element in this ironic "record of effort" comprises the page's last line of text. By isolating and centring the final item in this otherwise meagre catalogue of the vital components of the postmaster's existence, Rukeyser aligns it with the initial line, creating a visual symmetry that reads: "to the Virginia postmaster and his face." Positioned thus, the text both salutes the subject and directs attention towards it. Likewise, in Levinasian theory, the face of the other both greets and summons the self towards a meeting.

Yet Rukeyser's ambiguous language also serves to frustrate a true "meeting" here. Does, for example, the postmaster's "belief" extend from "a god in the room" to "his face"? Or has "his face," despite Rukeyser's formal positioning of it outside the catalogue of objectified phenomenal existence, been thematised and collected by the documentarian in the same manner as have his "household objects"? Rukeyser's understanding of the world and of poetry (the two are inseparable for Rukeyser) was built upon a philosophy of eye-witness that involves responsibility to the self and the other. An objectifying look can, in both Rukeyser's and Levinas' philosophies, suppress and possess the other, freezing the continuity of life, and creating further distance between faces. Inability or refusal to respond responsibly to the other is equal to an inability to see the world and the self's place within it. Rukeyser's decision to position overleaf from this spread a full-page photograph of another, anonymous face whose large, open eyes are discernibly blind may therefore be understood in the light of Levinas' ethical rhetoric.

Responsibility arises from Levinas and Rukeyser's understanding of "regard" as incorporating both a way of seeing and the act of giving particular care. Rukeyser's poetic caption labels the blind gypsy's face as "the still look," while beneath the opposite image of a whirlpool resembling a large eye, the text responds with a reference to "the inward look of waters, carrying their currents" (**figure 5**). Rukeyser's combination of image and text again alludes to ethical and poetical ways of looking at the world, which naturally include perception of both an outer event and an inner impression. Encountering the face of an Other provokes immediate introspection, and Rukeyser confirms that these dual elements of perception must "dance in unique balance" (95). The last image of the photo-narrative indicates the necessity to consider the "look" of others, and features what Rukeyser captions as "the Mexican boy in his look at the silver plane" (**figure 7,** 98). The contrast of perspectives that these pictures and the narrative alongside them depict, challenges the

primacy of the viewing subject by constantly confusing and resisting the reader's inferences as to what the pictures mean. By extending and questioning the photographs' meanings, the narrative provides a subtle interrogation of the reader/witness, who is made to re-evaluate her or his own position within the dynamic of visual and ethical regard.

Language with or without words: "the face speaks"

"Worlds Alongside" exhibits a symmetry and reciprocity that is largely absent from *Land of the Free*. Rukeyser took issue with what she understood as MacLeish's translation of, rather than response to, the faces in his chosen images: "He has taken these people's faces and translated the inarticulate physical life seen in them to a lost periodless quality" ("Review" 27). According to Levinas, the face to face involves an encounter with language prior to our own speaking. Before we can speak for ourselves or for others, "the face speaks":

> The face is a living presence; it is expression. The life of expression consists in undoing the form in which the existent, exposed as a theme, is thereby dissimulated. The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse. He who manifests himself comes . . . to his own assistance. He at each instance undoes the form he presents. (*TI* 66)

Responsibility is interpreted by Levinas as response, which is in turn interpreted as *saying*, whether aloud or not. Levinasian theory posits that the communicability of the face transcends objectivity by involving a saying that is both the essence of being and the commencement of "the presence of exteriority in language" (302). Levinas terms this initial saying as an affirmative "'Here I am,'" a command that issues from the face of the other to awaken one to response and responsibility (*OB* 142-149). It is the exposure of the self to the other, a saying of the self, because "saying is witness, it is saying without the said, a sign given to the other."

Consequently, it is "a fraternity, a proximity that is possible only as an openness of self . . . . It is thus exposing of exposure . . . the one-for-the-other" (150-151).

In MacLeish's chosen faces the "physical life" is "inarticulate," according to Rukeyser, because it is reduced to language of the self-same: the self as witness can only be called to respond to the other, not to speak in his or her place. MacLeish's use of the first person plural therefore differs from Rukeyser's. Unable realistically to include himself among the rural labour contingent of America, MacLeish represents both the other and himself in what Levinas terms "a borrowed light" (*TI* 67). Rukeyser's problem with MacLeish's words is her belief that they are "in somebody else's mouth" ("Review" 27). The pictorial-verbal imbalance of the book is the result of MacLeish's inauthentic response to the faces he encounters. Rukeyser's use of "we," as noted earlier, conveys a more modest, reproachful tone. In her review of *Land of the Free*, she argues that "[t]he 'we' so many critics suffer over is not so important, once the tone is there. The thing really is not to fall into the grandiose tone that is in another tradition altogether" (a tone amplified by MacLeish's quotations from documents such as The Declaration of Independence). Her belief in the need "to supply the cleanest, sharpest, most alive words we know to meet these faces and these scenes" prefigures the ethical obligation Levinas perceives in the human act of meeting.

However, whether Rukeyser succeeds in creating and sustaining textual-pictorial equilibrium in her photo-narratives is debatable. At times, her text constitutes an immediate response to the images, arguably allowing the Levinasian "'Here I am'" quality of the face to manifest itself, and affording a markedly different effect from that of the faces MacLeish helped to thematise as "lost." Additionally, the phrase "Worlds living now!," occurring twice, might be seen to undermine the "periodless" quality that Rukeyser thought MacLeish had given to the faces in *Land of the Free.* Yet it is difficult to believe that such a phrase, despite its emphasis on "living," demonstrates what Rukeyser intended when she made a plea for the

"cleanest, sharpest, most alive words we know" to accompany the FSA photographs.

Furthermore, in an effort to expose the revelatory quality of the face to face encounter,

Rukeyser must inevitably employ the photograph as representational symbol. While she

avoids speaking for the other, the imagination governing her text represents the other as a

poetic image. She is thus unable to maintain a generosity towards the other's face that is over

and above its presentation as an image, and although Rukeyser at times transcends visual

objectification, or at least points the way to its transcendence, there exists within "Worlds

Alongside" occasional slippage into thematisation of and condescension towards the

perceived other. "The face of the Other," asserts Levinas, "at each moment destroys and

overflows the plastic image it leaves me" (*TI* 51). By employing the static image of the

photograph as a means of overcoming the distancing effect of an objectivising vision,

Rukeyser risks reducing alterity to symbolism, augmented by her tendency at points to fix the

other as type. This is most evident in the central pairing of the faces of Graham and the young

African woman, to whom Rukeyser refers as "primitive."

The primitive

In his short critique of "Worlds Alongside," Hunter is right to refer to the pictured African

woman as "portentously symbolic" (143). Approached on Levinasian terms, her face

embodies Graham's confrontation with irreducible alterity, and Rukeyser's description of it as

"ready . . . beautiful and receptive" offers a lesson in the open "passivity" that Levinas states

is necessary for an ethical and phenomenological encounter with the other (*OB* 139).

Moreover, the face's readiness to "receive history upon itself" situates it beyond the province

of systematic knowledge that Levinas terms "totality." It is before and without history, and as

such, a symbol of "infinity" which may insinuate itself into my world as my interlocutor

(Wyschogrod 190). In short, the face is necessarily my self's precondition. However,

Rukeyser's further characterisation of the "primitive" face as "a dark genesis for us all" and "a living rock" defines the image according to the terms of a primitivist aesthetic inherited from the 1920s, and situates it within the burgeoning visual-anthropological discourse of the period.

By alluding to an ideological location of the "primitive" in a more innocent, irretraceable past, Rukeyser's narrative contributes to the era's fascination with the exoticism of the cultural Other, established by Robert Flaherty's founding documentary film, *Nanook of the North* (1922), and anthropological texts such as Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa: A Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation* (1928). The cultural theorist Lila Abu-Lughod has argued that "the Western civilised self was constituted in part through this confrontation with and picturing of the savage or primitive other" (24). By formally picturing a confrontation between the face of the African woman and "the finished face of the dancer," Rukeyser would appear to underline the progressive civilisation of the "Western self." Her characterisation of the "primitive" as "beautiful" and "a living rock" contributes to an established primitivist rhetoric that figured the other in romantic, natural terms. Additionally, the photographs' layout contrives the African to gaze upwards to Graham, who appears to look down upon her. However, Rukeyser's utilisation of such imagery involves a conflict between established perceptions and new creative perspectives.

Fatimah Tobing Rony has written of the "redemption motif of anthropology"; this is the idea that the primitive is an uncorrupted example of the values of the West: fraternity, independence, and perseverance (131). Indeed, contemporary filmmakers and critics alike were aware of films such as *Nanook* representing a "romantic desire to summon, preserve for posterity, the purity and 'majesty' of a way of life not yet spoiled by the advance of civilisation" (Kracauer 273). The thirties' impulse towards an alignment of the agrarian, land-labouring life with "culture," in opposition to an urban-industrial "civilisation," found

expression at times in such crude anthropological terminology. Yet the term "primitive" was also used pejoratively. Caldwell, for example, marvelled at tenant farmers' ability to get by on so little, calling them "primitive" and "savage," and concluding, "but they are still people" (Bourke-White and Caldwell 168).

In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser writes of the "primitive" in terms of the romantic aesthetic of redemptive lesson: "We can understand the primitive--not as the clumsy, groping naïf of a corrupted definition, or even the unskilled 'unsophisticate' of modern aesthetic usage--for what he was and what we have to be: the newborn of an age, the pioneer, Adam who dares" (177). For Rukeyser, then, a "primitive" sensibility was commensurate with an archetypal, American pioneer spirit. Criticising those modern poets (including MacLeish) who "go blaming, blaming," and "who emerge with little but self-pity," Rukeyser endorses a poetics that relies on moral responsibility and expansive inclusion, rather than "the smallness of things" (176). This responsibility is founded upon "the only things with survival value": "our relation to each other and to ourselves" (177).

The "primitive" thus comprises a poetical and anthropological motif of expansion and experiment for Rukeyser: "a source in ourselves which we had almost lost." It is in this capacity that she characterises "the primitive waiting face" as primordial, "a dark genesis for us all." In the "newborn of an age" resides the potential to return to the reality of the world. Rukeyser believed that this reality was only half-seen in her lifetime--a "century" that, in her own words, had "only half-prepared us to be primitives." Believing that "the time requires our full consciousness, humble, audacious, clear" (177), Rukeyser argued for a return to a primitive state of being whose receptivity and capacity for direct experience she figured ten years earlier in the visual and verbal repetitions of "Worlds Alongside." The "waiting face" of the "primitive" is echoed in the migrant who is "waiting for the car ahead to move" and the upturned face of the Mexican boy in his look at the symbol of "civilisation," a "silver plane."

Meaning in combination: the photo-narrative as montage

By layering meaning in face to face encounters, Rukeyser wished to locate her photo-narrative among "the only things with survival value," aiming to create the "new kind of poetry" she had hoped for in MacLeish's text. Her technique of juxtaposing photographs without an apparently logical sequence, from a variety of locations, times, and sources, rendered "Worlds Alongside" unlike the photo-essays published in other picture magazines of the time. The resulting fragmentary effect, representing a conflation of multiple viewpoints, alludes to documentary film's origins in the montage experiments of Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov's "kino-eye" method during the 1920s, which sought to capture moments of life--"bits of energy"--and edit them into a "tectonic whole" (Michelson 20). Having worked in film editing and production during the 1930s, Rukeyser was aware that "selection and ordering are a work of preparation and equilibrium." Likening the frame of a film to the image of a poem, Rukeyser notes in *The Life of Poetry* that "the single image, which arrives with its own speed, takes its place in a sequence which reinforces that image" (143). Her preferred term for this sequence was "cluster" or "constellation": a "gathering-together of elements so that they move together according to a newly visible system" (19). "Worlds Alongside" enacts this "gathering-together"; a collection of "elements" and ideas whose ideological and philosophical relations are linked by the dynamics of looking, and reinforced by their spatial relations.

In this way, "Worlds Alongside" also recalls the montage work of another Soviet filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein. Rukeyser writes at length in *The Life of Poetry* about Eisenstein's methods of image and text combination, and her citation of his book *The Film Sense* (1942) in her acknowledgements indicates that her poetics is aligned significantly with the filmmaker's theory of montage technique and form (215). Additionally, Rukeyser's

archived papers reveal several handwritten notes taken from chapter one of Eisenstein's book: his seminal essay "Word and Image" (1939, originally published as "Montage in 1938" in *Iskusstvo Kino*). Rukeyser was actively involved in the American publication of *The Film Sense*, providing the translation of Arthur Rimbaud's *Voyelles*, which is included in chapter two, "Synchronisation of Senses," of the English-language version of the book (Gander 100). Originally published in the year after "Worlds Alongside" appeared, "Word and Image" advocates the juxtaposition "of two facts, two phenomena, two objects" to combine into "a new concept, a new quality, arising out of that juxtaposition" (Eisenstein 14). For Eisenstein, this combination "resembles a creation--rather than a sum of its parts", whereby "the whole emerges perfectly as 'a third something'" (17, 19). Defining the "third something" as a creative energy that draws the "spectator" into the very process of creation, Eisenstein employs language strikingly similar to Rukeyser's own on the subject of witnessing "the image of the theme itself" (19):

> The strength of the method resides also in the circumstance that the spectator
>
> is drawn into a creative act in which his individuality is not subordinated to the
>
> author's individuality, but is opened up throughout the process of fusion with
>
> the author's intention. (35)

Eisenstein's description recalls both Rukeyser's and Levinas' expression of ethical visual encounter, whereby the combination of elements gives way to an openness and receptivity over and above assimilation. It also prefigures Rukeyser's description of "witness" in *The Life of Poetry* as an act of creative exchange whereby "work is being done on the self" (175). Rukeyser writes that in the combination of images and words, "there are separables: the meaning of the image, the meaning of the words, and a third, the meaning of the two in combination. The words are not used to describe the picture, but to extend its meaning" (137). Her theory of the creative energy generated from such a combination recalls Buber's "sphere

of the between" in its "third alternative," and Levinas' notion of the irreducible distinctness of the self and other: "The relation with the Other does not nullify separation. It does not arise within a totality nor does it establish a totality, integrating me and the other" (*TI* 251). While it seems probable that Rukeyser developed her ideas regarding image and word combination from her experience of Eisenstein's work on the same subject, it must be noted that her work on "Worlds Alongside" represented, a year before Eisenstein's "Word and Image" essay was published, a pioneering effort in montage aesthetics and poetics.

  Rukeyser's commitment to montage innovation extended to her work for the Office of War Information (OWI), where she worked as Visual Information Specialist between 1942 and 1943, creating poster campaigns in support of the American war effort. Upon her resignation from the OWI, prompted by her disappointment in the capitalist forces that guided it, Rukeyser wrote the essay "Words and Images" (1943), in which she describes the pairing of word and image as "one of the cleverest means of communication" (140). Here, Rukeyser stated publicly for the first time the conviction that had infused her work for *Coronet*. Noting that her aim was to create something akin "to what dialogue does to a movie," Rukeyser asserts: "The point is not in the *naming* of a picture, but in a reinforcement which is mutual, so that the words and picture attack the same theme from slightly different approaches" (140). Her belief that "poetry can extend the document," voiced first in an endnote to *U.S.1* (1938), became invested in the printed word's capacity to "enlarge the context" of a visual image (*CP* 604). The reciprocal work done by words and images must also possess that quality which MacLeish had strived to achieve: enough synchrony and balance to put one in mind of film.

  This balance is contrived in various ways in "Worlds Alongside." In the one double page spread to feature four images, the photographs are situated above and below a thin ribbon of text, which runs horizontally across the pages' centre (**figure 8**). The ribbon resembles a strip of film negative, with the monochromes of the words and their background

reversed, and Rukeyser seems to allude to the technical aspects of still photography whilst simultaneously creating a sense of motion in the text's progression across the spread. The words of the poem reinforce the parallelism with which the entire photo-narrative is concerned: "We freeze into placeless art the shadows and bright waves . . . and out of poverty-thin religion we raise up Mont St. Michel" (88-89). The "bright waves" of water, associated by Rukeyser with the fluidity of life, are carved into stone in the first photograph, and arrested by the camera in the sailing photograph beneath. Rukeyser appears to struggle with her meanings here: her choice of the word "freeze" would indicate a certain lament at art's tendency to remove and isolate moments from time, yet by choosing to depict the rush and motion of life in a photograph of a speeding yacht, Rukeyser undermines, or at least complicates, her own message. No matter how dynamic the photograph's angle and composition allow it to be, it remains a frozen representation of life. Additionally, the homophony of the word "freeze" with "frieze" refers not only to the nature of the artwork figured in the first picture, but also to the narrative, as it provides a band of textual decoration across the pages. It is in this frieze-like capacity that the words, in their short statement of fact, become "something like a poem . . . something like news in lights around the *Times* building," their white colour against a black setting evoking the luminescent lettering of moving headlines.

In the picture spread the *Times* building is replaced by two churches, and Rukeyser implies that the splendour of Mont St. Michel is constructed upon unstable moral foundations, a "poverty-thin religion." Lange's image of a small clapboard church, displaying a welcome sign above its open door, depicts a structurally unsound, rudimentary spiritual shelter. At the end of the photo-narrative, Rukeyser imagines a "little congregation going into the Zion church," categorising the worshippers among the collective "world" that "waits" whilst people in "the other world" "use their luck" to "speed across" it (97). Rukeyser's style in this

last passage approaches journalese, prompting Hunter to dismiss those parts of the text in which Rukeyser writes "as if she were still writing for *New Masses*" (142). However, in any critical examination of "Worlds Alongside," it is important to remember that it constitutes an experimental contribution to an ongoing ethical and aesthetical project, inseparable from documentary discourse--itself an evolving and shifting term in the thirties and forties. The innovation of Rukeyser's approach to established means of visual reportage should not be downplayed.

John Berger has written of the prohibitive nature of the standardised, singular perspective "reportage photo-story," noting that for journalists "to speak of their experience with images it would be necessary to introduce pictures of other events and other places, because subjective experience always connects. Yet to introduce such pictures would be to break the journalistic convention" (Berger 279). It was Rukeyser's aim to create a "poetry of meeting-places" by breaking such "convention," and her disappointment at the lack of risk-taking in combinative works of text and image relates to her lament at a general and pervasive "fear of poetry": "Editors have grown timid," she writes in *The Life of Poetry*, "a brave advance is almost inevitably followed by quick back-tracking, generally by dilution and debasement of the original intention" (140). The montage cluster of diverse images in "Worlds Alongside" is indicative of the variety of life and the occasions for contact it creates. Joined by the common "themes" of visuality and connection, the photographs refer and respond to each other, both across the double-paged spread and beyond it: the face of the postmaster recalls the faces of the African, the dancer and the blind gypsy; "the Mexican boy in his look" on the last page refers us to the "inward look" of the whirlpool, the "still look" of the woman, and our own act of looking at them all. This internal cross-referencing generates what Eisenstein calls "the image of the theme itself" that "binds together all the details into a whole" (Eisenstein 19). Berger explains that the photo-story narrates "through montage": "the

energy of the montage of attractions in a sequence of still photographs destroys the very notion of *sequences . . . .* The sequence has become a field of co-existence like the field of memory" (288). Rukeyser's intention is to bring a "field of co-existence" into her readers' field of vision. Encountered in this way, the photographs are restored to life; their context is enlarged to what Berger labels "a context of experience" in which "their ambiguity at last becomes true" (289). Apart from the almost immediate historical memory of the widely circulated FSA photographs, the photographs in the photo-narrative possess the quality of historical and psychological memory in their connection to the primitive. It is in this capacity that some of the images Rukeyser employs extend beyond the objective document to engage the viewer/witness in a reflection on the nature of the image itself.

The hypericon

Rukeyser employs the image as communicative symbol of the real, an approach that may be helpfully read through the picture theory of W.J.T. Mitchell. Raphael Allison has referred briefly to Mitchell's writings on ekphrasis to support his reading of Rukeyser's poem "Ajanta." Citing Mitchell's "ekphrastic hope" of "the overcoming of otherness" as principle to Rukeyser's poetics, Allison astutely argues for her engagement with pragmatism and its association with graphic representation, although his lack of mention of the exemplary photo-narratives indicates their unfortunate obscurity (12). Rukeyser's narratives are not ekphrastic; however, Mitchell's notion of the visual image's narrativity provides a model against which to read Rukeyser's choice of photographs.

Mitchell gives the term "hypericon" to dialectical "figures of figuration" such as Plato's cave, Aristotle's wax tablet, and the camera obscura (*Iconology* 158). These, he asserts, "provide our models for thinking about all sorts of images--mental, verbal, pictorial and perceptual" (6). The hypericon thus signals the possibility of interplay between the

subjective and the objective, philosophy and metaphor, science and art. Following from this, it becomes easier to see how Rukeyser's own poetics of relationship is iconographically manifested in the photo-narratives. According to Mitchell, hypericons occur whenever "the nature of images becomes a subject for philosophical reflection" on human nature (158). Notwithstanding Rukeyser's text, which proffers an authoritative statement on how "we" as humans, and more specifically as Americans, behave, the images themselves comprise an ethical and philosophical comment on our being-in-the-world. The best example is the double-paged spread of the blind face and the whirlpool. These images represent what Mitchell calls "multistable" or "metapictures": images which specifically indicate their own ambiguity and openness to interpretation (*Picture Theory*, chapter 2). Mitchell contends that "multistable images are also a staple feature in anthropological studies of so-called 'primitive art,'" including art that figures "profiles or frontal views" of faces, given that they generate "'fort-da' or 'peek-a-boo' effect' (45-6). Understanding primitiveness to mean a self-awareness that invites introspection, Mitchell posits that "metapictures" are primitive "in their function as reflections on the basic nature of pictures"; they "show themselves in order to *know* themselves: they stage the 'self-knowledge' of pictures" (48).

Rukeyser's images are reflections on both the nature of pictures and the nature of looking at pictures. The gypsy's face is overwhelming in its near life-size immediacy. The smaller photograph of the whirlpool is pictured at the woman's eye-level, an arrested swirl of motion with a black, pupil-like abyss at its centre. That these images prompt us to address the theme of visuality is clear; what remains unclear is *how* we should address it. Yet questionability is a defining aspect of the metapicture: "if the multistable image always asks, 'what am I?' or 'how do I look?', the answer depends on the observer asking the same questions" (48). Blurring the line between figuration and abstraction in the same way as she challenges established relations between images and words, Rukeyser engages the "observer"

in a dialogue of interrogation wherein boundaries between the objective and the subjective are constantly shifting. Significantly, Mitchell notes that "the figure of the whirlpool" is the multistable image *par excellence* in that it suggests a way of picturing the "'Vortex Effect'" of metapictures. The image greets and pulls the beholder into a dialogue, and so doing, "enfolds the observer as object for the 'gaze' of the picture" (75). We are therefore able to approach the ultimate image in "Worlds Alongside" from a multiplicity of perspectives, having been prepared by the figures preceding it to question the nature of looking and of appearance.

Rukeyser speculates that the upward-looking Mexican boy is contemplating a silver plane. Whether we take her word for the picture is not the point. The image as multistable, hieroglyphic icon depends on our own reflection upon *how* the boy is looking (ambiguity intended). If he sees a plane, is he, in the manner of a primitive, awed and impressed? Does he lament the rapid progressions of modernity? Or is he raising his eyes in prayer? As Mitchell attests, "the words 'reflection,' 'speculation,' and 'theory' indicate [that] there is more than a casual relation between visual representation and the practice called theorizing'" (82). Rukeyser draws attention to this relation, contriving her reader to become witness to "worlds" where, as Berger asserts, "appearances become the language of a lived life" (Berger 289).

Rukeyser explains the image as symbol in her prose biography, *Willard Gibbs* (1942), which she was researching at the time the photo-narratives were published. Applauding Charles Baudelaire's idea of "the universal analogy," she describes her hope "not only for symbols that may be related to other symbols, but for meanings that are hieroglyphs of the world" (*Gibbs* 81). Believing that these meanings exist in meeting-places between ostensible opposites, for example, "where scientist and poet share the world," Rukeyser argues for a "combined power" that "does not call for a knowledge of types alone, but for a search among deviations" (82). In *The Life of Poetry*, Rukeyser cites the spiral as the prime example of such

a universal symbol in its combination of organic, scientific, and imaginative elements. Rukeyser gives the spiral many names: "the life-giver and carrier, the whirlpool, the vortex of atoms, and the sacred circuit" (37). With its origins in the imitation of natural forms, the spiral represents both an organic process and the development of creative imagination. As such, the spiral contains "the history of human passion for a relationship" and "an expression of the most deep connection" (38). Rukeyser's recourse to symbolism within the photo-narratives, especially her use of the whirlpool as connective figure of inward and outward "look," documents the emergence of what would endure as the defining ethos of her poetics. "The emphasis," Rukeyser asserted, is "where it must be, in spite of all specialization: on *combining*" (*Gibbs* 82). In the meeting of "separates" there arises a creative potential that Rukeyser recognises as an analogy for poetry. In these moments, new images are formed, which provide lessons in the ethical relations between human beings. Fear of poetry is thus the fear of new combinations: "This is the knowledge of communication, and it is the fear of it which has cut us down. Our lives may rest on this; and our lives are our images" (*Life of Poetry* 40).

A concluding note

Rukeyser's photo-narrative format was discontinued after two issues. In response to an editorial request for reader reaction to the new photo-essay format, asking whether Rukeyser's "treatment implement[ed] the photograph as a significant commentary on human existence" (*Coronet* 120), the majority of replies were negative.[9] Such reader feedback allows us to comprehend the difficulty Rukeyser had in introducing her imaginative new method of communication to a public audience, who resoundingly requested a return to the separatist attitudes that Rukeyser was reacting against. Yet despite their faults and their cool public reception, the photo-narratives remain an important example of Rukeyser's early work not

least because they illustrate many aspects of the poet's work and philosophy in gestation. In addition, they upset generally accepted models of the 1930s documentary photo-text, highlighting an ethical and ontological element that had hitherto been given very little critical consideration. That the photo-narratives are not representative of Rukeyser's most sophisticated work is partly due to their status as experiments. As Rukeyser noted, "the process of combining depends on experimentation. Knowledge and effective action here become one gesture; the gesture of understanding the world and changing it" (*Gibbs* 82). "Worlds Alongside" was one such significant gesture.

Notes

1. A part of this essay has been published in different form in chapter 2 of *Muriel Rukeyser and Documentary: the Poetics of Connection* (Edinburgh UP, 2013).

2. The photograph credit lists it as being a Resettlement Administration image, and therefore, an American subject.

3. A photograph's *punctum* is explained by Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (1980, trans. 1981) in contradistinction to its *studium*. The latter is the 'average affect' (26) of the photograph, constructed out of various cultural contexts, whereas the former is the sharp and

unexpected 'wound' caused by a certain element of the photograph's visual field: 'A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me [but also bruises me, is poignant to me]) (27).

4. Kenneth Rexroth, publicity quotation for *The Speed of Darkness* (1968), back cover.

5. Draft preface for *The Speed of Darkness*, 18 June, 1967, Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Box I:23, Library of Congress.

6. The Photography Unit of the FSA (1937-1944), headed by Roy E. Stryker, was previously called Resettlement Administration (RA, 1935-1936).

7. Robert W. Marks, "Portrait of Bourke-White," *Coronet* (Jan. 1939), 163-74; "Portrait of Lewis Hine," *Coronet* (Feb. 1939), 147-57.

8. Rukeyser's papers contain numerous references to the work of Buber dating from the early 1950s. In 1961 she acknowledged the debt her poetics owed to Buber's thought in a footnote to the publication of the poem, "Akiba," in *American Judaism* (April 1961), 13. Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Box I:21, Library of Congress.

9. The responses were not printed. The Muriel Rukeyser Papers, Box I:5, contain the forwarded replies.

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