

POETRY AND PEACE: RUKEYSER

Poems: The Harbingers of Peace



Memory is doomed to fail. Humans will forget or distort their memory. However poems stand both eternal and truthful. For Rukeyser, poems are born of emotion, they tell the emotional journey of events. As Rukeyser states in her book *Life of Poetry* “the universe of poetry is the universe of truth” (23). Poems were made to evoke emotion, therefore they tell a different truth than history. History sacrifices emotions to what is seen as fact by the writers of history, whereas poems tell an emotional history of war, recounting the emotions of those who have experienced war to those who have not. The emotional ability of poems allows for new generations to understand the emotional trauma of war, creating peaceful efficacy as poems persist through the generations. It is these emotions that people will remember, beyond the factuality of history. They can empathize with the victims of war poems, and be reminded about the true emotional horror of war, and therefore be compelled to craft peace. Moreover, Muriel Rukeyser makes a call to poetic duty when she writes, “we shall define that peace, we will live to fight its birth, to build these meanings, to sing these songs” (Life of Poetry 214). For Rukeyser, poems are the harbingers of peace, their songs shall stand the test of time and continue to remind future generations of the inhumanity of war. The poet’s mission is to never let people forget. The poet’s memory may fade in time, but their writing will never lose their words, meaning, and emotion.

II

Frontier of Europe, the tideless sea, a field of power touching desirable coasts, rocking in time conquests, fertile, the moving water maintains its boundaries layer on layer, Troy—seven civilized worlds: Egypt, Greece, Rome, jewel Jerusalem, giant feudal Spain, giant England, this last war.

The boat pulled into evening, underglaze blue flared instant fire, blackened towards Africa. Over the city alternate lights occurred; and pale.

in the pale sky emerging stars. No city now, a besieged line of lights masking the darkness where the country lay. But we knew guns bright through mimosa singe of powder and reconnoitering plane flying anonymous scanning the Pyrenees black now above the Catalanian Sea. Boat of escape, dark on the water, hastening, safe, holding non-combatants, the athlete, the child, the printer, the boy from Antwerp, the black boxer, lawyer and communist.

The Games had not been held. A week of Games, theatre and festival; world anti-fascist week. Pistol starts race. Machine gun marks the war. Answered unarmed, charged the Embarcadero, met those guns. And charging through the province, joined that army. Boys from the hills, the unmatched guns, the clumsy armored cars. Drilled in the bullring. Radio cries: To Saragossa! And this boat.

Escape, dark on the water, an overloaded ship. Crowded the deck. Spoke little. Down to dinner. Quiet on the sea: no guns.

The printer said, In Paris there is time, but where’s its place now; where is poetry?

This is the sea of war; the first frontier blank on the maps, blank sea; Minoan boats maybe achieved this shore; mountains whose slope divides one race, old insurrections, Narbo, now moves at the colored beach destroyer wardog. “Do not burn the church, compañeros, it is beautiful. Besides, it brings tourists.” They smashed only the image madness and persecution. Exterminating wish; they forced the door, lifted the rifle, broke the garden window, removed only the drawings: cross and wrath. Whenever we think of these, the poem is, that week, the beginning, exile remembered in continual poetry.

Voyage and exile, a midnight cold return, dark to our left mountains begin the sky. There, pointed the Belgian, I heard a pulse of war, sharp guns while I ate grapes in the Pyrenees. Alone, walking to Spain, the five o’clock of war. In those cliffs run the sashed and sandalled men, capture the car, arrest the priest, kill captain, fight our war.

The poem is the fact, memory fails under and seething lifts and will not pass.

Here is home-country, who fights our war. Street-meeting speaker to us:

“... came for Games, you stay for victory; foreign? your job is: go tell your countries what you saw in Spain.” The dark unguarded army left all night. M. de Païche said, “We can learn from Spain.” The face on the dock that turned to find the war.

III

Seething, and falling back, a sea of stars, Black marked with virile silver. Peace all night, over that land, planes death-lists a frantic bandage the rubber tires burning monuments

sandbag, overturned wagon, barricade girl’s hand with gun food failing, water failing the epidemic threat the date in a diary a blank page opposite no entry— however, met the visible enemy heroes: madness, infatuation the cache in the crypt, the breadline shelled, the yachtclub arsenal, the foreign cheque. History racing from an assumed name, peace, a time used to perfect weapons.

If we had not seen fighting, if we had not looked there the plane flew low the plastic ripped by shots the peasant’s house if we had stayed in our world between the table and the desk between the town and the suburb slowly disintegration male and female

If we had lived in our city sixty years might not prove the power this week the overthrown past tourist and refugee Emeric in the bow speaking his life and the night on this ship the night over Spain quick recognition male and female

And the war in peace, the war in war, the peace, the faces on the dock the faces in those hills.

Key:

Pink- War and fire

Green- Images of death

Blue- Cold, dark sea

Purple- Stars and legends

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