

NEW VOICES IN CLASSICAL RECEPTION STUDIES
Issue 5 (2010)

**MYSELF, SPLIT OPEN: OVID, RUKEYSER, AND THE
POETICS OF ORPHIC RE-MEMBERING**

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ABSTRACT

Ovid's Orpheus epitomizes the intersection of transfiguration and catastrophic loss. It is this juxtaposition of creative and destructive potentialities that best characterizes both the orphic figure and the art of poetry that he embodies. In its Ovidian guise, orphic agency arises, in Muriel Rukeyser's apt phrasing, 'in exile from [it]self.'

While we might expect the post-Romantic Ovidian poet, like the frenzied maenads in 'their dances and wildness,' to tear the bard apart, refusing participation in his austere, self-rending ethos, we find that instead she recurs to the orphic mythos despite its burdensome legacy. We find that Orpheus haunts the history of modern poetry, heard still at the heart of its darkest and deepest ambitions. What in particular compels the modern poet to return to Orpheus with all the passion of the bard's own quest for his Eurydice, seeking to disinter his spirit as a partner in poetry's ongoing dialectic of wretchedness and redemption?

This paper will pursue this question with particular reference to Muriel Rukeyser's persistent, if ambivalent, involvement with Orpheus as poetic exemplar and antagonist, prototype and challenge. Not only does the Ovidian seer instigate Rukeyser's keenest poetic reflections of the poetic enterprise itself, but her anguished revision of her own 'Orpheus' in the later 'The Poem as Mask' enacts its own mimesis of orphic re-turn, descending into the agonies of the myth once again in order both to reform and retrieve its potential for a redeemed poetics. Each crucial feature of this reflexive *katabasis* is already anticipated by the Ovidian pre-text, particularly the specific interest in passing through the limitations of writing to the more 'originary' mode of eloquent, if still fractured, song. And yet, while this interest is itself a synecdoche or symptom of the more encompassing orphic pattern of doubleness and division, this will not mean that Rukeyser merely doubles the orphic narrative; rather, in taking up that lyre again and again, she poses for modern verse the Ovidian question of poetry's constraints and possibilities, while modelling for modern poetry and criticism a view of reception as critical production, not echoic reproduction.