

**Sarah Ehlers. *Left of Poetry: Depression America and the Formation of Modern Poetics* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019). 308 pp. Hardcover \$90.00, Paperback \$29.95.**

Creating an upheaval in academic approaches to Depression-era poetry is a lofty goal; moreover, to disrupt the status quo concerning opinions relating to modern poetics, especially left-leaning poetry, requires a deft-handed methodology. Sarah Ehlers's extensive use of fresh archival materials and the application of previously overlooked, underused, or merely unincorporated fodder enables Ehlers to arguably achieve this goal and, in turn, contribute a significant addition to the studies of radical 1930s poets. The key players in Ehlers's work are both well and lesser known, but the following six individuals are portrayed as kindred spirits of the left: Langston Hughes, Muriel Rukeyser, Genevieve Taggard, Edwin Rolfe, Jacques Roumain, and Martha Millet. Ehlers quickly establishes that this work breaks away from previous conceptions concerning the use-value of certain poetic styles, particularly lyric and rhythmic poetry, and Ehlers delineates how these aforementioned poets attempt various nonconformities of social commentary. The overall objective of the text is to evaluate "how Depression-era left writers waged struggles over the function of poetry as an object and an ideal of political efficacy" (144). The work is intentionally historical without bombarding the reader with chronological dialogue; Ehlers succinctly places each poet in their specific period and allows the artist's material to reflect the setting through which it was produced. From the introduction to the final chapter, *Left of Poetry* brings to the forefront the active debates among left writers in the 1930s concerning the effectiveness of lyric poetry for the communist party.

Ehlers is forthright in stating that this research is intended to instigate (or enliven) a debate surrounding the tendency of contemporary scholars to cast aside certain forms of poetic construction, either deemed unfavorable by modern standards or ineffectual by Depression-era criterion. In the introduction, Ehlers makes clear the intent to "reveal how 1930s poets' conceptions of the dynamic interaction between artistic production and processes of historical change challenge the positivist assumptions about history undergirding historical poetics scholarship" (13). Other scholars, like Cary Nelson, Alan Wald, Nancy Berke, Alan Filreis, and Walter Kalaidjian, have carried similar lines of thought. Nevertheless, Ehlers argues that far too many studies remain entrenched in the idea that the 1930s poetry strikes contemporary readers as "disappointing" (17n60), and Ehlers emphatically stresses that this period was far from a poetic failure. On this point, Ehlers is ready to make a stand; over the course of the five chapters, readers are presented with new material from archives and then challenged to reconsider how the Depression-era poetry of

the left was far more engaging and successful than even critics in the 1930s were ready to admit.

Langston Hughes (1902–1967) is certainly the most well-known poet in this study, but Ehlers approaches Hughes from his photography, rather than merely rereading his much-studied poetry and essays. Hughes, an amateur photographer, kept a photographic record of his 1931 trip to Cuba and Haiti. From a variety of Hughes's photographs, Ehlers creates an historical narrative that broadly enriches the poetry Hughes composed during the years after his return from those foreign yet connected lands. By incorporating Hughes's photographs, rather than merely looking at letters or unpublished texts, Ehlers provides for us another form of media: images, rather than written word, allowing us to literally glimpse the past and perceive how Hughes witnessed communist Cuba and Haiti. Included in the chapter are four full-page images of the scrapbooks housed at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. Another important use of photography derives from Hughes's engagement with the "Scottsboro Boys," nine African American men and boys arrested in Alabama in 1931, eight of whom were charged with raping two white women. *Scottsboro Limited: Four Poems and a Play in Verse* was published by Hughes in 1932. It is well documented that Hughes visited the men, but Ehlers's incorporation of a photograph of the jailed men from the Hughes archival material at Yale, a photograph likely taken by Hughes, allows us to see just how Hughes recalled the men as he worked on his political poems and literature concerning this prejudice filled legal case.

Similar to the fresh incorporation of Hughes's photograph scrapbook, and in order to enrich chapter two, Ehlers utilizes the Muriel Rukeyser (1913–1980) papers held at the Library of Congress. Of specific focus is Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* (1938), a series of poems that highlight the plight of the mine workers in Gauley, West Virginia. In 1935, roughly 1,500 workers exposed to silica dust subsequently died in rapid succession. Chapter Two, entitled "Fusing an Alloy: Muriel Rukeyser and the Limits of Poetry/Documentary," follows the events that surround Rukeyser's visit to Gauley, which subsequently evolved into the poetry published in 1938. Ehlers specifically approaches Rukeyser's text as "documentary poetry" (68) and emphasizes how Rukeyser "attempts to portray the experiences of specific persons without reducing their representation to the logics of liberal reform undergirding New Deal portraiture" (80). Interestingly, Rukeyser made efforts to adapt *The Book of the Dead* into a documentary film, and the last lengthy section of the chapter illustrates how Rukeyser viewed the value of incorporating various forms of media to convey her words and meaning across platforms that would reach new readers and viewers, thereby further empowering the personhood of her subjects.

The only chapter to combine two left-leaning poets, Genevieve Taggard (1894–1948) and Edwin Rolfe (1909–1954), Chapter Three focusses heavily on the importance of lyric poetry within the left environment. The predominant argument of the period, that lyric poetry did not represent the movement of the left, is effec-

tively counterargued in this chapter. The main position by left critics against lyric poetry was that the individual appeared to take predominance in the poem, leaving the masses dispersed. Ehlers succinctly argues that Taggard and Rolfe used lyric poetry for historical and political motives, thereby refuting the general opinion that lyric poetry was unsuited for the left's partisan motives. To counter these views, for example, Ehlers argues that "Rolfe used the lyric mode to mediate an individual subject's relationship to an imminent communist future" (115). Both artists, however, used alternate forms of approach to the lyrical style. A common view during this period was that the lyric was synonymous (to an extent) with the Romantic thinker, and romanticism was viewed as a bourgeois form of expression. Whitman's influence here is noted, in that by incorporating the lyric mode into their poems, poets were not fully embracing romanticism but retaining a meaningful distance from the origins of the lyrical method. The tendency of lyric poetry to incorporate "I"—self-referentially alienating the masses—is overcome, Ehlers argues, by turning the "I" into a collective pronoun. On par with the other chapters, Ehlers enlivens the chapter with archival material on Taggard located at the New York Public Library. The chapter is more focussed on Taggard and ends with a discussion of Taggard's interest in utilizing poetry with music, and the idea that poetry need not be printed, but rather just heard.

Jacques Roumain (1907–1944) is perhaps the most internationally recognized left-centric poet in *Left of Poetry*; hailing from Haiti, Roumain lived in Europe and the United States, where he was arrested and imprisoned for communist activity. He was part of a "communist internationalism" (144), which sought to bring together various nations under the premise of common objectives. With the support of archival material from the New York Public Library, Chapter Four is Ehlers's most engaging section, perhaps because its subject had been considered a "radical" in terms of his political thought and poetic output: "Roumain's late-thirties and early-forties writings, composed and distributed from his experience of exile, articulate the role of the poet and poetry in relation to routes of Black radicalism that cross, or cross-pollinate, with those of socialist internationalism" (145). Again, lyric poetry comes to the forefront of analysis—in conjunction with Black radicalism—as this form served Roumain as a means to denote "specific folk forms" that created "parameters of lyric expression and address" (147). During Roumain's imprisonment in the United States, the Committee for the Release of Jacques Roumain was supported by Sherwood Anderson and Langston Hughes, among many other prominent artists. There was significant effort, Ehlers notes, to spread Roumain's writings across the United States in order to draw attention to his work and political plight. *Dynamo: A Journal of Revolutionary Poetry* was essential to achieving this dispersal of Roumain's writing to his supporters.

Chapter Five, "The Left Needs Rhythm," follows the poetic career of Martha Millet (1918–2004), perhaps the least known of Ehlers's subjects. Although Millet contributed to the popular *Seven Poets in Search of an Answer* (1944), her oeuvre

remains mostly unknown (at the time of this writing, there was no *Wikipedia* page for Martha Millet). The breadth of the chapter, as well as the richness of original materials, proffers more of a stand-alone feeling in contrast to the other chapters. Millet's literary career spanned several decades, and during the latter part of the century she worked on a manuscript entitled "The Ezra Pound Myth." Because of Millet's interest in Ezra Pound, and the unpublished criticism about Pound, Ehlers gives significant attention to Pound in relation to his communist associations in the face of the witch hunts of McCarthyism. Part of Ehlers's excellent and productive use of archival materials has allowed for a detailed and rich engagement with this unpublished document in an effort to investigate communist and antifascist writing from a new perspective—in particular, dealing with Pound's fallible anti-Semitism. From attending her first May Day parade at age 11, to extensive publication of communist poetry for children, to novels and critical prose, Millet's literary career is canvassed by Ehlers and numerous new avenues for future research on Millet are generously proffered. While Ehlers does not exactly make Millet come alive on the page, we do receive an excellent overview of both Millet's political life as well as her theoretical approach to rhythmic poetry. Rhythm is political, Millet believed (199), and moving away from the poetic rigidity of the early 1930s allowed Millet to put forth communist values in forms from nursery rhymes to rhythmic poems that have "potential mass appeal" (198). This final chapter brings together Ehlers's main argument developed across the previous chapters: the shift of opinion concerning the lyric poem which went from a strict rejection of the lyric back around again to an understanding that rhythm helped bring the masses together.

It is impossible to imagine that Ehlers would have produced this engaging work without the undertaking of extensive archival research. For almost all of the six main figures discussed, Ehlers accessed untapped material in order to weave together an engaging narrative—the result is the demonstration of the archival turn at its best. The text is readable from cover to cover, but each chapter is accessible in its own right. Overall, *Left of Poetry* is a work that serves a plethora of purposes: researchers interested in any of the six main subjects will find fresh material; students pursuing a broader and grounded understanding of the left poets of the 1930s will be rewarded; and professors looking for a scholarly work to incorporate into their courses need look no further. There are a few detractions, of course, but these do not diminish the value of the text. In particular, Chapter Five, on Martha Millet, stands out as the least integrated of the chapters within the overarching argument. Two key points are worth noting. First, supporting references from the work of Alan Wald, the foremost scholar on left writers, is conspicuously missing in the first four chapters, but references to his work are incorporated several times in the last chapter. Additionally, theoretical criticism from the likes of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and their *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), as well as a broader sphere of poetic references, occurs more often in the fifth chapter. These additions are by no means a distraction; however, they do create the feel that the chapter is

slightly different from the previous. Indeed, the copyright page records that parts of this chapter were published on Mike Chasar's blog, *Poetry and Popular Culture*, in 2013, suggesting it may have been one of the earliest chapters. Another minor distraction is Ehlers's exposition into the poetry. It is clear that Ehlers's strength lies in the extrapolation of historical context, uncovering new archival material, and meshing together an engaging narrative—if there is a weak part of the text it is the sections when extensive poetic analysis fails to match the quality of research. Fortunately, these scenes are selective and few, but the poetic analysis remains noticeably surface level, whereas the presentation of materials that support Ehlers's arguments appears to be thoroughly soundproof. Rather neutral in gauging the values of the communist left poets, Ehlers's *Left of Poetry* will stand the test of time and prove to be a valuable and sought-after resource for academics, researchers, and enthusiasts interested in the modernist poetry of the left writers.

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