

The Sounds of Sight: Jennifer Rankin's Poetics

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Attention to Jennifer Rankin's poetry was sparse within her lifetime. Her papers in the Australian Defence Force Academy Library reveal that she was well connected to her literary peers, corresponding with Robert Gray, Galway Kinnell and Ted Hughes, among others. These connections show that, despite a lack of public and critical profile, fellow writers knew of Rankin's work. Nevertheless, one of the most influential of these, John Tranter, excluded her poetry from *The New Australian Poetry* anthology he edited in 1979. According to Judith Rodriguez, when Rankin sought his feedback earlier in her career, he had declared her work "unimportant" (*Collected Poems* xvi). Since then, Gray and Geoffrey Lehmann have challenged the prominence of Tranter's voice with their own counter-anthology, which includes Rankin although their later *Australian Poetry in the Twentieth Century* does not. With the possibility of a broader view of Rankin's generation, twenty-eight years after her death, the time has come to challenge her critical reception and to recognise the importance of her unique poetics on its own terms.

Since her death, Australian literary scholarship has largely forgotten her work, partly because she died so young, at the age of thirty-eight. A more significant explanation, however, is found in her work's antithetical relationship to Tranter's proposed generation of '68. The shadowy place that Rankin's poetry takes among her peers can be defined by its struggle against subjectivity; a poetics at odds with one of Tranter's descriptions of a new Australian poetry: "self-reference, where the 'method' is reflected consciously in the 'medium'; emphasis on individualist values" (xix). Understanding Rankin's work outside of existing and conditioned ways of reading it, allows us to see that her departure from the poetic mode outlined by Tranter makes a significant contribution to Australian poetry. A close exegesis of three poems from *Earth Hold* (1978) reveals Rankin's control of form and voice, to suggest that what develops in her work is nothing less than a transformation of the written sign. Through aural, tactile and visual affects, her poetry works at bringing about objectification of and through language, creating an intriguing affiliation with painting practice. Comparison of her work with a poem by Robert

Adamson, a poet included in Tranter's anthology, confirms that Rankin's poetry, while alluding to shared poetic contexts, makes its own, alternative aesthetic achievement.

Rankin lived from 1941 to 1979 in and around Sydney but she also spent periods of time in Yerrinbool, Bundeena, Melbourne, and Devon, England. She published two volumes of poems in her lifetime, *Ritual Shift* (1976) and *Earth Hold*, now unavailable. In addition to publications in poetry journals and a number of anthologies, including two of women's writing, Rankin's poetry appears in Judith Rodriguez's 1990 edition of *Collected Poems*, also out of print. Martin Harrison's short radio broadcast in the 1980s, which made some brief but insightful readings of Rankin's poems, and his twice-published article, "Self, place, newness", are the only detailed studies of Rankin's poetry to date.

Robert Gray, reviewing *Ritual Shift* in 1976, praises her work's ability to reach "sensory experience, which will naturally be primarily visual" as well as the "alive texture of sound". Her poetry, Gray claims, achieves "what the image should: it floods one for an instant with an experience not of one's own; it makes one for a moment 'put off time'" (17). Following this review, her husband, painter David Rankin, sought Gray as an adviser on her work (*Collected Poems* xvii). Despite his praise, however, Gray concludes that Rankin's poetry lacks "depth of thought, a human depth" (17). Gray's concern was echoed in 1992 by Robert Darling's comment that, in Rankin's work, "the emotion of the poem goes lax at points" and that this emotional vagueness results from the fact that Rankin's imagery is "not followed by the necessary freedom of syntax, the enjambed line, that allows the reader space to breathe" (155).

Yet that "alive texture of sound" Gray describes is not an isolated observation. Interviewed in 2005, Harrison speaks of Rankin's visual sensibility and the nature of her work as transcendent of contemporary poetic trends:

[It offers] a way of dimensionality that is best thought of in terms of aural experiences. [The poems] are acts of orientation, almost. They are visual, but the structuring is an act of listening, which then comes together in a language mode.

Her work is not only about the aural, he comments. The visual must also be seen as equally significant:

In an obvious sense, and in a less obvious sense, she's a painter; she makes painterly references and, less obviously, is someone who is very aware of how paintings are made. She's not, as it were, skimming on the surface awareness of paintings; she's aware of the construction of paintings in terms of depth, as in terms of how surfaces are laid on the

canvas, how things are built, how colours are allowed to sit on top of each other, how lines occur within this dimensional process.

Additionally, Harrison makes note of “the atmospherics of space” that characterise Rankin’s poetry (2005). This observation, combined with his remarks on depth in her work, suggests that her poetry engages three senses with which her reader is invited to respond: hearing, sight and touch. Rather than simply providing signs on a page, Rankin evokes an interconnected physical experience. Harrison’s analogy of the painterly helps explain this experience in the following examples of Rankin’s work.

The poem “Cliffs” offers an example of the multi-sensory poetic experience:

Where the cliff cleaves up
clean into the sky
I see my day cut through
and again another cliff
and again
cleaving up.

Then it is the faulting
the falling in folds
the going back into the sea.

And this day and again this day
and again days.

Birds fly in formation.
They jettison space
while at the cliff line
a twigged bush thinly etches away
the hard edge.

Cliffs heave in blue air

heaving and faulting
rising and falling
bird flight, twig etching,

cleaving up and folding back. (*Collected Poems* 49)

Typical of Rankin’s work, the poem establishes a few sonic elements that comprise the landscape of its subject matter. They become, in other words, phonic elements through their utterance and, in turn, represent the auditory reality of what is being described. In “Cliffs”, the “hard-edge” of “cl-” is repeated; synaesthetic, this plosive is the *visually* hard drop of the cliffs themselves, their abrupt *tactile* surface and edge, and the *sound* of the flinty, crumbling, clattering nature of a cliff face.

Other dominant elements in this landscape are the fricative “f” and the stressed “heav-”. “Faulting” and “fold” and “falling” pose a contrast to the plosive, giving a sense of the softening effects of weather and perhaps even talc-y chalk in the rock; “-ff-”, “fly”, “formation” and “flight” add buffeting air currents and wind dynamics. The element of the heard and felt/spoken “h-” denotes the stress of weight and tectonic movement, however it too is contrary to the affricative “etch” that introduces the abrasive twig. Then there are the various complementary and singular sounds, such as “through”, “this”, “thinly”, “space” and “twigged”. It is worth noting, too, that “etch” is not quite metaphoric in this context: it is used to create a representational sonic affect; and its suggestion of acidic impression is consistent with the geological content of igneous “faulting” that Rankin’s poem observes.

The reader of “Cliffs” realises a multi-sensory experience, that is, a simultaneous sensation, because Rankin appeals to a universal understanding not only of the perception, but also of the object itself. One needs to bring experience or knowledge of a cliff as a thing, for instance; to acknowledge the existence of a cliff as it is outside of the poem. Indeed, there is little to the poem that could be called self-referential or self-contained, in the way of the symbol.

“Cliffs” is almost solely comprised of repeated, limited elements, but those are the actualities of its subject matter: the limitations of the organic at a given time. The “organic” in this case denotes the non-human or pre-industrial as non-self-reflexive. Furthermore, the poem is not merely “sensory” in terms of representing human, subjective experiences alone; rather, it recreates existence that has reality beyond the human, and which can be termed objective. When Gray describes Rankin’s “sound as imagery”, he identifies not only her representation of “alive” or real things, but her creation of *live* texture (17). Rankin’s committed attempts at writing for stage and radio attest, perhaps, to this sense of the dramatic in her poetry.

One feature of “Cliffs” remains to be accounted for: that of the subject who appears in the first stanza. It can be argued that the nature of this first-person voice, perversely, reveals the poem’s expansion beyond human limits. Initially, the appearance of the subject stakes out its own existence, with the fiat, “I see”, claiming perceptual reception—possession—of the objective world by the phrase, “my day”. From this point onwards in the poem, however, a more interesting tension arises, which sees the breakdown of subjective positioning. Not only do the “I” and its possessive pronoun fail to reappear, they are endangered even from the first, where “my day” is “cut through” or interrupted by an external, objective existent. Firstly,

this equalises the subjective and objective “worlds”. Secondly, the objective becomes dominant and primary: when we next hear of the “day” it is not banished by an arrhythmic world (dichotomous with the human measure), but is dissolving into a stretching vista where new frameworks of time and space measurement exist (“And this day and again this day/and again days”). These frameworks are not humanity’s yesterday, today and tomorrow, whereby a subjective anchor must be placed in order for sense to be made. Instead, they constitute a repeated regularity, within which the subjective position dissolves.

The painterly (the process of, medium, result, idiosyncrasies and conventions of paint as art) acts as a reflection of these ways of thinking, seeing and being which emerge from Rankin’s work. Rodriguez has recognised the influence of David Rankin’s art on his wife’s poetry, particularly in her use of “visual art phrases” (*Collected Poems* xvii). Harrison mentions Rankin’s understanding of the technical processes of painting, a sympathy that may also have developed from observation of David Rankin’s work. He introduced Jennifer to concepts of Zen aesthetics, such as the koan (“Koan”, *Collected Poems* 27-29) and “dragon vein” (“Dragon veins”, *Collected Poems* 34) that are referred to in her poetry. Her interest in these would also have been supported by the influence of Gray, whose work demonstrates an enduring concern with Buddhist philosophy. Rankin’s poetry betrays feeling for and interest in the painterly as an inherent sensibility. As Judith Rodriguez points out, the importance of “arcs”, edges and lines in Rankin’s work “run before and alongside” her use, for instance, of calligraphic principles (*Collected Poems* xviii).

Further evidence of Rankin’s enduring connection to the painterly can be found in the fact that, around 1978, she looked into the engraving practices of the people of the Dharuk (also spelt Daruk) language of the Blue Mountains and Hawkesbury River. Her notebooks document that every time a particular story was told or ritual performed, the Dharuk people would deepen an engraving in a sacred rock, hence creating for the most important stories the deepest grooves (ADFA MS 348, Diary entry c. 01/78, Series 2, Folder 1). Also at this time, Rankin began researching the life and work of Australian painter Ian Fairweather. While available sources fail to clarify Rankin’s intention, her private studies of other art practices certainly reflect the reading of her work proposed here. Rankin’s linking of painting with the organic is clear in her notes on John Olsen’s place in an Australian landscape painting tradition. Olsen’s work, Rankin writes, trades fear of landscape for an understanding of it: such work teaches that “we shall have to learn to move with it—to live with this land, within it and as part of its own cycle” (ADFA

MS 348, Diary entry 27/01/78, Series 2, Folder 1). The engraving custom of the Dharuk people suggests this synchronisation.

The painterly, more broadly, denotes the achievement of a material reality, an object. The physicality of painting is something far beyond the visual. It is significant that a poem such as “Cliffs” does not ask the reader to make a primary link with music, prose, film, printing, dance, performance or sculpture. Only in painting and drawing does there remain an unchanging technological reality: the physical connection of the artist, the object and the receiver. The brush or knife or stick or hand is held and must make material contact with the paper, canvas, board, rock or wall in order to produce the work; the artist, through the implement, engages in physical continuity with an object. Furthermore, the object of the painting remains the very same that has undergone this process, a singular and material reality in three dimensions. Its audience can literally see, smell and touch the very result and its becoming: while there are indeed elements of this experience in other art forms, none hold the same guaranteed continuity of objective existence, nor do they do so as exclusively. Even the dramatic arts, with their immediacy, fail to leave the receiver with the immutable objective actuality of the poem and the painting.

In “Cliffs”, the reader undergoes a physical experience of which visualisation is but a part. That experience leads to an objectified representation of the organic world; and one can see in Rankin’s poetry an intention and a potential to represent a three-dimensional mark. “Earth hold” promotes this positioning of the object:

My slow fingers close about.
 This pod. Seed and pod.
 Squat brown seed-pod. Closing about.
 Wrapped inside the mud-bed.
 Mangroves. Mangrove tree and root.
 Oyster and shell.
 Now it is the grey heron.

Here, Rankin represents the sheer multiplicity of organic existence. The range of elements in “Cliffs” has become, in “Earth hold”, an inventory of simultaneous life, and an experience of fragments instead of wholes. Once again, the subjective position is addressed directly: “my slow fingers” establishes a point of reference within this subjectively undefined landscape, but the phrase is followed—and covered, obscured—by “this pod” and the following nouns. Rankin confidently gestures with “the”: the excerpt above can be seen as a kind of Adamic naming process. What might be emphasised,

however, is recognition of the poem's process of naming not as a projection of subjectivity in order to make sense of the world, neither as a parallel nor tantamount creation process. Rather, there is potential to see this naming ritual as an acknowledgement of objective existence.

Something interesting occurs in a following section of "Earth hold", when the first-person subject reappears:

Now my white ibis flies.
 This warm morning's sun.
 This valley folding away.
 Sea-glare.
 And thin houses. Weather-whitened.
 Tall drying wheat. Wet grass.

The subject recedes, again smothered by what Rankin later calls the "pre-determined" (*Collected Poems* 45). The will to locate the self within these poems can be strongly felt, notably by the failure of the speaker-subject to completely withdraw from the organic world. Both Harrison and Rodriguez have focused on this will as a definitive impulse in Rankin's work. In her introduction to the anthology *Mrs Noah and the Minoan Queen*, Rodriguez comments on the role of landscape in Rankin's work as "symbolic", referring to the "context of the coast" and "shapes of fire and tree, as living explorations of the past" (x). *Ritual Shift* and *Earth Hold*, Rodriguez writes, move around "the tasks, ceremonies, and furniture of family knowledge", exploring the identity of "'the woman' in an inward, self-inclusive way" (*Collected Poems* xii). Rodriguez's references to gender in her critique of Rankin's work leads to her discussion of the female human subject in the work; moreover, Rodriguez makes it a subject defined by domestic and physical experience. Rodriguez's emphasis is not dissimilar to Harrison's, though they use different methodologies. For Harrison, the sensual physicality of Rankin's poetry can be understood in phenomenological terms. "She's implanted in a mind/body relationship with things around," he states, "as someone who relates to that notion of body and consciousness, complex consciousness. And she understands that that's what poetry is, this integration of a set of different aspects of sensibility" (2005).

The observations and criticism made by Rodriguez and Harrison of Rankin's poetry as a located, bodily account, by no means need to be viewed as excluding the reading that notices withdrawn subjectivity. We can suspend the emphasis both make on the central role of human subjectivity in the interests of placing weight on a new way of reading. By disappearing, the

speaker who emerges twice in the above sections of “Earth hold”, throws *negative* perceptions of organic life into question. There seem to be moments of absent subjectivity in which a broader “voice” takes over the poem, although “voice” is an unhelpful term, denoting human expression or response, whereas Rankin attempts to escape that presence. While subjective expression bobs up occasionally in Rankin’s work, she persistently suppresses authorial and narrative subjectivity in favour of a dominant representation of material reality.

This reading struggles, naturally, with structuralist and post-structuralist conceptions of language. In “Cliffs”, signifier and signified are fused at points, so that the Saussurean notion of the sign devoid of objective validity is challenged. Likewise, “Earth hold” removes the reflexive presence of the diachronic voice, so that the poem’s vocabulary appears to move of its own accord. The apparent lack of linguistic scepticism in these two poems, as in much of Rankin’s poetry, is a source of division between her work and that of another poet included in *The New Australian Poetry*. Robert Adamson’s poetry offers one point of comparison and contrast between Rankin’s approach and the approaches of her ’68-er contemporaries. Adamson advised Rankin on her early work, and was close friends with David Rankin (*Collected Poems* xvi); both Adamson and Jennifer Rankin persistently address landscape, particularly through motifs such as the Hawkesbury River of Adamson’s work, and the littoral, locally ambiguous shorelines of Rankin’s.

In Adamson’s 1970 poem, “The Harbour Braces Itself”, an authorial and self-reflexive speaker is a vital element, undermining the act of language:

1
It is early, the harbour braces itself
like cold skin expecting a breeze—I have been here
standing on a barge before dawn
for no reason. The new sun washes over lights
left burning.

2
The moon is halfway up the sky,
although is rapidly growing fainter in steady rising
sun . . . Had I not been here watching it fade
I would never find such a pale & thin rim.
A boat sails out of my eye. (17)

As in Rankin’s work, Adamson’s poem is rich with images of organic and material life, and oscillation between representation of that life and reference to an ordering subject. In the poem’s third part, the speaker loses his rational certainty (“I have lost my sense of time”) when the exterior world does not

provide familiar signs (“without warning this happened [. . .]/Clouds have come over the sky without raining”, 17). The difference between Adamson and Rankin, therefore, is a matter of depth: Adamson’s speaker is unable or unwilling to recede as deeply as Rankin’s often does, a sense created by the poet’s approach to language and form.

It is this approach that places Adamson within the group of poets that Tranter links by a poetics of “self-reference”. Above, the first line presents us with a metaphor of personification; two tropes, which project the narrator-subject’s order upon what is represented. Fusing of the (non-human) object onto a primary (human) subject is extended by the dash between “like cold skin expecting a breeze”, and “I have been here”. The lines following these lose the speaker momentarily, but in the second part of the suite an ellipsis joins “rising/sun” with “Had I not been here”, reinforcing once again the necessity of the speaker, that without the subjective voice and eyes, the harbour could not exist. The poet stands between the thing and the word, the poem mirroring the act of perception. Adamson’s line, “Had I not been here watching it fade/I would never find such a pale & thin rim” gestures toward a negative answer to an absent Zen koan: “If a pale and thin moon fades in the sun, and nobody is there to see it, could it be seen?” Similarly, the closing of part two, “A boat sails out of my eye”, with its play upon “eye”/“I”, is a transparent admission to negative perception. Adamson’s narrator-subject is tied up with an authorial voice that is, in turn, the driving force behind what is “seen”.

In his introduction to *The New Australian Poetry*, Tranter suggests that when Adamson and his contemporaries achieve these “self-aware conceptual gestures” they have made an adequate “response to contemporary experience” (xxiv). In contrast, Rankin’s lingering preoccupation with self-erasure appears unrelated to this “response”. Unlike Adamson’s poem, for instance, Rankin’s formal innovation creates affects that are representative of landscape rather than landscape-being-perceived. In a final example of her work, from a suite entitled “Mound poems”, Rankin attains a sustained moment in which language is bleached of what Gray calls “human depth”:

Hollowing out.
 The sea.
 Dressing and undressing the black rock.
 Hollowing out.
 And always the tugging
 the sloping of the ground
 the thin winding way of the cliff

hollowing out
 in the curve of the circling hill
 the wing-pit of the gull
 the dressing and undressing of black rock. (*Collected Poems* 46)

This poem, like “Cliffs” and “Earth hold”, attempts to remove the self-reflexive subject from the expression of the poem and concerns of the medium. In this section, the experience of the objects presented is raw, primary and naked; it is as if the glass has been removed from the viewing window or aquarium wall.

Rankin’s use of repetition documents the rhythm of waves wearing into rock, the echo within “hollow” and between the repetitions of the word, sounding out the concave space. “Dressing and undressing”, too, creates a thin, splashing effect once the wave is broken into white-water: is the rock being dressed like a piece of wood, stained and polished? “Black rock” is a resonant drip; “The sea”, a long, receding pull after the wave, its motion reflected visually with the capital “T” (down and along). Without a defined subjective position, Rankin’s poem assumes a motile, drifting, omniscient delivery. This objectified narrative presence quashes an evaluating or transcendent vision (poetic and otherwise), replacing it with a sequence driven by rhythm, circling and simultaneity.

The short lines, contained images and sparse, abrupt phrases of Rankin’s poetry indicate the well-known roles played by Kinnell and Hughes in her poetic development, however Rankin gains original momentum with these forms. Her struggle against primary subjective expression in the poem is a struggle to make language more literal and less mediatory. This task asks us to consider, as Kinnell writes in *The American Model*, what it is “about poetry which transcends language” (26). Thomas Shapcott suggests that such a consideration marks “the overthrow of one of the twentieth century’s dominant intellectual preoccupations: the impasse of man as a non-communicable being” (Kirkby 36-39). Rankin’s exploration of landscapes *a priori*, is activated by this treatment of language. Her appeals, through linguistic resources, to the reader’s memory, experience and physical engagement invite comparison with the Objectivist poetics of William Carlos Williams—an influence that is also important to Gray. Rankin was certainly reading Williams between the publications of her two collections (ADFA MS 348, Notebook entry, c.1977, Series 2 Folder 1), after Gray used Objectivist aesthetics to contrast Adamson’s work with Rankin’s: “Poets cannot afford to forget, or to slight the fact, that ‘outside/outside myself/there is a world’ (W. C. Williams). The attempt to deal with that is the source of all freshness, interest and innovation in literature” (17).

Ironically, it is in pursuit of this “fact” that Rankin attempts to contradict the need for human thought in the poem, which Gray seems to feel is problematic. Her often startling jumps into unfamiliar aesthetic territory—landscapes without a human compass—tend to take us to the “world” without first travelling via “myself” or acknowledging being “outside” of anything. “Mound poems” is predominantly without a recognisable or sympathetic “voice” in the truer sense of the word; and there is no subjective narrator that drives the perception of the poem’s events. In these poems, as in others, Rankin skirts projection of human faces, voices, dialogue and emotional scenario, upon non-human organisms. In her work, the fleeting presence of human activity and expression exists alongside parts of the green world: not in duality but as a transient, fallible and ultimately forgettable part of that world. As evidenced here, Rankin’s exploration of this poetics is particularly deep in *Earth Hold*, suggesting that, had she lived and continued to write, it may have become increasingly definitive of her work. This development, suggested by the titles of her two publications, reflects Rankin’s engagement with Adamson and Gray at opposite ends of her career. With that arc of growth, Harrison remarks, “she had the makings of a major poetry”, and “was going to be that ‘big’ writer” because of the fundamental shifts in modern aesthetic experience and function that are embryonic in her work (2005).

In this sense, the most exciting aspects of Rankin’s work go beyond the “new” poetics championed by Tranter. The absence of an especially human experience from Rankin’s poetry challenges Rodriguez’s assertion that “things” (particularly organic ones) can be reduced to an emotive and symbolic conclusion. In light of Australia’s ecological and cultural *status quo*, Rankin’s work seems an utterly appropriate and even useful “response to contemporary experience”, to use Tranter’s phrase. In terms of poetic contexts, such an interpretation of her poetry allows Rankin to be aligned not with her immediate contemporaries but with both pre-’68 poetic trends and prospective possibilities:

Clearly, her work was related to all those discourses of the earth; clearly, she was going to head off in an environmentalist direction and, clearly, she is/was the writer, with Judith Wright, who would have been able to create some sense of dialogic space with indigenous poetics. (Harrison 2005)

These suggestions and their link to ideas about influence and technique in Rankin’s poetry, warrant further, dedicated exploration elsewhere. As Harrison has argued, Rankin’s work engages the human senses and body to offer a “renewal of perception” (2005). What ought to be emphasised, however, is that Rankin’s work suggests renewal by regarding the possibilities of language as an extension of reality. Her poetry can be read as an exercise

in putting the perceiving-self second, allowing the primacy of the organic object/landscape to emerge, and re-thinking language to accommodate these. Allusion to painterly technique and theory articulates this reading particularly well: Rankin's poems work through the lesson apparent in Olsen's philosophy of painting, that to represent landscape is "to move with it". Rankin's struggle against subjective poetics makes a radical response to perceived limitations of language and dominant forms of poetic expression. It demands, for the sake of Rankin and other poets, relaxation of the hermeneutic prescriptions we bring to reading Australian poetry.

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