

## PLACE AND IDENTITY IN THE LETTERS OF RACHEL HENNING

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When Rachel Henning came to Australia in 1854, the displacement she felt profoundly affected her sense of self. One of the indicators of that displacement, and one of its causes, was the apparent failure of the Australian landscape to provide her with the sense of security her home English landscape had given her. I wish to go further than this and to suggest that the removal of her accustomed physical setting and its attendant activities actually challenged a core part of her identity. Only after she had returned to England for a period of five years and then re-migrated to Australia was Rachel Henning able to accept her new surroundings and her new identity as an Anglo-Australian woman.

There has been much work in recent years on women's autobiographical writings: by Sidonie Smith, Leigh Gilmour, and Susan Friedman among others.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the interpretative paradigms of autobiography have been thoroughly re-figured to accommodate all those women's self-writings which at one time would not have been considered "autobiography" at all. Traditional critical emphasis had been on the two major strands of accepted autobiography: the events of the public life of an exceptional or representative individual; or, from the nineteenth century on, the growth of an individual's isolated, coherent, and transcendent self, the "egotistical sublime" in a hundred versions. Just one such traditional definition of autobiography will have to suffice as an example – that of James Olney:

I suggest that one could understand the life around which autobiography forms itself in a number of other ways besides the perfectly legitimate one of "individual history and narrative": we can understand it as the vital impulse - the impulse of life- that is transformed by being lived through the *unique medium of the individual and the individual's special, peculiar psychic configuration*; we can understand it as *consciousness, pure and simple, consciousness referring to no objects outside itself, to no events, to no other lives*; we can understand it as *participation in an absolute existence*

far transcending the shifting, changing unrealities of mundane life; we can understand it as the moral tenor of the individual's being.<sup>2</sup>

With its emphasis on the uniqueness and independence of the self, this definition and others like it have excluded most women's life writings of the early modern period from consideration, just as they would have continued to exclude many modernist and post-modernist life writings if there had not been a fundamental re-thinking about just what autobiography (and autobiographical *subjectivity*) is. Indeed, such definitions have *always* excluded most women's life writings as there has been no acceptable category of interpretation, no *genre*, and therefore no attention paid to the hundreds of female works that did not conform to the definition of what was in effect a male genre of "autobiography". These female life-writings include not only those attempts at formal autobiography which were about the "wrong" subject matter - houses, babies, domestic events, illnesses; but also the thousands of journals, diaries and letters in which women characteristically wrote about the details of their lives and attempted to construct viable female "selves" outside that essentially male possibility of a coherent, transcendent, independent and consciously individual identity.

The controversial term "self" has been at the hub of the matter. As theorists such as Sidonie Smith and Nancy Chodorow, among others, have pointed out, women have not had the opportunity to imagine themselves as having the same kind of "selves" as men, at least not in Western culture from the fifteenth century onwards.<sup>3</sup> Women have not only been denied public selves; they have also been encouraged to be self-effacing even in the private sphere, concerning themselves primarily with the thoughts and feelings of others. Nancy Chodorow has positioned these cultural demands within her own feminist post-Lacanian theorising of the development of female subjectivity:

...growing girls come to define themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic

masculine sense of self is separate...Girls come to experience themselves as...more continuous with and related to the external object- world...<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, the social theorist Sheila Rowbotham emphasises this sense of shared identity that women see *as* their identity. For her, women cannot avoid this consciousness of their "selves" as belonging to a community of women.

Ann Mellor, an exciting and influential feminist critic of nineteenth century English literature, has taken the notion of this shared female self even further, into the world of objects and material existence. In her analysis of the kind of "self" which Dorothy Wordsworth constructed in her journals, Mellor posits Wordsworth's sense of self not only as "fluid, relational, (and) exhibiting the permeable ego boundaries" Chodorow identified, but as related "to a significant other, whether a man, a woman, God, nature, or the community".<sup>5</sup> Moreover, according to Mellor, Dorothy Wordsworth inscribes her self as embodied in "a routine of physical, of the daily production of food clothing and shelter" as well as her daily activities in her garden and in the surrounding countryside.<sup>6</sup>

Rachel Henning, too, constructs her self in the relationships she has with others, in her daily domestic routine, and most noticeably in her reactions to and contact with her natural surroundings. When she first came out to Australia to join her brother and sisters in 1854 the family settled at Appin. But Rachel was unsettled and felt alienated from her bush surroundings:

I dislike this bush life extremely and find it sometimes difficult to amuse myself, though at home the days used to seem too short for what I had to do.<sup>7</sup>

She constantly compares her new natural surroundings with those of her life in England:

I often see very pretty flowers in the bush and just gather them to take a look at them, and then throw them away again without any further interest, while at Home every wildflower seemed like a friend to me. The Danehill woods must be getting full of wood anemones, primroses and woodsorrel now. How beautiful they must be, and how I should like to see them! (26-27)

Henning realised that her dissatisfaction was in some way connected to the way she lived her life in England and not just to the flowers themselves, but she does not articulate this fully, stating only that it was "the want of any pleasant associations connected with them" (26) that was the source of her unease. As the reader gradually begins to realise, however, it was the activities connected to nature, as much as the plants themselves that at home had made the days "seem too short for what I had to do". (24) The lack of these attendant activities, the lack of *things to do*, made her days and her life seem empty. Indeed it was the things she did that helped to make up her sense of belonging and, consequently, her female identity.

In England a significant part of a young rural middle class woman's day would have been spent gathering flowers in her own garden, walking through the surrounding countryside, gathering wildflowers, identifying specimens familiar to her, sketching a scene perhaps, making more detailed drawings of the plants she collected, and arranging the flowers in rooms of her house. Thus the realm of her domestic identity was extended out into the surrounding countryside. These activities were as much a part of her "self" as her social and familial role as mother, daughter or sister.

However, for Rachel Henning, in Appin, in 1855 "...there are no walks to take" (27) and her sketchbooks, easel, and drawing equipment remain stored away, awaiting her impending return to England. The fact that her sister Amy "was established as housekeeper" (23) pushed Rachel even further into depending on her other familiar activities as a means of placing herself in this new country. She tried to keep vegetables:

We have begun to dig our potatoes, but they are very small and many of them diseased owing to the dry weather... We can get nothing to grow in this dry soil, and the fowls scratch up the little there is. (25)

She even attempted to overcome her sense of alienation from Australian flowers by asking a friend in England to see if there was any book called "Flora of Australia" to be had, but there was not. In any event she had by this time virtually given up, merely waiting for the time to come when she could return to England.

Before she left, however, she went for a visit to the newly married Amy's home in Bathurst. In some ways her letters about this trip continue to demonstrate Henning's reluctance to accept the Australian landscape; yet at the same time they indicate the means by which she was later to fully revise her poor opinion, and to overcome her feelings of alienation and displacement.

The ability to observe and appreciate landscape was a necessary part of the education of every middle-class English girl who wished to become at least a competent draughtswoman. On the trip to Bathurst, Henning looks carefully at her natural surroundings, describing them for her letter recipients, comparing them to landscape features she has seen, and judging them. Bathurst does not do well on her aesthetic scale:

I cannot say I admire the "city" of Bathurst. It stands in the midst of the Bathurst plains without a tree or a shrub near it...What they call "plains" are in fact low hills, covered with tufts of brown grass. In England we should call them downs, and they must be like the American "rolling prairie", only the latter is said to be covered with the most beautiful grass and flowers, while nothing can be more barren than these are. (41)

But the habit of observation soon begins to sew the seeds of interest in, and even appreciation of, the Australian landscape:

I sometimes go up a little hill that is near the house and the view from the top is not exactly beautiful, but very curious, being so utterly un-English. There are these undulating hills, stretching round you for miles, without a tree or a shrub upon them, in a hollow below you lies the red town, scattering itself over a large space of ground. The Nepean River<sup>8</sup> winds along near it, and you can trace its course through the treeless landscape by the fringe of swamp-oaks that grow here and there on its margin.<sup>8</sup> (42)

In the distance are the "beautiful 'Blue Mountains'".

Henning was later to respond with intense joy to the freedom of space of the Australian bush; here it is daunting, but at least it is also "curious". We must note, too, that she had persevered in her English habit of walking to satisfy what seems to be a need to be physically involved with her surroundings.

Soon after this visit she returned to England to live with her principal correspondents, her sister Etta and her husband, Mr Boyce. Five years later she came back to Australia, apparently unable to remain apart from her

brother and sisters here and determined to adjust. Fittingly, perhaps, she went first to her sister Amy in Bathurst; the coach journey across the mountains was dangerous but Henning herself seems physically exhilarated by it:

I wish I could give you the least idea of the beauty of the scenery here. It was a lovely morning, and we wound along one side of the hill with a deep ravine on our right, and, on the other side of the ravine, a wall of rock that seemed to rise up to the sky with trees growing out of every crevice and the sun shining on the top, while all below was in black shade. I had forgotten how magnificent those Blue Mountains were. (66)

However, it is when she settles with her brother Biddulph at Exmoor Station in northern Queensland that Henning seems most completely at ease. Immediately she places her new home within its surrounding domestic and extended landscape:

The house stands on a low hill at the foot of which runs the creek which supplies us with water, and a very pretty creek it is, with deep banks covered with trees and shrubs. We have a piece of ground fenced and dug for a garden at the foot of the hill, but at present it only contains some pines and pumpkins and some petunia cuttings. (107)

There is no doubt that the house was central to the identities of most nineteenth century women, but the garden and grounds and the immediate natural surroundings were incorporated into this as an extension of the domestic. Therefore, here and elsewhere, Henning finds it almost impossible to envisage a house in isolation from its surroundings. Her activities, and indeed, her very identity depended on them. When a new and better site for the permanent homestead was discovered nearby, the same necessary features were present:

The new site is the ridge of a high plain, a rocky creek at the foot of the ridge in front, and a noble view over a wide sweep of undulating plains dotted with gum-trees and patches of scrub, like a park, beyond the thick bush and a panorama of mountains all round, peak behind peak. There is plenty of room for a garden round the house, and a flat of rich soil close by the creek for a kitchen garden. To the right of the house is a rocky creek with pools of clear water and pretty trees growing in it; to the left is an expanse of sloping plain, where the store, men's huts, woolshed, yards and paddocks are to be. At the back of the house the gentle slope on which all the buildings are rises suddenly into a little steep rocky hill, crowned with gum-trees and rocks where you can sit down and survey a most lovely prospect. When we go there to live there will be very few days on which I shall not mount that hill, about ten minutes walk. (111)

This is a long way from Appin, both in terms of Henning's appreciation for this Australian setting and her obvious sense of optimism about her own place in it. She will be a part of the scene, taking it in nearly every day and thus re-affirming her own identity which is so closely bound up with it. Here at Exmoor her sense of wellbeing, her sense of satisfaction in being able to place herself literally, is clearly in evidence. It is even extended to the wildflowers which were so useless to her at Appin:

I wish you could see the wildflowers here; they are not very numerous, but some are so very handsome. I found the other day a beautiful wild azalea, the blossoms quite as large as those paper ones I made for you, and pure white with deep crimson stamens. There is also a tree we find in the creeks that has a beautiful pink blossom in shape and size something like a Turk's-cap lily, and very sweet. Another beautiful shrub we call the fire-tree...I dress a vase of flowers every morning... (114)

Some of the flowers are still, of necessity, identified via familiar English specimens but she has begun to use the Australian vernacular names, and the collection and display of these flowers are again part of the ritual activities of her day. Other daily events are outside the scope of this paper, but her letters show that her time was now full again with the kinds of domestic activity needed in an outback settlement of some ten or more people including house and station workers.

Henning appears to revel in this broadening of activity, especially in one particular aspect, the long country rides she can now undertake in the open spaces of the Australian landscape. Every nineteenth century English girl of her class was taught to ride, and this would of course have formed part of her English identity; yet now we feel she can perhaps indulge her physical experience of the landscape in a socially freer and a physically more spacious environment:

We went through the bush and over the wide sheep plains for nearly ten miles till we came to the Broken River. More beautiful scenery I have scarcely ever seen in England: the riverbed is full four hundred yards wide, the banks steep precipices in some places, in others sloping down more gradually. We rode down the best place we could find, and I cannot fancy anything wilder and more picturesque than that Broken River when we were down in it; banks of sand and shingle, beautiful groups of trees, something like willows only much larger, tumbled masses of grey rock (from which the river has its name) rising into crags and ledges in some places and pools of the clearest water here and there among them. The river was still running in a channel on one side and tolerably

wide in some places, but what a sight it must be when it is bank to bank and a torrent four hundred yards wide is rolling over the rocks and trees. (113)

Henning is now in her element; her identity is once again in place in yet another familiar natural environment.

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#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987; Leigh Gilmour, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994; Susan Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice", in Shari Benstock, *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, London, Routledge, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Shari Benstock, "Authorising the Autobiographical" in Benstock, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Chodorow, *Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> in Friedman, p. 41. By objects Chodorow means people rather than things.

<sup>5</sup> Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 156-157.

<sup>6</sup> Mellor, pp. 166, 163-164.

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Henning, *The Letters of Rachel Henning*, edited by David Adams, Ringwood, Penguin Books, 1969, 1988, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> The manuscript has Nepean River, *Papers - Rachel Taylor 1853-1882*, ML MSS 342, State Library of New South Wales.