“A tactic of return”: purpose and ground in the poetry of Jennifer Maiden and Jennifer Rankin

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the poetry and poetics of Australian poets, Jennifer Maiden and Jennifer Rankin, in the years 1974-1979. By focusing on this period, it seeks to establish their bodies of work as two extended projects. Maiden's neglected formative volumes, particularly Tactics and The Problem of Evil, represent the fundamental concerns and stylistic identity of her recent and more acclaimed work. Rankin's poetry, including Ritual Shift, Earth Hold, "The Mud Hut" and contemporaneous drafts, is entirely circumscribed by that decade, and presents an equally concentrated and perhaps even more urgent working of poetic ground.

Placing these two poets' work side by side, this study explores their common sense of purpose and thematic preoccupations. Close readings of key texts by Maiden and Rankin are assessed in relation to the impact of American modernist and postmodernist poetics in Australia. Maiden's account of Wallace Stevens' role in her development of analytical technique opens a discussion of how her work's interrelational relationship with, and ethical awareness of, the reader can be read alongside Robert Duncan, George Oppen and Denise Levertov. Levertov's and Robert Creeley's representation of the material world is linked to Rankin's reading of William Carlos Williams, and her subsequent approach to poetry's contact with the more-than-self.

As well as contributing new primary research, this thesis argues for the continuing relevance of Maiden's and Rankin's works by examining them in relation to broader philosophical and theoretical approaches to poetics. Maiden's early work introduces a vocabulary that structures the thesis as a whole: incarnate/disincarnate, ground/field and openness/return. Grounded in the inherently violent interchange of identity and power within human circles, Maiden's poetry points to the intersecting discourses of ethics and aesthetics, while Rankin's emphasises detachment and interconnection of existential crisis through phenomenological processes. Rankin's work's links to postcolonial Australian traditions in poetry and art advance a unique view of poetry's function both in Australia and the contemporary world.
This is to certify that:

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the Ph.D.,
(ii) due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other materials used,
(iii) human research ethics clearance has been obtained for all interviews conducted,
(iv) the thesis is less than 100,000 words, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.
Contents

Acknowledgements
Abbreviations

Introduction i

Chapter One
No Ideas: "The Problem of Evil" 1

Chapter Two
Mobiles: "The Construct" and "The Magnetron" 32

Chapter Three
To complicate the play: "The Sponge" and "Tactics" 66

Chapter Four
The line: From "Daub wall" to "Earth lock" 94

Chapter Five
I find earth: "The Mud Hut" and "Earth hold" 115

Chapter Six
Pre-thought: "Island cycle" and "Cliffs" 153

Neither once nor only: the poetic horizon 192

Bibliography 206
Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations

Works by Jennifer Maiden:


Works by Jennifer Rankin:


Introduction

If, as Angus Fletcher writes, in the production and reception of art “we leap beyond ourselves, simply by noticing exactly where we are”, then the act of return is central to the aesthetic experience. What is this two-faced action of departing reality in order to discover it, so that we might be better prepared for departing from it; are these the limits of a poem? Fletcher sees this dynamic at work in his theory of the “environment-poem”, a poetics rooted in elements of both British and American romanticisms. The environment-poem “seeks symbolic control over the drifting experience of being environed, and it introduces the experience of an outside that is developed for the reader inside the experience of the work”. This definition introduces the concerns that this thesis brings to the works of Jennifer Maiden and Jennifer Rankin: poetry’s dialogue between purpose and ground, terms for its navigation between authorial control and a reader’s “drifting” agency. In the following chapters, I will explore how their poetry reconciles the “inside” poetic experience of environment with the “outside” environment of a poem. In doing so, I will be looking at their respective approaches to place and space, and defining their poems’ quality of return.

This thesis investigates how and towards what affects the works of Maiden and Rankin marry poetic influences shared between them and their peers with more broadly informed stylistic and thematic decisions. While neither poet divides her work’s fields of reference between the literary and philosophical or the local and international, both are conscious of their poetry’s unique function within a particular moment. I want to use Maiden’s work and statements of poetics to introduce a vocabulary for critically approaching their awareness of poetic function. Her recent poem, “Reflected Hearth at Bowen Mountain”, opens with the statement, “This is not a cluster poem. This / is a


\footnote{Fletcher, A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment and the Future of the Imagination 227.}
Bonny Cassidy

parallel poem”. Her notion of the poem’s ability to be, or to establish, a “parallel” seems to anticipate the dualistic inside/outside experiences of Fletcher’s environment-poem. The environment-poem and the parallel poem suggest a dialectical struggle: for Fletcher it is the metaphysical confrontation between idea and thing, a distinction that the environment-poem asks us to “blur”; while for Maiden it is the nature of human dialogue itself, a poetic mode related to Wallace Stevens’ role in the formation of her poetics. Important for this study is that both Fletcher and Maiden turn away from a view that the poem is alternative to an authentic or inaccessible reality. Maiden’s early work is marked by Stevens’ approach to poetic expression as “an ongoing process [...] rather than a stasis”. By assuming processual forms, Maiden’s poetry writes against its being interpreted as abstract commentary on its environment. This can be seen in terms of a wider rejection of aesthetic experience as idealistic or closed: any one of Maiden’s or Rankin’s poems is parallel to similar effects in another, and is equally as real as other kinds of experience, without being isolated from them. For this reason, I want to reconsider the parallel poem in light of another term, “return”, from one of Maiden’s earliest works. Drawn from the poem “Tactics”, discussed in Chapter Three, the “tactic of return” describes the relationship between poet and reader, and between poem and environment. In this relationship, the poem is a return to the world it images, narrates, observes or feels.

This thesis is concerned with return in a number of ways. To return—whether by never departing, or whether by developing otherness within—is to establish presence and currency. It is, firstly, a formal effect of these poems, that they are able to create a space of wandering, a kind of movement that does not stray from reality. Unlike the literary tradition of the wanderer as a narrative and symbolic author, the aesthetic figure of the wanderer represents the reader. “Technically,” Maiden stated in 1977, “I like poetry to be rich and inexhaustible”; a way of “inviting my reader to wander in [the poem] and explore without having his way barred by any immediate and dismissive simplicity”. A

3 Maiden, Jennifer, Friendly Fire (Sydney: Giramondo, 2005) 55.
5 Maiden, Jennifer, Tactics (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1974) 60.
Bonny Cassidy

theory of wandering is variously suggested by the conceptual, imagistic and thematic vocabularies unique to each poet. Maiden’s dynamic of tactical movement between her own intentions and her reader’s interaction not only acknowledges that a poem, as Simon Critchley writes, “is concerned with the rubbings of a reality that resists the power of imagination” but also that it considers the feasibility of “a shared sense, a sensus communis”.7 Rankin, on the other hand, traces loose cyclic structures as an alternative to the “three primary modes of representing space: the map, the landscape, and the panorama, each essentially ill-fitted to represent the spatial contingency of exploration”.8 More striking than the poets’ sustained intentions, however, is what I see as their shared preoccupation with mediating aggression. As Critchley reflects:

What, then, are poets for? In a time of dearth, they resist the pressure of reality, they press back against this oppressiveness with the power of imagination, producing felt variations in the appearance of things. Poetry enables us to feel differently, to see differently. It leavens a leaden time. This is poetry’s nobility, which is also a violence, an imaginative violence from within that protects us from the violence from without – violence against violence, then.9

However, re-posing Martin Heidegger’s question for a contemporary reader, I find that the poems examined by this thesis are difficult to position “against” the world of their reader. Once again, the dualism of spaces “within”/“without” the poem needs to be reconsidered. This issue comes to the fore with the poets’ original approaches to postmodern poetic forms that dissipate (authorial, hermeneutic and, ideally, scholarly) “violence”. Maiden’s and Rankin’s mutual interest in poetry’s aleatory capability resembles the “limitless set of relations” that Joseph M. Conte finds in American models of “open” form:

[...] distinct from the neoromantic sequence because of its discontinuity and radical incompleteness at odds with the latter’s basis in an organic theory of continuity and development [...] that still hopes to discover an immanent form and unity in creation.

9 Critchley, Things Merely Are 10.
At the same time, stressing the interrelational possibility of such form, both poets place its dynamic of discontinuity in dialogue with what Conte describes as:

[...] a generative structure that constrains the poet to encounter and examine that which he or she does not immediately fathom, the uncertainties and incomprehensibilities of an expanding universe in which there can be no singular impositions.\(^\text{10}\)

This crucial return to what I will call the ground of meaning determines a level of coherent experience shared between poem and reader. In Maiden's case, this is partly due to her semantic control; in Rankin's, it results from the concrete affects of her poetry's engagement with sensation. My focus in reading both bodies of work is the identification of a gestalt of hermeneutic experience: "a structure of protension and retention, with expectation and memory thereby projecting themselves one upon the other", and the reader taking responsibility for this imbricative process in order to put "together what his wandering viewpoint has divided up".\(^\text{11}\)

I trace a pattern of return, secondly, in the poets' use of the wandering experience to represent complex thematic issues. To this end, I have located the focus of the thesis in the years 1974-1979. Maiden's formative volumes, particularly Tactics (1974) and The Problem of Evil (1975), as well as The Occupying Forces (1975) and The Border Loss (1979) are chosen to represent the fundamental concerns and stylistic identity of her recent, more acclaimed work. On the other hand, Rankin's Ritual Shift (1976), Earth Hold (1978), "The Mud Hut" (1979) and contemporaneous drafts present a highly concentrated and urgent development of her poetic voice, cut short by premature death in 1979.\(^\text{12}\)

By framing their works' development within a decade, I seek to establish consistency between the sustained impact of the poems' meaning or ground, and the poets' philosophical and formal purposes. Each poet's engagement with the "cluster" structure of a formal and thematic nexus serves her fidelity to a sustained project or poetic purpose. As Umberto Eco argues, aesthetics are not based in chance but in "a cluster of possibilities", and it is this imagining of the writing and reading experience that


\(^{12}\) "The Mud Hut" was published by Margaret Atwood in the year of Rankin's death. See Rankin, Jennifer, "The Mud Hut," Exile: A Literary Quarterly 6.3-4 (1979).
Bonny Cassidy

I draw from their work.13 Grounded in the inherent violence of human communication, Maiden's early poems compose scenarios in which a meeting of voices seeks to establish shifting, ironic balances (never syntheses). Rankin, meanwhile, deals with reiterative ecological cycles that spin out into a larger experience of environment. Their subject matter is, therefore, a return of form—and vice versa. Over a sustained period of time, Maiden and Rankin revisit these hermeneutic structures as a way of engaging perceived social and aesthetic problems identified in the following chapters: war, urbanism, ecology and the more-than-human.

By forging modes of return, the poets show an awareness of the unfinished nature of their process. Precisely because of this openness, and despite their contrasting modes of expressing poetic purpose, the function of the poet is central to this study. Whereas Rankin “was very suspicious of theoretical issues”, seeking to eliminate discursive ideas from her poetic voice, Maiden has assiduously pursued the explication of her concerns beyond poetic image and form.14 Indeed, Rankin’s initial opinion of poetry as “a fictile art” came to be replaced by the “discipline” and conviction associated with Maiden’s process. Rankin’s archived papers and drafts reveal a more deliberate politics than might at first be evident, what David Brooks describes as “extensive, rather than intensive imagination—one that transgresses, laterally, the customary channels of our thought”.15

If any contemporary shared Stevens’ sense of a troubled relationship between ideas and things, it was William Carlos Williams, one of the few poets in whom Rankin records an interest.6 Williams’ flight from the reductive dualism of perception and reality establishes the poem “as an activity, not as a passive substance. For this reason it

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14 Rankin, David, Written interview with Bonny Cassidy, 14 April 2008.
16 Rankin, Jennifer, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Series 2, Folder 1: Notebooks & Diary, 1970s. Notebook entry, c.1977. Living sources have been unable to shed light on specific authors and works that Rankin may have read as she worked, however Williams' name appears in a private reading list that includes Ted Hughes, Michael Dransfield, Charles Baudelaire, Jean Paul Sartre, Randall Jarrell, Shaw Neilson and Sylvia Plath. Suggesting fascinating and numerous contexts for her work, a number of these references are examined within the following chapters.
Bonny Cassidy

must be a dynamic thing, primarily verbal".¹⁷ Again, process claims a significant role, as Rankin's poetry extends from verbal dynamics to other affective possibilities, returning the image to the world of sensation. Yet its link to a determined function is suggested by the sequential modes of return that define Maiden and Rankin's bodies of work. These are not static or closed, like a perfect circle, but rather advancing and refreshing in the way of a cycle. The works' apparent awareness of their purposes affects how they might be read; and, subsequently, how the poem can continually return us to the world or environment we believed to be "outside" aesthetic form.

Thus, the driving motivation of this thesis is described by the deliberate choice to return: to revisit Maiden's early poetry in a critical context, and to revive interest in Rankin's body of work. Their poetry continues to be relevant—perhaps now more than ever—to how we understand Australian poetry's function, and to the possibilities of aesthetics within a "post-semiotic" philosophy of language.¹⁸ What is remarkable about these works is their common sense of an ethical imperative, an urgency that has been somewhat eclipsed in the thirty-year gap since their publication. In Rankin's case, this gap has been exacerbated by her death and subsequent disappearance from contemporary poetic horizons, whereas Maiden has persistently continued to publish:

[Rankin's work] had that trough to pull out of—the ten to fifteen years after any poet's death, while people tread delicately—stand back to contemplate a scene mercifully simplified—or prepare their major research works on the subject—whatever it is they do in this period. (Gwen Harwood is in that trough at present. A.D. Hope's Notebooks have just had a selected publication. Judith Wright—a few people are bringing out stuff.) How many poets pull out of this trough?¹⁹

Rankin's death from breast cancer at the age of thirty-eight has tended to diminish the force of the work that she achieved. During her lifetime, her publications received attention in favourable reviews by Robert Gray and Martin Harrison, who remain

¹⁹ Rodriguez, Judith, Written interview with Bonny Cassidy, 8 January 2006.
important champions of her work. Gray found **Ritual Shift** to achieve “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’”. In his review of **Earth Hold**, Harrison announced the “beginnings of a major poetry”, praising “the suggestiveness and indeterminacy” of its “curiously, even puzzlingly evocative moments at which the focus would be blurred and uncertainties allowed in”. In an interview, Judith Rodriguez describes how, when editing the collected works over a decade after Rankin’s death, “people I mentioned her to felt Rankin’s work to be of passing importance—not enough done, was one feeling”. This was certainly the case for John Tranter when editing **The New Australian Poetry** between 1977 and 1979:

> [..] there were some writers who hadn’t done much good work at that stage and they just didn’t go in because they didn’t have enough good stuff. Jennifer Rankin would have been one of those, I think. I liked her writing, but I didn’t feel it was particularly, alarmingly fresh or new or different; and, then again, there wasn’t very much of it.

Although Rankin had released two volumes by the time the anthology was published, opinion as to its poetic value differed. Was it fully developed? Tranter didn’t feel it had grown strongly enough as “work that was ‘experimental’ at the time or had an interest in developing poetics a little further than the norm”. Standing “outside a paradigm”, suggests Harrison, Rankin’s work was “uncomfortable”, posing “questions of process,

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22 Harrison, Martin, "Folding the elements (rev of Earth Hold by Jennifer Rankin)," *The Sydney Morning Herald* 2 June 1979.

23 Rodriguez, Written interview with Bonny Cassidy, 8 January 2006. Another explanation would be the distribution of Rankin’s work. As Rodriguez notes, her “first little book with Gargoyle made an impression only on those who follow poetry closely. The second, published in England and with Olsen’s etchings, made a lot of impact […] but there was the unusual, and very ambitious format for the regular poetry reviewer to grapple with. However I remember its reception as warm.” Rankin’s final publication, “The Mud Hut”, was simply not circulated here.


the spoken and the unspoken”. Part of the work of this thesis, then, is to salvage Rankin’s body of work for a changed critical environment. How do we shape readings of Australian poetry ourselves, and why should we take care to do so? A post-Adornian paradigm of reading, spurred on by increased environmental awareness, a continuing war in Iraq, the discourses of terror and security, turns from linguistic to ethical engagement in which the text ceases to be abstract from a reader. As Gary Madison argues, a “postsemiological theory of language must [...] avoid as best it can the ancient matter/spirit dichotomy” and define language by both limitation and possibility:

Although words (ideas) are always historical (localized) in origin, the unique thing about them is that they can always be detached from their place of origin (a particular form of life) and be transferred (“applied”) to any other place and time.27

Madison’s theory of language can be fundamentally linked to Satya P. Mohanty’s point that a theory of value—aesthetic and ethical—must “account for both the social and historical variability of values and (simultaneously) the possibility of objectivity”; and that this project would be inherently transcultural.28 I believe that we may, given this environment, now be able to recognise in Rankin’s poetry what Tranter calls a “commitment to the overhauling of poetic method and function that seems to become necessary from time to time in any culture”.29

By examining the writing process noted by Rankin, I link her work to Robert Gray’s conviction that, “if [poetry] is to be taken in any way really seriously, if it is to have a very basic value in our lives, it must be able to be associated with something as fundamental as ethics”. It’s possible to find a model of this association within Rankin’s sustained return to form and subject. I argue that she approaches poetic expression and

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26 Harrison, Martin, "Holding the Elements (Rev of Earth Hold. by Jennifer Rankin)," *The Sydney Morning Herald* 2 June 1979.
Bonny Cassidy

affect “as not dogma, but as the products of responsiveness, of empathy”.

Gray’s contribution to this discourse is important to this study because of his close association with Rankin’s poetry. Both he and Harrison are able to articulate her work’s correlation not simply with ethics but specifically with the fields of aesthetic phenomenology and ecopoetics: “a sense of writing that comes with an embodied sense of relation with the world and that has a sense of language as constantly active”. Rankin’s subordination of lyrical voice to image and sensation is capitalised in Earth Hold, but begins in Ritual Shift with poems like “Soft track”: “The track peeled off from that morning’s rim / just there leaving the main road it swept / deep into waiting grey trees / and in its momentum I was carried and placed”. The volume’s title alludes to her family’s regular rural retreat, and, while this journey is referenced less overtly in her second volume, Rankin’s papers reveal that many of the Earth Hold poems were drafted alongside those in the earlier publication. Thus her body of work emulates the actual retracing of the shift, which David Rankin, when interviewed, called “virtually sacred to her from childhood”. At the same time her work comes to explore precisely what the movement to that locale signifies. Broadly, it can be read as a reinvigoration of how Judith Wright’s poetics “encompasses the human place in a physical universe at a time when both are under threat”. 

In a sense, Rankin’s work continues the conversation begun by the Jindyworobaks, who anticipated Fletcher’s sense of environment with their broad definition of “environment values”:

33 Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Series 2 Folder 1: Notebooks and Diary, 1970s. Diary entry, c. January 1978.
34 Rankin, Written interview with Bonny Cassidy, 14 April 2008.
Bonny Cassidy

[...] the relationship, subjective or objective, between a man and the world about him. In poetry this mostly comes to mean the relationship between personal or individual sensibility and the physical or social landscape.36

Rodriguez has pointed out that many of Rankin’s contemporaries were “feminist readers and those who saw a new and feminised reading of the land”.37 Highlighting Rankin’s claims to personal narratives in her work, Rodriguez interprets the poet’s symbolic attention to physical environment, utilising the “context of the coast” and “shapes of fire and tree, as living explorations of the past”.38 The poetry’s concern with trying to get into and out of these contexts and shapes can, however, be read in terms of body rather than gender. Perhaps, as Harrison remarks, the distinction is “not just about ‘being a woman’ but is about the question of a certain non-masculine sense of the world that anyone can have”.39 Considering what this sense might comprise, I look to the various influences on Rankin’s work, including her husband David’s painting; the relevance of a contemporary British voice embodied by Ted Hughes; and Rankin’s exposure to American imagism and Zen Buddhist aesthetics in Gray’s poetry, as well as the romanticism of Robert Adamson’s landscapes. As if aware of the variety of these frames of reference, Rankin’s poetry presents the formal and metonymic device of “the line”.40 I have defined this figure in relation to Rankin’s development toward her posthumous publication, “The Mud Hut”. The constant presence of the line in her work – as an image, a term and a form – is essential to the question of whether Rankin’s metaphysics is a prolepsis of her physical breakdown, or “a way of looking at the ‘primaeval’ landscape, whether that implies the Aboriginal, mythical and original Australia or something rather closer to mere geology”.41

Maiden’s first volumes show a comparable commitment to engaging with their immediate environment, and are neglected. While a time lag has certainly played its part, cool receptions of her early work have been detrimental. Publishers, Maiden says,
Bonny Cassidy

"couldn't come at 'The Problem of Evil'", largely because they "couldn't categorise it". She had difficulty publishing the poem in book form, as the publishers of Tactics "thought it was some form of unsuccessful nineteenth century verse novella". Maiden encountered "the same problem with Gargoyle [Press] with The Occupying Forces; in fact I remember Leon Cantrell not really being able to understand or accept 'The Problem of Evil'. I recall Carl Harrison-Ford said he found it baffling". As with Rankin's publications, contemporaneous attention to Maiden's early work existed in brief reviews, however these totaled a considerable number due to the more accessible format and greater frequency of Maiden's publication. Although Maiden describes Tactics as comprised of her "accessible" poems, it establishes templates for the more dense forms and narratives in The Problem of Evil; and indeed, as she notes, "so much is taken out of Tactics that went into The Occupying Forces and The Problem of Evil itself". Its poetics of wandering exhausted reviewers such as Geoff Page by presenting "beautifully elaborate iron traceries that hint, but obscure, something beyond". Similarly, Finola Moorhead noted the complex "layers" in The Problem of Evil that "cannot easily be distinguished, all being one: actuality—(action conversation everyday/thought memory imagination/identity predicament of existence, the Is)". Through to her final volume of the 1970s, The Border Loss, ambivalence was a recurring response to work that, according to Page, "seems to be more often searching for the perception rather than conveying it". Asked about the reason for these responses, Maiden remarks that, "I just don't think the whole critical apparatus was geared for it".

Her later work's marked stylistic movement toward lyrical first-person voice and increasing self-reflexivity, however, has not shifted Maiden's thematic concern with warfare, Western democracy and interpersonal confrontation. Her poetry continues, as

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42 Maiden, Jennifer, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
43 Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
44 Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
48 Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
Bonny Cassidy

Martin Duwell writes, to consolidate “an analytical framework with its own vocabulary, but one with which the reader is not entirely confident”. In doing so, it also continues to wander and search through drifting voices and positions. The consistency of her work’s “vocabulary” is due to its analytical foundation in an ethics that recognises what Andrew Taylor identifies as “a moral commitment to the experience and to the act of communication (at the other end of which, remember, are other people)”.

For Maiden, however, it is not disconnection of self from world, but cleaving of consciousness to language, that is highlighted by the necessity of this recognition. Her view that “language and ideas are intrinsic and deep in the psyche and originate together rather than one before the other” reflects post-semiotic accounts of language as constitutive:

The constitutive process, then, is imperative not only to the form of Maiden’s poetry but also to its rewarding alertness to “the problem of evil”:

I do not mean that well-trodden theological field of why a Deity allows evil to exist, but rather the intricacies and potencies of a practical problem. Why we commit evil acts and violence upon each other and what psychological means are available to understand and prevent such things.

Given her correlation of the psyche with language, it is by testing lyricism that Maiden is able to both represent “a situation in which individuals could not choose appropriately to be incarnate and aware of the immediate circumstances of suffering, or to disincarnate and remember their principles and values in face of immediate threat”, and to “disrupt such rhetoric (including by re-contexting it)” through “the power of choice” inherent in aesthetic process:

I tend to work with the moral theory in “The Problem of Evil”, that bad behaviour comes from people becoming totally immersed in an ideal and then being unable to experience the reality; or, rather, being totally immersed in the reality and forgetting about the ideal. My idea is, through mediums similar to language, you need to experience both in order to judge what’s appropriate to the circumstances. So you’ve got a combination of representationalism and some sort of surrealism going on \[sic\].

Maiden’s explicit application of the discourse of ethics to her writing and, concomitantly, to the reading of it, reflects her attention to Simone Weil. I have extended Maiden’s terminology further by relating it to Alain Badiou’s definition of evil and an “ethic of truth”. This link not only reflects her work’s epistemological currency but also its bridging of ethics and poetics, which clearly appeals to Adorno’s aesthetic theory. Maiden constructs her own ethic of truth by avoiding obstructions to choice, whereby “the reader, in striving to produce the aesthetic object, actually produces the very conditions under which reality is perceived and comprehended”. Rather than magnification or representation of existing experience, the freedom of poetic form is in its generation of “the experience but also of the means whereby it develops”. Within its formal limitations, the poem “makes it possible for the reader to formulate a reference for what he is restructuring”:

Herein lies the practical relevance of aesthetic experience: it induces this observation, which takes the place of codes that otherwise would be essential for the success of communication.

Utilising the ironic potential of poetic expression, Maiden is able to mobilise a conceit by prompting us to grapple with it. The threat posed by mass media and urban life to an ethic of truth highlights the urgency of returning, as Charles Bernstein suggests, to “the poetic project itself—the details of particular sounds in particular orders”.

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54 Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
56 Iser, The Act of Reading 103.
57 Iser, The Act of Reading 134.
Paul de Man warns that, “whenever the aesthetic is invoked as an appeal to clarity and control, whenever, in other words, a symptom is made into a remedy for the disorder that it signals, a great deal of caution is in order”. However I would emphasise that Maiden’s own caution toward poetic language, particularly the later ironic stance prefigured in her earliest poems, works with disorder rather than against—or parallel to—it. Does the self-awareness of her work’s dialogic process obstruct its seemingly aleatory freedom? On the contrary, the process is heightened because that freedom is of course a prerogative shared between multiple subjects: the author, the poem object, and the reader. The purpose and process that Maiden writes into her poems will always be matched by her reader’s presence; similarly, Rankin’s intention to literally guide the reader through an environment must be reconciled with the affective nature of her work’s construction, which is not a monolith, in fact, but a gesture or sketch toward a perception.

Their gesture, “each time just this once”, is to the ground of meaning itself. As this study seeks to highlight, Maiden and Rankin converge in what Gray calls a poetics of care. Such an approach to writing and reading “means poetry can have an ethical function and effect while having no didactic—no deliberately moral—intent”. A close reading of Maiden’s and Rankin’s works reveals how they rely on the ability of their own markings of poetic ground to be redrawn. As the first extended and sustained scholarly return to their work, this reading’s motion of return is defined by the simple act of interaction with works that have not often been engaged in conversation. Martin Duwell has made a long-term critique of Maiden’s work, particularly highlighting her engagement with ethics and the difficulty of metaphor. Rodriguez’s editing of Rankin’s Collected Poems not only highlighted the cohesion and sheer amount of work by Rankin, but also offered in its introduction a first retrospective reflection on the poet. Martin Harrison has developed Rodriguez’s biographical perspective by bringing focused exegeses of Rankin’s poetry into discussion with issues in contemporary Australian poetics. This thesis builds on that work, establishing its own emphasis on purpose and

59 Man, Paul de, The Resistance to Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 64.
Bonny Cassidy

ground in the formal aspects of Maiden’s and Rankin’s poetry. I am interested in how, to differing ends, both Maiden and Rankin explore processes of intersubjective evaluation in which the text and reader each “forms an environment for the other during the reading event”.63

If Rankin’s work achieves new ways of phrasing what Wright called Australia’s “emptiness, its sameness, its distances”, I am positioning it in relation to Maiden’s awareness of the poem as a space in which sameness and difference are negotiated.64 As Mohanty argues, it has become philosophically problematic to imagine a better society through the use of a flawed society’s language.65 By examining how analysis and error underpin their poems of return or revisitation, I want to suggest that both poets express the way in which “objectivity is attainable in the realm of values”. In doing so, their work redefines truth as an endeavour of flux and qualification.66 Finally, I want to suggest why this might be an important social and aesthetic project.

My interest in the interactive animation of these poems reinforces Adorno’s emphasis on the aesthetic work’s materiality.67 It raises, however, the question of methodology, thematising dialogue between the poets’ purposes and the ground assumed by a scholarly reading. For example, in both her introduction to the Collected Poems and earlier anthologising of Rankin’s work, Rodriguez has considered gender to be critically important;68 whereas I have adopted Harrison’s post-feminist view of an embodied poetics, which suggests wider scope for the future unfolding of Rankin’s poetics. And while previous assessments of Maiden’s early work have positioned it in relation to the generational tradition suggested by The New Australian Poetry, I feel that defining the conventions of a generational view can be problematic.69 Broader surveys have come to

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64 Wright, Judith, Preoccupations in Australian Poetry (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1965) xviii.
68 See Rodriguez, ed., Mrs Noah and the Minoan Queen.
highlight the ultimately heterogeneous nature of Australian poetry first published in the late 1960s and early 1970s.70 As Duwell remarks, while a history of discussing and critiquing those poets in relation to one another has been formed, “my sense at the time and my sense now is that they’re all very different”.71

A parallel study of two previously unrelated authors and oeuvres provides ready access to similarity and contrast between its subjects, as well as a dedicated focus on each. By adopting this duality, this thesis marks out its own ground. I am reluctant to apply a historicised critique that might reiterate critical contextualisation that the poets, particularly Maiden, have already undergone. Yet I am also hesitant to fix their work within delimited, retrospective environments—a way of reading that I feel is neither genuine with respect to the writer’s process nor to the myriad readers’ appreciation of poetry. Rather than claiming some kind of methodological purity, therefore, I have largely considered the works’ historicity when indicated by the poets themselves: direct influences within twentieth century American poetry; the postmodern discourse of ethics; the Vietnam War; Australian postcolonial traditions in literature and art; and the ecological movement.

By using select biographical and factual information to introduce and support the more formal discussion of their works, I want to underline the poets’ own reticence toward establishing a direct political voice in their poetry. When Maiden writes a poem in response to Vietnam such as “The Problem of Evil”, its subject is easily conflated with contemporaneous international conflicts, or even with domestic argument. Alternatively, when Rankin seems to be focusing on the Great Barrier Reef, the coastline resembles Devon. Both poets, furthermore, favour narratives of women’s experience and voice in their work, but, while Ann Vickery has made a relevant case for feminist critique’s exemplary postmodern collapse of poetry into the everyday, I will be considering the politics of an aesthetic act rather than a personal code.72 Just as I have steered away from


71 Duwell, Martin, Personal interview with Bonny Cassidy, 13 December 2006.

Bonny Cassidy

undertaking a feminist analysis in Chapters One, Two and Three, I have also chosen to
limit the role of ecology and ecocriticism in Chapters Four, Five and Six. Vickery’s
remarks indicate a valid field within the wider discussion of politics in postmodern
poetics that deserves consideration elsewhere (not only in existing work but also in one of
the many possible studies that a thesis can suggest). More to the point is her generalised
comment on postmodern poetry’s inherent political critique, based on the disruption of
hegemonic identity.\textsuperscript{73} In the work of Maiden and Rankin, this is perhaps closest to the
“becoming” state that Gilles Deleuze has identified, in which participants are not so much
becoming-other as “becoming-imperceptible”.\textsuperscript{74} This disruption applies to critical canons
and contextualisations as well as authorial and hermeneutic possession of a text.
Maiden’s and Rankin’s tangential allusion to the ideas and problems important to them is
not quite what Adorno describes as the aesthetic work’s austere independence from social
qualities.\textsuperscript{75} Blurring of identity and voice is a deliberate act by both poets: it becomes the
refrain of their work. What I have defined as their common project of other-ing and
same-ing begins during the poems. It is reconciled with the contemporary reader
afterward, in another contextual moment such as this one.

\textsuperscript{73} Vickery, "Poetic Form and Cultural Politics: Protean Linkages between Language Poetry and Feminist
\textsuperscript{74} Deleuze, Gilles, Michael A. Greco and Daniel W. Smith, "Literature and Life," Critical Inquiry 23.2
Bonny Cassidy

Chapter One

*No Ideas: “The Problem of Evil”*

In praise of J. S. Harry, Jennifer Maiden reflects the concerns of her own poetics by highlighting Harry’s juxtaposition of “different ontologies […] logically but transformingly”. As Rose Lucas explains, Harry creates a textual moment comprised of “a diversity of spheres of signification”. Widening rather than narrowing, Harry’s work becomes “a medium of travel” through “all possible speaking positions”. For Maiden, the appeal of this effect is its achievement of “real philosophical expansion” beyond the “seemingly playful” parameters of poetic expression. In poems from Harry’s first volume, *The Deer Under the Skin* (1970), a perambulating poetic voice is matched by meandering forms. The poem makes slippery drifts into metaphor, and from narrative lyric to irony, which contrast with a determined sense of image. In “coming and going: peripatetic poet”, Harry describes the poetic process that results in “traveller’s eyes”; “that what you observe, returning, / although seeming the same as when you left / in itself, / is viewed altogether differently”:

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Having realised you cannot depict the world
in which you are travelling –
its guns, nails and cash-registers
turning you blindly back into yourself –
you realise, now,
shut in your own state,
you cannot see that, clearly.
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To make the agony of the condition

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real, you must accept
the full weight of the pressure out –
the torn flesh, the cries, the hostilities;
in order to return,
with a traveller’s eyes,
to the miserable hearth you left.4

This gathering of the poem is “a shifting continuum of epistemological reference”, a
dynamic that Lucas likens to the reflexive nature of cinematic time.5 It is comparable to
Jennifer Maiden’s sense of poetic time, in which a poetic space is carved out, like a
tunnel, by the advance of the poem itself:

An earlier theory I had
about the problem of evil during McNamara’s War
in Vietnam was that reality/immediacy and
ideal/illusion are both killers
unless mixed together evenly – that
immersion in either the physical or rhetorical
will lead to some deadly none escape. [FF 94-95]

Through a poem’s “stylised boxing” between ideas and voices, both Harry and Maiden
attempt to create real impact.6 In an increasingly typical self-reflexive twist, Maiden
places the above passage at the centre of a recent poem, “Day Release”. It refers to her
second volume, The Problem of Evil, and the aesthetic theory to which her work has
constantly returned. In The Problem of Evil, Maiden had already established her interest
in analysing the function of her poetry, and she has carried on doing this not only through
retrospective critique such as in “Day Release”, and numerous statements of poetics, but
also by developing “tools of analysis” from the aesthetic and ethical ideals of Weil,
Stéphane Mallarmé and Wallace Stevens.7

What marks her early poetry from work like “Day Release” and from Harry’s
style, is that it reflects poetic process dramatically, without alluding either to the writer or
the poem. Maiden’s poetry, to use her own terms, becomes an attempt at the dramatic “embodiment” of its ideals—to give them form as “three-dimensional philosophy”:

It’s the idea of fleshing out, the embodiment, the incarnation of the idea probably—ultimately in a non-pin-downable, infinite form because once something’s three-dimensional it’s not trapped in one dimension. It’s using the physical fleshly techniques of poetry—the physical nature of language—in order to incarnate an idea and explore it. It’s almost as if you had a human being embodying an idea, and living out an idea and testing it rather than it just being in the abstract.8

In her broader aesthetic vision, poetry represents the media that contain this process of embodiment. Poetry is like “sex or art, because/these allow dominance and submission to be simultaneous”.9 But why is the simultaneity of reality/ideal or immediacy/illusion essential to Maiden? Given that she establishes a project of aesthetic embodiment in her formative poems, what is it for?

By raising such questions, her poetics remind us of Heidegger’s query—and of its answer, which figures the poet as an inherently political being, and the poem and its reader as active political agents. This chapter follows this answer through the influence of Stevens upon Maiden’s ethics of analysis, particularly her response to the politics of violence. I also want to consider how her consideration of Weil’s philosophy establishes a counterpoint to Stevens’ modernist forms. In doing so, I will suggest the subject of warfare as a continuing and protean concern in the study of Maiden’s work, highlighting Maiden’s use of poetic structures of return to explore that form of violence.

Maiden’s definition of the modern, given in an interview with Martin Duwell, is probably more useful than an historical sense of modernism to a reading of her poetics.10

Modem—which I take to mean stylistically flexible and adventurous—poetry and prose are more powerful ethically since they use more physical and spatial

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9 Maiden, Friendly Fire 94.
10 See Fox, “Down the road between the promise and the freaky now: Understanding The New Australian Poetry.”
Bonny Cassidy

devices and more changes of tone and person to specifically involve the reader. He or she has more work to do, more decisions to make.\textsuperscript{11}

Maiden’s work engages in a complicated relationship with the modernist tradition encountered in Stevens’ poetry. An investigation of Maiden’s ongoing response to Stevens reveals its formative role in the development of her poetics; differences that a reader might discover between the works of the poet and her precursor; and how Maiden’s unique poetic project grows out of those differences, toward forms of postmodern poetry.

Her work resists being read as an “equation […] of synthetic literary history”.\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, the notion of synthesis comes to seem contrary not only to her poetics but also to ways of approaching it. Nevertheless, reflected by recurrent allusions in Maiden’s discussions of her work, Stevens plays a significant role in the foundation, if not equation, of her poetry—even if this often presents itself as anti-influence. We can see this engagement charted in her first volumes, in which she uses technical approaches that have resurfaced in more recent work. Her long poem of 1975, “The Problem of Evil”, reflects her remarks on embodiment: like both Mallarmé and Stevens, Maiden is concerned with “looking at illusion and reality” within poetic language.

Stevens writes in his essay, “The Noble Rider”, that while reality comprises art’s undesirable surroundings—“life in a state of violence”—art is “capable of resisting or evading the pressure of the reality of this”.\textsuperscript{13} It is, as the jar in his “Anecdote of the Jar”, “a port in air”—a vacuum “gray and bare”—closed off from the “wilderness” of the world outside.\textsuperscript{14} Stevens is also suggesting that art is remedial to some degree: life in a state of equilibrium. Placed in contrast to violence, this might sound like an anodyne or anaesthetic effect, but he means to describe an experience of poetry that combines the real/ideal or immediacy/illusion in balance. It’s important to Stevens that “the

\textsuperscript{11} Duwell, "Jennifer Maiden," 129.
\textsuperscript{12} DuweH, "Jennifer Maiden," 124.
Bonny Cassidy

imagination loses vitality when it ceases to adhere to what is real";\textsuperscript{15} and so, time and again throughout his work, he locates a starting point for the poem in a concrete scenario, often a casual observance or particularity—the thing itself: "A bird's cry, at daylight or before, / In the early March wind".\textsuperscript{16} It is from such a single and very real detail that the illusions and ideals in Stevens' poems unfold. In "Nuances of a Theme by Williams" it is "a widow's bird / Or an old horse";\textsuperscript{17} in "Girl in a Nightgown", "A look at the weather", and so on.\textsuperscript{18}

For Stevens, adherence to some point of reality outside poetic language—usually an image but sometimes an effect of sound, or a pronoun—extends to the acknowledgement that poetry is "unfixed" from conclusion.\textsuperscript{19} Equilibrium of consciousness does not lead to the poem's unification of a chaotic world. Stevens is content to pose questions as "suggestions, not as statements", argues Helen Vendler. Often, as in "Sunday Morning", their answers never arrive:

Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
What is divinity if it can come
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
Shall she not find in the comforts of the sun,
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else
In any balm or beauty of the earth,
Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven?\textsuperscript{20}

This, states J. Hillis Miller, is the questioning voice of "a barren man in a barren land". Stevens writes from within a void, the "ruined" theatre of classical, objective truth:\textsuperscript{22} "We live in an old chaos of the sun, / Or old dependency of day and night, / Or island solitude, unsponsored, free, / Of that wide water, inescapable".\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{15} Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," 645.
\textsuperscript{17} Stevens, \textit{Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose} 15.
\textsuperscript{18} Stevens, \textit{Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose} 194.
\textsuperscript{19} Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," 664.
\textsuperscript{21} Stevens, \textit{Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose} 53.
\textsuperscript{23} Stevens, \textit{Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose} 56.
If language is the site of a void in modern consciousness, Stevens’ definition of the real is complicated. The ontological abyss figured in “Sunday Morning” is, in “The Man with the Blue Guitar”, repeated in the aesthetic experience. Like the figure of Eliot’s Prufrock, poetry and art “cannot bring a world quite round”, that is, they are indefinitely alienated from essential or transcendental truth. Miller writes of how “the logos captured in language, is at the same time the annihilation of the logos as the hidden one”. For there to be poetry, “there must be distance between one sign and another, but what language says, in a characteristic turning back on itself, is this distance”. Adhering to this version of reality, Stevens views the agency and generative power of the ideal or imaginative capability of poetry as a counterpoint:

There is, in fact, a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live, or, I ought to say, no doubt, from the world in which we shall come to live, since what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it.

Stevens’ pregnant moments of reality are not imagistic sites of quidditas but fully reflexive analyses of reality’s “annihilation” by language. As Miller explains, Stevens’ poetry “constantly deprives itself of that origin or ground with which it seems at the same time to provide itself”. “The Man with the Blue Guitar” informs us that the poem is its own defeat—“to miss, by that, things as they are”—just as the lingering questions posed in “Sunday Morning” reveal that human perception, that is, illusion, creates reality itself. Marie Borroff writes:

For Stevens, truth is identified with one’s own experience, and experience with one’s state of consciousness at a given time. Experience does of course stem in part from a world external to and independent of the self but this world cannot be

Bonny Cassidy

known as something apart from one's present awareness of it; it must remain forever the sum of perception and appearance.²⁹

Like the synthetic Cubism from which 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' draws its title and central image, poetry generates additions to that "sum" of meaning. In Stevens' works, what it adds is what comprises the nub of its political usefulness. Stevens, writes Charles Altieri, "tried to understand how his imagination might possibly make a difference in a world desperately in need of political change":

While he recognized that need, he also quickly and painfully realized that [...] he had to find a way of convincing himself, and perhaps his audience (or of convincing his audience and perhaps himself), that there was another level of imaginative activity addressing not our beliefs but our orientation toward belief. Rather than project any single practical ideals or forms of heroism, poetry might explore how we can continue to believe in the very idea of idealization.³⁰

If Stevens' poetics focuses on how we can do this, Maiden develops his project by seeking to identify what becomes of poetic and aesthetic idealization. In "The Problem of Evil", she builds upward from the analytical tools of Stevens, creating strategies for redefining ideals and the immediacy/illusion dichotomy in a world of violence. In examining this poem, I want to argue that analytical form is central to her poetics because it allows the poet and reader to develop "a more nuanced conception of objectivity" than postmodern theory has allowed. By recognizing, as Mohanty argues, that "the identification and analysis of error is essential for the attainment of objective knowledge", Maiden's work redeems the project of attaining reliable evaluative structures.³¹

Maiden's first volume, Tactics, introduces violence in the more diffuse form that it takes in her later work. Typically, she analyses this theme through dialogic or conversational structures. Her tools of comparison, contrast and nexus literally contain the friction of interrelating voices, motivations and actions. In this sense, violence simply

Bonny Cassidy

denotes the consequence of sociality, the meeting of wills. As Schiller writes, if the will is the definition of human being, "violence calls into question nothing less than our humanity". 32 As I will discuss shortly, this hypothesis appeals to the existentialist concerns of Weil and her conception of freedom. The spectrum of scenarios proffered by this interpretation of the human state of violence is infinite. Maiden figures the friction of wills in "A set of negatives" in which the material images of photographs are commented on through the lens of memory. This creates a dialogue between description/interpretation and present/past within the poetic voice, whereby the object of the negative film is paradoxically representative of immediate reality:

1

His face is grim here, with a short
White ache of afternoon boredom.
His bleak pretty eyes
Seem grey as wings, crisp as wings.
(His voice, then absent, was precise with terror
Of the wide world's casual death.
My tongue was on his numb mouth earlier,

both new.)

2

This is my first school: a real one
Predictably unkind
Note the grey eaves and brown rustic benches.
(Cicadas crooned intolerably of freedom
At lunch-hour teachers tactfully
Began to lock that gate
– you see it there, the milky metal lattice –
To hold me in there,

literally
hysterical and stumbling.) [T 22-24]

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Bonny Cassidy

Turning on the connotations of the "negative", the poem describes the potential for violence between the mimetic image and the information it retrieves from the speaker-viewer, who is, in some cases, also the subject of the images. The poem is a spreading intersection of consciousnesses and experiential modes. Maiden’s use of parentheses—shifts that, in other of her poems, tend to be marked by a change of speaker—suggest the subliminal pressure within these meetings. Neither the poem’s ekphrases nor its asides complement or synthesise with the other. Instead, they face up to one another with an equal claim to truth; and it is largely the reader’s decision whether they are reconciled or not. There is a similar pressure elsewhere in the Tactics poems. “Couple” creates suspense—the anticipation of violence—through a sequence of images that would not be out of place in a film noir montage:

2
His hair, dense with sweat
Now wanders
In strands against the car seat
& the salt
Of torpor shuts his lips as he
Prejudges corners,
His eyes, young, sleek with noon-glaze
Prejudge her.
His gnarled hands clutch the wheel,
The fingers
Already eroded by gardens
Are as merciless as sleep,
avoiding her. [T, 17]

For Maiden, violence is the theme of reality. Whereas imagination and illusion are the fields of an individual consciousness, reality and immediacy are defined by the individual’s brush with an other. The brief and isolated images strung together in “Couple” create a rhythmic emulation of that encounter. The poem is a wending list rather than a peak. Its allaying of narrative or structural climax speaks to violence but, like the young man, avoids it. Forms of accretion are important to the recurring theme of Maiden’s 1970s work, seen again in the contemporaneous poem, “The Sponge”. Her
Bonny Cassidy

preference for a generalised *vers libre* is often incompletely free. It is tempered by carefully planned, albeit minimal punctuation and lineation, as well as by irregular rhymes and aural affects. In “Lithgow” Maiden chooses an especially free form punctuated by only two commas:

In rain’s oxide fissures  
   the ferns  
star open-cut coal  
its jetty teeth, a face  
the bitten edge  
in soot that stings  
& bites all sunless  
jowls of the road  
the miner or the road  
that licks & grits into  
the stubby wattle, tars  
each stubborn cliff [T 52]

Fluid rhythm conveys the business and labour of the mine, man working against earth, and its peculiar combination of the subterranean and topographical. Maiden emphasises this sense of confrontation with hard consonants, particularly “t”, to create sharp sounds that are associated with a violent motif of incising: “jetty teeth”, “bitten”, “stings / & bites”, “licks & grits”. The play of bitten/bites and “stubby”/“stubborn”, later “cut”/“cut”, and even the pattern of double-“t” and other doubled consonants (“fissures”, “sunless”, “stubb-”, “cliff”) generates an aural and visual sense of gnashing repetition.

Duwell writes that the poetry of John Tranter and John Forbes often finds violence in wit and humour, whereas Maiden finds it in the “interrelation between characters”.33 I would extend his concept of interrelation to point out that a poem’s brush with otherness also occurs across language, through the reader. Maiden’s poetics collapses these modes of encounter into one another. Her work is reminiscent of Stevens’ perception of the trough between consciousness and language, and therefore between realities. It recognises, however, that violence responds to otherness, and that this otherness is encountered through language. In “The Problem of Evil”, the poem’s

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33 Duwell, "Jennifer Maiden," 125.
adherence to reality is declared by the analytical tool of the poem’s scenario. Written in direct response to Vietnam, it also contains allusions to Cypriot and Irish conflicts. Unlike Stevens’ interpretation of adherence, which is closest to an extension of reality, Maiden’s is an attempt at return. In an interview, she explains the philosophy of this poem:

I think, whilst it’s not necessarily representational in a descriptive sense, what it was trying to do was recreate the moral complexity of living in those eras, and what it was like to actually experience those things. For instance, somebody who had been in Vietnam told me that the work he’d read that was closest to his description of Vietnam was “The Problem of Evil”. Whilst it isn’t just about Vietnam—it’s more generalised than that—it’s meant to recreate that feeling of verbal complexity. It’s meant to recreate a real situation of verbal complexity, which the central persona has to find their way through, or work their way through, so it’s not meant to be complex for its own sake.

For Stevens, poetic voice reinforces and re-inscribes a duality of imagination and reality; in touching reality, it presses back. For Maiden, the problems of poetic language—hardened, concentrated, spatial and sensual—open the poem to reality and return us to its problems. Her aesthetic reflects Bernstein’s defence of poetry:

By refusing the criteria of the efficacy for determining the political value of the poem, we confer political value on the odd, eccentric, different, opaque, maladjusted—the non-conforming. We also insist that politics demands complex thinking and that poetry is an arena for such thinking: a place to explore the constitution of meaning, of self, of groups, of nations,—of value.

For this reason, while Maiden’s “poems of aesthetic indecision and interrogation” provide “a view of her experimental considerations”, their awareness of process could not, as William James Fox suggests, be described as “personal and emotional” or even “personable”. Dramatic dialogue, for example, plays on Maiden’s idea of the poem’s

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35 Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
36 Critchley, Things Merely Are. 11.
37 Bernstein, Charles, “The Revenge of the Poet-Critic, or the parts are greater than the sum of the whole,” My Way: Speeches and Poems (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) 4.
38 Fox, “Down the road between the promise and the freaky now: Understanding The New Australian Poetry,” 95.
Bonny Cassidy

embodied, "three-dimensional" existence. In the opening stanzas of "The Problem of Evil", a dialogue has begun before the reader's arrival. The question of whether it is in fact continuous or whether it is comprised of several exchanges, is left hanging:

"Mistrust
the cool, the slept, the sure alone...
they guess lacks & their strategy
is hush & hazard: war again,
its diesel-pulse of debt and appetite"

The soldier incognito, triggered, zips
his briefcase on his thighs & strokes his chin
at travel brochures: rescue.
Where salt has catacombed a reef
the engine of all meaning breaks to prove
each drowner molten in his sky of tides,
the sojourn in identity too long.

"A terminal's air will bed
the dust as velvet does" [PE 11]

The given sequence of the poem's opening should not be presumed to be a linear guide. Its structure houses semantic complexities that recreate the state of violence. For example, Maiden removes the pronouns that rope together subject and predicate. This is not to say, however, that the above lines do not form a cohesive syntax. A chain of words hints at the narrative events obscured by the poem's fragmented structure. From the "Diesel-pulse", the soldier's "incognito" disguise and the view of reef, it's difficult to imagine what form of transport this is; while "the engine of all meaning" fails to provide a clear image. The phrase, "a terminal's air", however, illuminates the previous mechanistic terms by alluding to aircraft terminals as well as terminal velocity. Not only must a reading of the poem work retroactively but sometimes literally in retrogress. Then the narrative gears forward, linking from terminal velocity to, "the wings spin out". The reader could now interpret that elliptical statement, "the engine of all meaning breaks", as the failure of the aeroplane engine:
Inaudibly, the wings spin out,
from lips or antennae. One night
traces them for politics. The waves
lilt mortal here — the drones that meet
the sea’s swarm in a liquid sting
to complicate the play. [PE 11]

When Maiden’s reader deserts a desire to make an immediate heuristic reading, the connotative semantics of the poem surface. By obstructing meaning in this way, bringing us into negotiations with language, Maiden reveals an actual rather than imagined interrelation occurring in the space of the poem. She highlights the basic fact that language demands a face-off between oneself and another; a meeting that always returns to the presence of language in between.

This concern is probably most noticeable where Maiden deals with metaphor, as Duwell has noted. His reference to the “metaphoric set-up” of her poetry, however, might suggest that Maiden’s poems execute rhetorical conceits that are supposed to be deduced by the reader. Maiden expresses her doubts about this approach to her poetics and to poetic language in general:

I think the problem is if you say there’s a double layer of metaphor, people tend to see it as some sleight of hand going on, like they’re not reading what they’re reading. But in my work, they are reading it, they’re not being deceived into something going on that’s not; it is going on, but of course there’s other layers of metaphor being applied all the time. […] I think metaphor can certainly be a form of escape and relaxation, but I think primarily it’s not. Primarily, it’s to do with a process, not a referential process but to do with a realistic process.

The metonymic process described in this reading of “The Problem of Evil” is not an attempt to reveal the centre of the poem. Unlike Stevens’ poetics, there is no absolute idea or grand narrative in “The Problem of Evil”. What is this “realistic process”, and how can we account for it without deferring to the inherently deceptive principle of metaphor?

40 Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
In the stanza quoted above, Maiden stretches the sequential nature of metonymy to tenuous linkages. The aircraft is “the engine” literally driving the “meaning” of the soldier’s existence and, concomitantly, of the incognito mission. It seems to be controlled from onshore, “by lips or antennae”. The “night” could indicate the nocturnal activity of the soldier (or soldiers—for we cannot be sure whether the dialogue is indeed a monologue or not) or falling light. What “traces” what is therefore ambiguous: does the phrase indicate darkness passing over (“them”) the wrecked wings, or the enemy attempting to track (“them”) a hijacked mission? Both, of course, are valid; and much of any reading of this poem can be called into question simply by the reinterpretation of one or two words. Take, for instance, the opening dialogue as overheard by the soldier. He is “triggered” by it to perform his incognito disguise (his “rescue”) as a tourist. At a beach (“Where salt has catacombed a reef”), the engine of the craft cuts as it lands; and what had been giving the passengers “meaning” or purpose has stopped. They are disoriented between “sky” and “tides” after the long journey. The beach landing, velvet-soft and airy, suggests that this is not a plane but a helicopter, conjuring more familiar images of the Vietnam War. This also explains that “the wings spin out” as it takes off again, mysteriously controlled by either man or machine. In the discourse of flight, we might define “drones” as craft controlled from land, as the helicopter travels for one night to (“here”) a new location. Then the poem bifurcates again: if the drones are aircraft, why has Maiden linked them to the “swarm” and “sting” of that either kind of drone, bees? Is it possible that the insects are, “to complicate the play”, swarming at the shore where (“waves / lilt”) the helicopter eventually lands? And is the soldier narrating this stanza, having been transported to this point (“here”) alone? We can associate his voice with the speaker who takes up the next section of the poem:

We hid to wait.

She nipped an olive & the salt
drifted on her patience as she told me:

“I’m a shrewd bitch, but this
is wheels within wheels, & it seems
to be your thing, not mine”

“The trick,” I said, “of wheels
within wheels is to build
Bonny Cassidy

call the machine yourself..."You are
another shrewd bitch", she grinned...
but slowly so: in embryo,
& partial:
This is her part,
so focus. [PE 11]

Yet, when read further, the role of "the soldier" makes itself clear as a separate, lurking character. Our double-take is fundamental to the metonymic act and, moreover, to Maiden's poetics. Rather than trying to "escape" or evade reality, Maiden's deflection of metaphor draws attention to the interrelation between the poem's fixed presence and the fluid reading of it. Ultimately, these are interchanged as we recognise the poet's multiple intentions and our own intentionality coming into being.

This interchange would seem to conflict with Stevens' favouring of equilibrium as a distance between aesthetic, referential space and reality. His influence on this aspect of Maiden's work is two-faced. Firstly, his fundamental sense of the poem as an oscillatory rather than static dynamic is central to "The Problem of Evil". Avoidance of the possibility of conclusion is evident in the poem's hermeneutic mobility. This is underlined by the above stanza, in which the earlier discourses of espionage and mechanical hijack are confirmed by talk of "wheels within wheels" and "the machine". There is now an interlocutor to further "complicate the play", but as the characters are in hiding together we may assume that she is part of the same mission. Maiden's use of ellipsis and the "partial" sentence toward the stanza's end, however, troubles our fleeting sense of semantic consistency.

Yet, secondly, these are also self-reflexive references to language and the poem itself. They remind us of Maiden's analytical project in which the subject of warfare is not so much a metaphor as it is a heightened scenario of violence; and the same violence of encounter defines language acts. For Maiden, in poetry "the violent situation is entirely real". This stanza foreshadows the protagonist's mission: "My voice explores unhurriedly / their new machine: its own". She states that, in "The Problem of Evil":

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Bonny Cassidy

[...] you do have that idea of the language as machine, a controlling machine. The central character tries to gain control of that machine in order to survive, and sort of succeeds in the end; the landscape may not survive, but I think the central character does.

Her poem asks how the machine that composes war also informs how we ask for street directions or declare our love to somebody. The dual purpose of her work—to activate the physics of language by creating a piece of it, and to reflect on the possibilities of that physics by activating it—means that the poem's analytical framework awaits the reader. By returning us to the fidget wheels of hermeneutic process, provoking us to look over it time and again, Maiden's poem purports to retain logos rather than annihilate it. In this way, the outcomes of her analyses diverge from Stevens' investigations into illusion and reality, and embrace, as she puts it, the "fleshly" significance of language. To do this, she heightens the affect of one of his analytical tools, dialogue. In "The Problem of Evil" it is a tactic for avoiding a limited poetic voice. In this regard, Stevens and Maiden utilise aesthetic extension or expansion in different senses. Whereas Stevens defines it as the imaginative capability of the poet, Maiden means it as an opening and loosening of authorial control. She agrees that poetry is an inherently dialogic form, but emphasises that her frequent use of dialogue is a device for liberating the poem from abstraction:

[...] rather than bore everyone with synthesis and antithesis, you dramatise it through the characters. It's expansive, because once you come up with them you come up with all sorts of contradictions and objections, and interesting things that you wouldn't have, otherwise.

Her belief that poetic language ought to be complex and, subsequently, sincere (not deceptively controlled) steers her early work away from the more rhetorical flights taken by a poet such as Stevens. If "you've got to get control of the language machine" to survive reality, then language has power to shape violence, and thus reality.43 A modernist poetics of fictional space is dissolved by Maiden's reality-language-reality equation, and she creates an "illusion of continuity" between aesthetic and non-aesthetic space.44 Maiden replaces the dualism of real/ideal or immediacy/illusion with a scale of

43 Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
44 Duwell, "Jennifer Maiden," 129.
Bonny Cassidy

degrees—those coulds, mights and maybe of a flexible semantic process—that is managed by the tactic of positional return.

By exploring the consequences of this constitution of reality and ideality, "The Problem of Evil" becomes an ethical venture. In doing so, it establishes the goal of Maiden’s poetry throughout the 1970s, if not also the basis for her subsequent works. As she looks to Stevens for technical tools or tactics, Maiden evaluates the philosophy of Weil to explain her thematic concerns. Indeed, the interaction of their ideas is imperative. To dismiss either Stevens or Weil, at least in discussion of Maiden’s own analytical theory, would be to lose the sense of the unique framework she has crafted for her work. Maiden herself is careful to make this qualification, distinguishing the parts of their ideas that appeal to her from those she morally or aesthetically avoids.45

In her recent definition of “three-dimensional philosophy”, Maiden refers to the “incarnation” of ideas as a simile for their embodiment as language. In doing so, she reworks a discourse borrowed from Weil. Whereas Weil advocates fully incarnate existence and denounces disincarnate experience, Maiden argues for the ethical value of balancing subjective idealism with a perspective located outside the self:

I share [Weil’s] ideas of the incarnate and disincarnate, [but] complete incarnation is not a good thing. When people think of the Promethean gift, they remember the gift of fire, but not the ability to forget death. […] So, the use of art is one way of dealing with this, it can bring stabilising forces.46

Maiden has, in fact, favoured this term since as early as 1982. Prior to that, she described poetic embodiment in alternative but conceptually consistent terms, as “an unguarded embrace” using “both hands”.47 Her ethical design, however, is focused less on the state of simultaneity or stability itself, as Stevens focuses on equilibrium, and more on what is being held simultaneously:

As Simone Weil put it: art is potentially evil because it allows man to “disincarnate” himself, to forget about his own reality at the same time as using it. The balance is provided by the fact that art also allows one to recognize one’s

45 Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
46 Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
47 Maiden, "Questionnaire on Poetry," 149.
Bonny Cassidy

own incarnation. For me, using flexible writing techniques and concepts is part of attaining this balance and therefore creating the power of ethical choice. [...] I hope it extends into the ontology of myself and my reader.

As she argues, the achievement of experiential "balance" leads not to stasis or synthesis but to "choice", that is, extension and expansion. Subsequently, the resistance to aesthetic forgetting, evasion or escape, comes at a price of vigilance. Maiden's approach to language keeps good faith with the complexity of reality. Her use of poetic language as an often-unyielding medium reminds us of the existentialist awareness of freedom. That "the reader/writer should have freedom of choice about reality" is a conviction that shares Stevens’ concern with questions rather than solutions. Her probing of reality through the subject of warfare, however, cleaves to Weil's philosophy that:

[...] there is a seduction in whatever helps us to forget the reality of the obstacles. That is why upheavals like war and civil war are so intoxicating; they empty human lives of their reality and seem to turn people into puppets.

The dislocating effects of war and art can pose the same problem: hence the artist or poet has an obligation to create an aesthetic space in continuity with reality; but how? For Maiden, the dynamics of extending and returning to reality are not only the poet's ethical responsibility, but are also an inherent and unique property of poetry. As she writes in "Slave Gold" from Friendly Fire, there's "something about the poem that / differs from contexted art", something to do with its "going up and down / [...] in society". Maiden suggests that poetic form embodies the interactive principle underlying Weil's ethics of ontological mobility. As in "The Problem of Evil", "this dichotomy comes through hierarchies, and is explored through a constant flux of position".

Giving Weil's analogy of war and civil war its literal impact, "The Problem of Evil" is not a narrative of triumph or defeat but of the oscillating states of sabotage, trust and alliance, interrogation and lies, and the twist of war tactics. The dominant impression made on the reader is a sense of blindness or groundlessness. This affect results from what I have called Maiden's loosening of signification, in which the

50 Maiden, Friendly Fire 97-98.
51 Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
Bonny Cassidy

hierarchy of the poem’s characters and voices remains unstable. The roughly linear structure of its narrative, with its regular pace of action, creates a degree of tension. This is partly diverted, however, into several perspectives contained within episodic cantos. Their interconnection reveals itself in fits and starts as the poem progresses. “The soldier” from the poem’s opening, for instance, reappears at intervals, performing solitary tasks that might be either innocuous or sinister:

The soldier straps his helmet on,  
remembers being known.  
Beyond the bitterness of chrome  
half-tented shadows enter, stoop,  
their silhouettes honed clean. [PE 18]

The reader is unable to build a consistent emotional engagement upon this lurking sense of mistrust. We end up, by turns, as cold and clinical toward the narrative as the incumbents are, and close to the speaker’s incarnate state. While it becomes less controlled, the speaker’s tone is also distanced. Maiden creates this sense of disincarnate detachment by relentlessly training the narration, like a military log, on description and observation of physical action. Is there more than meets the eye? In the soldier’s case, the dubious nature of his work and its implications for the narrative aren’t revealed until the poem’s third part:

Outside the tractors labour,  
frozen in a channel swarm:  
fluids, interlaced at zero,  
stitch thawed plague into the clay:  
are preparing for possession by retreat.  
Masked to tread the furrows now, the soldier  
rakes peace back in ochre lumps—  
rock: reassuring, worn to salt. [PE 28]

In a neat reflection of our relationship with the poem’s language, the coveted ground is sabotaged and does not “survive”, as Maiden reminds us. Hence character and reader alliances are further complicated: who is the baddie? Held for interrogation by either his own military or the enemy’s, the speaker is preoccupied with the events occurring “outside”. This plays on our sense of being drawn into double agency or parallel
manoeuvres. As if there is always more information within the poem than what is grasped, the gradual departure of helicopters takes place both from the speaker's point of view and in a separate fragment of the poem:

This, though, is still the tiny
ring of the arena,
& choppers turn outside.
Intent on lethargy.
the soldier overhears our interview.
Predictable at last, the M. I. offers
his hand-cupped match & roll-your-own to me.

Outside, the choppers climb [PE 19]

It seems that the aggressor's helicopters are attacked as they leave the territory, with the “incendiary” grenades launched, like the poem, from unseen hands in unseen locations. This frustrated knowledge brings the reader close to the speaker's limited view of the swarming sky. Again, the ground is out of reach:

Outside — incendiary clouds —
grenades/ a helicopter
boils down to oily
hiccoughs of spray and blood

My fingers, now unguarded,
clench, torturing the cushions,
& act out my impatience
which like a child's, pleads
pain-subdued to be "outside, outside"

Lights program me my task
but, aiming from her absence,
the woman's hand is steady, pours
the gracecup of a death.

Outside in uniform revenge
the helicopters swarm [PE 20-21]

Geoff Page criticised the teasing obscurity of Maiden’s early work. However, to view her effect of obscurity as a formal flaw or a hindrance to another potential poetic experience is to overlook the ethical preoccupation in Maiden’s poetics. Positional flux (hint/obscurity or foreground/background) is crucial. Our sensation of blindness in the above excerpt recalls Weil’s remark that intelligence and understanding consist in looking rather than interpreting; as for words, we might “look at them till the light suddenly dawns”. 52  By accounting for the influences of both Weil and Stevens on Maiden’s early work, we appreciate the value of ranging over meaning rather than penetrating it in the sense of Michael Riffaterre’s hermeneutics of “structural decoding”.

In the following chapter I will ask whether Maiden’s works are really “a variation or modulation of one structure”, as Riffaterre argues of poetic form. 53 This question is raised by Finola Moorhead’s response to “The Problem of Evil”, which claims that, “in place of obscurity you find a startling control and delicacy, a careful and intricate pattern which becomes increasingly clear”. 54  We can tangentially look at this by comparing the poem’s transitive verbs and word patterns with a slightly later work, “The Patient”:

Walking now, the wind  
from wet concrete  
makes her breasts ache,  
& she fastens  
lower cardigan buttons  
designed as ornaments.

He wakes, mouth  
sleep-wizened, she  
fetches morphine & her coffee.  
He lies again, hears them  
string this day on trains,

52 Qtd. in Zwicky, Jan, Wisdom & Metaphor (Kentville: Gaspereau Press, 2003) 25.  
Bonny Cassidy

syringes, & smoky diamonds, a shuffle
of matchboxes, platinum lighters.
She shuts
the windows, makes them glint
like flat caves of phosphorous.
now he is the last
gunner in the engines, laughs
below her. The ocean
of wilderness is in now, but
she shelters slowly, moveless,
& the nets are folding, empty. [BL 52]

A rhythm of flux carries the poem between nurse and patient, binding them within a shared current of active/reactive behaviour. Rather like the effect of metonymy, this is built as a sheen surface of transitive verbs: makes, fastens, fetches, hears, string, shuts. “The Problem of Evil” also slides forward on chains of transition, always on the move, as if to blur and hence resist the very moment of “clarity”: zips, strokes, prove, bed, meet, nipped, build, straps, remembers, stitch, offers, and so on. Both poems seem to contain an extended, rippling moment; and yet, patterns seductively emerge from their tide:

An interim for breath. He gave
a dubious shiver or, maybe
a dubious shrug of consent.
He smiled in winsome
platitudes of sorrow, bent
his forehead in ironic pleats:
acceptance, scrutiny.

He wondered if, strangely,
calf-length skirts
aren’t after all most sensual since
her hem always brushed that most
sensitive skin below the cave
& tendons of her knee. [BL 50]
Bonny Cassidy

The word “pleats” is a startling image, whilst its more usual associations, “skirts” and “hem”, are included later in an apparently unrelated context. And what are we to make of the windows’ “flat caves” repeated in the “cave” of the nurse’s knee? In “The Problem of Evil”, one of the more noticeable motifs is bees: drone, swarm, sting, wings, antennae; and, elsewhere, “honeycomb” and “hive” are repeated. What appears to be architectonic order in Maiden’s work would contradict what Page views as the obscuring surface of its syntax. Or perhaps these patterns, like an incognito tactic, are simply red herrings to an expectation of telos.

Does clarity dissolve the obstructions that are necessary to freedom? Does the poem become complicit with the violent strategy of civil war when it controls the positioning of the reader? Maiden has attempted to tackle this problem by adapting Weil’s philosophy of incarnate experience. As she writes in the essay, “Alliances with Violence”, Maiden feels that experiential simultaneity is “not an impossible equality but rather a situation of deliberate and fluxing role-reversal”. She sees this situation as able to be enacted in poetry as a “trochaic pattern of life”: “fast then slow, hard then soft […] which allows for a reflection and analysis that impede the acceleration of violence”. It interprets the dialogic mode featured in “The Problem of Evil”, in which the potential dominance of the speaker is impeded by other characters and by the work’s structure, and the semantic hierarchy of poet/reader becomes a fluxing interrelation instead of rigid duality.

This pattern, she argues, is an ethical way that poetry can “disrupt […] rhetoric”. Real moral choice is not achievable through uninterrupted incarnation, but only when the disincarnate view is also admitted. Maiden’s stance recalls Mikhail Bakhtin’s aesthetics of “the answerable act/deed of self-abstracting and self-renunciation”. Bakhtin presumes, like Weil, that aesthetic form has an inherent capacity to disincarnate or abstract the participant; but he argues that this level of detachment from complete incarnation or ideal/illusion is never utterly objectifying and never utterly empathetic. It is a simultaneous experience:

Bonny Cassidy

This moment of empathizing is always followed by the moment of objectification, that is, a placing outside oneself of the individuality understood through empathizing, a separating of it from oneself, a return into oneself.58 Language, Bakhtin states, has an ethically answerable capability because it contains doubt as well as pragmatism toward its own adequacy. Through this capability, the dialectical movement—rather than “the abstract moment of the logical in its purity”—of ontology and poetry can be explored.59

It is fitting that Maiden has echoed Arthur Rimbaud’s attack on rhetoric, as she returns to him in her recent poem, “Slave Gold”, to explain poetic alchemy within the terms of her own project:

Poems have a peculiar solidity – not just a solid quality but they are – unlike prose – objects – far beyond that old fake debate between Williams’ no-ideas-but -in-things and Stevens’ no-things-but -in-ideas.

[...]

The poem’s solidity is not made of moral solution, nor of referential art, nor marred identity cut loose, as Thomas suggests. Maybe Einstein is closer – the poem object feels inevitable because its mass distorts time, one knows it was always there, the gold was never metaphor or description. I used to argue that Rimbaud’s belief in magic was too great a compliment to reality and could only result in the whole slave thing, but he

58 Bakhtin, Toward a Philosophy of the Act 14.
59 Bakhtin, Toward a Philosophy of the Act 31, Bakhtin’s italics.
Bonny Cassidy

did see something about the poem that
differs from contexted art.
You touch it and it jingles in the dark. [FF 98]
The hard, transitive surfaces of Maiden’s early poems create the flashing, jingling quality
that Mallarmé, in “Crisis in Poetry”, describes as a “pure” poetry:
The pure work implies the disappearance of the poet as speaker, yielding his
initiative to words, which are mobilized by the shock of their difference; they
light up with reciprocal reflections like a virtual stream of fireworks over jewels,
restoring perceptible breath to the former lyric impulse, or the enthusiastic
personal directing of the sentence.60

The metonymic dynamic of image and word patterns in “The Problem of Evil”, “The
Patient” and earlier Tactics poems could be seen to have the effect of Mallarméan shock:
creating signification that has little representational significance to a reality beyond the
poem. Indeed, Page’s review of Maiden’s obscurant “tracery” reflects the patina that
David Brooks has detected in Tranter’s poetics.61 But the pragmatic aspect of Maiden’s
poetic project, which seems to have heightened over time toward the voice of “Slave
Gold” and “Day Release”, suggests that Maiden is unsatisfied with working at the
symbolic level of language alone. This emerges in two ways: firstly, the important role
that Maiden demands of her reader seems to concern something more complex than
clarity, as I will discuss in the following chapter; and secondly, as I explore in Chapter
Three, a reading of Maiden’s work must acknowledge the ethics engaged by her theme of
violence.

Ultimately, the nature of this engagement differs from Stevens’ symbolist sense of
how poetry can converse with reality.62 Stevens fails to identify with romanticism
because of his conviction that “the life of imagination is forever transcending the reality
from which it obtains its life”.63 This poetics clashes with Weil’s prioritising of reality.
In Maiden’s poetry the impersonality of poet and reader, and their subsequent freedom to

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62 See Benamou, Michel, Wallace Stevens and the Symbolist Imagination (Princeton: Princeton University
63 Borroff, ed., Wallace Stevens 73, Borroff’s italics.
Bonny Cassidy

explore ethical scenarios are more important than the subjective or moral invention of those scenarios. She is less interested in universality than in the only place where the poem will grow: between human subjects rather than within them. This approach to poetic language and form heeds Weil’s theory that, “the moment a writer fills a role among the influences directing public opinion, he cannot claim to exercise unlimited freedom”. 64

Maiden values the question mark that modernism places over illusion and reality, but her poetics of return moves on from Stevens’ quest for a poetic diversion from the real. The only way to apply the terms of transcendence to this poetics would be through Emmanuel Levinas’ re-definition of the word, in which “All encounter [...] would be a first transcendence”. 65 Does this reflect a more general distance between her formative work and the impact of modernism emphasised by Tranter’s The New Australian Poetry? In Maiden’s own words, “modern” form is capable of facing reality as well as escaping it:

Since modern writing, particularly, strives for this illusion of continuity—by meeting violence and trying to survive it—it also involves a great amount of guilt and a mingling of the creative process with theft, selfishness, irreligion and insanity. 66

Modernism can be seen as the ultimate exploration of this moment. Surveying Maiden’s work in the 1980s, Brooks perceives that it is based on the “template” developed by Eliot that values “comprehensiveness and indirection”, or “the accommodation of variety and complexity”. Like Eliot’s Metaphysical model, Maiden’s poetics need not draw toward “some hypothetical essential”. 67 Of course this is also true of Stevens’ ability to draw dialogic form (“The Man with the Blue Guitar”) and inconclusiveness (“Sunday Morning”) into the poem. The presence of this template in “The Problem of Evil” can be compared with the similar framework of Tranter’s long poem, “Red Movie”. His poem is relevant to Maiden’s work not only because of a common influence but also because of its immediate response to the subject of the Vietnam War.

Bonny Cassidy

"Red Movie" employs a fractured and disrupted spatial and syntactical structure, broken into five cantos each comprising numerous fragments:

the poem will allow you to move. a girl is burning
in her underwear, leaving this continuum in rags
shattered desert...he can allow me to travel
from this insight:

stopped the track. if this trick
I will allow you to depart

'if it's all you want'; how piteous, such a mistake
brings back a river of what you can least afford
in your present extremity: God bless you

in your present grasp
of an unidentified illusion

as if resisting a new stripe of colours
a whole street...I'm thinking...
in a new suit of hands

...as though fallen
from a shelf of ice, newly frightened,
his prepared the scent of mint for the roadway

a new cloud appeared. a helicopter chopped its way
through the blue
his blades
are
too68

Like Maiden, Tranter pushes the poem’s semantic freedom by deconstructing the rules of capitalisation and punctuation, dissolving conventions of what is and is not important, distinct or new. Doing away with the narrative rhythm retained by Maiden, his poem is

68 Tranter, John, Red Movie and Other Poems (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1972) 40.
Bonny Cassidy

more fractured than “The Problem of Evil”. While Tranter also uses the first-person speaker to create a more emotionally engaged perspective than the robotic narrator of “The Problem of Evil”, the voice is extremely liquid. It reflects the psychological trauma of the character: sometimes “I” and sometimes “he”, it is unable to put past and present into sequence. As in Maiden’s work, repetition (“new”, “blue”, “appeared”, “allow”, “cloud”) has a similar effect of suggesting order yet undermining it. In Tranter’s poem, patterns seem to be dislocated from the speaker’s present experience, instead hauled up from memories of other people’s words (“I will allow you to depart”), French, or abstracted sensations (“blue”, “cloud”).

Although it shares formal techniques of complexity and indirection with Maiden’s poem, the atomised state of “Red Movie” speaks of a different approach to language:

across the gravel road, in the bushes
were some bona fide travellers, also
skulking. something else happened. to the poem

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an experiment which has failed is no longer
an experiment, it is, he smiled,
nothing more than a failure.

* 

listen to me: you’re enjoying nothing
seen from this crisp angle

listen to me. I have been travelling for some time
aware of the necessity for choice: move.69

The reflexive twists made by Maiden aim to reveal the “wheels” of language at work within the greater wheels of interrelation between self and other. As she has stated, in “The Problem of Evil” the machine of language is finally occupied and owned by its

69 Tranter, Red Movie and Other Poems. 41.
Bonny Cassidy

user: it works or, as the French put it, it walks. Not only is her protagonist able to overcome coercive language practices, but her reader also begins to navigate the jingling object of the poem. This is achieved despite the ongoing difficulties of the work. The act of "re-inventing the language is just a moral necessity", she writes. “How else do we escape those rigid cultural, linguistic and biological microcosms which result in violence?” If we view it symbolically, the poem itself can become one such microcosm. However, Maiden states:

writing not only allows one to practise such continuous writer/reader reversals of power, but to explore these reversals in their macrocosmal content—how they work or could work in life [sic].

Tranter’s poem conveys his doubt about the “solidity” of poetic language in macrocosmic reality. He writes that “the poem will allow you to move” because it can access “the necessity for choice”. This sounds familiar to Maiden’s ethics, but in “Red Movie” language does not open a door to the macrocosmal: “something else happened. to the poem”, namely the “failure” of language and self-defeat of the work. To revisit Bakhtin’s terms, if Maiden keeps the pragmatic function of language in view, then Tranter errrs on the side of doubt. Trapped in a cyclic space similar to the poem, his speaker cannot escape irreparable trauma. Much “appears” in “Red Movie”; the frustrated, symbolic space of the speaker’s consciousness seems to “move” but, in fact, this sealed and unreal space is the “movie” he is living:

he thinks he is ready to go somewhere
but the gasoline reeks out of the tank
blood runs from the fingers like red ink
from a leaking pen.

now the girl stands in the concrete yard.
her eyes go white, reflecting
the sky she has come to love,
that has so little of the human in it.

her look turns back against her with a jealousy

Bonny Cassidy

beyond repair.\textsuperscript{71}

At the end of the poem, the first-person speaker has faded away, deserting the returned soldier in his fictional existence. He does not hear the world, but hears language as an obstruction to it: "at a faint distance someone cried a noun / as some presence awoke from the steep hill / and moved down to the sea which was speaking / in the voice of gulls / \textit{aubade} / \textit{aubade}". Reality is a noun; and while it seems the man has at last grasped the correct context of both languages, French and English ("\textit{aube}, he said, \textit{aubade}")\textsuperscript{,} he is conscious of the sea and dawn not as themselves but as the gulls and aesthetic form (\textit{aubade}). The closing line, "we can begin", is not an exiting from the movie at last but "winter again"—a replay, a return to the violent microcosm of incarnation.\textsuperscript{72}

Tranter and contemporaries of the early 1970s including Maiden shared the "assumption that poetry and poetics were transparently political".\textsuperscript{73} However, while the technical approaches to "The Problem of Evil" and "Red Movie" are deceptively similar, Maiden is quick to isolate her work from Tranter's:

Because it took me a long time to get "The Problem of Evil" published in book form, [...] it came out after some of Tranter's work on the same subject.

Tranter's work on the same subject was actually written later [...]. There's that idea in Australian male poetry circles: that I had to be copying some Australian male poet or other.\textsuperscript{74}

In fact, a close look at both poems reveals their distinct approaches. Is Tranter's mode of violence found in wit and humour, as Duwell suggests? It's possible to see wit in "Red Movie", in a loose sense as play or even irony. The poem's word patterns and narrative are set out to undercut the poem's hierarchical and rhythmic dialectics. Tranter's withdrawal of the speaker's voice has a part to play, too, in this declaration of language's failure to interact fully with reality. The character becomes clownish in this regard, muttering away at his half-formed words and thoughts. Incongruence and confusion come to be seen for their absurd affect rather than their abject quality. This is not to say

\textsuperscript{71} Tranter, \textit{Red Movie and Other Poems} 43.
\textsuperscript{72} Tranter, \textit{Red Movie and Other Poems} 47.
\textsuperscript{73} Fagan, Kate and Peter Minter, "Murdering Alphabets, Disorienting Romance: John Tranter and Postmodern Australian Poetics," \textit{Jacket} 27 (2005): 5.
\textsuperscript{74} Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
Bonny Cassidy

that the poem is funny, precisely—it is too disarming for that. But ultimately, Tranter seems to be asserting that the poem is an illusion: it cannot move as it promised. It is, as Stevens has it, “indistinguishable” from the other “supreme fictions” that we call reality. As Kate Fagan and Peter Minter argue, Tranter’s poetics “sets up two sufficiency conditions: repudiation and futility”.75 We can see here the influence of modernism’s disenchantment with language, and shifting of focus to semiotic play. We can also see its location in a middle ground between the poetic imagination and its objective correlative, which stops at the word itself.

Maiden begins her work in the 1970s by shaping ideas about the poem’s solidity or ground. If she does not drive toward a “hypothetical essential” it is because she chooses not to, and not because as a poet she cannot “bring it round”. The subsequent impression of her work’s groundlessness is not permanent, as it is in the work of a poet such as Tranter. “The Problem of Evil” attempts to meet the ground of the real with the extensive possibilities of poetic interrelation. What, then, is the nature of this ground? It’s evident that its definition requires a broader and more complex view of modernity than a consideration of modernism allows. If it is not a middle ground beyond incarnation, is it a transcendental form of truth? It is not enough to say that, through her poems, “the attention, the receiving of the other, like his recognition, mark the priority of good in relation to evil”.76 Maiden’s reader comes away from her poetry with what J. S. Harry calls “traveller’s eyes”. The cycle of her poetry’s return brings us to the same reality “viewed altogether differently”. I will now explore these concerns by focusing on Maiden’s appeal to “infinite form”, directing this study toward other angles on modern poetics, particularly those related to the contemporaneous forms of American postmodern poetry. This will also lead me to also examine how Maiden’s return to the expanding subject of warfare allows for an analysis of violence manifested in the poet-reader relationship.

76 Levinas, Alterity & Transcendence 98.
Chapter Two

Mobiles: “The Construct” and “The Magnetron”

The limitless is the test of the one: time, of eternity: the possible, of necessity: variety, of the unvarying.

Simone Weil

The borderlines of sense in the morning light
are naked as a line of poetry in a war.

Robert Duncan, “The Song of the Borderguard”

1. Transactional analysis

Maiden’s concept of “infinite form” reflects the unfolding manifestations of violence in her poetry. Her body of work is framed by a return to the subject of warfare: having entered the reading consciousness in the mid-1970s with Vietnam, she now faces the complexities of the current Iraq War. However, as Tactics demonstrates, her analytic poetic forms are designed to turn themselves to any human social occasion. In such a scenario, Maiden wants to emphasise, we will find violence in some shape. When we forget this, our ethical awareness drops; we withdraw to an incarnate state. Is the political effect of Maiden’s work not to argue a moral response, but to remind us of this danger? Is it the reason for a sustained thematic and formal project that favours reiteration over development, in which the infinite act of sustenance itself is the key intention?

I want to investigate the question of Maiden’s intentions within “The Construct”, from The Problem of Evil, and “The Magnetron”, published one year later in The

1 Qtd. in Zwicky, *Wisdom & Metaphor* 31, Weil’s italics.
Bonny Cassidy

**Occupying Forces.** These poems open up the theme of violence by reinterpreting it at domestic and physical levels. Maiden works to show us that “the problem of evil” is, as it were, an elephant in every room. “The Construct” presents the paradoxical violence of an “annulled” relationship in which separation or “distancing” is a form of interrelation:

She visited early,
still chilled by sleep

there wasn’t a whisper
of light under the door

she controlled her eyes slowly
& let
the room develop around her

he tried unsuccessfully to join
his memories of her together:

they were not so much
separated
as organically,
metaphysically
& tastefully
annulled

he saw
the skin of her fingers almost numbed
to hollow pleats by turps

she smiled as a
distancing gesture

he knew
she had taken to painting portraits
not so much as if
Bonny Cassidy

she coloured by numbers
but rather as if
she made up her own face
she posed innately, as she saw,
her fingers arched & poised: [PE 37]

The pair of ex-friends, ex-lovers or ex-spouses is brought together by the poem, but they are reunited only in an abstract sense. Although they share space on the page, they could almost be in different rooms. The hermetically sealed door simultaneously functions to shut the woman out, lock the couple in, and to partition them. The gap between their ways of approaching the situation spreads numerous cracks. While she attempts to control her absorption of the scenario, allowing it to "develop" itself, he forces his perceptions to "join", but loses. This buffer zone—which is not actually a comfort but a tension against which they strain—is maintained by the man’s nervous, observational viewpoint ("he saw", "he knew"), and the woman’s reciprocal, "numbed" withdrawal. The poem’s third-person narration, moreover, takes a position within the tension gap. This voice accommodates both their perspectives ("she posed" and "she saw"), taking on either incarnation as it suits. Like the portrait-painter, it represents the other but ends up voicing or constructing itself, too ("she made up her own face"). This voice is the violence of the scenario: the site where the two characters face one another, and the ontological difference that holds them apart. As such, it embraces the microcosmic instances of violence that comprise the poem, not only between two human beings, but also between a person and a room, a person and their memories, and an artist and their subject.

The microcosm is particularly important to the figuring of violence in "The Magnetron". As the title suggests, we are dealing with a scenario of intensity in which a great force is channelled through a small or compressed field:

1
Seascape

2
Rest mass
The poem's abrupt shifts in imagery are at first distracting from the broader environment being described. The violence that takes place is not between human subjects but between the wills of other existences—some of them non-human ("the atoms"), others of them extensions of human intention ("A tanker / persists"). The poem conveys a Schopenhauerian sense of the common intentionality driving existents; unlike Schopenhauer, Maiden wants to use the poem to explore and magnify this will. The violence between subjects is also framed within an experiential perspective. The verb,
Bonny Cassidy

"to taste", in canto 6, suggests the self-conscious subject who is not introduced until canto 11:

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You swim, delict
& in all senses prone to watch
pebble cities & cold versts
of forest in a rockpool [OF 31]
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The effect not only compares this subject with the others to follow, but reassesses how the subject stands in relation to what has preceded— the harbour, the atoms, the sea grapes. Entering the interplay of objects is a swimmer who is implicated in possible relationships with each of them, as they are with one another. Rather than a conflict between subject and object, “The Magnetron” explores movement between the swimmer’s macrocosmic perception of “the wet / rim of the charcoal harbour”, for example, and the microcosmic perception of “pebble cities & cold versts / of forest in a rockpool”. The structure of “The Magnetron” begs comparison with Stevens’ well-known “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”; but while the poems appear similar, their differing effects point out Maiden’s extension of her ontology to the reading experience. As its title suggests, Stevens’ poem scrutinises the act of perceiving itself, which transcends the blackbird. Its self-contained epigrams, distinguishable from fragments, represent moments of human subjectivity as inescapable islands. On the other hand, the spatially scattered parts of “The Magnetron” signal its more flexible, non-dualistic approach to perception. By introducing a speaker close to the end of “The Magnetron”, Maiden signals that its contingent perspective is of secondary importance to the poem. The poem’s darting structure underlines this source of violence: how to prioritise and sequence these perspectives?

By building interaction between two realities within one perceiver, “The Construct” also challenges the validity of exploring perceptual limitations. The construction of the title refers, at least partly, to the imaginary rendition of the reunion as seen by the male character:

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electro-kinetic
in plastic collage
he built
the surf coruscating with waste-suds
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Bonny Cassidy

&

from foam, terrorists
crossed the cactus terrace
in elegant saunter to

a plastic consul,
kidnapped & killed
who struggled with a kind
of self-oblivious
& animal abandon

so that at first
the woolworths soldiers shot
him with savage
inaccuracy, as

he ran, hobbled & askew:
    half
bubbled down by matches
    powered so
electrically
like a pinball target, on
his newsprint road [PE 38]

This actual or dreamed diorama performs a similar function to the aquatic microcosms of "The Magnetron". The man encounters the other through the visionary medium, literally objectifying the situation into dramatic play. Typically, the form taken by the inherent violence of this encounter is literal warfare between toy soldiers: surely a self-aware nudge by Maiden intended to remind us again that the ethical dilemma of this poem represents those other, fatal wars to which her work returns. While the man's meta-world is to some extent remedial, the poem focuses on the friction between its boundaries and his greater reality. Amidst the comfort of his play appear "the camouflaged but hyper- / sensually arched limbs / of victorian furniture", and soon the dream is broken: "easier / to

37
Bonny Cassidy

capture than hold”. In the couple’s eventual reunion, the violence suggested by their initial meeting settles into a permanent state, “lapsed into a volatile hush”. He finds empathy through drinking, and she quells hatred through the “therapy” of punishing “the inanimate”. Closing with an interstitial asterisk rather than a full stop, this is a stalemate.

If we understand violence as the meeting of wills, warfare can be defined as comprising the tactical manoeuvres for dealing with this. Anyone can step into a scenario of violence; nobody unwittingly engages in warfare. Beyond her poems’ obvious admission to violence, their analytical structures undertake warfare. Maiden’s theory of trochaic rhythm is the central tactic of her poetics. With such rhythm, she attempts to achieve “a humane new channel toward pensive seduction for what otherwise, in more direct poetry, can be a jealous urge for power over the reader”. This statement reveals her insight into the inherent state of violence between writer and reader. Meaning or truth is the contested ground. It is both the topography that writer and reader build their manoeuvres around, and the coveted outcome. An assessment of how Maiden effects “seduction” rather than power returns to the terms of control and clarity used by Moorhead. How do they relate to one another; and how does this relationship govern the state of violence underlying poetic form?

While Maiden claims that a “more direct poetry” might set out to coerce the reader into meaning, her early work’s indirection is deliberate. Its narrative ambiguities prompt the reader to pay especial attention to the formal construction of the poems; indeed, Maiden is careful to ensure that their inner workings are exposed. This does not ease the negotiation of sense as we might expect. However it does make an ethical gesture, inviting us onto a level playing field with the poet and clarifying the terms of the language game. Both “The Construct” and “The Magnetron” draw our attention to their trochaic rhythms. The former interacts with two other poems within a numbered cycle, “Mobiles”, in which the continued use of anonymous pronouns suggests both the ongoing narrative of the original couple and the distinct but somehow related exploits of different characters. The section break that closes “The Construct” is a hinge conducting

4 Maiden, “Questionnaire on Poetry,” 149.
Bonny Cassidy

a reflexive dialogue between the poems. The result is episodic, but the gaps between time and space, like the volatile void between the reunited lovers, have a concatenated quality. The unity of the cycle is thrown into a fluxing rhythm that simultaneously advances and revisits its subject. The numbered cantos of “The Magnetron” are a similar indication of conversation going on within the poem. The images of fluidity, slipperiness and surfacing in each canto of “The Magnetron” are independently valid, as well as contributing to a cumulative rhythm and narrative line. A revival of the Romantic fragment form, they are both part and whole, and engaged in a “centripetal relationship” in which one finds “each element illuminating the whole and being illuminated by it”.

Particularly attached to the fragment, Novalis explains that the form “points to disturbed equilibrium [...] at once the result of the disturbance and the means of restoration”. Reflected in Maiden’s ethical conscience, it is “an allegory of social relations”. While by its very definition it “requires an interruption, a break (fragmentum derives from frangere = to break)”, the form lends itself to the space of meeting and contact necessitated by society. The scenario that we piece together from “The Magnetron” is literally atomised into its parts, yet the poem encourages an awareness of the language game as having, as Stewart writes, “semantic and pragmatic importance”. In both poems we are alive to the (de)construction of sense; but who is controlling the process, poet or reader?

Martin Duwell remarks that Maiden’s poetry approaches “questions of appetite on the one hand and action on the other”. She negotiates the violence of language exchange by inviting her reader “to gain control”. From the reader’s perspective, the challenge of her earliest published work lies in accepting to “build the machine” of language ourselves, as her renegade protagonist expresses it. Ideally, this process reconciles the reader’s appetite or will with action or control. I have explored one reading of “The Construct”; however it’s not difficult to perceive that several interpretations can be made of the poem’s complex syntax and grammar. Even though it is “she” who “visited early”, the door could belong to her home as she leaves it, or to the exterior of his house—in

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7 Stewart, "The Symbol Model vs. Language as Constitutive Articulate Contact," 18.
which case, the lack of interior light might suggest that the visit never took place, or that it occurred elsewhere. How else, for example, can we understand the shift that transports us to an image of her in the act of painting (“she posed innately”) —a perspective gained by an other— except that it is located in a studio? Or has she woken the man to paint his portrait? The poem’s heuristic ground is never solid to begin with and only becomes more porous and fractured as we become aware of such variations.

Again, in another dialogic sequence from The Problem of Evil, “A Solstice Miscellany”, Maiden’s word play offers her reader the freedom of groundlessness. Here is the fifth canto:

She would swim it again,
her muscles strained and burning

She would cloak
her shoulders in a towel to
free her wet red hair.

She would twist a teatowel in
the bottom of the glass
dexterously

But the trees
don’t gaol her enough. Her hands
imprison each other
desperately

The wind whittled the trees.
It loosened her concentration

lack of circulation creased
her bent arm red

It’s unknowable who voices the actions of Ann, the protagonist; and, as a result, the anaphora of frustrated actions can be both imperative or past tense, in an open and moving narrative. The poem’s utterances allow us to choose and change perspective as
Bonny Cassidy

we please. They operate as a set of variable components and metamorphic combinations: Ann's hands are both "dexterous" and "desperate", and her muscles "strained and burning" even while her skin is cressed from lack of circulation. Maiden’s characteristic flaunting of capitalisation and punctuation also releases the poem’s infinite form. Her use of repetition and capitalisation in its first three stanzas seems forceful, however the loss of a full stop after "burning" and "dexterously" contradicts the adjectives' power. This "loosened" affect carries this episode to its meandering close:

"My curiosity loved you,

even

before my sense of humour

demanded it",

she soothed, this odd contempt

superfluous & free

By means of a leather halter,

the child

steered its mother toward the novel snow [P 59]

If Ann is addressing the child, her guilty "contempt" might explain the fretful behaviour earlier in the poem. But there is no didactic evidence to suggest that she is speaking to the child, or aloud. Maiden’s extension of indirect poetic form through dialogue and monologue reflects her work’s resemblance to Roland Barthes’ account of speech as a “self-devouring momentum [...] in a perpetually suspended state”. Maiden’s replication of the trochaic mode in these poems initiates a para-tactic momentum that unlocks such potential, “superfluous” subtexts. That momentum is deferred or redirected when the reader is "steered” toward a differing, "novel" path by word patterns and line structure.

The “rhythm, diction and spaces of a poem usually penetrate the psyche before much meaning does”, Maiden remarks. In each of these poems, the “physical and spatial devices” highlighted by Duwell are equally as definitive of infinite form as narratorial effects. Multiple narratives sit literally between the lines. The ambiguity of

“Rest mass” is deepened by its spatial isolation, which allows us to link its meaning with “Seascape” or the image of the tanker, but doesn’t persuade us to do so. The two words themselves signify states that are paradoxical to the poem’s mobile, weightless rhythm. In fact, their force is indicated by the “ant-wise” appearance of the tanker, diminished by the spacious harbour. Perhaps there is some reflexive significance to that space, which is not white or blank but “charcoal”. In this poem, space is rich with meaning rather than emptied of it. Yet, of course, interpretation of Maiden’s fractured, fragmented phrases relies a great deal on the boundaries and borders set by spacing. Her arrangement of space creates a material or visual metonymy of narrative possibility. In “A Solstice Miscellany”, Ann’s veering concentration is made concrete, merging indefinitely with the space ahead of it; similarly, the image of her awkward hands is boxed in by the word “desperately”, which, having gradually reduced her state to a single word line, seems to make a gesture of trailing off into worldlessness. And in “The Construct”, the man’s attempts to gather his memories hang patiently but perilously on an enjambed colon, much like the embryonic smile of the female character in “The Problem of Evil”. In both cases, uncertainty turns to unease, suspicion or mistrust by the intervention of visualised (but deafening, charcoal) silence. This affect extends Maiden’s tendency to build chains of associative relation in place of metaphor’s symbolic function.

With their spongy surface of stanza breaks in contrast to the hardness suggested by Mallarmé’s poésie pur, all three poems look as though they are trying to gather numerous threads, a kind of poetic pick-up-sticks. For Maiden’s reader, gaps are either holes to drop into, or paths that bridge a navigated version of the poem. They extend our capacity, in Maiden’s words, to “wander” in it. Yet, can poetic form and our agency be truly infinite? If trochaic rhythm allays “rest mass”, what precisely is “the poem’s solidity” described in “Slave Gold”? If Maiden’s poetics diverges from the hard aesthetic surface, how does her work jingle out its meanings? The wandering reader may appear to be lost; but they will, by the very virtue of being a reader, persist ant-wise toward sense. As evidenced by a reading of “The Problem of Evil” or “The Construct”, the openness of spatial forms determines the narrowing of semantic options.

That is, possibility results in choice; and whilst the reader steers the latter, the poet is surely answerable for the former. Asked how important reader-response is to her
Bonny Cassidy

poetics, Maiden remarks that her “ideal fan letter would be someone writing, ‘You’ve just liberated my response’”11. But while she avoids the jealous urge to coerce and persuade, and thereby negotiate a tactic of diffusing violence between her and her reader, Maiden has agency equal to ours. We are, after all, steered by Maiden’s analytical intentions, albeit her directing of us toward indirection. Open forms are a deliberate part of her poetic project in the 1970s. Her tactical control of rhythm, voice, word choice and lineation can simultaneously delimit and dissolve a poem’s ground, such that a trochaic structure is maintained. Fragmentation and spatial widening of the poem not only make meaning porous but also, conversely, sustain a paratactic connectedness within the poems. By laying down an ongoing and renewing material ground, Maiden draws our engagement through the poems’ dense textures. She creates a linear quality from the length of “The Magnetron”, illusively extended by its numerous cantos, and from the spatial attenuation of the longer narrative poems, “The Problem of Evil” and “The Construct”. Our eye, emotional engagement and cognition tend to trace the poems’ shapes over perpetual interruption. This allows Maiden to place emphasis on particular moments in the text; the anaphora in “A Solstice Miscellany”, for example, pivots each repetition on the previous phrase, evoking the spiralling and overlapping movement of the character’s or speaker’s memory. Maiden imparts a dominant sense of temporal and spatial unity to this point in the narrative. As in “A set of negatives”, she can manipulate this effect in order to strongly delineate voices. “Verandah” also uses parentheses to make this distinction, and although lower case stanzas ignore the self-contained, end-stopped lines, the openness of the poem’s form is contained:

from the raw ribs of the bay
a soft
but feral stormwind purrs
at our arms for harbour, sly.
despite the carpet,
our footsteps scrape like thirst.

(cold colours open

11 Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
Bonny Cassidy

along our faces
intricate
with speaking:
the empty lighthouse –
automatic, dying – gleams/
gleams, remote as venus, on our eyes.) [T 13-14]

With the poetic rhythm described in “Slave Gold”, the “up and down” variety of voices in “Verandah” embodies the poem’s party scenario. The three-dimensionalfiguring of dialectical tactics of communication is achieved again in a later poem, “the border loss”, by the speakers’ close juxtaposition on the page:

I say, “They say in danger one’s
instincts are always wrong” . “Not if
you’ve perverted your instincts as long
as I have”, he responds. [BL 1]

The register of Maiden’s poems is often heightened to the point of becoming a spatial and temporal trope. The peculiar density of language in her poems dictates their pace, revealing the violence of dialogue and diatribe, and slowing a reading to the careful examination of phrase, word and image. This pacing has a disincarnating affect of alienation from the personae and speakers. Maiden almost seems to want the reader to replicate the characters’ labored articulation. Associative motifs can have the same function as the careful pauses between stanzas and lines in “The Construct”, or as the narrative quality she bestows on enjambment and caesura rather than punctuation. She takes an assertive approach to poetic language by creating phrases and neologisms that denote highly specific images. Like the use of “verst”, a Russian term of measurement, in “The Magnetron”, or “noon-glaze” in “Couple” and “stormwind” in “Verandah”, the reader has little choice in these instances but to follow the poet’s license. Maiden’s aim to gain literal value from her inventive vocabulary distinguishes it from the abstract level of metaphor.

This interaction between intention/affect or poet/reader determines, as Maiden asserts, a combination of representationalism and surrealism. It is, indeed, a particular or delimited sort of surrealism that functions by possibility rather than chance. Whereas Stevens’ poetics asks “whether reality can function without surreality and the other way
Bonny Cassidy

round", for Maiden the illusion of infinity is sufficient.\textsuperscript{12} She has defended her work against affective fallacy, maintaining the possibility of a reading made "from a false position". Maiden cites the case of Moorhead's review, which despite its feeling for the clarity of "The Problem of Evil", "assumed the narrator was female—and then it is complex".\textsuperscript{13} The nature of this somewhat perilous, shared poetic ground is reflected by theories of reader-response.

The theory of Louise Rosenblatt, developed contemporaneously to Maiden's late 1970s work, is particularly useful in reflecting on poetry's supreme ability to represent aesthetic form. Alluding to John Dewey's aesthetic transaction theory, Rosenblatt argues that the poem is "a coming-together, a compenetration, of a reader and a text [sic]").\textsuperscript{14} The act of reading, moreover, is "an ongoing process in which the elements or factors are, one might say, aspects of a total situation, each conditioned by and conditioning the other".\textsuperscript{15} Dealing with Maiden's trochaic negotiation of poet and reader control requires a co-operative and partly dependent hermeneutics. The contingent fragments of "The Magnetron" or gaping spaces in "The Construct" not only convey their narratives in the conventional sense (construction), but are also the poems' subject matter (construct): change of allegiance, erosion of unity and tracing of meaning. An ongoing oscillation between poet and reader is therefore essential to her thematic concerns; and within this the reader is engaged in responsive acts as well as assertive ones.

Rosenblatt's contemporary, Wolfgang Iser, writes that a reader's response is liberated not into independence from poet and poem, but into "an intersubjective frame of reference". "The verbal aspect guides the reaction and prevents it from being arbitrary; the affective aspect is the fulfillment of that which has been prestructured by the language of the text".\textsuperscript{16} If the poem's frame of reference embodies the state of violence engendered by difference, it must, as Rosenblatt argues, be looked on as "an event in the life of a reader". The poem "becomes part of the ongoing stream of [the reader's] life experience,"

\textsuperscript{13} Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
\textsuperscript{14} Rosenblatt, The Reader, the Text, the Poem 12.
\textsuperscript{15} Rosenblatt, The Reader, the Text, the Poem 16-17.
\textsuperscript{16} Iser, The Act of Reading 25; 21.
Bonny Cassidy

to be reflected on from any angle important to him as a human being". As Maiden’s work demonstrates, “the ongoing stream” runs in more than one direction; but, ultimately, the text is a reaction to the “impulsion” that is “to set it in motion”—the presence of the “liberated” reader, encouraged and magnified in Maiden’s work by her control of infinite form.

Iser’s theory of the aesthetic work as a volatile reaction is akin to the Rimbaudian alchemy referred to in “Slave Gold”. “Effects and responses are properties neither of the text nor of the reader”, he writes. The “text represents a potential effect that is realized in the reading process”. In Maiden’s words, the poem “jingles” when this potential connection or “touch” is made. The ground of her poems, then, is the instant of contact that is discovered through the mobility of their dialogic, interrelational forms. Moving “in the dark” of semiotic and semantic freedom, Maiden’s reader experiences the poetic ground of her work as a moment of sense or meaning—comprehending, for example, that the speaker of “The Problem of Evil” is male, or that canto 11 of “The Magnetron” accesses a subjective perspective.

Yet this solidity is unfixed. As she writes, the poem’s “mass / distorts time”. If its solidity or ground is, according to Maiden, “always there”, we might consider its relation to the “prestructured” verbal intention of the work; and to the pre-existing mass of signification by which Barthes distinguishes writing from the “disorder” of speech:

Writing is in no way an instrument for communication, it is not an open route through which there passes only the intention to speak. […] Conversely, writing is a hardened language which is self-contained and is in no way meant to deliver to its own duration a mobile series of approximations. It is on the contrary meant to impose, thanks to the shadow cast by its system of signs, the image of speech which had a structure even before it came into existence.

Barthes means to identify writing by the arbitrariness of language, which problematises the conveyance of intention and representation. Like Stevens and Tranter, he wants to question the possibility of escaping that “self-contained” structure. Maiden, too, wants to challenge “belief in an absolute reality” advocated by both Rimbaud and Weil (“hers was

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17 Rosenblatt, The Reader, the Text, the Poem 12.
18 Iser, The Act of Reading ix-x.
19 Barthes, Writing Degree Zero 19.
Bonny Cassidy

in God, his in alchemy”). Her reluctance to either absolutely relinquish or control sense indicates that she is troubled by the state of violence implied by an “open route” through language.

However, the nature of her poetic ground is generated neither by authorial intention nor by “the shadow” of ideological structure. Asked if it is possible to “get control of the language machine” as the speaker of “The Problem of Evil” does, Maiden remarks that, “One has to assume it’s possible, otherwise there’s no point. I think the poetry is constructed to make it possible”.20 The construction of her early poems assumes “a mobile series” of ontological encounters. Their mass is a measure of what they signify to the reader: the “always there” potential gravity of an embodied, experiential interrelation between oneself and the poem. Her poetry’s mass distorts time because its contents change temporally, that is, its sense or meaning (as in Heidegger’s aletheia) is revealed anew with each transaction between poet, poem and reader.21 As Rosenblatt asserts, the only case for an interpretation of “the poem itself” must observe “that the reader’s interpretation not be contradicted by any element of the text, and that nothing be projected for which there is no verbal basis”.22 She draws on formative hermeneutics theorist Hans Robert Jauss, who notes that a text’s ground has a “horizon of meaning”. According to Jauss, its cumulative tracing ought to be limited to “significance that appeared or could have appeared possible to the interpreter within the horizon of his preceding reading”.23 Maiden’s reader performs a tracing action within a trochaic spectrum of semantic control, therefore, the points of clarity identified by Moorhead are fleeting, even endangered, moments rather than epiphanies or deductions that must hold true. That is why we can touch Maiden’s poem to hear it jingle, and remain in the dark.

2. Mobiles

20 Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
22 Rosenblatt, The Reader, the Text, the Poem 115.
The reading I have so far made of Maiden's poetic forms challenges Michael Riffaterre's theory that a poem presents itself as a sustained relation to or variation on one word or structure. In "The Magnetron", the word "Seascape" fails as an original structure because the poem is a floating, fluid raft of images that, at times, seems barely fixed together. "The Construct" follows a discernible line of events, yet where and how they take place is illusive and elusive. This ambiguity highlights the major influence of American postmodern poetic forms on Maiden and her generation, particularly the Black Mountain school and also objectivist traditions. The common elements of their poetics would later be accounted for by reader-response hermeneutics. Robert Duncan, to be echoed by Rosenblatt, writes of how "I enter the poem as I entered my own life, moving between an initiation and a terminus I cannot name", he writes. "This is not a field of the irrational. [...] The poem is not a stream of consciousness". Maiden shares his resistance to the coercive "stream" of authorial incarnation, which poses the reader as the chimerical "terminus" of poetic ground. In Duncan's poetics, the poet must undertake the same interactive work as the reader—a work that remains unfinished:

We ourselves in our actuality, as the poem in its actuality, its thingness, are facts, factors, in which It makes itself real. Having only these actual words, these actual imaginations that come to us as we work.

In "The Construct" the reader touches ground in the meta-poem dream sequence unified by its motif of toy infantry action:

like a pinball target, on
his newsprint road
he limped with a marked
& poignant list to the left

the clay sun
blended with the hills, but
still something
shiny & tender, there,

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25 Duncan, Bending the Bow vii.
like grafted skin, revolved / 

appeared [PE 38-39]

The sequence is a sustained relation to the title but also to the lesser motifs like “terrorists” within the poem’s unfolding of “The Construct” as a whole. As well as building a metonymic vocabulary, Maiden uses the rhythm of lineation to carefully control the weaving of the poem’s potential conceits. The first paragraph above reads at an even and fluid pace, involving the reader in the man’s vision. This is broken by the second stanza, which begins to unravel the diorama, dropping from “the clay sun” as it meltingly blends into the hills, until “still something” interrupts his engagement—and, finally, cuts it with a slash (/) and a stanza break from which he surfaces toward what has “appeared”. Duncan comments on how the hermeneutic reading is itself a process of “polysemous” construction, “taking each thing of the compositions as generative of meaning, a response to and contribution to the building form”.

The old doctrine of correspondences is enlarged and furthered in a new process of responses. Parts belong to a poem’s architecture not only by the concords and contrasts in chronological sequence, as in a jigsaw puzzle, but also by the resonances found within the poem as a temporal whole. Each part is conceived as a member of every other part, having, as in a mobile, an interchange of roles. Through memory, forms are created within forms. However, because the poem’s ground distorts real time into “the time of the whole in the reader’s mind”, its structure stands to become numerous variations on more than one matrix of meaning—wheels within wheels:

[…] the junctures not binding but freeing the elements of configuration so that they participate in more than one figure. [The poet] strives not for disintegration of syntax but for a complication within syntax, overlapping structures, so that the words are freed, having bounds out of bound.26

Maiden uses what agency she has in the poetic transaction to destabilize that agency itself. In one sense this is a preemptive tactic that reacts to anxiety about authorial violence; while on the other hand it is a proactive execution of an ethical project that

26 Duncan, Bending the Bow ix.
Bonny Cassidy

sympathises with the political conscience of a poet such as Levertov. Duncan can be seen to offer a specifically formal set of concerns to twentieth century poetics, yet both he and Levertov answer Heidegger’s lingering question — what are poets for? — by dismissing the ideological shadow that Barthes casts over language. They approach poetic language with a kind of good faith, investing it with freedom or what Charles Altieri has called “sincerity” in poetry.27 Despite differing applications of this freedom to politics, as Albert Gelpi observes, it leads both poets to a conviction of “the engagement between the experiential field and the linguistic field”.28 As Levertov argues, the “poet’s task is to hold in trust the knowledge that language, as Robert Duncan has declared, is not a set of counters to be manipulated, but a Power”.29 In regard to Maiden’s work, it is this common aspect of their poetics that I want to draw upon.

The “modern” poetics imagined by Maiden encompasses postmodern forms. Conte’s account of twentieth century American poetry provides an analysis of Duncan and his peers that illuminates Maiden’s trochaic structures. Conte’s fundamental distinction between American serial and procedural forms is not divisive but, like Eco in The Open Work, identifies two “complementary responses to postmodernity”. Reflecting Levertov’s concern with the modern poet’s obligation to assume power, Conte emphasises that both forms “are acutely aware of what has generally been perceived as the lapse of governing orders in our existence”.30 It’s important in analysing the structure of Maiden’s poems to remember the shared function of these forms. As will become clear, her early poetry embodies a combination of the serial and procedural.

Maiden makes a claim for infinite form but, as we’ve seen, this is the hyperbole of her project: transactional or interrelational are more accurate terms for the forms encountered in the hermeneutic experience of her early poetry. If Conte approaches the work of Duncan as typically based on “infinite serial” forms, then we need to consider how this influence is tempered or complemented by Maiden’s interest in the poem’s

30 Conte, Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry 15-17.
solidity. Eco, for instance, explains infinite form as denoting what is in fact variable form in which “the traditional dualism between being and appearance is replaced by a straight polarity of finite and infinite, which locates the infinite at the very core of the finite”. The conversation between Maiden and her reader is an ongoing discussion, a working-in-progress, distinguished by what Conte calls the “discontinuity and radical incompleteness” of serial forms. These two qualities of the serial create its double-edged dynamic of fracture and accretion. We find them at work in a comparison of Duncan’s “A Storm of White” and Maiden’s “The Magnetron”. In his poem, Duncan reveals ideas about language’s incapacity to stand without its user(s), like the poem without a reader:

neither

sky nor earth, without horizon, it’s

a-

notherr tossing, continually in-
breaking

boundary of white
foaming in gull-white weather
luminous in dall white, and trees
ghosts of blackness or verdure
that here are
dark whites in storm.

Without horizon, that is, without a location in subjectivity, the poem is a messy, “foaming” whiteness—not mass but froth. The fractured “a-/notherr” and “in-/breaking” embody this, and the relieving pauses followed by unpunctuated rhythm add to the paratactic chaos of a single phrase. It is as if the white spaces that figure in Maiden’s poems have, in Duncan’s, merged into an ocean of possibility that dominates any other presence. “The tension or complexity that traditional form assigns to metaphor”, Conte writes, “is here taken up by the diversity of patterns established among metonymic

31 Conte, Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry 19.
32 Eco, The Open Work 19.
Bonny Cassidy

particulars and their contexts". This creates a sense of limitlessness that links the poem's surfacing from the white page, to its images of white; and connects those images to the poem by way of Duncan's broader construct, stated in "The Natural Doctrine", that "There's depth, weight, force at the horizon / that levels all images". "A Storm of White" as a poem is therefore also related metonymically to Duncan's oeuvre, in which language can only gain the radiance (ground or "horizon") of the telluric world by the reader's engendering of the transaction.

A similar diversity of patterns exists in the metonymic structure of "The Magnetron", which also adopts the image of ocean. In this case, it is a point from which the state of violence can be explored through a dividing reading:

7
The rays swell,
force
the drift bolts out.
They glow

8
Temporal & safe
closed shells
compound most easily

9
seepage
burnt sienna
ochre azure sand
drawn always down to splash
the anti-light again

10
Within the magnetron, now urged
the tides of atoms squirm,

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34 Conte, Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry 91.
35 Duncan, The Opening of the Field 81.
Bonny Cassidy

in suspense invisibly
their satellites compelled
to constellate & sway [OF 31]

The dividing hermeneutic process follows a number of motifs that parallel the pattern of ocean imagery, each of which seem to claim equal potential for cumulative power: atoms; floating or suspense; the magnetron; constellation. Because of their metonymic capacity, furthermore, it would be inaccurate to train these patterns so rigidly upon the appearance of single words. The nature of their build-up (like compounding shells on a beach) is to “drift” and “sway” toward synonyms and tangents that broaden, rather than narrow, the line of significance. The poem’s return to a variation on flotation, for example, is comprised of terms and images as laterally connected as “dally”, the “float” of seagrapes, “swell”, “suspense”, the swimmer “prone”, and “driftnets”. Indeed, Conte writes of horizontal structure as the central trope of serial form, exemplified by Duncan’s use of space, line and rhythm in “The Collage”, from the suite, “Passages”:

It won’t smear, it can be
moved, can move, but
no word, it’s that clear, is
soft, shit, painty • Can consonants
so crawl or blur to give...

contrive to imitate juices, excretions, the body’s

spit?

The horizontal “axis of syntagm” is what Ferdinand de Saussure names the axis of parole—the flow of individual utterance by which Barthes defines speech. The horizontal structures of serial form express the distance between Maiden’s poetry and writing as a “hardened” structure. On the syntagmatic axis, the reader’s consciousness moves across one word after another in a “Heraclitean” line. This motion is responsible for driving the rhythm of “The Collage”. The reader drops from “be” and resumes the track at “moved”, eventually encountering a stanza break not below but within the line. The affect is of sense as a runaway caboose; and while it does not present to us as “soft, shit, painty”, there’s a genuine sense of unease at having been placed in the driver’s seat of language.

36 Conte, Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry 59.
Bonny Cassidy

Again, Duncan thematically joins the poem with his larger quest for ongoing metonymic representation of language transactions. The poem’s horizontal movement contains the poet’s frustration for “this rrr to be a river” — which it has of course already become, ripple upon ripple:

until the reefs upon which we lie are exposed,
the green water going out over
the rock ledges,
body upon body

Like “The Construct”, the title of “The Collage” prepares the reader for Duncan’s project. The poem diverges from this structure by returning to an image of ocean, an image that is not centred but, like the poem’s spatial arrangement, multiple and “overlapping”, as Duncan puts it. Its reflections on language are formed as repeat attempts at an idea, not unlike multiple photographic exposures. Ellipsis becomes increasingly important because it draws attention to the poem’s fractures; and because it gestures to a reality that is injected into language:

In the curve of the dark
the light strives
where they come

...the roll of the returning waters
over the stone stretches
remotely

reaching us. 37

This is achieved by the reader’s following of the syntagmatic axis, which Maiden makes use of in “The Construct”. The male character is alerted to the gaps that will not allow him “to join / his memories of her together”. The tangential line is particularly noticeable in the meta-poem that carries on without destination or shape until it runs, figuratively and physically, into a piece of furniture. Horizontal motion embodies the energy of violence. It is, however, a clumsy and spontaneous kind of energy that trips over itself as the reader decides what direction it will take:

wine blazed
an empathy for her

37 Duncan, The Opening of the Field 19-21.
Bonny Cassidy

through him

it was as if, as in dancing, they
no longer strained hand to hand

he remembered
that her room was wonderfully
cluttered by civilization [PE 40]

The poem’s incomplete phrases and sentences convey the character’s fluxing thoughts, which refuse to indicate whether the couple has become successfully joined together or not.

All four poems can be split into investigations of “more than one figure”, questioning a notion of the poem as a variation on a semantic matrix. This said, however, it is notable that Maiden’s poems are capable of being read with a stronger sense of groundedness than Duncan’s orthodox serial form. Her control of form enables the open and procedural intention “to encounter and examine” a subject, which Conte sees as exemplified by a poet like Charles Olson. A good example of this direction is found when her work’s parallel structures intersect with one another, such as the interconnectedness of distinct patterns in “The Magnetron”: ocean and light, rays and a magnetron, the magnetron and atoms, atoms and the atomised viewpoint, the viewpoint and the constellation, constellation and sun, and so on. If there is indeed a “matrix” of meaning within this poem, it is tined, just as “small waves / push back at random the ragged / cuticles of the beach” (OF 31).

For Duncan, the vertical (langue) or paradigmatic axis of reception is secondary; whereas significant accretion in Maiden’s work also occurs through retroactivity and repetition. Her reader is never quite as embedded as Duncan’s, because vertical structures require a less myopic engagement than horizontal ones, and provide less opportunity for the reader to be absorbed into an incarnate state of sense-making. The vertical is partly a “hypotactic structure” whose “elements are subordinate to or dependent on other elements for their meaning”.38 The reader, in turn, is dependent on

38 Conte, Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry 22.
Bonny Cassidy

the transaction encountered through the text—the “breath”, as Olson would have it, projected “from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself, all the way over to, the reader”.39 His notion of the Projectivist breath is nicely reflected by Eco’s study of open form:

Therefore, to sum up, we can say that the “work in movement” is the possibility of numerous different personal interventions, but it is not an amorphous invitation to indiscriminate participation. The invitation offers the performer the opportunity for an oriented insertion into something which always remains the world intended by the author.40

But what Maiden brings to procedural form is a space in which the reader, rather than the poet, undertakes the determining role. The procedural form is aware of its system, as Maiden’s analytical intentions are; and as such, it relies on “repeated evaluation of the affinity and dissimilarity of its elements”. We recall that Duncan and Conte use the same word, “generative”, to define two differing forms. It is Duncan’s version that Maiden’s work responds to, by approaching a poetics of analysis and construction through affect rather than coercion. Importantly, by offering us the moral task of evaluation she recreates this generative approach: open, but finite.

Duncan’s image of the poem as “a mobile” reflects the relationship between Maiden’s work and American postmodern forms. For Duncan the mobile represents an “interchange of roles” similar to Maiden’s hypothesis of hierarchical flux between poet and reader. Conte adopts the analogy of the mobile to describe serial forms, in which “the finest of wires connects all the parts”. The nature of this wire, which is a kind of solidity, brings the parts into cooperation by holding them not in a unity of time and space but in a true position. This position, what I have been calling ground, is a moveable moment located in the reader. Maiden’s use of procedural form, however, reworks the mobile as a model of strictly serial structure. Its grounded points reveal the possibility of a “false position” in reading Maiden’s work. Conte claims that while, in the mobile, “the whole turns in a state of disequilibrium, all parts are intrinsically necessary to the maintenance of the form; if a wire were to snap and one of the parts fall off, the

40 Eco, The Open Work 19.
Bonny Cassidy

object would collapse". But given the need for a post-semiotic, transactional approach to Maiden's language and forms, the mobile model recreated by her poems should be recognised as capable of greater flexibility than this. In the instance of a misplaced or misread part—my quoting of excerpts rather than whole poems being a case in point—the results, rather than collapse, are new emphases and vigilant hermeneutic attention.

The generative reading procedure demanded by her work steers Maiden's poetry through potentially unstable points. The centripetal fragments of "The Magnetron" are unlike the centrifugal scattering of horizontal structure in Duncan's poems. They relate as atoms viewed through a "transactional analysis", they "dally / in commune & avoid, / just by fractions, absolute / collision & decay". That is, they are able to cluster together to form a nexus of sense, but they do not emanate from the single, central matrix given in Riffaterre's structural mode. Rather, the poem's fragments emanate from its reader(s), loosely gathering and satelliting "moments" or possible structures, as Iser explains:

Once the segments have been connected and a determinate relationship established, a referential field is formed which constitutes a particular reading moment, which in turn has a discernible structure. The grouping of segments within the referential field comes about, as we have seen, by making the viewpoint switch between the perspective segments. The segment on which the viewpoint focuses at each particular moment becomes the theme. The theme of one moment becomes the horizon against which the next segment takes on its actuality, and so on.

This play of horizontal motion within a referential field (infinity within finitude) reflects the complementary forms within Maiden's work. We've seen this occurring in "The Problem of Evil" and "A Solstice Miscellany", where a shift in the frame of reference can redirect the reading of an entire canto or even an entire poem. I would like to relate this dynamic to the two poems that complete the "Mobiles" cycle: "The Exhibition" and "Space". Without its counterparts, "The Construct" succeeds as a self-sustaining fragment—and as an incomplete mobile. Considered alongside the second and third parts of the cycle, the true positions that have been discovered within it are not diminished or found to be lacking but are simply increased. The impermanent nature of Maiden's

41 Conte, Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry 57.
42 Iser, The Act of Reading 198.
poetic ground means that the cycle remains incomplete—a suspended and jingling mobile.

The finite serial form of her work's spatial and temporal aspects is used by Maiden to create both an ambiguous and a disincarnate view of a narrative scenario. In doing so, she builds a generative experience of the poem that harnesses the affects of procedural form. In “The Construct”, intoxication, dancing and clutter flow one into the other, but the spaciousness of the poem's form affords us distance from the man’s incarnate state. Hence we remain aware of the woman’s presence, and also of their mutual failure to interact. The distinction is between detachment from evaluation, and detached or objective evaluation. Thus, the arrangement of “The Exhibition” seems designed to complicate the cycle’s narrative whilst advancing it:

“even the children
literally screamed
with their boredom”

he stood up, & sat down again
without
discernible motivation, but
now they were
finding that affectionate
paradox
& qualified
sympathy discouraged
more than direct attack

(“inhibited by
self-conscious freedom”)

he would have left,
& left them to respect
his supposed annoyance, but
he was annoyed & stayed
Bonny Cassidy

while steadily, with knotted ropes,
the load was hauled away

The movement of language and narrative in her work is bidirectional: up and down, across and back, along and through. As a counterpoint to the serial aspects of her forms, the uniformity of *The Problem of Evil* poems is visibly noticeable in their slender, arrow-like format; short lines, frequent enjambment, anaphoric listing, and stanza breaks instead of full stops tend to draw the reader's eye, ear and voice cascading down the page. This impression prepares us for the probability of some teleological quality in the poems—or, at least, for the illusion of it. As Ron Silliman writes, vertical form acknowledges that "time functions as a kind of gravity within the linguistic act, holding things together".43

Closer to the distancing effect of parentheses in "Verandah" and "A set of negatives" than to the horizontally intensive dialogue of "the border loss", the vertical sequencing of the inserted quotes slows the poem's dialogic pace. There are literally pockets of breathing space between this other voice's interjections, which give us time to assess its function. It provides didactic comments on the character's actions, and yet, despite their externalised form of quotation, these have the quality of asides. The quotations' tendency to guide our reading of the narrative is supported by Maiden's italicised emphasis on "was"—an emphasis alternately consistent with the character's own expression of his feelings, and with the poet's voice. The register of "The Exhibition" is generally more interested than the descriptive nature of "The Problem of Evil". Little action occurs externally but much is happening to the character psychologically. Maiden balances this procedural, searching tactic with her typically ambiguous horizontalities: who are the children that, once mentioned, are never to return; is the second interjection in parentheses because the voice is somehow distinct from the opening quotation; and is "the load" related to the portraits painted in "The Construct"?

The poem plays with alternation between agency and disengagement, or serial and episodic sequence. The influence of syntagmatic rhythm and line on Maiden is counteracted by the real sense of episodic "wire" that runs through the "Mobiles" cycle. While unanswered questions and doubts remain, there is ample evidence that true narrative positions link the three poems. They are the journey of a man struggling to deal

Bonny Cassidy

with a past relationship brought into the present; he subsequently encounters a world of art; and the relationship gradually mends. These truths are embodied within the microcosm of “The Exhibition”. Repetition and lacuna highlight the reflexive nature of the narrative:

he was
subdued by their
strategic silence

at first
he needed to lose: it was part
of his passion for the final

then
anger filled him
seamlessly [PE 42]

The movement of time and attitude through the rhythmic refrain of “he was” / “at first” / “then” clearly indicates connection rather than disconnection. Where Duncan exemplifies syntagmatic hermeneutics by his use of ellipsis, Maiden’s signature punctuation is the colon, which remains ubiquitous even in her most recent work. In both “The Problem of Evil” and “The Construct” it is a vertical tactic that denotes, in place of metaphor, the mapping or linkage of ideas and the generation of new, overarching connections. In “The Exhibition” it allays the horizontal motion of the poem’s shape and pace, stretching a clean visual line or wire, and organising this part of the poem into a list:

there was no
trace of superfluous
hysteria: he was
wise
& prudent
& his air
hinted that sort of violence, a
particularly fierce one, bred
out of pedantic despair [PE 43]
We can see her idiosyncratic ampersands as having a similar function. While “and” is a cumulative, accruing and paratactic conjunction, the ampersand is an embodiment of upright and efficiently abbreviated verticality.

This reflexive capability of “Mobiles” is itself an episodic tactic that reviews and thus evaluates the generative potential of the poems. Like the clusters of conceits that gather in the structures of Maiden’s other early poems, various ironic motifs of dialogic interrelation meet in “The Exhibition” and “Space”. The character’s action at the opening of “The Exhibition”, “he stood up, & sat down again”, emulates the poem’s paradigmatic form against the violence of narrative stream. His own struggle with violence embodies Maiden and her reader’s mutual struggle to maintain the freedom and equality of trochaic flux. His friends, for example, “quelled their sadistic / impulse to save” him and decide that “sympathy discouraged / more than direct attack”, a phrase that hearkens to Maiden’s discourse of warfare. Sympathy, of course, can come through art: something that we as readers have, but which the character is clearly unable to comprehend:

He tried on his new
past like a dubious suit;
but
he felt his voice fade at
the obviousness of what
he said
“at that
value it is time to sell”
he said [PE 44]

As we know, “freedom” is “inhibited” by self-consciousness or incarnation, and so the friends’ “strategic silence” toward the man is successful in theory but misinterpreted by him. At losing hierarchical control (“his passion for the final”) his “violence, a / particularly fierce one”, bubbles over. Robbed of closure (of his old relationship, we presume), he communicates with the urge for jealous power:

his words
were quick &
close together, pushing them away
Bonny Cassidy

with no

gaps to pierce between [PE 42-43]

"Space" opens with the same image of vertical mobility: "They descended, either climbing / or sliding / down with the dislodged earth". In this poem, however, it is linked to one of perspective focus, "to distant refulgent grass / & fenced country gravestones". Within their newly found vertical mobility, the characters' interactions no longer travel the horizontal momentum of violence but "circled each other / like escaped kites" to which "her eyes might climb / slowly / & sardonically upwards". The "volatile hush" of violent incarnation that overcame the woman in "The Construct" is inverted in "Space" when Maiden writes that "the wind no longer hovered as if / hushed above solemn prey". The original spatial and ontological gap between the characters is crossed by the woman's gesture of a gift, a rock with which she scores patterns into her arm and then hands to him. His acceptance that their relationship would "be tidied up by time" helps us to approach the serial-procedural effects of the cycle's end. The figure of time in the character's emotional journey is reflected by its use as a vertical refrain:

Looking up

"Hours ahead EST
Hours behind EST"

for his travel, he was
rather relieved when she left,
being free — as he was —
to imagine her again

he accused himself of hankering
once more for something final

his silence had refused
to relinquish her formally &
he relived what hadn't happened
happily

he felt no need to be,
didn't decide to,
Bonny Cassidy

& was.

Whereas earlier in the cycle this kind of rhythm might have possessed the quality of verbigeration, it comes to reflect the character’s ultimate resolution and comfort to be in flux—represented by his preparation for the suspended, vertical time and place of flight:

in his hand he turned
the rock, already
a star-edged construct
"found"
polishing it no longer possible,

he
resolved to grind it down. [PE 48]

There is a conflict between “a star-edged construct” and something “found” by chance: Maiden’s poetic forms tread this line. Like her trochaic forms, the character seems ultimately resolved to seek the essence of his journey—a vertical, alchemical act of distillation. Grinding/grounding is an exertion of force, but so is polishing the hard, slippery surfaces of infinite serial form. And, like he who is about to gain the disincarnate state of aerial surveillance, we are compelled to return to the beginning of the cycle in order to plot its ground with the retrospective information we have gathered.

The illusion or suggestion of infinity is sufficient to the achievement of Maiden’s poetics. With her definition of freedom based on choice, not chance, she sustains an intention to allow for degrees of objectivity within her poems. Duncan responds to a modern state of disorder by recreating it through serial form but, while she also wants to create continuity with that reality, Maiden uses the influence of open forms to generate more possibilities for a reader to gain ground. As she remarks, the dismissal of “Objective Observer” as a superior ontological position is a rightfully “causal factor in postmodernism”. Yet for her construction of procedural effect, objectivity remains a possibility and retains an important role in the form of disincarnate perspective. The objectivity to which she subscribes occurs in her reader’s discovery of possibility itself, that is, the possibility of otherness. She is troubled that “an abandonment of the possibility of objective observation indicates a mistrust of reality and of the complete facts”. I think we can relate her caution to the inherent “moment of objectification” that Bakhtin finds in aesthetic interrelation, a moment that’s both an alienation of and return
Bonny Cassidy

into oneself. Degrees of power over sense are necessary to Maiden's poetic project of allowing "as much choice within the dual hierarchy of the objective and subjective as possible". To abandon the possibility of reality and truth is to dismiss this mobility. This draws us once again to the quality of speech, in which we are aware of our participation in a language game, with its particular fields of immediate reference—constitutive of false positions as well as golden solidity—rather than the truly infinite detachability and adaptability that Derrida ascribes to writing.

The deliberate shapes of Maiden's mobiles are "not the conceptual structures but energies recurring in numinous moments". Stevens' modernist poetics of analysis can be traced in Maiden's valuing of "the dailiness of poetry" as a serial or "ongoing process [...] rather than a stasis" as Taylor writes. Yet postmodern form, in its procedural guise, contains a romantic sense of "creative ground, a source of energy and value in the objective order that otherwise mocks subjective consciousness". It is arguable to what extent Maiden's early poems reflect "the Romanticism in an existential cage" that some commentary has found present in work by her Australian peers. As in Conte's account of American postmodern poetry, Maiden's poetic forms are best thought of as complementary responses provoked by the poet's own historical moment:

[...] a post-humanism in which man is no longer the measure of all things; the reasoning mind is cast into shadows by celebrated irrationalities, and the individual ego finds itself to be at the periphery rather than the focus of modes or order. [...] The reciprocal relationship of seriality and proceduralism, aleatory procedures and arbitrary constraints, is founded on attitudes toward chaos and order which are newly effective in the postmodern era.

Suffice to say that her peculiarly interrelational or transactional forms of representationalism and surrealism are a way of "accepting with depressing accuracy the

47 Taylor, "The American Model: Penelope or Circe?" 61.
49 Dobrez, Parnassus Mad Ward 96.
50 Conte, Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry 15-17.
Bonny Cassidy

unsatisfactory state in which things are”.

Furthermore, the prospect of her early poems as being part of a sustained, reiterative project like the tradition of the “longpoem”, suggests that they “can never be originary in the sense of pretending to be direct speech motivated by some surfeit of emotion”. Her constructed acceptance of ethical problems suspends the poet’s evaluative moral agency. The reader’s sense of the unsatisfactory state of violence is piqued. Moral procedure carries the tactics of warfare into greater reality. As Iser writes of transactional form:

The result of this process, triggered and sustained by the serial arrangement of perspectives, is that the reader, in striving to produce the aesthetic object, actually produces the very conditions under which reality is perceived and comprehended.

We originally seek out the text, Iser argues, precisely because of this immediacy, for “a reaction to contemporary situations, bringing attention to problems that are conditioned though not resolved by contemporary norms”. Maiden’s strong sense of what both she and her work are for speaks to the discourse of ethics.

53 Iser, The Act of Reading 103.
54 Iser, The Act of Reading 3.
Chapter Three

To complicate the play: “The Sponge” and “Tactics”

The trochaic form
being suited best to war
does fit here again, I guess:
the falling metre
retains its power longest to return.

“Scotch Blue” [FF 13]

The effect of “living out an idea” motivates Maiden’s poetics of embodiment. Hers is a creation of forms in which philosophy is experiential rather than theoretical or rhetorical. But who is affected by this encounter; and how does Maiden engage her transactional forms with non-aesthetic experience? I have suggested that there may be a remedial aspect to her project, but the extent of this intention remains to be considered. Shelly Patak comments that, “Maiden’s focus is on viewing and understanding evil, before it is possible to transcend it”, however the influence of serial forms has allowed Maiden to avoid the application of romantic processes—understanding and transcending—to the ethical dilemma of evil. Viewing is the key act, here: disincarnate observation of experience that embraces the procedural approaches of encountering and examining without need for absolutist structural or moral telos.

It is through the procedure of encounter that we reach higher points of ground from which to view scenarios of violence in perspective. Michel de Certeau’s distinction between two types of social agency, “tactic” and “strategy”, underlines this process as fundamentally linguistic. In “everyday” transactions of all kinds, human power relationships are metonymically represented by the combination of semiotic axes within language. All consumers, Certeau writes, are “poets of their own affairs” who design and

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Bonny Cassidy

imagine their way through encounters with others by using both a given material such as language and an arbitrary, creative response. Tactic and strategy describe this dialectic: a strategy assumes a position of power to determine the limits of circumstances, “planning general strategy and viewing the adversary as a whole within a district, visible, and objectifiable space”; while a tactic is “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus”. This gives it priority as a defining term of Maiden’s approach to ethics. Like the paradigmatic motion of speech, “the space of a tactic is the space of other”. As such, it is above all mobile:

Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power. It does not have the means to keep to itself, at a distance, in a position of withdrawal, foresight, and self-collection: it is a maneuver within enemy territory. [...] It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow. It takes advantage of “opportunities” and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position, and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep. This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment [sic].²

Certeau’s theory returns us to the interrelation of chance and possibility in Maiden’s poetics, an interchange of roles in which possibility steps forward to ground the work in a fleeting, jingling way. The tactics of warfare defined by Certeau are explored and expanded in two early poems, “Tactics” and “The Sponge”. Continuing within Maiden’s sustained thematic framework, the poems embody violence in the domestic theatre. As the final poem of Tactics and one of the longer poems in The Problem of Evil respectively, they link the developments of scenario and form that take place in “The Problem of Evil”, “Mobiles” and “A Solstice Miscellany”. Furthermore, in extending the forms of quotidian life contained within the theme of her work, these poems demonstrate how ethics inherently interacts with what Certeau terms the “everyday”. Their structures use the everyday dialectic of language transactions to encounter and examine how we manage this dialectic itself. Bernstein argues for this view of poetry in which “the

Bonny Cassidy

relation of theory to practice is like the relation of strategy to tactics [...] the best picture of an aesthetic is a work of art, and vice versa”.3

The ontological framework of influential work by poets like Duncan and Levertov reflects the breakthrough in American serial form made by George Oppen, among others. Oppen’s poetry attempts to engage poetic language and form with the nature of human encounters, as Peter Nicholls argues.4 The perpetual “nowhere” of the tactic shares the detached, syntagmatic motion of serial poetic form to which Maiden and peers were exposed from the 1960s onwards. Oppen’s extended poem, “Of Being Numerous”, comprises a series of cantos linked thematically but not necessarily sequentially. In the present tense, the poem shifts from concrete images of New York City to the narrative of a speaker wandering the metropolis:

In which the buildings
Stand on low ground, their pediments
Just above the harbor

Absolutely immobile.

Hollow, available, you could enter any building,
You could look from any window
One might wave to himself
From the top of the Empire State Building—

Speak

If you can

Speak5

The poem is without spatial and temporal unity: the immediate journey is interrupted by images of World War One and primitive communities. However, Nicholls makes a case for Oppen’s use of form as an engagement with interrelation and truth. Oppen is able to present “all elements that evoke relationship without reducing it to two terms, to subject-object dualism”. We find this in his poem’s ability to stride across time and place without the need to assume the reader’s task of projecting or seeking relations between moments. Oppen balances infinite openness with a “sense of commonness [...] that is primary because it exists prior to social codes and prescriptions”. It is as if “On Being Numerous” takes for granted an indiscriminate quality of being: “Of rootless speech” and a space “unable to begin / At the beginning”; of “Anti-ontology”. If Oppen’s poetics drives toward ground that is already within the tactic and strategy of human transaction (“One might wave to himself”), then it also attempts to locate ground prior to language (“Speak / If you can”) in the modern landscape:

Coming home from her first job
On the bus in the bare civic interior
Among those people, the small doors
Opening on the night at the curb
Her heart, she told me, suddenly tight with happiness—

So small a picture,
A spot of light on the curb, it cannot demean us

I too am in love down there with the streets
And the square slabs of pavement—

To talk of the house and the neighbourhood and the docks

And it is not ‘art’

Thus this “poetics of ‘encounter’ will assume that the domain of the ethical is also the domain of the ordinary and the everyday”.

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7 Oppen, Of Being Numerous, 18-21.
8 Oppen, Of Being Numerous, 16.
Bonny Cassidy

This awareness is foregrounded in Levinas' ethics, where "the self comes into being only by first recognizing its responsibility to others". His philosophy allows for "the claims of others rather than a body of moral rules and values". After all, to accept the possibility, as Maiden puts it, of "the complete facts" is to accept Levinas' argument that there is "more than what is intimated or revealed in a continuum of subjective aspects at the moment of perception". This observation is put forward by Maiden's control of image in "The Magnetron", and also by the layering and patterning of line and space in "Mobiles". Maiden's early poetry engages with politics without being political, just as it possesses an ethics without moral ends. Lack of poetic closure, writes Nicholls, is "a primary instance of poetry's difference from politics, placing the poem within that intermediary space". If Maiden's work suggests a remedial function, it is as this intermediary space between poet and reader, self and other, agency and passivity, control and clarity. As Nicholls argues, this space is a departure from modernism akin to Maiden's divergence from Stevens' style. It anticipates the influence of postmodern American poetry's "linguistic impenetrability or opacity"; a concern with language transactions that draws near to Olson's Projective breath but also, principally, to Levertov's awareness of "language also as a form of life".

Her definition of the modern poet's politics calls out its latent answer to Heidegger's echoing question, by arguing that the handling of language be conflated with the handling of an other, the reader. As in Maiden's careful approach to the state of violence between writer and reader, and particularly to the initiatory power of the former, in Levertov's poetics the poem is reinforced as bearing a metonymic relation to everyday human interaction:

The obligation of the poet (and, by extension, of others committed to the love of literature, as critics and teachers or simply as readers) is not necessarily to write "political" poems [...]. The obligation of the writer is: to take personal and active responsibility for his words, whatever they are, and to acknowledge their potential influence on the lives of others. [...] And the obligation of readers is:

Bonny Cassidy

*not to indulge in the hypocrisy of merely vicarious experience, thereby reducing literature to the concept of "just words," ultimately a frivolity, an irrelevance when the chips are down...* When words penetrate deep into us they change the chemistry of the soul, of the imagination. We have no right to do that to people if we don't share the consequences.¹³

Levertov's dual focus on writer and reader roles underlines the shared affective function of the poetics of encounter. Her words foreshadow Maiden's own remarks on the reader's ethical interaction with poetic form:

> [...] a poem becomes part of the identity of the reader, as a three-dimensional experience which like any other will associate itself with that reader's past and future in just the same educational or confirmatory way as any other instance of pure life, gathering and creating significance as it breathes.¹⁴

Both Levertov and Maiden realise language as a transitive act to be lived out or embodied. This places particular emphasis on a poem's spatial and temporal existence, as Levertov points out:

> It seems to me that the absorption in language itself, the awareness of the world of multiple meaning revealed in sound, word, syntax, and the entering into this world in the poem, is as much an experience or constellation of perceptions as is the instress of nonverbal sensuous and psychic events.

These are aspects of Maiden's early poems that become inseparable from her ethical project. Levertov values complexity or "multiple meaning" as crucial to the poet's "obligation". Maiden's poetry clearly observes this, but its linguistic opacity as a "rhythmic norm" should be distinguished from the opacity of symbolic representation and, along with Levertov, the closed aesthetic of Language poetry.¹⁵ This returns us to Levinas, who explains aesthetic disincarnation as an experience of continuity with a wider reality rather than detachment from it:

> The disincarnation of reality by an image is not equivalent to a simple diminution by degree. It belongs to an ontological dimension that does not extend between

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Bonny Cassidy

us and a reality to be captured, a dimension where commerce with reality is a rhythm.¹⁶

This comment combines two dynamics, both of which we have found in Maiden’s transactional forms: a fluid passage into physical as well as conceptual reality; and an inability to wholly capture that reality. Poetic continuity, therefore, is more like entering a (Heraclitean) current than netting an entity. The state of disincarnation takes us into a dimension we may not have previously imagined, a new “norm”.

Like much of Maiden’s early poetry, “The Sponge” reveals the ethical negotiation that takes place between poet and reader. To describe the poem as a tactic is to fold this negotiation of hierarchy into one manoeuvre—a single, non-dualistic space of mobility in which poet and reader share power over meaning. The poem’s serial form of short, fragmented stanzas is more like relative gatherings of lines in a crowd of narrative possibilities. The poem’s signification is determined by its denotative variety, which is shaped by a given reading, such that words can create a sense of random incident (“She munches something”) rather than authorial control. Maiden structures the poem around pronouns that continue to demarcate new horizons of what I call ground, or hermeneutic meaning. Unable to hold ground for long, however, Maiden’s reader must follow personal pronouns as they perpetually bob in and out of sight:

Radiator.
the warmth stretched her veins,
etched them puissantly on
her calves. Their daughter

under the coffee table,
kicked
the hem of the rug. Guilty.

The furniture
criticizes her limbs

Bonny Cassidy

His scrutiny maims
Her concentration forever

She bullies the cat prettily

Defensively
she rides the mop
& cackles, building
smokescreens of energy

He couldn't
carry her enough

In her despotic arms the cat
twitched as if stroked by its sleep

At night he thinned
the child's wine from
a carafe of mineral water

Boredom tightened her face
so close to tears & sleep
She munches something that is
splintery and loud

She meanders her crayon
on a colouring book:
the page
cuts her thumb,
thin & deep, & too neat
for belief or lamentation

* * *
Bonny Cassidy

The child rammed the pram side with her head

* * * [PE 51-52]

Through this kind of territory, Certeau writes, we can only take "isolated actions" of procedure. The poem's serial approach to identity manages to sidestep what Linda Alcoff calls "the construction of the subject by a discourse that weaves knowledge and power into a coercive structure." This tactic accommodates the self and other at once, rather than taking an obliterating strategy. In "The Sponge", the tactic of serial form first problematises identity at the level of gender, and then across a platform of related positions.

Denoting both mother and daughter, the double feminine pronoun in "The Sponge" blurs the female characters into one another, and yet its very repetition reiterates gender difference. Maiden uses only a few narrative suggestions to distinguish mother and daughter ("Their daughter/ under the coffee table", "the child's wine"), so that the females occupy interchangeable places in the family's syntax. As they are constantly disrupting of and disrupted by the reappearance of "he", the poem suggests that gender delimits these characters by representing their changing emotional positions.

As we read more closely, however, we come to realise that "The Sponge" constructs identity in a more nuanced fashion. Its gendering of action moves into the background of the poem's scenario as other modes of difference come to the fore. Its volume of transitive verbs rivals the pronouns, for example. As the poem's characters and objects are perpetually exerting what Certeau calls "the law of a foreign power" upon one another, most of its isolated phrases and sentences repeatedly enact the violence of subject to predicate. Like pronouns, they tend to propel the sentence toward mirage ground, emphasised by an absence of full stops. Maiden underlines the inherent condition of violence by choosing verbs that denote physical pain, incision and dominion: "stretched"/ "etched", "kicked", "criticizes", "maims", "bullies", "rides", "munches", "meanders", "cuts" and "rammed". As the pronouns blend with a mass of nouns—

Bonny Cassidy

radiator, rug, cat, mop, carafe, crayon, and so on—not only people and people, but also things and people confront one another. The girl is able to bully the cat, for example, but the page is able to cut her. "The Sponge" is a series of isolated temporal and spatial moments that generate an infinite narrative horizon.

Increasingly, gender becomes a more general presence of violent difference. Moreover, the modes of difference that we encounter in the poem shirk reductive dualism by establishing numerous moments of multiplicity and changeability. In fact, the confluence of the female characters into a single pronoun reflects the unimportance of conventional gender duality to the poem’s possibilities, and suggests that there are other, more precise ways of identifying Maiden’s characters. The duelling capitalisation of the couplet, “His scrutiny maims / Her concentration forever” indicates parallel identities brought together by the poem’s form rather than by the poet’s evaluative construction of subjectivities.

As well as moving around its numerous identity positions, we come to “forfeit” any expectation of fluid climactic rhythm or privileged narrative. The lacunae that isolate “The child rammed / the pramside with her head” allay the poem’s procedural continuity by redefining difference (structural emphasis) as sameness (minutiae). Toward the poem’s conclusion, Maiden reiterates the action: “The other child rammed / the pramside with her head”. Here, the child is differentiated (“other”), and the action is underlined by its reappearance. But while the reader might have confirmed this point in the narrative ground, the child’s action is doomed to repeat itself—in the poem and as the poem—over ground that she will never win. Narrative evaluation, then, is equally as problematic as reductive identification of gender. In “The Sponge”, there’s no such thing as identity of the known and unknown—ground won and ground lost—only the surfing motion of the tactic through various positionalities.

Does this deny the possibility of shared meaning between Maiden and her reader, or a true reading of her poem? Alcoff suggests that to break free of a dualistic and incarnate condition—the condition of violence—it is necessary “to assert total difference, to be that which cannot be pinned down or subjugated within a dichotomous hierarchy”. However, the potential for ground in “The Sponge” refuses “total difference” by

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Bonny Cassidy

persistently attempting to construct identities, building an “identity politics” that is constantly dismantled or reworked throughout the poem.19 The poem suggests that gender “is not a point to start from in the sense of being a given thing but is, instead, a posit or construct, formalizable in a nonarbitrary way through a matrix of habits, practices, and discourses”. Maiden treats gender as she does time, space, age or physicality: “always a construction yet also a necessary point of departure”.20

The daughter’s “smokescreens of energy” reflect the elusive nature of this power play, in which the tactic of survival leaves intangible and impermanent traces. The poem’s almost imperceptible shifts between present and past tenses signal its delicate sense of defeat: “he feels / that her listlessness almost / slanders him / he felt that she had ruined him”.21 At the same time, they remind us that coercive or fixed identities can perpetuate a state of violence outside of discrete temporal moments. The closing stanzas of “The Sponge” reveal the ethical tactic of identity politics, reincarnating the child’s violence in the tormented cat, and conjugating her father in an imperative position. Thus, on the one hand, violence is indefinitely projected forward:

She rounds the dough in her hands.
I am combining people.

His somnolence filters the words

to safer proportions

I have crossed the line

The cat punched its head
softly against the window

Alone,
he would cook breakfast
mysterious crisps of meat
& liquid eggs — proudly,

21 Maiden, The Problem of Evil 52.
Bonny Cassidy

demolish
his meal like an argument [PE 54]

In this way, the problem of evil would seem to be a problem of self-defeat. The image of the cat’s masochistic turn reflects the ambiguous statement, “Guilty”, made at the poem’s opening and unclaimed by either the characters or poet. This pervasive, communal guilt is evident in the man’s demolition of his “proud” but, like the smokescreen built by his daughter, groundless structure. His argument, which is to say his survival, is not won because it was never a transaction; he is “Alone”.

On the other hand, this implosive family is close to agency. It would be easy to suggest that the characters and world of “The Sponge” don’t share in the liberty of the tactic; that, like Keats’ frozen Grecian figures, we can’t affect them as they affect us. But this would be to cast them outside the encompassing dimension established by the poem’s identity politics. I think this would constitute a false reading of the poem, for two reasons. Near the poem’s end, for the first and only time, mother and father make a parallel claim for the personal pronoun. Happily, any final result remains inscrutable. Consider, however, the altered tone of the transitive verbs, “rounds” and “filters”, which are in stark contrast to the harsh and coercive transitions made earlier in the poem; and the insertion of the intransitive ‘to be’ and ‘to have’, which soften the character’s exertions. And, while he is able to reduce his violence “to safer proportions”, she channels hers into an expressive form that, like the poem, combines identities. The suggestion that her statement is in fact a self-description reinforces this interpretation. The characters’ voices are of course both confessions of surrender, and defensive attempts to stake out higher ground; both constructions and points of departure.

By engaging with the ethical tactic of constructing the “subject as positionality”, her reader shares the dimension of identity politics with the world of the poem.22 Elizabeth A. Flynn argues that the “transactional view of the reading process”, such as Rosenblatt’s reader-response theory, supports the positionalist nature of identity politics. Hermeneutic agency such as we find in Maiden’s poetic forms “emphasizes that reading

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is an event in time that subsumes the individual participants so that they are no longer recognizable as individual entities”.

Maiden’s creation of an intermediary space can be thought about in terms of Alain Badiou’s discussions of evil. By translating the tactic into poetic form, Maiden’s early work deals with truth and meaning as real but shifting semantic ground. It illustrates Badiou’s argument that “the only ethics is of processes of truth, of the labour that brings some truths into the world”. As it maintains an intermediary framework around its thematic scenarios and narratives, her poetry reinforces his fundamental assertion: “Ethics does not exist. There is only the ethic-of”. In “The Sponge”, Maiden is careful to manoeuvre the poem away from closure, even where true positions, such as the parents’ claiming of first-person positionality, seem evident. Her tactic of opening/open form resists the “terror” of coercion:

That truth does not have total power means, in the last analysis, that the subject-language, the production of a truth-process, does not have the power to name all the elements of the situation. At least one real element must exist, one multiple existing in the situation, which remains inaccessible to truthful nominations, and is exclusively reserved to opinion, to the language of the situation. At least one point that truth cannot force.

Maiden’s poetic form is designed to divert the everyday reflexes that result in evil, by redirecting “the language machine” away from hierarchical and dualistic modes of meaning. The result is an ethical process of seeking sameness through collusion, recognition and pattern rather than deferral or difference. Whereas Levinas centres ethical awareness upon the self’s interrelation with the Other, for instance, Badiou emphasises the encounter with the “Same”. “Differences being simply what there is, the question of what ‘ought to be’ must concern only what is valid for all”, writes Badiou. “Differences are; the Same is what may come to be through the disciplined adherence to a universal truth”. Badiou’s emphasis on the process toward the Same reflects how the

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25 Badiou, Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil 82-86.
26 Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
Bonny Cassidy

transactional tactic of Maiden's poetic forms can be read as an ongoing sifting for truth. Her reader mediates positions of possible identity, possible semantic and epistemological ground, which are intermediated by the poem's limits and Maiden's intentionality. The poem, as Deleuze writes, "traverses both the liveable and the lived". These fleeting positions gesture to a value of sharing and commonality within the poetic experience; the "living out", as Maiden claims, of a wider, interrelational experience of human being that may be the sought-after universal truth itself. Frederic Jameson's description of Marxist ecology reflects this experience:

Such momentary reunification would remain purely symbolic, a mere methodological fiction, were it not understood that social life is in its fundamental reality one and indivisible, a seamless web, a single inconceivable and transindividual process, in which there is no need to invent ways of linking language events and social upheavals or economic contradictions because on that level they were never separate from one another. An imminent incarnate experience differs from the coercive and delimited kind of interaction that Maiden and Badiou associate with evil. As an aesthetic, argues Levertov, the processual nature of human interaction insists on the conflation of art and life:

The poet develops the basic human need for dialogue in concretions that are audible to others; in listening, others are stimulated into awareness of their own needs and capacities, stirred into taking up their own dialogues [...]. The substance, the means of, an art, is an incarnation—not reference but phenomenon.

Poetic language and form recognise what Maiden calls the "physical fleshly" reality of words; the nature of the language act is the ultimate grounding of ethical discourse, and this is actually explored by the poetic exchange. Maiden's tactic of negotiated identities and truths replicates or, more precisely, undertakes human interactions. It engages with an ethical turn in twentieth century poetics, particularly with what Bernstein calls the "radically small scale". He emphasises the importance of maintaining a grip on the uniqueness of poetic expression, that it can do its best work "not as an idea but a practice,

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28 Deleuze, "Literature and Life," 225.
Bonny Cassidy

and not a matter of comrades—through-time or cultural positions, but of words and syntax”:

The cultural project of this poetry of radically small scale is to refuse such absorption by mass culture, so as to keep the attentional focus on the possibilities of language, on what language has to tell.31

Incarnate moment or imminent web, Maiden’s grounded poetic space breaks away from both transcendentalism and detachment.

The space of poems like “The Sponge” is never static. According to Dewey’s aesthetic theory, the poem’s tension ensures an interaction with the work that “is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed”.32 Dewey adopts the figure of rhythm, also used by Levinas, to describe the spatial existence of interrelation between self and other/other and same. For both Dewey and Levinas, rhythm denotes a quality of undulation rather than boundary, in which art is simply one of “all the rhythmic crises that punctuate the stream of living”.33

This contrasts with Wallace Stevens’ desire to escape reality through poetic consciousness, ultimately refuting the concept of poetic ground. Maiden’s poetry can be seen to work against the play theory of aesthetics—“the idea that esthetic experience is a release and escape from the pressure of ‘reality’ [sic]”:

There is an assumption that freedom can be found only when personal activity is liberated from control by objective factors. The very existence of a work of art is evidence that there is no such opposition between the spontaneity of the self and objective order and law. In art, the playful attitude becomes interest in the transformation of material to serve the purpose of a developing experience. Desire and need can be fulfilled only through objective material, and therefore playfulness is also an interest in an object.34

33 Dewey, Art As Experience 7.
34 Dewey, Art As Experience 279, Dewey’s italics.
Bonny Cassidy

The strength of Maiden’s work is its capitalization on the fact that poetry is built from a medium that also constructs non-aesthetic experiences of life. Indeed, when she speaks of the “Objective Observer”, it could be language that she means to indicate.

“The Sponge” and “Mobiles” are able to extend the understanding that “to be human is to be a conversation”, not only through their capability to encompass scenarios of dialogue and to convey the tone, mood and physicality of different voices, but also through their anticipation of the temporal and spatial reality in which they sit. Levertov cites the essay “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry”, in which Heidegger refutes that poetry is play, because language captures us at the most fundamental state of humanity. It is “by filling his given space, that a man, and in particular a poet as a representative of an activity peculiarly human, does make ‘traceries sufficient to others’ needs’”. In this contact with the other, in which the other is brought closer to becoming the same, the poet performs a profoundly “‘social’ or ‘political’ action”. Her function is to cultivate our capability for accessing the other, and this is unique because the poem re-conditions language:

Man’s capacity for evil, then, is less a positive capacity, for all its horrendous activity, than a failure to develop man’s most human function, the imagination, to its fullness, and consequently a failure to develop compassion.35

Is Maiden’s invitation of the reader to “wander” in her poems challenged by Heidegger’s refutation of poetic ground as play? How is the liberty to wander distinct from an escape into play? Maiden provides answers by comparing the rhythm of her poetic spaces with televiusal news broadcasting. In “Channel Surf” the poet is “surfing the news on cable, trying / to construct, in my endless quest, / the perfect lyric” [FF 96]. As both viewer/reader and constructive author, her motion of surfing is analogous to the tactical manoeuvre that keeps itself afloat on the displaced ground of the poem. Echoing Levertov, Maiden suggests that the wandering space is one of “compassion”.36 This affect of wandering occurs not only in modernity’s poetic forms but also in its mass media: “modern 24-hour satellite news coverage can provide a trochaic (fast then slow,
Bonny Cassidy

hard then soft) news pattern which allows for a reflection and analysis that impede the acceleration of violence.

Maiden’s poetics develops Eco’s thesis that there is a “rapport between the communicative structures of television and the ‘open’ structures of contemporary art”. Live broadcast, argues Eco, continues the “real time” of subjective perception by comprising a montage of multiple viewpoints sequenced immediately. Its dialectical rhythm between subject and director, and then between channels, seeks to fit into the web of reality as what Eco has called “a cluster of possibilities”. As he explains, “natural events do not inscribe themselves in any formal scheme that has already foreseen them; rather, they require that such a scheme be developed along with them, simultaneously”. Open forms of poetry create this scheme more readily than other forms of contemporary art. Bernstein reiterates this view:

[...] isn’t the nonlinearity of much so-called disjunctive poetry indeed a point of contact with the everyday cultural experiences [...] where overlays of competing discourses is an inevitable product of the radio dial, cable television, the telephone, advertising, or indeed, at a different level of spatialization, cities?

If Maiden’s poetic space of wandering, with its trochaic rhythm, is compassionate, then the space of play is a hardened, incarnate site. Rather than exercising the burden of freedom, play is defined by awareness of its own limitations. Zygmunt Bauman states that play theory has come to circumscribe aesthetic space outside of moral space. Informed by the modernist flâneur, aesthetic spacing adopts a unique point of view that can retain full control in the face of the other:

One plays when knowing that the assumptions are what they are: assumptions, which have been freely accepted and may be freely dropped. We speak of reality when we do not have such knowledge, or do not dare to believe it, or suspect it to be untrue. There is nothing gratuitous and not much that is free about reality.

This theory of aesthetic play runs counter to Weil’s philosophy of individual responsibility, and Levinas’ being-for the Other. In play’s encounters with otherness,

38 Eco, The Open Work 105-108.
39 Eco, The Open Work 112-113.
40 Bernstein, “The Revenge of the Poet-Critic, or the parts are greater than the sum of the whole,” 6.
good faith cannot be kept because “knowing” restricts the definition of play. The repudiation and futility of language in Tranter’s “Red Movie” enacts this theory as a poetics, “a manner of suspended disbelief, i.e. knowing that a dream is just a dream”, which views suspension as play (knowing) rather than as engagement (entering/colluding/seeking). As if to underline the earlier poem, Tranter’s 1976 “The Alphabet Murders” speaks of poetry “easily erased”, as “all the while we have been bereft” in dealing with a medium “left […] behind before this trip has even begun”.

The irresponsibility of the flâneur is very different from the wandering agent invited by Maiden’s poetics. This difference can be examined through the contrast between urban and suburban space. For the urban figure developed and theorised by Baudelaire and Benjamin, the city offers the same site of spacing as the aesthetic. It maintains distance from cognitive and moral spaces, neutralising both disincarnation from shared reality and incarnation in the “solitaire”. “In the aesthetic space, togetherness is casual and fortuitous—a closeness of monads, enclosed in the invisible”. On the other hand, as David McCooey observes, the “voice of suburbia does not require any smuggling in of the poetic”. Maiden’s thematic interest in “the rhythms of suburban morality” posits a space in which trochaic rhythm is (spatially, geographically and socially) grounded. The rhythms of live news broadcasting are but one example of suburban mobility:

The privacy made possible by suburban rooms, lawns and gardens is in itself a seedbed for the critical faculty. It gives one a breathing-out pause in which the events of the news or the immediate impositions of society can be considered and then perhaps evaded or met more effectively.

By “presenting the suburbs as an area of increased free will”, Maiden’s poems create for both her characters and readers scenarios that allow for the breakdown of delimited and non-free aesthetic space. Tracing the attempts of characters, like the family in “The

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44 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics 178.
Bonny Cassidy

Sponge", to discover their way out of a state of violence, she attempts to reinstate opportunities for responsibility. Suburbia itself provides both the scenarios of violence and the possible passages through them:

The violence which can also result is less remarkable. It has either a desperate, self-defining function or a conservative religious function (often associated with drugs) both of which are a reaction to social impositions which the tantalising and utilitarian privacy of suburbia has not been able to overcome in the way it does normally. [...] When it happens, suburban violence is more sinister than national violence like war because it is more about individual free will and therefore more likely for the individual observer to suffer or perpetrate.46

The existential burden is fearsome to the aesthetic space of play: the "tendency of suburban living to be challenging in terms of sexuality, imagination and ethical choice" is, Maiden reflects, "described from an urban perspective as being 'monotonous' or 'boring'"; but "negative reaction to this type of boredom is in general merely a revulsion against free will".47 It is unacceptable, Maiden feels, for the poet to either submit to or solve this cowardice. "The innate terror in free will itself", she asserts, "is something about which I can do nothing".48

This debate suggests that the neutralised or bored state of play reflects aesthetic forms that perpetrate hierarchical enclosure. Ultimately, play is determined by an external will; in contrast, Maiden seeks to cultivate poetic space that, like live broadcast, focuses on the agency of a viewer/reader who takes on the role of surfer and shapes the sequencing of material with which they are presented. The surfing tactic maintains the fundamental ethical question of the encounter with reality:

At this primal scene, the course of action is not-yet-determined. The dividing line between good and evil is not-yet-drawn. It is only the subsequent actions of the actors that will make the distinction, set apart from good and evil, determine the goodness and the evil of what will have been done. There is no scenario written in

advance, and the actors write the plot as they proceed, each being his or her own
director; and construe the language of writing in the course of writing it. 49

The "assumptions" of a poem's limitation are avoided in several ways by the
transactional forms of her work. Firstly, of course, the poem is open to be inhabited by
the reader. Secondly, her long poem "The Problem of Evil" and recent poems like the
"George Jeffreys" sequence draw the poem into a continuum of reality by referring to
contemporary affairs. 50 For readers in the early 1970s, there would have been no doubt
about allusions to Vietnam in "The Problem of Evil"; in Friendly Fire Maiden highlights
the political currency of her poetic space by making explicit reference to Iraq, and to the
Clinton and Bush administrations. This historical construction of the poem's identity
reflects a wider ontology of identity politics: that "we are embodied and embedded selves
whose identity is constructed narratively". 51 Finally, questioning the argument that poetic
language is an abstract medium, "The Sponge" relishes its substance or solidity as
objective material. Maiden's attention to nouns, pronouns, transitive verbs and spatial
possibilities sustains the poem's fleshly presence.

The profound "'social' or 'political' action" undertaken by Maiden can be
compared with Levertov's intention, in Jose Rodriguez Herrera's words, to "explore the
limits of her language in time of war in order to see whether those limits could be
stretched farther, whether it was possible to imagine other boundaries, other worlds". 52

However the task taken up by Maiden's poetics of "dismantling the aesthetic space" falls,
finally, to the audience with whom the poem shares reality. For that task to take place,
"the seeker of aesthetic satisfaction must be, however, also a moral person". 53 That is, the
reader must choose wandering rather than play, a choice that might require the
breakdown of conditioned reading either prior to or through the process of encountering
the poem. Characters confront this same choice within a few of her poems. One example
is "The Construct", in which a meta-poem (the hero's day dream) functions in the same

52 Herrera, Jose Rodriguez, "Revolution or death: Levertov's poetry in time of war," Robert Duncan and
Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, the Politics of Poetry, ed. Bertholf, Robert J. and Albert Gelpi
53 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics 180.
Bonny Cassidy

way as the poem proper. The character constructs a sequence of fabulist images, allowing for dramatic wandering that objectifies his crisis:

the stems of roses
calloused to sprout

a matchbox
jeep on the headland

by warm jade waves
to

long curved globes
half-enveloped
nymphish
in veils of falling water

easier
to capture than hold
he termed it at random,
avoiding all
fallacies of description

there were no
wants involved & no
satisfactions [PE 39]

As I have pointed out, this dream has horizontal limits that threaten to return the character to violent stasis. His treatment of wandering, however, is unlike play; the space he moves in is, after all, crafted from the objective materials in the room about him. He’s not interested in licence to fashion a world of escape or “fallacies of description”. Furthermore, he accepts that the wandering space is defined neither by an outcome (“wants”) nor by closure (“satisfactions”). It could be that the character’s approach to imagination as a space of responsibility is one of the steps in his journey out of hierarchical conflict. Although “He still / exercised compassion / regularly as if afraid / it
Bonny Cassidy

would atrophy", he is yet to reach the ground of free empathy and "aesthetic satisfaction" that he feels at the end of the “Mobiles” suite [PE 40]. The choice to do so, however, seems to be made at this point in the narrative.

It's important that the poem's narrative ground is uncertain, as Maiden is reluctant to present moral evaluation within the poem's structure or narrative. The ethics of dismantling aesthetic spacing is Maiden's intention, but the qualitative outcomes of this framework are variable. The result of the man's wandering in “The Construct” remains unknowable; and true to the laboratorial nature of Maiden's poetics, our reading is provisional. Thus, the reader's role in approaching Maiden's poetry is microcosmically presented by the poem's characters, who are confronted by the decision to take on an analytical worldview. We approach her poem first as a diorama-like space, and then as a passage through reality. This process is richly and finely explored in “Tactics”, the final poem of the volume by that title. It represents the poetic concerns set out in the book that it closes, which is the first in Maiden's ongoing investigation of violence and evil; and it also anticipates the deepening exploration of these concerns in The Problem of Evil.

The narrative and form of “Tactics” draw attention to the definition of play, set out by Bauman:

It is precisely my ability to detach myself, to opt out, that makes the play the 'as-if' action that it is. Play may be restarted and repeated; even its end is 'as if', not really real. No defeat (no victory either) is final and irrevocable. The chance of revenge sweetens the most bitter of failures. One can always try again, and the roles may still be reversed. Because it can be repeated, played again, because its end just clears the site for another beginning, makes new beginning possible — to play is to rehearse eternity: in play, time runs to its appointed end only to start running again. Time has a 'direction' only inside the play, but the repeatability of playing cancels that direction, indeed the flow of time itself. Playing is not cumulative.54

Like “The Construct”, “Tactics” explores a character’s encounter with an ethical decision about poetic space. Our own, parallel choice to wander is paralleled by the poem’s tightly self-reflexive structure. “Tactics” is comprised of three voices: the speaker, a poet in the midst of drafting a new poem; the meta-poem that is quoted as if in dialogue with

54 Bauman, Postmodern Ethics. 171, Bauman's italics.
Bonny Cassidy

its author; and the intervention of a secondary character. Rather than achieving mimetic continuity or unity, the poem’s irony succeeds in unfolding its poetic space into reality.

The meta-poem itself is about the immediate scenario in which the poet-speaker and companion find themselves:

Telling this fiction,

finding the thing,

dressing one story

once I would have been

defeated by each dying

novel of your skin.

Maiden doubly reflects our analytical process, by simultaneously presenting a fictional reality, its representation in the meta-poem, and the representation of that as both the poem’s super-narrative and as our experience. Its two cantos resemble a dialogic exchange in which the meta-poem is proffered, then dismantled and flattened into the narrative sequence and hermeneutic encounter. The “dying” note in its opening stanza briefly suggests the deconstructive nature of aesthetic “fiction”, in which “the thing” in itself is too grounded in reality for the poetic space to bear. However, we are told, that was “once”; since then, the speaker seems to have discovered something, perhaps a secret, to her craft. There remains the pleasing ambiguity of “dressing one story / once”, as if to indicate the singularity of the hermeneutic moment; however it is precisely the speaker and poet’s mutual dismantling of exclusivity which differentiates Maiden’s poetic space from play.

To surf through “defeat” and “victory” of contested ground suggests that the tactic is a manoeuvre in response to play. While this is a plausible view of open or serial forms, the tactic of Maiden’s work is a response to a different impulse built into her poem’s temporal and spatial states. Unlike the boundaries of play that “end only to start running again”, the dimensions of her poem do not have to be limited to the poetic/aesthetic experience alone. In this sense both its serial (quantitative) and procedural (qualitative) forms are united in their contrast to the circular form of play. That is to say, space in Maiden’s poetry contingently extends itself according to the hermeneutic encounter. Through cumulative procedures it makes “new beginning possible”.
Bonny Cassidy

As in other of the poems we’ve explored, in “Tactics” such beginnings are about allowing for diversion, shift and reworking along the procedural route. Particularly in this poem, moreover, those motions directly apply to the writing process. The first canto delivers two beginnings and the second canto provides a third start, as the poet-speaker arranges her draft:

"In its unspun knots of water
the sun in the harbour shows
leaf-embossed like a sideboard of silver
an antique’s ominous glow.

commuting back on Sunday
to the ecstasies of sleep
two voices edge & flicker,
as one scar of cloud
gells in a dusk current
to bed the vales in blood.

irritation’s pincers set
new flesh between her brows,
& the girl’s moist hair clings, bundled
by her knuckles from her nape.
he listens as if gentle
& withdraws to concentrate
on her tired shrugs of walking
in the canna-rooted slime,
then glances down, impatient
at the wristed beat of time”. [T 58]

And as she dismantles it:

No, the last line rhymes too tightly,
& time’s random spill is strange –
too anarchic to quite execute
immaculate revenge…
Bonny Cassidy

no consequence is needed: just
those waters & a wristed watch.
that world...

all histrionics prove
too obviously good there, like
some business man who pensions off
his ghosts above the basic wage,
too desperately good.

Her revisions also reflect our grappling with the narrative and meta-narrative sequences of “Tactics”, what William James Fox calls Maiden’s “quasi-documentary poetics”. The speaker shifts from her present physical moment—signified by the lyrical “you”—to the poem before her. Meanwhile, we turn our attention from “Tactics” as a whole, to the poem as distinct sets of lines on the page. The poet-speaker narrates her poem’s character in the third-person, setting herself outside herself. The constant dialectic mobility of “Tactics” means that, like her, we are unable to fully engage with a complete narrative or a complete, spaced poetic experience. As the poet-speaker resolves, “no consequence is needed” for the poem; the prospect of “immaculate” resolution is not possible and, therefore, not ethical. She does not want to enforce a moral evaluation upon her reader, hence the “histrionics” of her draft must be cut, else they “prove / too obviously good”, too ready to “pension off” complexity for simplicity. Reading “Tactics”, we are in a single space that encompasses reality and the poem. Its outdoors setting, and particularly the speaker’s composition of her poem as she wanders, reinforces the continuity between poetic, cognitive, physical and moral spaces. Maiden’s arrangement of space as an open, extensive passage is figured in the image of the speaker firstly finding her reflection “angled in my compact”, and then glimpsing that of her companion, behind.

At this point the poet-speaker reverses the conventional order of representation by returning, as it were, to her body; guiding her poetic character whose “moist hair clings, bundled / by her knuckles from her nape”, across (literally and fictionally) to an incarnate

55 Fox, “Down the road between the promise and the freaky now”: Understanding The New Australian Poetry,” 108.
Bonny Cassidy

state with “a wet / nun’s coif”. The distinction of poetic and real time is erased. Maiden’s special focus on time in “Tactics” highlights the priority of wandering in her work. The vertical structures of her poetry collude with the hermeneutic moment by constructing pattern, nexus and cluster. Its time is not defined by an “appointed end”, but rather moves into the poem, through it, and out. Recalling Olson’s Projectivist arc, the poem’s time cannot be locked inside form because it belongs to the poet and reader. The speaker of “Tactics” argues to herself that “time’s random spill” is “too anarchic” to conform to a frozen aesthetic space. Even the somewhat simplistic duality of the two cantos’ dialogue is to be broken by the companion’s sardonic voice:

“Don’t hurry for me”, you lounge
where mantled finches suck & brawl
like sparring flames, noon-rapid: tall
in fitful flashes, echoer
at ease to disconcert, you yawn. [T 59]

Although it seems to be suggesting that play has come to its inevitable end, and that the meta-poem’s time will be “tightly” closed once the speaker’s drafting process has ended, in fact this voice reintroduces the theme of time’s compassionate ability to “spill”:

“I won’t keep you long now”, I say
& though
I now can’t keep you long,

delay
that working of the world, to gain
Its expertise, a tactic of return. [T 60]

To “return” is to pass into the incarnate moment in which we read and which the poet simply “can’t” control; and, at the same time, to revisit the disincarnate “delay” of language in order to form a poetics for dealing with incarnation. “Tactics” dismantles the exclusive once-ness of aesthetic spacing to reveal a three-dimensional experience in the world: “It”. The poet-speaker anticipates the work that will extend this ironic poetics, and return her to its project of transactional analysis. The learned “expertise” of her craft is the tactic, which breaks through our preparedness to “rehearse eternity” by cultivating ethical ground at the essential site of human interrelation.
Bonny Cassidy

Maiden recognises that the poem is privileged in processing an "ethics-of". In language she dually locates the origin of the problem of evil and violence, and the generation of compassionate ethical capability. While postmodern poetic forms allow her the flexibility to explore this issue, they also present a reluctance to accept the possibility of controlling the language machine. Dewey's aesthetics reflects this concern with ontological limitation:

In the end, works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience.56

However by exploiting the possibilities of unhindered communication in poetry, Maiden’s poetics supports his claim to the possibility of deconstructing or at least surfing over and around these obstacles:

Except where “ideal” is used in conventional deference or as a name for a sentimental reverie, the ideal factors in every moral outlook and human loyalty are imaginative. […] Hence it is that art is more moral than moralities. […] Were art an acknowledged power in human association and not treated as the pleasuring of an idle moment or as a means of ostentatious display, and were morals understood to be identical with every aspect of value that is shared in experience, the “problem” of the relation of art and morals would not exist.57

Stevens argues that, because we constitute both spaces, the poem is indistinguishable from reality. But Maiden’s approach to three-dimensional poetic space and ground allows language to bridge ontological positions. Maiden’s work adopts neither the romantic aesthetic of ingesting the world in order to transcend it, nor the modernist projection of the subject onto the outside world. By hosting scenarios that require our real ethical might, its macrocosmic space opens a conversational passage between poem and reality, and subsequently between self and world. The effect is close to what Altieri describes as “an intense force deepening one’s participation in experience”.58 We find this depth in the reflexive twist of “Tactics”, in which our choices about approaching the

56 Dewey, Art As Experience 105.
57 Dewey, Art As Experience 348.
58 Altieri, Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry during the 1960s 49.
Bonny Cassidy

poetic form become changed by the process of reading. Ultimately, its affect is ontologically broad rather than political, as Maiden explains:

The problem is, “social role” sounds like something you would do to move a crowd, it sounds like compromise, like it could be manipulative. I think you can have a social responsibility, which you ought to have, but it’s not manipulative. [...] I don’t think one has any feeling that one is going to write a poem and change anything directly, but [...] it’s like breaking down the language: once you’ve broken it down, it’s broken down; once you’ve redefined a hierarchical concept in language in a different way, that remains, that is a fact. In doing so, you’re undermining moral authoritative positions.59

Rather than adding to the sum of experience by extending its limitations, the first decade of her work establishes a project that grounds her poems within existing historical and hermeneutic reality, and thereby allows them to prepare intermediary spaces for experience yet to come. In a recent poem, “Shortlists”, Maiden reiterates that, since “art and sex are not predictable”, a “solution” to the problem of evil cannot be offered by poetry. Nevertheless, poetic form offers a meeting space to test ideas, “eyeblink-fast / but crossroads-bright”.60 The unbounded nature of this ongoing poetics actualises the observational and analytical purpose of her work, and its challenging and experimental effects.

59 Maiden, Telephone interview with Bonny Cassidy, 9 September 2005.
Chapter Four

The line: From “Daub wall” to “Earth lock”

The writings of Jennifer Maiden and Jennifer Rankin are linked by their common preoccupation with an existential problem. For both, the question of how the poem can establish ontological ground, *aletheia*, underpins an entire body of work; and poetic language and form realise a response to that problem by mediating a space in which human consciousness becomes a shared reality. Maiden’s and Rankin’s works underwrite the essentially ethical space that for Heidegger, Eco, Levertov and Duncan determines poetry as the apotheosis of aesthetic experience. Its language acts describe the fundamental interrelation between self and other. The ethical capability of Maiden’s 1970s work comprises a procedure rather than a solution. Her mobile approach to the spatial and temporal possibilities of poetic form attempts a shifting identity politics that does away with hierarchical arrangements of power both within and around the text. Ultimately, Maiden’s early work opens a space that sustains a conversation beyond conventions of form and accessed by free hermeneutic agency. By doing so, it avoids “a deliberate choice between artistic activity and ethical action (art as protest, as a message of salvation)”.

Rankin’s formation as a poet shares aspects of Maiden’s philosophical and poetic influences and interests, specifically the problem of interrelation between subjects. On the other hand, Rankin’s work turns not to truth in human society but to the reality in which it is situated. Is Rankin as interested as Maiden in the function of her poetry? What scenarios of interrelation are generated by Rankin’s poems; and how are they related to her development of form?

My themes of space and ground reveal Rankin’s negotiation of romanticism, nationality and ecology. Rankin’s poetics is double-edged, accommodating a sense of place involved with her awareness of relating to Australian literary tradition; and revealing consciousness of a telluric void informed by her existentialist interests, and, arguably, foreshadowing her own death. It is a dialogue between the voices of a very

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1 Eco, *The Open Work* 169.
Bonny Cassidy

young person and one who has passed beyond the experiential limitations of a single lifetime; and, as such, it tends to reflect the texture of Australia itself. Anticipating her poems, Rankin’s journals and interviews record her attention to her country’s cultural and physical layers. In her remarks, she figures the redemptive future of literature, to use David Carter’s phrase, “as a kind of ‘public good’”.

Even when Australians decide to “look” at their country amongst the majority of tourists there is this need to do so without dirtying their hands [...]— perhaps it was our literary inheritance that predetermined our need to have it soft. Wordsworth, etc...false view of country — and as Marg. Atwood says in Survival of the Canadians p.50, they feel “gripped”. In fact of course even for the Eng. much of Romanticism can be quite misleading, missing out the harshness that in fact exists in all places at some time in Nature [sic].

Although Rankin’s nationality centres her perspective, she sees the colonial and romantic fear of environment as a concentration or extrapolation of a Western and perhaps fundamentally human anxiety. Her perspective agrees with the essential contention of ecocriticism that, “Once you invent the category of the ‘human’, you have to make ‘nature’ its Other”. Questioning these conditioned ontological categories, her poetic aims are interested in facing the challenge of unknown existence. “Humans living within the cycle of [...] universe can only exploit truly what first exists in their understanding”, she writes. “The world caves into existence only as it is discovered—so the potential of Aust. lies unrevealed because we do not know how to look for it. It does not exist for us”.

Rankin’s sense of the possibility in the “unrevealed” environment is clearly comparable to the polemic and activism of Judith Wright. Wright’s encouragement that “one’s country [...] be observed, understood, described, and as it were absorbed”

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3 Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Series 2, Folder 1: Notebooks and Diary, 1970s. Diary entry, c.1978, Rankin’s emphasis.
5 Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Diary entry, c.1978, Rankin’s emphasis.
6 Harrison, Personal Interview with Bonny Cassidy, 28 September 2005.
Bonny Cassidy responds to her concern that human beings have come to accept environment as the “outer equivalent of an inner reality”. For Rankin, literature has become a way of creating a delusion that avoids, rather than explores, that antagonism. Wright anticipates Rankin’s feeling that romanticism in particular has duped readers of transactions with place:

If “in our life alone does Nature live”, then we are, in existentialist terms, the soul givers of value: Nature as an entity can no longer exist except in passive receptiveness of the forms and interpretations conferred by the human imagination. [The poet] can no longer step beyond himself for communication.8

In Australian Poetry: Romanticism and Negativity, Paul Kane has surveyed the “false view of country” perpetuated by the coincidence of Romanticism with white, colonial views of Australia, and perversely reconstituted by “autogenesis” in twentieth century poetic trends.9 By critiquing this tradition and aligning it with a wider ontological problematic, Rankin establishes for herself an alternative poetic space in which places are visited as sites of interrelation. As ecocritic J. Scott Bryson writes, definition of place can supersed terms of dualistic hierarchy:

(1) to create place, making a conscious and concerted effort to know the more-than-human-world around us; and (2) to value space, recognizing the extent to which that very world is ultimately unknowable.”10

Rankin’s work initiates movement from a negative figuring of environment, and thus from a dualistic ontology, to processes of knowing the “more-than-human” as more-than-self. In a poem from her first volume, Ritual Shift, she reiterates the romantic model of a poetically transformed environment that will be countervailed by much of her later work. The dwelling referred to in “Daub wall” establishes itself as a site of Rankin’s stylistic and conceptual development, centering her poetry’s unbounded metonymic trajectory. Throughout her work, it is alluded to both explicitly and via a tangent of fragmentary

7 Wright, Preoccupations in Australian Poetry xi.
Bonny Cassidy

motifs: walls, mud, bees, pines and oaks. Its image draws on Pine Camp, a wattle and daub cottage near Bowral in New South Wales’ southern highlands, where Rankin spent parts of her childhood and where, according to husband and painter David Rankin, she “really posited her spiritual, animistic feeling”. In “Daub wall” Rankin allows the dwelling’s colonial history to reflect a place of tamed environment—of attempts to “have it soft”. Its cultivated landscape is complemented by an ethos of rustic domesticity:

The children are comforted with the pointing out of time and the slow journey of the striped bees.

At first we were content to trap the creatures in jam jars with brown perforated paper lids watching them die outside their meandering holes. Later we tried a sophisticated spray. It was the fifties.

Our English grandmother’s lemon tree continued to bear although we regularly transplanted the absurd holly.

In our teens we caught greater numbers of bees always intending to send them away to a government department or some other place of science, certain that the damage to the walls could only be marginal.

In summer the mason bees and blowflies mingled with the kerosene primus and our whistling kettle.

In the middle of the day the paddock grass stood straight under my mother’s blanket and my sister carried tea trays piled with paperback romance. [RS 22]

The poem sympathises with the children’s perspective in order to construct a picturesque scene from the dwelling’s reality. Something menacing looms about the edges of this

Bonny Cassidy

"paperback romance", in which the children need to be "comforted" by stasis, as by "mother's blanket". Their trapping and killing of bees signals corruption of otherwise childlike innocence ("certain that the damage to the walls could only be marginal"), hinted at by the later, ironic realisation of the bees' over powering abilities; and a sense of desolation surrounds the ascetic discomfort of the home with its camp stove and blowflies and spiking grass. Yet the luxurious, abundant ("piled") leisure of the girlish readers dominates "Daub wall". At the hut, time moves slowly enough that it can be "pointed out" and marked by the bees' lulling rhythm. Regardless of the "sophisticated" fifties, the era of the poem's setting is ambiguous. Introduced vegetation blurs the home's location, invasive bees are treated as if they are wholly uncommon fauna seen by foreign eyes, and the English grandmother, a spectre of colonial "inheritance", looms around the fringes. In Wordsworthian style, values are reified by the mundane, which is guided by the experience and vision of children. The poem mimics memory and naivety in order to represent the cottage, in the Romantic mode, "through an imaginary frame; its parts were compared, and perhaps censured and rearranged: the spectator was before it, rather than in it".12

The dual vision/blindness of harshness and unfamiliarity in "Daub wall" correlates with the direct influence of Robert Adamson's neo-romantic poetics. When Rankin began writing in the late 1960s, she sought Adamson for advice on her work and found him to provide a "positive, formative role".13 His own poetic interest "in an almost totally imaginative world" is reflected in the way Rankin colours her focus on place in "Daub wall".14 Their shared attention to more-than-human locations and details is, in fact, distracting from the important dissimilarity of their poetics. Despite the Hawkesbury River becoming a totemic and yet closely observed setting for Adamson's work, and Rankin's Pine Camp drawing together her travels along Australia's east coast and in southern England, Adamson's withdrawal to a realm of imagination rather than verisimilitude becomes a source of their work's eventual stylistic divergence. This

12 Salvesen, Christopher, The Landscape of Memory (London: Edward Arnold, 1965) 66.
Bonny Cassidy

tension is the dizzying subject of “Toward Abstraction/Possibly a Gull’s Wing”, in which Adamson’s immediately self-reflexive voice is unable to reconcile perceptual abstraction with observation of place:

The most disconcerting feature is an absolute flatness especially the sand. I’ve been here in love and having passed the perfectly calm ocean had only noticed the terns – if there was some way back, some winding track to follow I’d possibly find the elusive agents for creativity.

Agitated that such fodder for “creativity” should have gone unprocessed by his clouded eye, Adamson’s speaker concedes that the blank canvas of the beach’s “absolute flatness” is always somehow blurred: “As now for instance, I am completely indifferent / to the sad way that fellow moves over the sand... who?” In his final attempt to “drop opinions” from the act of observation, he finds his immovable imagination to be an obstruction to the aims of language itself. The reader is trapped within his point of view, unable to see through it to reality:

...At the far end of the beach is an object, a rifle – rusting. He comes out from the surf, stubbing his toes, heading towards the place where the rifle lies melting.

Like a play on Stevens’ illusive/elusive blackbird, the rifle is revealed to be “a dead tern” — at least, that is, until “the feathers catch fire”, and together the poet, poem and reader are once again plunged into the uncertainty between what is seen and what is known. The rifle, a figment of the poet's imagination, sees the poem “melting” in subordination to the speaker’s perceptual limitations.

Caitlin Punshon notes that the interruption of poetic ground, particularly in constructions of landscape, is typical of Rankin and Adamson’s generation:

Bonny Cassidy

[...] most of the poets of the generation of '68 who include images of the natural world in their work are conscious not only of the uneven nature of the land beneath their feet but also of the shifting and drifting attitudes towards it.**

In “Daub wall”, inconsistency between the imagined memory of the dwelling and the menaces of its reality is comparable to Adamson’s reluctance toward evenness. This is an acceptance of romantic dialectics, argues Livio Dobrez, in which:

otherness is not inserted into the poem as an abstraction: it belongs there, concretely, in the outwardly-directed act of subjective affirmation. The Other resides in the poem, within the poem’s subjectivity, so much so that it can “interrupt” the flow of the poem.**

In Adamson’s “The Nankeen Kestrels”, the “flow” of prosody performs this dual, paradoxical function. The perceived world enters the subject who is open to it:

My entire body alert
to the darting hawks coming towards me,
about to enter the space I occupy.
Sitting right back here on a rock, the river
moving in before me. One kestrel enters through
my right arm, the other remains an impression on my eyes.

In this process, openness, reflected by the poem’s sexual analogy, is a matter of degree: the subjective space is already occupied when it greets “the other”, and is even partially closed to anything deeper than “an impression”. Nevertheless, the bird’s semi-inhabitation of the poet-speaker instills in him a moment of perceptual clarity in which the ability to “record” temporarily allays interruption/impression:

As we fuck I compose this, recording the peculiar events and features of our surroundings – I see
what appears within the present, the various trees,
mainly gums, throwing more shade as the sun moves,
and down below in Stingray Bay, the fishing-punts and skiffs
turn around on their mooring as the tide shifts centre.

[...]


Dobrez, Parnassus Mad Ward 99, Dobrez’s italics.
Bonny Cassidy

Saying to Mrs Barry, the kestrel
is disturbing the sun, we are disturbing the hawk,
my arm is the arm around you, the arm you see –
but it is also the river’s arm.

This Bergsonian moment of “what appears within the present” occurs when place is “absorbed”, as Wright puts it, into the poetic space acting as both body and poem. The nature of the poetic space is for both Rankin and Adamson something other than mediation between self and other, human and more-than-human. Appearing in Rankin’s “Williamstown”, it is “a line” of continuity through place, voice and poem. As in “Daub wall”, interrelation occurs through the meeting of an interior/domestic and (“you would not believe”) exterior/foreign dwelling:

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The thin brown house waits with me
while the wind roughs up the bay

before us the bulk floor containers
upright on their single railway track

stand still, while at the other side
the seasky wrestles gently with the city for a line.

2 South Willie Sunday
A container ship broke some of the sky’s space
just then when it sailed by up the bay,
blocking out the city that lay behind
filling my window with irregular coloured shape

now it is gone and the waves are soothing

you would not believe in boys with chequered coats
riding their rough ponies before weekend cars
not bothering to check the sea over their shoulder

Adamson, Robert, Cross the Border (Sydney: Prism, 1977) 84-85.
Bonny Cassidy

or the pane of glass where I sit. [RS 12]

But while Rankin also “wrestles gently” with the line, her poem complicates the absorptive, embracing poetic space that she and Adamson would seem to share. Harrison believes that “she is actually talking about the line of the poem. She’s really talking about the idea of measure”. In “Williamstown”, however, another concept of the line that expands prosody to encompass the ontological capability of poetic language.19

Initially, the poem appears to establish a romantic duality of perceiving subject and perceived object, mutually defined by a window. Like Adamson’s river, the bulk floor containers are positioned “before” the speaker, however they are also before “us”. Is the second canto’s addressee, “you”, included within the collective pronoun? If so, Rankin’s “us” differs from “we”, the lovelakers in “The Nankeen Kestrels”. Instead of a dramatically reflexive moment, she suggests a shared space whose openness is reinforced by the presence of the house “with” or alongside the speaker; and by the ambiguous nature of perceptual space behind the window. The container ship, for instance, breaks “some of the sky’s space” instead of the speaker’s view; and, instead of obstructing their vision, is “filling my window”. The poem’s imagery does not exist through a glass dimly, as we might at first expect. It contains awareness not only of its own limitations but also, in parallel, an awareness of what lies beyond them. Reflecting the interrelations between microcosmic and macrocosmic focus in Maiden’s “The Magnetron”, the voice of “Williamstown” expresses a static, limited viewpoint (“now it is gone”) as well as a sense of “the other side”, which is a reality independent of perception and “not bothering” with “the pane of glass where I sit”. With a moment that does not find its equivalent in Adamson’s poet-speaker, this image suddenly presents the poem from outside itself.

A line of continuity grounds the rich poetic space of “Williamstown”. If Adamson’s “protagonist always has his eyes pressed ‘against a window pane’ of his own experience”, then Rankin’s approach to experience and, concomitantly, to interrelation, would seem to differ quite fundamentally.20 Adamson’s “landscape extends to include the subject”, writes Punshon, “yet consciousness still seems to shape and create the

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19 Harrison, Personal Interview with Bonny Cassidy, 28 September 2005.
Bonny Cassidy

environment around it”.21 This exercises a neo-romanticism in which “the protagonist really is the location, the geography, which *contains* the subject, even if that same subject animates the rhetorical voice, *building up* the reality of place”.22 In “Goshawk over Broken Bay”, Adamson figures the poem as a concentration of imitative deficiency, akin to the speaker’s “electric fire” and “bird book”:

My whole life seems curbed with these demands
For order – I fling back the chair

Stride straight through the back door to the high
Verandah and stare directly at the hawk.
There is no order: just excuses for more talk.
I turn, instead of jumping from the rail I sigh –23

Adamson reinforces romantic dialectics by founding his poetry on the repeated recognition of irreconcilable dualities. His poetic voice acknowledges this problem of desire and frustration and, in doing so, creates a tripartite order in which the antitheses of poet and world are temporarily worked into a third, poem-shaped form. Whilst it finds that interrelation causes an ongoing, dynamistic ripple of disturbance, Adamson’s poem resigns to compose that tension into “more talk”. The only possible direction for this poetics is toward abstraction.

Rankin’s path, on the other hand, increasingly follows in pursuit of the line. Her poem, “The line”, uses this conceit, like Olson’s breath or Duncan’s field, to positively define both the conceptual centre and formal realisation of her poetic spaces. While, because of its discursiveness, “The line” is an unusual poem within Rankin’s oeuvre, it is for the same reason a valuable critical tool that crystallizes the poetics of *Earth Hold*. It assists the reader in coming to grips with the impact of her brief but determined development of poetic purpose:

Grey stone is there. Squatting amongst the trees.
Old slabs butting out of the grave.
They make an edge. They make a line with the air.

Bonny Cassidy

And this morning that shag flew hard against the river.
I saw its beak-edge carve into the wind.

I am not speaking of shadow.
I speak of the line. Butting and carving.
And again of the line. Edging the air.

Clearly, the line of measure is a highly realised element of Rankin's poem, with its decisively layered end-stops and caesura emphasising gentle repetition. However, the formal rhythm of "The line" also realises the line's creation of poetic ground. Reiteration of similar phrases suggests, like eroding soil or duning sand, a law of shifting rather than difference, and of ground rather than attitudes toward it:

- It is fixed to the grey slab.
- It is on the beak of the bird.

I walk away from the line and it is there before me.
I close my eyes and the line rolls in and under my lids. [EH 34]

If the line is not an indication of shadow, that is, negative space, then how does it appear to us? The opening stanza establishes the line's origin in more-than-human telluric elements. The first phrases, two temporal and spatial moments, are positively linked by an adverb ("there is"), one of Rankin's favoured verbal tropes. The assertiveness of its gesture is mirrored by the motion of defined edges, "butting out of the grave" from subterranean to atmospheric placement. We sense the contrast between Rankin's images of heavy, dim solids and light air. Yet, as the stone edge makes "a line with the air", those images are less about duality and more about parallel elements. They are with rather than against.24 They buttress one another, the first phrase expanded by the second. And while the bird descending to the river—an image familiar to Adamson's reader—encounters water and wind "against" itself, its beak finds a point of entry by carving "into" the air. Rankin's line exists in both "Butting and carving", resistance and passage. Towards the end of "The line", "fixed to the grey slab" and "on the beak of the bird", it is

24 This interpretation of line can be related to Deleuze and Félix Guattari's definition of the "rhizome" type. See Deleuze, Gilles, Félix Guattari and Charles J. Stivale, "Concrete Rules and Abstract Machines," SubStance 13.3-4 (1984): 10.
Bonny Cassidy

a simultaneous dynamic instead of a dialectical one. Where Adamson asks us to move around the corners and turns of extended, streaming sentences, Rankin’s line transports us from one subject to another, linearly. The reader is both within and without this process: an agent in linguistic and formal affect, and subject to the repeated shock of encounter.

In “The line”, the voiced presence of perception can be a part of the line without generating or commanding its direction. As noted, this firmly sets the line’s origin and course in a space that physically surrounds the speaker. The poem’s final couplet revisits the momentum of continuity that is common to Rankin’s and Adamson’s work. Here, however, the significance of the line “there before me”, reinforced by the use of “before” in “Williamstown”, is dissimilar to the river that appears “before” the dually occupied poet of “The Nankeen Kestrels”. Rankin’s closing phrase recalls the bird’s entrance into Adamson’s speaker but her positing of an interrelational scenario takes “The line” elsewhere. Rather than a separate reality (“I walk away”) encountered a posteriori, the line exists prior to the speaker’s consciousness. Furthermore, it “rolls in and under” the speaker, regardless of their attempt to occupy a subjective reality by shutting down the interrelational moment of perception (“I close my eyes”).

Through the trope of the line, Rankin seeks a different sort of poetic ground than the problematic kind she addresses in her journal entries. For her, perception and poetic vision are engendered by place, and return to it. Thus, her poem is located in the space defined by Bryson, in which the particularised experience of phenomena intersects with its possibility as a more-than-human reality. As she writes in “Night bird”, “Out of the night came my eyes / and they were attached / latched to the wing of a bird” [EH 14]. The bird can be seen as a pivotal phenomenon that initially emblematises Adamson’s early influence and, concomitantly, the conventionally romantic impulses of poetic ambition, vision and inadequacy. As Rankin traces a route away from romantic tradition in Australian contemporary and landscape modes of poetry, the bird becomes a recurrence of place rather than a symbolic correspondent. It carries the line through her work—on its beak, on its wing—carving the linear development of a new poetic space.
Bonny Cassidy

By confronting the comfort/danger zone of poetic space, Rankin’s work grows into its function of dirtying human hands. Rather than delineating man from “Nature”, as Rankin puts it, the continuity between self and other permitted in “The line” suggests the poem can present a larger existential space that encompasses the “harshness” of the “unrevealed” and undetermined. Rankin’s experience of place undertakes a crucial re-evaluation of these terms:

I think that part of the fascination of the Australian landscape for me, is that strength that it has. I find there is a real beauty in a lot of the harshness of the landscape. I don’t, actually, necessarily, think of it as harsh [...] It’s part of life. 25

Whilst Maiden was absorbing Weil’s ethics of liberty, Rankin’s encounters with Kierkegaard, Sartre and Camus underline the two poets’ common preoccupation with overcoming subjectivity, a need that they specifically approach through the moment of poetic interrelation and transaction. The scenarios of interrelation in “The line” best define that moment or focus as a phenomenology in which the processes of perception comprise both the content and form of Rankin’s poetry.

Evidence of her reading of Heidegger and Iris Murdoch reflects the way her work experiments with the presence of the line, reinforcing her sustained engagement with both an ethical and ecological purpose. 26 Interviewed about her work, Harrison indicates how Rankin is “implanted in a mind/body relationship with things around”, an animistic relationship like the one suggested by David Rankin, which “relates to that notion of body and consciousness, complex consciousness”. As such, Harrison remarks, her work invites a conversation with Maurice Merleau-Ponty. 27 In particular, it seems to be Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the possible that Harrison has in mind:

Each time I experience a sensation, I feel that it concerns not my own being, the one for which I am responsible and for which I make decisions, but another self

25 Qtd. in Harrison, Some Poems of Jennifer Rankin.
26 Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Series 6, Folder 1: Other Prose. Rankin’s brief notes on this subject appear to be drawn from a general course on existentialism. The “unique, particular myths and experience of the individual being, she writes, are of “supreme importance”, more significant than “universal, common truths”. This remark underwrites her poetry’s balance of the local (phenomenon, consciousness, nation) and the far-flung. Its access to common perceptual experience is rooted in the individual’s bodily awareness.
27 Harrison, Personal Interview with Bonny Cassidy, 28 September 2005.
Bonny Cassidy

which has already sided with the world, which is already open to certain of its aspects and synchronized with them. [...] I experience the sensation as a modality of a general existence, one already destined for a physical world and which runs through me without my being the cause of it.28

Merleau-Ponty's equation of sensation with possibility anticipates the origin of Rankin's line prior to the poetic subject, and its continuation through the perceptual moment. Their common discourse draws on Epicurean physics, namely Lucretius' principle that, "no single element can be put apart, nor can its powers be set in play divided from others by empty space, but they are, as it were, the many forces of a single body".29 The processual nature of perception extends this physics, so that place is encountered through absorption. In "The line", repetition and association link images, "not speaking of shadow" but creating a place of interconnection within the poem that is structured as a common "body". Her attempt to present a single perceptual reality obfuscates the dialectic of incarnate perspective and disincarnate overview or objectification. The individual's perceptual experience continues to expand through their own open-ended set of encounters and the encounters of others that these entail. In Rankin's words:

> Once you do establish a relationship with a certain place and with certain people, then you do in a sense carry that place with you. And so it doesn't matter where you go, whatever country you go to, whether you go to the Moon, you're carrying these early perceptions.30

The similar expansion of the poetic space parallels Maiden's ethical concerns, but also suggests a position beyond the dialogic assumptions of the latter's poetics. As a process of encountering and knowing, perception replaces Maiden's interrelational scenarios of confrontation and negotiation. If Maiden's early poems work to show us how we can become other than we are, in the fullest sense, then Rankin allows us to experience how we become, because we are, more than our selves.

30 Qtd. in Harrison, Some Poems of Jennifer Rankin.
Engendered by perception, the presence of possibility in her poems enters the void of alterity and departs from the human. For Merleau-Ponty, the ultimate quality of human consciousness is the concept of possibility, the capability to conceive of a moment outside the present. It enables human consciousness to proceed from itself to the more-than-human. In “What Are Poets For?” Heidegger resists this paradox, reframing the moment of encounter by referring to problematic “Nature” with Rilke’s term, “the Open”, and by presenting the possible as man’s greeting of another. The “venture” outwards and through the possible “removes all barriers” of dualistic consciousness and returns us, recalling Lucretius, to “the whole draft” of being. In Rankin’s work, we hear the echoes of Heidegger’s assertion that man “stands over against the world. He does not live immediately in the drift and wind of the whole draft”. The possible, on the other hand, opens man up to a threshold of discomfort and exposure that has, in Rankin’s view, been “missing” from poetry.

Despite itself, “Daub wall” conveys the simultaneously menacing and comforting, familiar and unfamiliar, aspects of a place that stretch beyond the limits of the speaker. The speaker is positioned before place in the sense of Adamson’s poet before the river and Australians before the island-continent. “It is by the positioning that belongs to representation”, Heidegger states, “that Nature is brought before man. Man places himself before the world as the whole of everything objective, and he places himself before the world”. The poem illustrates a metaphysical and poetic tradition that fails to deal with the complexities of being. As a response to human anxiety about space, the romantic sublime is perhaps the ultimate articulation of that tradition. Rankin’s poetics break down the positioning of the sublime source, from the non-human to material grounded in “the Open”.

“Earth lock”, the opening poem of Earth Hold, reworks the conventions of sublime representation as “non-rational and violent aesthetic experience”.

32 Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?,” 103.
33 Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?,” 106.
Bonny Cassidy

to that supremely sublime landscape, the ocean, subverts Edmund Burke's terms and reflects the dominant nexus of coastal, littoral and marine places in Rankin's work. To new ends, the poem's structure also emulates the sublime affect of pace and multitude:

Flying up and down the coast of this land
I am unable to enter in.

Cloud-shadow is making blots on the sea.

Below. A sea-horse. Slowly moving
between protecting sea-weed.

Earth stirs under its sea-bed.

Yesterday there was no cloud.
Yesterday there was no sea.
Only now. This distance.

Muddled at the edges of the land
even the rivers cannot enter. [EH 1]

In "a richness and profusion of images, in which the mind is so dazzled as to make it impossible to attend to that exact coherence and agreement of the allusions", Burke finds a dialectic of pleasure and pain.36 This effect relies on the fearful and disbelieving response to a materialist conception of infinitude in which "the idea of perfect unity can no more be arrived at, than that of a compleat whole to which nothing may be added [sic]'".37 Thus, "Earth lock" creates an unstable poetic space in which the continuous line of forms has to be unearthed from the poem's arrangement. Similar to "The line", its closed phrases and enclosed lines create a cumulative affect of multiple subjects, which overcome the tradition of a lyrical ethos. How can we define that voice? Not only does it present a profusion of temporal moments both narratively ("Yesterday"/"now") and formally, but it also shifts spatial locations—from "up and down" to "Below" and

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36 Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful 78.
37 Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful 72-73.
Bonny Cassidy

"between", and across frequent lacunae—in such a way that the reader is challenged to find the single body among them. In this case, the speaker assumes the aerial position of the bird by tracing the "muddled" line. By being liberated from the gravitational definition of the human body, the speaker is freed from the condition of human scale upon which the idea of the sublime is founded. Rankin's "I" is a problematised, fluid identity whose humanity is in no way a given.

Can we imagine that this passage away from the only-human and toward "the Open" accesses the space of "the whole draft"? I would argue that "Earth lock" attempts to venture toward a poetic space in which structure, image and voice present existence as a non-dualistic structure. It highlights the perceptual encounters that are found time and again throughout Rankin's poetry. For example, similar scenarios occur in the dissolution of interior/exterior segregation and the meeting of perspective points achieved in "Williamstown". In "The line", shifting word and structural patterns, and density of image disorientate the reader from a non-participatory role. As I will outline in the following chapter, this affect becomes linked to motifs of entrance/exit motion, and the intersection of spatial, visual and aural affects. Rankin's journal states two approaches to her need for ontological re-evaluation:

"Being" – that invisible whole made up of particulars.
Coleridge: "it is." The sacred horror of this awareness of being.\textsuperscript{38}

This somewhat obscure pair of epigrams reflects Rankin's engagement with the abject fact of existence, and its infinite possibility. The invisible whole or "whole draft" that hosts Being is radically different to the synthetic whole of "perfect unity" imagined by Burke. It is interchangeable with the single but boundless "general existence" of "many forces" developed by Merleau-Ponty. On the other hand, the momentum of possibility in the phenomenological processes of "The line" and "Earth lock" is generated by an existential horror that Rankin associates with Coleridge. Reiterating the romantic revulsion at uncontrolled vitality, it's a moment that can be associated with the sublime impulse—a sense both of "sacred" reverence and of shock. Its dialectical quality describes Rankin's poetic development, and occurs in two contrasting instances within

\textsuperscript{38}Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Series 2, Folder 1: Notebooks & Diary, 1970s. Diary entry, c. January 1978.
Bonny Cassidy

her work: firstly, in “Daub wall”, the speaker’s retrospection at having been “certain / that the damage to the walls could only be marginal” conveys an unvoiced horror containing a future initiation to reality; and, in “Earth lock”, the same initiation is revealed but now as the direct, present tense statement, “I am unable to enter in”, reiterated by the fact that “even the rivers can not enter”.

The latter moment becomes the dominant mode in Rankin’s poetry, developing a space in which the “it is” of consciousness is accepted and entered rather than repressed or transcended by the Romantic poetic of Coleridge’s “I am”. Self-assertion, Heidegger writes, is an act of willing that “has already posited the world as the whole of producible objects”.39 Rankin’s arrangement of her poems resists this vision of wholeness and completion. The assertion of the Open is the first step in this venture toward recognizing oneself amidst the positive existence of the more-than-self. As I will come to show, Rankin makes this assertion through a positive, adverbial multitude of the more-than-human, from walls, to mammals and the elements. The line of her poetry encompasses the dazzling number of images that populate each poem, and creates a sense of place in which their positive interrelation with one another and with the perceptual process carried in language is revealed.

If self-assertion “is the constant negation of death”, then a concern with life beyond the human known is affirmed by the function of Rankin’s poetry to venture into the fact of materiality.40 Indeed, the “impossibility of death” is, for Levinas, an affirmation of the ethical nature of existence itself. The horror of self-awareness, “it is”, is a realisation of what he calls “there is”, the space that precedes, surrounds and follows us, and which, therefore, cannot be measured by dualistic or idealistic means:

[...] the rumbling within silence that one hears when putting a shell to one’s ear, the horrifying silence confronting the vigilant insomniac who is and is not an “I”.

It marks the end of objectivizing consciousness, since it is not an object of perception or thought, and cannot be grasped or intentionally constituted. As such, one cannot avoid the experience of the “there is”, since one is steeped in it.

40 Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?”, 122.
Bonny Cassidy

"It is this unavoidability", writes Seán Hand, "that Levinas is suggesting when [...] he speaks of 'the impossibility of death'". 41 Rankin replaces the notion of rooted or located existence with phenomena. "Earth lock" presents the "horrifying silence" that surrounds things both human and more-than-human:

Now the mountains part near the coast
creak into pale grey chasms.
Intermittent valleys appear. And disappear.
Trees clot. New shifts.

A crimped sea is moving up into sky-folds.
Repeating the valleys.

Beneath sea, beneath cloud,
beneath tree-clotted mountain
Earth is hidden.

I hang in my white sargasso. Sky creature in air-weed. [EH 1]

Rhythmically, this silence is carried between Rankin’s short phrases, where it is also a visual or spatial presence. Absence of humanity from the poem’s description of place tends to cultivate an illusion of remoteness from verbal intrusion. Rather than latently making this intrusion, the penultimate expression of consciousness in the final line sits in equilibrium with the numerous phenomena that precede it. In this sense its conventionally "objectivizing" force is balanced or neutralised. Moreover, as in “The line”, this equality of existential evidence complicates the identity of the speaker who “is and is not an ‘I’”. As a “Sky creature”, can it answer to humanity? The amniotic space described by Levinas is a lock, not of stasis but of embeddedness. Rankin literally interprets this space as the “hidden” environment of “Earth”. As we’ve noted and as Harrison points out, we need to rethink prosodic measure in order to describe its affects in her work:

Bonny Cassidy

Measure is any moment of rhythmic occurrence, or energy, to use Olson’s term, that has a middle, beginning and an end. She’s aware that this connects with a sense of dimension, of what’s over there, what’s over here, and that these are also rhythm and structure events. While in a way she literalised it too much, she can talk about this question of the line entering the eye; you can use the reflexiveness of the writing, and become aware of that fact that she’s thinking, “Oh yeah, this line, and now this line, and now this line”, acts of utterance that are being putting down as lines in a poem. So you can actually think about it as a deep prosody that is a language utterance but is also about all the gestures, all the interactions that are going on in the space around us, and all the moments of attention, like “Oh, over there—oh, over there—ah, back there”.

For Rankin, however, it is not the surfing tactic but the unbounded line that asserts itself and binds phenomena into poetic ground.

For the re-evaluation of human existence must occur through poetry. Rankin’s sense of purpose underwrites Heidegger’s suggestion that, if representation has perpetrated the positioning of man behind barriers to the possible, then representation can take new forms to remove those barriers. The line in Rankin’s work is the passage of the possible. Wright provides a precedent to the politics of Rankin’s project, echoing Dewey by arguing that language and, furthermore, poetry:

 […] can still be vitally used—does still have the powers the writer needs of it—for most if not all purposes. […] Only in their poetic use can words form a true bridge for the experience to cross from one mind direct to another.

Rankin develops the line as a conceptual and formal expression of her concerns as a poet. Ultimately, the line is a function of the binding agent of language, supporting phenomenological processes, just as language is a function of the line that seeks ground for critical human engagements with place. Reading and critiquing her work is a journey of discovering individual, national and global resonances over that ground. In Wright’s words, by addressing the effect of poetic language, it “can be a result of [the Australian poet’s] art that by its force and bearing national as well as personal attitudes can be

42 Harrison, Personal Interview with Bonny Cassidy, 28 September 2005.
Bonny Cassidy

changed or modified". 44 Her argument affirms Rankin's desire to initiate a poetics based on that possibility of changing and settling, circling and shifting.

In "Earth lock" Rankin awakens her reader to the possibility that language facilitates perception of the "wind and drift" of the whole draft; the rumbling of "there is" within a shell. A focused examination of her poetic forms reveals, however, that her attention to phenomena is more complex than a catalogue of objects. In order to adopt a phenomenological process of perception, her poems are arranged to exhaust the possibility of the line. Her attention to a common phenomenal space blurs interior/exterior orientation into a continuous physical line of matter:

For there is transcends inwardness as well as exteriority; it does not even make it possible to distinguish these. The anonymous current of being invades, submerges every subject, person or thing. The subject-object distinction by which we approach existents is not the starting point for a meditation which broaches being in general.¹

Based in process rather than distinction, Rankin’s forms gesture toward the possibility inherent in perception. Experimental psychologist James J. Gibson writes that places are described by the “paths of possible locomotion” through them; routes based on unique points of observation rather than taxonomical mapping of space. At any given moment, beneath perceptual mobility, the “possibilities or opportunities, these affordances as I will call them, are invariant”.² In other words, they comprise the ground of a place in which perception ranges; but ground that is, of course, in motion itself. Harrison has written of Rankin’s “need to see her own glimpse, her own intense imagining, of local time and space as themselves mobile, temporary and temporal”.³ I want to rework this, to state that places and beings are composed of “permanence and change” rather than time and space. “The flow of abstract time, however useful this concept may be to the physicist,

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¹ Levinas, "There is: Existence without Existents," 30, Levinas’ italics.
³ Harrison, "Self, Place, Newness," 56.
Bonny Cassidy

has no reality for an animal”, writes Gibson. “We perceive not time but processes, changes, sequences”. Fluidity and mobility are important to Rankin’s poetic forms, yet by flattening the temporal and local they appeal to responses beyond one’s “own glimpse”.

Rankin’s exploitation of that reality can be found in the vertiginous, multiple positions of scale and distance—formal, altitudinal, temporal and visual—of “Earth lock”. By utilising forms of process and sequence, Rankin indicates poetic ground of permanence and change, uneven yet experienced. I want to explore her formal movement by tracing her return to the Pine Camp dwelling in “Soft track”, “Seasonal move” and “The Mud Hut”, and then to extend this discussion to a wider nexus of poems. In this and the following chapter I will argue that the work’s hermeneutic result is “a meditation” informed by Rankin’s accessing of Zen aesthetics and the visual field, and in contrast to the mode of romantic meditation represented by Hughes’ role in her poetic development. Finally, this leaves Rankin’s body of work subject to a discussion of the original ground that it has crossed, particularly in light of her own cultural and ontological concerns.

The transformation of the cottage through poetic form sees Rankin undertaking the organic processes of permanence and change within language itself. As we come to appreciate, the dwelling emblematises the movement of Rankin’s poetics into a space within the cycle of environment. Dismantled, the hut will define the intermediary space of her work: open to the real weather of her own history and experience, and of our affective responses; grounded on the interrelation between language and body. Even at an early point in this progression, in which her narrative voice retains its grip, the breakdown between enclosure and exposure that lingers in “Daub wall” is also “waiting” in “Soft track”. The swift, unpunctuated pace of the poem’s opening carries the speaker within a more-than-human tide against which they are powerless:

The track peeled off from that morning’s rim
just there leaving the main road it swept
deep into waiting grey trees
and in its momentum I was carried and placed

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Bonny Cassidy

The "momentum" of this single phrase also conveys the perceptual sweep ("just there") experienced by the speaker. Against this motion, "Soft track" initially attempts to arrange a dialectical narrative between two moments of recollection, one borrowed and the other personal. Rankin's indenting of deeper memory across the page suggests a neat compartmentalisation of time, however this assumption is challenged as the two moments blur—"away"—into one:

There had always been talk of two wells.
As the wind came up I remembered
one was man made, the other simply a hole
fallen in on itself. I found them together.
The boarded sides of one had rotted and dropped away
I watched the other choking with fallen trees.

In this figuring of the cottage, the dissolution of time also has the effect of crumbling memory, marked by the "dropped" line. Its image of decomposition disturbs the speaker's idealisation of the cottage by combining the rottting of the "man made" into humus. This image prefigures the poem's formal "choking" of the stasis and dormancy in "Daub wall". As the speaker experiences the melding of time into a single current, the poem's temporal sequence becomes one of overlap:

Always on my walks I had pointed my knees high
yet pale seeded heads still slapped
tipping and swaying whole paddocks as I passed
and now I look back the grass has covered up

A fluid rhythm of syntax and line returns the poem to the momentum of its opening. This sequencing of the poem's narrative also draws its spatial arrangement out of systematic order and into an alternative, "merging" continuity:

So I went with the track until it became confused
merging into morning walks to the highway store
dropping easily into circles worn by wallabies
climbing back to the dustswept paths of mountain villages
and I turned at first in each direction
slipping from one path to another always reappraising
Bonny Cassidy

until I could no longer focus and made instead
my own way crossed continually by other tracks. [RS 10-11]

Once again signalled by “dropping”, the poem’s lines emulate the speaker’s “confused”
path as a series of moments in which they experience place in locomotion. Rather than
being identified as delineated spatial locations, the points from which the poem’s voice is
generated are within both the speaker and the place surrounding them. Hence the effect
of “tipping and swaying” that results from Rankin’s uneven syntax: “as I passed / and
now I look back [...] up”. Her repeated reference to tracks—the speaker’s “own way”,
the public (“the track”) and the unknown (“other tracks”)—forms the constant
“reappraising” of ground undertaken in the poem. The poem’s shape is an act of return as
well as progress, and one guided not by passive observation (“focus”) but active
perception of environment (“made instead my own way”). The more-than-human force
at work in and on this place overcomes the speaker as both character and voice.

If “Soft track” leads a return to the hut, what we discover upon arrival is a much-
changed place. As Veronica Brady writes, the colonial “myth of progress is about
triumphing over the land with ‘building’ rather than ‘dwelling’”. In “Seasonal move”,
this sequence is inverted by Rankin, as less-than-solid forms inhabit the cottage. Its
walls, the very definition of its distinction from space, are penetrated by space itself:

All night waiting
watching the years blowing through

in the cold house brick walls bursting
under the jacaranda, summer-shade. [RS 23]

According to Rankin, “Seasonal move” conveys the “feeling of trying to break out from a
time and a place”. Typically, her sense of narratorial location is twisted so that night
suggests sun (“summer-shade”), and walls burst from “in” the house whilst “under” the
tree. As in “Soft track” there is a presence “waiting” on this process. Who is this,
“watching”? The poetic voice of this poem further complicates the slipping narrator of
“Soft track”. Here, the personal pronoun appears just twice. Its first appearance is an

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6 Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence
Force Academy, MS 348, Series 6, Folder 2: Other prose.
Bonny Cassidy

erasure: "in the hallway I move to one side". This gesture of removal or withdrawal not only allows "the years blowing through" but also liberates Rankin's poetics from closed form conventions that depend on the imposition of subjective voice.

When the poem finds the speaker a second time, it is outside the cottage and actively seeking ground that would seem to replace the evenness of a human experience: "Beneath the largest pine-tree / scraping apart the sweet-matted needles / I find earth. Hard and cold" [RS 23]. This act of unearthing alights upon the ground of the "The Mud Hut". Rankin's collapse of the temporal into the spatial line increasingly explores the possibilities of locomotion and awareness that comprise perception. This search culminates in the latter sequence, in which the serial moment is formed not only within the confines of one poem but as an extended nexus. By following the dwelling's collapse in this way, her poetic forms acknowledge the terrestrial structure of "nesting", in which place and space are intersecting states:

For example, canyons are nested within mountains; trees are nested within canyons; leaves are nested within trees; and cells are nested within leaves. There are forms within forms both up and down the scale of size. Units are nested within larger units. Things are components of other things. They would constitute a hierarchy except that this hierarchy is not categorical but full of transitions and overlaps.7

Thus the cottage is nested within the elements that blow through it, and the perception of this relationship locates a metonymy of all material existence. Rankin's return to the dwelling as both occupier and poet is a return to the shifting presence of the line. As her forms explore its vital infinitude, they necessarily extend the ongoing, procedural intersection of place and space.

It is not until "The Mud Hut" that Rankin delves into the full extent of this intersection's effect on the cottage. The dwelling's decomposition into its "nest" creates a series of phenomenological moments in which time drops into the horizontal axis. This is an extension of the failing human body that is narrated through the sequence of poems. We can call this a current or line, but we can also call it space. It is most obviously put

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Bonny Cassidy

into effect by the present tense and adverbs that characterise Rankin’s work; but her
treatment of the poem’s objective qualities enriches this experience. The cantos of the
sequence are largely moveable because its action and images tend to reverse, return and
reiterate; and because its lines are fragmented. In this way, the reader’s eye can rest over
and around the poem as well as in it:

Layers of grey rain thrown by the wind
hard and fast against the walls of this room

This rain
drawn from the ancient ravine
pulled up from the shocked abyss
hurled now out of the vast plateau

This rain
that drives against bone
against skull
against these old protective walls [MH 6]

The imagistic action of vertical trajectory (“up” and “out”) suggests a linear narrative but
is in fact balanced by the poem’s horizontal form. The line is figured as a process of
emergence from existential anxiety—“the shocked abyss” that comprises the speaker’s
bodily and mental distress elsewhere in the poem. But the vertical line of rain moves
“against” terrestrially grounded walls and bone. The hut’s bees (aerial) have been
replaced by an aggressive wombat (grounded), which overcomes the verticality of the
walls now that they have been rendered flat, foundational “remnants”:

Mud cracks
the skull’s temple cracks

wombat stretches inside his burrow inside the earth
he loosens himself his skin gliding easily on the head-bone
the thin white bone of the skull that picks its way out
hard and thin against this dry earth
these burrows deep and always winding
up now and out he leaves
Yet this is earth-tremor country
and in these crumbling walls new cracks
shuffle and reshuffle the light.

Now the roaring draws closer.
The walls twist and split.
And the distant clatter of the train
drowns in itself at last
as the earth takes itself back.

I crawl through these remnants
this diligently worked entrance
this exit dug by the wombat. [MH 33-35]

The wombat also joins the bird as a carrier of the line. Charting the creature’s progress, Rankin confuses word patterns and thus reworks closed directional cues. The motion of reading and surfacing “stretches” horizontally as well as “winding / up now and out”: the “deep” passage also “takes itself back”, always “against” the horizontal line of terrestrial surface, ambiguously “through” earth that is both “this diligently worked entrance / this exit”. Stretching time around phenomena, the lines of “The Mud Hut” are generally longer than in many of Rankin’s other poems. The overlapping minutiae contained within the images of each line measure the duration of reading across them. The sequence’s form acknowledges the horizontal line of gravity as the definition of perception. As ecocritic David Abram writes, even vertical motion is subsumed into ground:

One trajectory is a passage out toward, or inward from, a vast openness. The other is a descent into, or a sprouting up from, a packed density. [...] It is this resoluteness, this refusal of access to what lies beneath the ground, that enables the ground to solidly support all those phenomena that move or dwell upon its surface.8

Bonny Cassidy

The poetic solidity of Rankin’s forms contains the speaker’s flattening of themselves into earth, an act that chooses materiality over the suspended state of imagination and memory:

But tonight I take my body away from the sky.

Now I hold onto this old flesh
I dig myself into this earth
I shield my eyes from the stars
I dig in. I tether myself down. [MH 16]

This radical decision embraces the Open, which is figured again as simultaneously “into” the earth’s surface and as the “hold” of solid ground. The earth-hold inverts the “gripped” position of contemporary Australians described in Rankin's journal. By digging into the more-than-human line of existence, this poetic voice is eagerly “dirtying our hands”. In “Daub wall”, the anxiety toward momentum outside the human interior is presented by the speaker’s anticipation that the children will “grow and think of it crumbling / falling back into the soft yellow dust where we play” [RS 22]. This is both a disturbing and reassuring image that echoes Wordsworth’s “The Ruined Cottage”, in which the dwelling’s decrepitude is imagined as a calm segue into the green world. Such a soft process of transition is in contrast to the relentless “roaring” of change in “The Mud Hut”. Controlled rusticity and fragmentation are replaced by an extensive sequence of shifting. The microcosmic place of skull and burrow, for example, are nested within the monumental motion of tremor. Thus, “The Mud Hut” makes a thorough breakdown of walls and window frames as inhibiting circumscriptions of both human and poetic space. In their state of physical debilitation, the speaker does not want to hide behind the walls but to join with them: “I go into the mud walls”. In the final canto, the poem’s process of collapse is brought to a new status of horizontality that precludes completion. The minute motion of molecules, like Maiden’s dallying atoms, continues the line of permanence and change:

And where the room once stood,
mud walls back now within the earth,
molecules of air still shift
lazily changing the space
Bonny Cassidy

where last night the night-moth flew
black,
back, into and out of its own lacunae

these spaces intimate and unending. [MH 36]

Molecular momentum extends into the space by which it is bracketed, just as "The Mud Hut", as a sequence, reveals ground that continues between its many parts, and beneath it and the rest of Rankin’s poetry.

Rankin’s forms of continuity make their own extension of the line by focusing on the dynamics of return. The act of return and progress initiated in “Soft track” takes on a more recognisably cyclic form in the “The Mud Hut”. In its “winding” motion, the cycle observes the invariant nature of both poetic and earthly ground while undertaking the procedural and processual movement of perceiving space. Rankin’s interest in this form underlines once again the role taken by postmodern American poetics in the development of Australian poetry during the 1970s. Indeed, states Rodriguez, “I don’t think Jennifer Rankin’s poetry could be as it is without that influence”. Her open approach to space and line can, for instance, be related to the syntagmatic or serial modes of Oppen and Robert Creeley. And while Maiden’s work seems to respond to Levertov’s theoretical expressions, Rankin engages directly with her poetry’s will “to strike the human term from the equation, to be only a tree, a seed, a shadow, a worm. Headless spontaneity, intent upon its own sensation”.

During his early acquaintance with Rankin, Adamson introduced her to Levertov’s work as that of a fellow female poet, a political voice, and imagistic force. Rankin’s development of a gendered voice seems to have been secondary to her concern with form, a focus tied up with her politics of national and human identity. The nature of poetic voice in Levertov’s contemporaneous work is significant because of its partial

9 Rodriguez, Written interview with Bonny Cassidy, 8 January 2006.
Bonny Cassidy

interruption of lyrical convention. "Form sense" invites a broader awareness of affective elements into the poetic space of her work. "Air, light, dust, shadow, and distance have to be taken into account", remarks Levertov. In "A Tree Telling of Orpheus", for instance, the collusion of narrative voice with a more-than-human being generates an alienating tone:

White dawn. Stillness. When the rippling began
I took it for sea-wind, coming to our valley with rumors
of salt, of treeless horizons.

The unfamiliar quality of this voice and its imagery of uninterrupted horizon are carried by the horizontality of lacunae within the poem's extended lines. The spaces or drops that occur around its perceptual moments also mark a cycle of ontological changes:

I was seed again.
I was fern in the swamp.
I was coal.

Rankin's use of voice in "The line", for example, closely resembles the problematised identity of Levertov's personal pronoun. Both poets explore narratives of crossing ground, walking earth, as a way of tracking the more-than-human voice. The self-assertion of place in "Soft track" echoes the menacing sense of an unpopulated poetic space in Levertov's "The Footprints":

Someone crossed this field last night:
day reveals
a perspective of lavender caves
across the snow. Someone
entered the dark woods.

The effect of Levertov's horrified repetitions, "cross" and "Someone", is one furthered by Rankin when she uses the temporal sequence of "Soft track" to displace the human trace. The cyclic mode of her work partly derives from the way that image dictates lineation and punctuation in Levertov's work. With its suggestive title, "Hut" appears to be a

model for Rankin’s accommodation of phenomena within minimal phrases, pockets of space and density of images:

Mud and wattles. Round almost.
Moss. Threshold: a writing,
small stones inlaid, footworn.
‘Enter, who
so desires.’

Floor, beaten earth. Walls
shadows. Ashpit at center.
By day, coming in from
molten green, dusk
profound. By night, through smokehole,
the star.

However, Rankin’s poetics advances from the conventionally procedural form that lingers in Levertov’s poem. Unlike Rankin’s dwelling, this mud hut is defined by solidity and stability, static and silence. It is explored from the single and immobile perceptual point characteristic of romantic perception. Levertov’s sequencing of imagery is based on a conception of poetic space “from which the individual lines depart and to which they return”.15 A similar conclusion results from comparison between the tremulous speakers of Rankin’s “Seasonal move” and Levertov’s “Exchange”:

Sea gulls inland.
Come for a change of diet,
a breath of
earth-air.

I smell the
green, dank, amber, soft
undersides of an old pier in their cries.16

Levertov’s noun invention, “earth-air”, clearly speaks to the unique vocabulary of earth-terms developed by Rankin, while her affective description of “green, dank, amber, soft”

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16 Levertov, Poems 1968-1972 211.
Bonny Cassidy

shares Rankin's concern for the sensible appeal of poetic language. Nevertheless, Levertov's "individual lines" form a hermeneutic web whose stability relies on the linear sequencing of perception through time and space. By contrast, the exploration of phenomenological experience in Rankin's poetry abandons the lyric voice's distinction from phenomena and—as a shaping force of ethos—from the poetic space.

Duwell rightly asserts that Rankin's earth-hold is "getting into Galway Kinnell sort of subjectivity". His assessment describes the procedural nature of perceptual experience undertaken by Rankin's early forms. If we compare her "Soft track" to Kinnell's "A Walk in the Country", for example, it's possible to see both poets developing a poetic voice grounded in place:

But I could hear only in the close
Green around me and there in the dark
Brown ground I walked on, meadowlark
Or other thing speak sharp of shortness
That makes us all and under like that grass.

However, in Kinnell's own words, his is a peculiarly "human voice" of contained, individual experience; a circular perambulation that Rankin fleetingly visits in "Soft track", and subsequently interrupts. The more radically serial element in her work draws on earlier imagistic tradition in American poetry, one trained on moments and possibilities.

Any consideration of form in her work needs to acknowledge Rankin's attention to the poetry of Williams. Miller has explored the phenomenological value of Williams' poetry in which "reality comes to be present to the senses, present to the mind which possesses it through the senses, and present in the words of the poems which ratify

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17 Duwell, Personal interview with Bonny Cassidy, 13 December 2006.
20 Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Series 2, Folder 1: Notebooks & Diary, 1970s: Notebook entry, c. 1977.
Bonny Cassidy

this possession''. 21 The cyclical progress of Williams' forms achieves, argues Miller, moments of non-dualistic perception:

[...] if something exists at all, it dwells in the only realm there is, a space both subjective and objective, a region of copresence in which anywhere is everywhere, and all times are one time.22

In "Autumn", Williams focuses on images as moments rather than narratives, generating a poetic voice that we hear again in Rankin's work. It is a presence defined by possibility, keyed to a "region" of numerous place-events:

A stand of people
by an open

ground underneath
the heavy leaves

celebrates
the cut and fill

for the new road
where

an old man
on his knees

reaps a basketful of

matted grasses for
his goats23

Williams' proto-serial form explores the withdrawal of personal pronouns from poetic voice. The sequence of phenomena in "Autumn" does not obey a linear or temporal

21 Miller, Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers 11.
22 Miller, Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers 288.
Bonny Cassidy

order but, rather, draws those moments into simultaneity. The paratactic effect of the poem's single phrase emulates the spatial and, by association, ontological line that encompasses the gathering of mourners, the grave, the road, the old man, the grasses and, through the possibility of suggestion, the absent goats. The attenuation of the poem into moments is not in fact a measuring of time beats but a gesturing to the various directions of phenomenological experience. It shares the multiplicity of Levertov's entrance/exit lines, yet without their suggestion of a unifying matrix. Only the fluidity of Williams' lineation (to which "basket-ful" is subordinated) speaks of a stable perceptual position.

The reader of "Autumn" feels that its long, thin current could continue out of the limits of the poetic space and into a wider nest of place. That nest is spatially figured by the gaps between stanzas and, more generally, by the poem's minimal interruption of the unlettered space.

Rankin's "Thin tree" assumes a similar mode, accessing the process of sense perception by drawing discreet images into a poetic space that is, in turn, continuously drawn out of itself:

This morning there was a tree with purple flowers
printing itself into the end of the long night
onto the clearness the whiteness of sky

out of the night this thin straggling tree
eaten away dried at its base
carrying dense purple heavy with purple

standing quite still weighted holding this purple
which massed and swelled in that pale sky until it unfolded

one vast slow-throbbing memory of sea. [CP 137]

By imitating Williams' paratactic syntax, Rankin indicates the process of "unfold" that occurs both within the tree and its place. The poem's cyclic repetition, however, collapses the temporal unfolding suggested by its opening ("This morning"). Its present tense introduces uncertainty into the procedure of the tree's flowering, so that narrative continuity is interrupted by reversal and reiteration of "this", "purple", "night", and
Bonny Cassidy

“sky”. Night and dawn, the present plant and the anxiety of its potential change, occur together as “one vast slow-throbbing” current. Emerging from this line is the sea, which, like Williams’ goats, lies outside the immediate, image-based poetic space, and yet is recalled or anticipated by the poem’s suggested locomotions through place. For Rankin, the unbounded cycle of ocean becomes a metonym of the broader space in which places and microcosms are nested. She not only addresses the ontological middle ground or “copresence” established by Williams; she also expands upon the possibilities within poetic perception, and increasingly breaks out of procedural fluidity, into a region of transition and overlap. In emphasising the rejection of metaphor that occurs in both her and Maiden’s work, I am challenging Emily Potter’s argument that “a metaphoric poetics offers the active engagement with the world that metonymy lacks”.24 Whereas both Potter and Brady highlight the ecological *morphosis* understood by metaphor, I would suggest that it is a coercive (rather than comparative) imposition of anthropocentric imagination instead of a perceptually based exchange.25

“Mound poems” returns to the rhythm of the sea, reconciling an experience of the line with forms of disjunction. Generally speaking, the poetic form reflects the deceptive appearance of more-than-human phenomena as discreet entities. By working within a prosodic and spatial frame, it risks separating and isolating the elements of phenomenological continuity. Williams deals with this by maintaining a certain degree of unity in voice. Rankin attempts to redefine those limits by creating a single phenomenal plane, as it were. Here, the transitional voice of “The line” and “Earth lock” is filled by place, as wind replaces breath:

Ridges of wind thudding
born out of stone
stubbing the earth.

Speaking and cutting back.

Here early trees reach out and are shaved

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Bonny Cassidy

hard into straight-slanted horizons.
Always the cutting back.

And the wind that latches now at my throat-root
slowly fills the void

icy rivers cut under my tongue.

Equated with expressed voice, the lacunae, line breaks, punctuation and syntactical presentation of image are cut back to close the gaps between poetic and non-poetic effect:

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. [EH 20]

Revisiting the Epicurean principle that no element can be “divided from others by empty space”, the spacing of “Mound poems” does not signify temporal pause, but positive spatial presence. Firstly, the poem contains breaks between the above and following stanzas—conventional signals of the freezing or passing of narrative time. However in this case there are clear familial relationships between the images and events on either side of the breaks. They are of the same extra-poetic origin—ocean. They also occur
Bonny Cassidy

together within present tense, which breaks from an abstract temporal perspective in order to suggest their simultaneity. As a cycle of three cantos, “Mound poems” is held by the same stretch of ground that underpins “The Mud Hut”.

Secondly, lacunae are a phenomenon of this place, appearing literally in “the wing-pit of the gull”. The poem continues to work over the same ground:

   Earth is giving up its rock.
   Twisting and buckling.
   Fists of dark rock.
   Pushing up. Heaving out of the sea.

   And the deep sea-bed is bursting.
   Opening up.

   A long black ribbing of shale
   now pierces the grey sea-skin
   upending earth-layers
   revealing old cycles
   repeating and opening up. [EH 21]

The end-stopped lines and short phrases of “Mound poems” seem to contain their phenomena, but within what? Rankin’s images are not held within a lyrical voice; nor does her use of repetition (“up”, “rock”) allow them to be framed by a temporal sequence. Rather, it is the poem’s arrangement of space itself that moderates the form of image and moment. Space (visual, auditory and haptic) is also a phenomenon of place. As Altieri states, “every line of verse faces several adventures in transition”, thus space takes part in perceptual possibility. By shaping her poetic forms around repetition, Rankin blurs conventional, dualistic and hierarchical syntax of subject and predicate, bringing these numerous “adventures” to the poem’s surface. Furcate directions remain numerous, and thus replace distinction and refinement of meaning. Maiden’s poems construct sense via choice and selection of semantic interpretation, whereas Rankin’s forms require the reader to accept their multifarious images at once. The density of image in “Mound poems” presents unbounded evidence of existential linkage. Rock meets rock in syntax,

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line, image and sound affect. Words are closely gathered like mounds or fine lines of grain and flotsam. The perceptual moment is attuned to a sheer profusion of forms, an overfilling that stretches “the void” or boundaries of perceptual ground.

Possibilities, in the phenomenology of Mikel Dufrenne, “are the meaning which illuminates the real and outlines a world within it”.27 Taking the shape of the nest from the perceived world, Rankin’s cyclic forms retrace it. Her poetry’s continuous plane recognises processes that perceive further than Williams, Levertov or Kinnell. That breadth of change and permanence is suggested by the “vast” expanses accessed in “Thin tree”. Collapsing axes, its distances are temporal (from night to dawn) as well as spatial (from flower to sea). How far do the “straight-slanted horizons” of “Mound poems” reach; how far back and forward can they shift? How deep under the ocean’s surface, and under the ground; how high above? In comparison to Williams’ “Autumn”, for example, the coverage of Rankin’s poem is monumental: place stretches from the water, to rocks, a hill, and a cliff above the sea; from the gull sweeping over, down to the seabed, its volcanic shale and hints of geological strata. The space with which this place intersects is suggested by the final objects of the poem’s perceptual attention: a space of “old cycles”, which are beyond concrete image but, nevertheless, found by the inhabitant of this place to be “repeating and opening up”. By undertaking perceptual retracing, poetic form is responsible for venturing into unknown ground.

Wind and water are, therefore, particularly important to Rankin’s poetic form and, in turn, to its purpose of accessing what she calls “unrevealed” place. Their revelatory nature is demonstrated in “Mound poems”, as “cutting back”, “upending”, “giving up”, “opening” and “undressing”. Susan Stewart observes that wind and water “constantly erode the world: they are mutability itself producing mutability” because they “cannot be grasped”. Yet this does not mean they are groundless: as we find in “Soft track”, they produce uneven ground that degrades the procedural line. “Wind and water”, Stewart remarks, “disappear and erase all evidence of our existence: earth is shaped and shapes us and takes our form into itself after death”.28 The influence of open forms upon Rankin is

Bonny Cassidy

particularly identifiable when her poetry “succeeds in transforming the vertical
chronology of time into the horizontal parataxis of space”.29 Venturing through the lost
track and the filled voice, however, it traces a larger and deeper expanse of perceptual
ground than the romantic unity of American lyrical tradition.

This very departure is figured in the correlation of Rankin’s poetry with Robert
Gray’s local take on modernist form. For Gray, Williams’ focused attention on
phenomena is a path to the Open, and thence to the surrender of self-assertion against
more-than-human existence. This is, Gray feels, a mutually necessary action for
literature and consciousness to take:

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. And without respecting the
alterity of the world, there is no possibility of self-transcendence.30

If, in making this remark in a double review of Adamson and Rankin, Gray clearly shows
his poetics to be sympathetic to her own sense of purpose, he also underlines his work’s
distance from Adamson’s neo-romantic mode. Angus Nicholls has argued that Adamson
and Gray demonstrate differing interpretations of romantic poetics.31 However the
successive presence of Adamson and Gray in Rankin’s writing life coincides with her
work’s growth from the idealisation of place to a new poetics of interrelation with
unfamiliar ground. Gray’s interest in the phenomenological capability of poetic language
parallels Rankin’s exploration of cyclic progression as a form of change and permanence.
As well as Williams, he cites Charles Reznikoff, Gary Snyder and James Schuyler as a
lineage of poets that understands “that an idea is only ever truly given conviction through
the physicality which is poetry”.32

29 Buelens, Gert, “The American Poet and his City: Crane, Williams and Olson. Perceptions of Reality in
30 Gray, "Showing Feeling for Sound (Rev of Ritual Shift, by Jennifer Rankin and Theatre, by Robert
Adamson),” 17.
31 See Nicholls, Angus, "Robert Gray and Robert Adamson - A Dialectical Study of Late Australian
32 Kirkby, Joan, ed., The American Model: Influence and independence in Australian poetry (Sydney: Hale
& Iremonger, 1982) 123.
Bonny Cassidy

What does this statement mean for Gray and Rankin? I would argue that it indicates the same, post-semiotic view with which Maiden understands the “physical fleshly” nature of language. Furthermore, Gray and Rankin take to poetry’s physicality with Heidegger’s sense of the harm in human production. That is, both poets write with awareness that their poetry is capable of challenging the objectifying tendency of representation. “Such representation”, Heidegger writes, “knows nothing immediately perceptual. What can be immediately seen when we look at things, the image they offer to immediate sensible intuition, falls away”. Gray and Rankin’s uses of language and form seek to access that point of immediate perceptual experience prior to the reflexive or discursive moment that raises the walls of poetic space.

An early poem, “The Pine”, from Gray’s Creekwater Journal (1973), reflects their mutual sense of purpose. In Gray’s abstinence from the personal pronoun, we can once again see the impact of Williams’ attempt to withdraw from the hierarchy of lyrical subjectivity. Like “Autumn”, the poem seems to flatten a single moment into multiple angles:

With a snow-cap
only of needles;
asltant. And the lopped-off
branches of
various lengths
about its trunk.
The rhythm amongst these
such
a music, all
by chance.
Alone
in the back paddock
in the yellow grass.

With the poem’s subject deftly introduced in the title, its first line closely focuses on the tree’s “snow-cap” without forming a sense of completed perception. The parallel foci—

33 Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?”, 124.
Bonny Cassidy

needles, branches and trunk, paddock and grass—are not afforded priority over one another. Hanging together "all / by chance", the tree is placed within two wider environments that become almost incidentally apparent at the poem’s end. Moreover, they are not sequenced by a taxonomical order that would withdraw from the image but, rather, by Gray drawing the poem’s line back to phenomena: first the paddock, then the grass and, perhaps, like the sea beyond Rankin’s “Thin tree”, back to the base of the pine’s trunk.

Gary Catalano notes Gray’s successful use of imagistic language in “The Pine”, which “dispenses with what we generally regard as an essential part of speech and is quite clearly no poorer for it”. His radically serial experimentations attempt to bring language even closer to the immediate perceptual experience. A slightly later poem, from Grass Script, published one year after Rankin’s Earth Hold, also separates perception into moments of possibility:

bronze

linen tide

bronze

shadows

ibis

rowboat

farmlight

linen shadows

Both Nicholls and Catalan have discussed the rich relationship between the poetics of Williams and Gray; however the transferral of this link to Rankin's forms warrants attention. As evident in "Bellingen", above, Gray shares Rankin's approach to poetic language as a singular medium with which to extend the lengths of the possible. The words of "Bellingen" make sculptural gestures toward their own metonymy, a use of poetic space that is comparable to the truncated phrases of Rankin's "Earth hold":

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.
Now my white ibis flies.

This warm morning's sun.
This valley folding away.
Sea-glare.

And thin houses. Weather-whitened. [EH 18]

Like the "Speaking and cutting back" of voice in "Mound poems", the clipped images of "Earth hold" and "Bellingen" resist being framed as objective correlatives. In this regard, Rankin's heron may be distinguished from Shaw Neilson's totemic cranes and from Wright's symbolic water birds in "At Cooloolah". Gray and Rankin's common efforts to avoid the medial role of language between phenomena and consciousness draw on the

36 Gray, Robert, Grass Script (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1978) 52.
37 Gray's edition of Neilson's poems dually reflects his influence on a certain philosophical lyric tradition in Australian poetry, and the distinct poetry of place pursued by Gray and Rankin, which would seem to reject Neilson's symbolist mode. See Gray, Robert, ed., Shaw Neilson: Selected Poems (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993). See also Wright, Judith, The Two Fires (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1955) 30.
Bonny Cassidy

early work of their peer, Charles Buckmaster. In particular, Rankin’s imagery and lineation are clearly influenced by his first poems of the late sixties, such as “winter sun in the morning” (where even Gray’s pine needles make an appearance). Focused on more-than-human phenomena, Buckmaster shows an interest in reconsidering the human subject’s “privileged position” in poetic form.38

a breeze begins:

wet washing on the line
flaps heavy.
tossed about.

clouds fly.
the wind is making them move.

pine trees:
needles wet
and gleaming.

so far from the clouds –
thin and fast above them.39

The “gravity” of Buckmaster’s style reflects all three poets’ sense of the line as more than a prosodic fixture, and particularly more than a human thought-product.40 The individual lines of the poems’ phrases trace various viewpoints from ground to aerial, telescopic to macroscopic, and mobile to static, into one space. For the reader, that space begins as poetic but becomes continuous with sense experience. Thus it is grounded as a place when a poet challenges the expectation of language and poetic expression to be orders abstracted from a more real reality. In each of these poems, repetition is a crucial element of that challenge, in which human perception is realised by reversal, return and reassessment.

The verbal brevity of these poems figures mobility by generating movement through the poetic space itself. The lines of Gray’s “Bellingen” float between great

38 Dobrez, Parnassus Mad Ward 111.
Bonny Cassidy

sweeps of motion like the rowed momentum of a boat; indeed, they resemble reflections surfacing between ripples. In Buckmaster's and Rankin's work, space and visual pause present silence as well as the ranging distances that appear between mutually mobile places and perceptions. As Paul Carter writes, invisibility and silence are legitimate presences in an individual’s always-limited/growing experience of place:

A place includes the invisible things gathered somewhere (invisible because, like a bird beyond the next hill or the water moving in an aquifer, it remained out of sight; invisible because, like a microscopic organism, it is too small to make out with the naked eye; invisible because, like the air itself or infrared light, it is imperceptible to our eyes). A place includes, also, the silent presences and processes: the rocks and the old lives fossilized within them, patterns of erosion, the memories and belief "enfolded" into places by human experience.\(^{41}\)

In the words of Australian ecocritic Mark Tredinnick, place is "the sum of all the relationships at play somewhere, seen and unseen, heard and unheard".\(^{42}\) Using space as a medium and, often, as a concrete image, Rankin pushes the conditioned circumscription of poetic space. Space, therefore, becomes an expanding element. In contrast, Levertov's description of the individual lines of a poem indicates a form of concentration, even unification. This is reiterated by Miller's notion of line as destined for a matrix:

Going for the moment towards the void, [the words] go all the more strongly, as a man in isolation reaches out in longing toward other men and women. Into the white space surrounding the word go a multitude of lines of force, charging that space with the almost tangible presence of the various words which might come to complete the central word and appease its tension.\(^{43}\)

This view defines the physicality of poetry by containment, specifically the reduction of the poem's discomfort zone by the poet's assertion of intentionality over the poetic space. Yet Rankin, venturing towards the void of "there is", chooses not to appease the tension of confronting alterity. In her poetry, the line of the more-than-human is drawn out of non-verbal space. In "Mound poems", the void revealed by consciousness overcomes consciousness, the "throat-root" of language, itself. This reflects Gray's use of space to

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\(^{43}\) Miller, *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* 300.
Bonny Cassidy

interrupt procedural imagery. "The Pine" stands "Alone" on the page and yet, of course, it is not isolated as an aesthetic object but is involved with the perceptual process emulated by the poem's form. By comparison, Rankin's cyclic forms incorporate space as a part of the line. This ground runs through the phenomena of "Earth hold":

    Tall drying wheat. Wet grass.
    So many items and then

    leaf mould and mulch
    long shadow lying before a new sun.
    This day's still water weed.

    Palm trees. Always surprising earth's patterning.
    Popping up. Tall and thin and pre-determined.

    So many items.

Pre-thought. Pre-history. Mapping out my landscape. [EH 18]

Like the filled space of "Bellingen" and the filled medial voice in "Mound poems", the space that is "lying" between, beside and around the phrases of "Earth hold" embeds the human possession of place ("my landscape") into its "pre-determined" surface. It represents the extent of "items" that, seeming to be ordered by the prosodic line break—"and then"—continue to appear. This is their nature, infinite and uneven; surprising the perceived "patterning" of ground.

If perception can be "an aggressive act, an act of mastery in which the perceiver concentrates his attention on a particular thing and, in doing so, detaches or separates it" from place, then Gray and Rankin share something else with Maiden. They find that poetic form generates alternatives to coercive approaches to interrelation.44 In the seemingly abject moment of confronting the more-than-self, poetry can locate grounded connectivity. It is found by techniques that resist aggressive perception, particularly the aggressive use of line and space as delimiting tools. By exploring the poem's spatial

Bonny Cassidy

field, and the suspension of metaphysical structure by Buddhist aesthetics, Rankin constantly abstains from approaching the page itself as a void or an objectified matrix of human thought.

Gray’s poetry, writes Harrison, makes “the assertion that there is a direct connection between things and a poetic expression according to which the fulfilment of a life is, as he says, found ‘in the contemplation of matter’”. In this purpose, he adds, it is “hard to find a comparable poet”. I would like to argue, however, that Rankin is in fact that comparable poet whose work shares his purpose and dynamic of contemplation. Christopher Mooney argues this point when he refers to the meditative nature of her work:

Much of our traditional “nature” poetry hasn’t been receptive to the landscape in the way that Rankin’s is. So often form has dominated, perceptions forced to conform to tight metrical units, often for the purpose of extracting some moral statement about life. Implicit in Rankin’s work is the belief that mind and matter are not separate but are intimately connected [...]. What then can be seen as an “Eastern influence” in her work is a meditative quality, the way she looks at landscape, and conveys the experience of this finely tuned perception into poetry.46

What is this quality, precisely; and how is it translated into form? The presence of “Eastern influence” in Australian poetry has often been treated as subsequent to the recognised “American influence”, namely through the prevalence of “Imagist perception” within “American-derived Modernism”. Mooney has argued for a wider historical perspective on the permutation of Eastern influence into Australian poetics;47 and his reassessment has been followed by further research.48 It is evidenced in the cases of Gray and Rankin, both of whom were alert to imagist form but “went back to the original forms of the style” in Taoist and Buddhist philosophy. For Gray, “those philosophies

45 Harrison, “Self, Place, Newness,” 40.
Bonny Cassidy

have been a theory of literature for me". They appear in the contemplative nature of ranging, equilibrate imagery in "The Pine", and the moments of non-verbal absorption in the spatial presence of "Bellingen". This mode is "entirely absorbed in the here and now, without projections and pre-emptions: it is the literal, without any abstractions from it".

If Gray traces Ch’an Buddhist philosophy into Japanese Zen Buddhist forms of poetry, Rankin’s is a less academic but no less significant response to Eastern influence. David and Jennifer Rankin’s common feeling for the Ch’an calligraphic concept of the "dragon vein" is deeply manifested in her approach to both space and line. David’s early poetry, “often landscape based and with a nod to Ch’an and Zen thoughts”, clearly developed into the experimentation of his early paintings with this concept, in which “lines come up and form the landscape”. Their discussion, seemingly the most condensed and focused aesthetic dialogue that she undertook, “gave her a vocabulary of words, phrases and concepts she could identify with”, not only the dragon vein but also “‘bird’s eye perspective’ in Chinese paintings”. Jennifer’s tangential communication of these shared concepts reveals that, in contrast to Gray, her “interest in schemata was oblique”. Gray himself asserts that Rankin’s interest in Buddhist aesthetics was “forced”. However, in light of Rankin’s exploration of poetic form it would be disingenuous to reinforce his and Rodriguez’s view that Rankin’s interest was unconsidered:

I think [David] put her on to some subjects and sort of talked her into them, like thinking of the Chinese calligraphic line and a few other things, and an interest in Buddhism, [...] which she said she had but I didn’t find in her thinking, at all.

An examination of Rankin’s preoccupation with the line and its protean scope cannot ignore her awareness of the dragon vein’s spatial and physical dynamic. At a basic level,

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49 Anderson, Don, "Robert Gray shows how the ordinary can be sublime (Rev of Selected Poems, by Robert Gray)," *The National Times* 19 May 1986: 34.
53 Rankin, Written interview with Bonny Cassidy, 14 April 2008.
it appears to inform her acute sense of prosodic lines and blank space, which come to
share equal status in the work: “I find cloud / pick up the line / follow it into this poem”
[EH 2]. The typical brevity of those lines, and their active relationship with lacunae
reflect Rankin’s visual sense of the poem. Here, the line is a formal foundation of the
poem. But, emerging “out of the landscape” like the dragon vein, it is also a
phenomenological trace. Crucially, it marks her resistance to separating or detaching
phenomena and perception from place. In “White earth poem”, the line describes what
both Rankin and Gray see as the continuity between more-than-human life, language and
the poetic space:

On the track to the beach
there is the skeleton of a fish.
Picked clean it whitens daily.

Yet still the nights numb into morning.

And then a line blows off the sea.
Black birds. Shadowing in.

A soft slow winging is working the air above my head.

On this hot north beach I watch the line break up,
re-form, dip, and then it’s into the cliff. [EH 33]

To be followed and consolidated in Earth Hold by “The line”, this poem and “Dragon
veins” identify the generic presence of the line within place. Rankin’s overt reference to
the line as a phenomenon underscores its cleaving of mind and matter. Together, the
three poems establish a way of perceiving place, which, once located, tends to surface
from her images and forms in general. In “White earth poem”, birds reappear as the
carriers of the line, yet she also shows that the line belongs within all phenomena,
including sea and cliff, and is able to shape-shift into places as it does into poems.

Rankin presents the process of appearance, dissolution and reconstruction through
the privileged medium of open form. The lone phrase, “Yet still the nights numb into
morning”, effectively points out the line’s extensive presence. In “Thin tree” it
Bonny Cassidy

incorporates the image of a blurred temporal line from night into morning. The sharpness with which the line marks perceptual moments from one another is conveyed by its sudden, discursive appearance—"And then"—while its trajectory continues "off" into white space. This quality of stretch contrasts with the delineation of "Black birds" by caesura. Unlike their precision, the permanence of the line is a "soft slow winging" that comes in a long, paced sentence. To create the same effect of fluidity and continuity, the poem's final couplet is enjamed; and Rankin's repetition, "and then", reiterates the line's momentum through place and poem. The closing image of "White earth poem" is suggestive of the line being simultaneously embraced by the poet, and swallowed into language.

As both a poetic expression and a material reality, the line focuses the meditative mode of Rankin's work. In it, she has found a formal, conceptual and material phenomenon that challenges effects of perceptual and poetic mediation. A contemplative effect is created by the clarity of the line's concrete visual and spatial appearances in her poem. Buckmaster finds a comparable technique in the use of the colon, which is borrowed from the conventional pause in haiku. Its semantic and visual equation of images suggests a similar presence of equilibrium and continuity as that figured by the line. Reflecting he and Rankin's resistance to aggressive perception, Gray's more formal admiration for haiku is based on its "non-cerebral immediacy". He is, writes Peter Thompson, "fond of seeing things before thought interferes. What is this world of objects before thought interferes?" 56 Is it in Rankin's work, as in Gray's, a moment of "uncanny intensity"? 57 "White earth poem" represents her work's general confrontation of the "there is". Rankin's clipped syntax, avoidance of metaphor and simile, and expansion of space into the conventionally verbal domain of the poem create a sense of physical concentration as distinct from aesthetic distillation. Likewise, her collapsing of narrative frameworks refuses to place her poems' perceptual moments within either a single, fixed identity or a temporal location. Her return to the first-person and present

Bonny Cassidy

tense asserts the inescapable momentousness of phenomena and sensation within a contemplative “here and now”.

If her images seem uncanny or surreal it is because they share with Gray this attempt to achieve “non-verbal or pre-verbal silence”, in which perspective is neither finalised nor evaluated.58 This expression reflects Merleau-Ponty’s description of a “prepersonal” state of being in which “I am able, being connatural with the world, to discover a sense in certain aspects of being without having endowed them with it through any constituting operation”.59 In other words, Merleau-Ponty defines an experience of immediate contemplation of the more-than-self in which self-assertion is avoidable. And yet, as “connatural” with others, this state of human being is in active interrelation with its place. While contemplation is not aggressive, neither is it passive; and in this regard the dragon vein indicates more than disengaged observation of the line. Certainly, the meditative mode of her work tries to access existence before thought; but its recourse is less to a “world of objects” than to other forms in relationships with a place. This mode is attentive to Gibson’s hypothesis of perception in terms of “the properties of surfaces instead of the traditional qualities of objects: colour, form, location, and motion”.60 Rankin’s line, therefore, engages as much with subject matter as with process. Her poetic forms involve visual and spatial awareness with a painterly sensibility that can be directly linked to the dragon vein.

“Poetry is things felt”, states Gray. “In this way, it has more in common with painting than with prose”.61 That is to say, the surface life of painting provides a more obvious site of perceptual interrelation than language and even the page itself. It can be directly related to the properties of surfaces, or the attentiveness of one material to another, which comprise movement through place. Rankin’s treatment of space and the page often resembles painting more than poetry; not only in her concern with the objective form of the poem, but also and more often in terms of three-dimensional ambience:

Bonny Cassidy

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.\textsuperscript{62}

It is through allusion to painting that I want to articulate the interaction between dimensionality and surface in her forms. Her line recognises, as Harrison notes, “space as the medium through which things move”, as well as that space and things “have a flat, dynamic, aerial relationship”.\textsuperscript{63} Her development of the line “before and alongside” the influence of Eastern aesthetics questions how deeply her poetics could be related to calligraphic practice.\textsuperscript{64} More generally, she and Gray’s shared appreciation of the “wordless” medium both is and is not related to the common presence of Buddhism in their senses of form and purpose as poets.\textsuperscript{65} The confluence of painterly and poetic practice is also suggested by the influence of American modernism, as Miller’s study of Williams and others explores. In this context, the single plane of space that holds Rankin’s cyclic forms can be linked to the developments of formalism:

The disappearance of dimensions of depth in twentieth-century art provides special difficulties for someone trained in the habits of romanticism. An abstract expressionist painting does not “mean” anything in the sense of referring beyond itself in any version of traditional symbolism. It is what it is, paint on canvas, just as Williams’ wheelbarrow is what it is.\textsuperscript{66}

To this extent, the painterly (the process, medium, traditions and conventions of painting) describes Rankin’s attention to the non-verbal capacity of space and line in the poem. But it also indicates a more specific quality of process in her work, which does not make a primary link with music, prose, film, printing, dance, performance or sculpture, for example. Only in painting and drawing does there remain an unchanging technological

\textsuperscript{62} Harrison, Martin, "Personal Interview," ed. Cassidy, Bonny (Sydney: 2005).
\textsuperscript{63} Harrison, "Self, Place, Newness," 56.
\textsuperscript{64} Rodriguez, "Introduction," xviii.
\textsuperscript{65} Williams, "An Interview with Robert Gray," 33.
\textsuperscript{66} Miller, Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers 9.
Bonny Cassidy

reality: the physical connection of the artist, the aesthetic space and the receiver. The brush, knife, 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 the painterly space. Furthermore, that space 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—the levels of construction and depth to which Harrison refers. While there are of course elements of this experience in other art forms, none hold the same, exclusive tradition of material continuity. Even the immediacy of the dramatic arts cannot leave the audience with the perceptible possibility of text and painting. Painterly surface, therefore, combines the analysis of depth with the immediate fitting of poetic space into the wider environment.

That fitting or intersection is described in "Dragon veins" as the "search for a line / through hillside. Sand. Flat reef". The ubiquity of the line, regardless of topography from hill to ocean, also obscures its presence. "The line slips" easily, and the ensuing search for it within place actually leads to the poetic space [EH 2]. That is, by the process of perceiving place ("I find cloud"), one does not intake the line like the river that is taken in by Adamson’s speaker, but synchronises with it ("pick up the line") through ambient exploration that involves language ("follow it into this poem"). In this poem Rankin describes the trajectory of the dragon vein, out of the landscape and into the action of the painter; equating it with the poet’s uptake of the prosodic and spatial line onto the page. In a contemporaneous poem, "I had a room", the process is a release of collected phenomena: "I bow my head / and a great bird flies hard against the page" [EH 8]. Gray recalls:

I remember on one occasion she showed me a poem which impressed me about a white bird. And I always have this image of the white bird, and the last line of this poem, the bird flying hard against the page, that brings it right back onto the level of actual writing.

Found by Rankin in a Braque painting, the image of the bird is a figure of the line,
Bonny Cassidy

interacting with painterly surface to trace the poet’s transferral from place to page. Considering Rankin’s treatment of the page as a deep surface or flat movement that participates in the line’s trajectory, it seems unlikely that the impenetrable surface of the page should signify a boundary. Rather, I feel that it presents the real texture of the poem as a spatial field, and as a site of interrelation between phenomena and poetic form. The bird seems to emerge from consciousness (“I bow my head”), having been carried within language.

This is reiterated by “Spaces and ink”, in which ink denotes both the printed word and the calligrapher’s medium. What at first appears to be a reflection on imitation, à la Stevens, actually sharpens to reveal a narrative about the spatial process from thing to body to page:

Black crows are on the earth.
They ring themselves about
stabbing at whiteness.

Here is shadow and leaf-mould.
Here is silence.
Here is the beak of the crow.

And I am stepping back.
I am flailing with my arms
I am trying to climb out.

Five crows rise into the air.
They are form.
They place themselves on one dead tree.

I have broken this place.
Five motes are in my eye
and on earth a whiteness. [CP 215]

“Spaces” refers to the drop or gap between perception and language, as well as to the “whiteness” of the un-inked page. We must note the cyclic structure of the poem, which leaves whiteness “on the earth”, and returns to the poetic space. This traces the permutation of the Open into language, hence the speaker’s attempt to “climb out” of a closed poetic space. This is achieved when the crows (that independently “ring themselves” and “place themselves”) become “form”, and stated in the line, “I have broken this place”. Rankin does not suggest the coercion of the earth to the will of language but, on the contrary, the breaking of the walls of this poetic space to allow earth’s entrance. Finally, the crows have entered the perceiver’s physiology (“in my eye”), and where they were is not an absence but this new space, the whiteness of the poem.

Rankin’s sense of the painterly line as a merging of dimensions into surfaces furthers the breakdown of boundaries between interior and exterior space that culminates in “The Mud Hut”. If we accept that the perceptual experience is largely one of surface then we can understand Rankin’s interpretation of Buddhist practice as intersecting with an appreciation of phenomenological process. But her expansive interpretation of the dragon vein encapsulates her broader awareness of the line’s painterly dynamic. Its non-Western idiom raises questions about the significance of her poetry’s frequent images of “whiteness”, questions that will be reiterated in the following chapter in relation to Australian identity. Around the publication of Earth Hold, Rankin appears to have begun a private research project on the life and work of painter Ian Fairweather, whose attention to calligraphic practice and South East Asian art anticipates David Rankin’s own. At the same time, looking into the engraving practices of the Darug people of the Blue Mountains and Hawkesbury River, Rankin was interested in the common Indigenous practice whereby a line in a sacred rock is deepened as a record of ritual and story.68 The practice seems to reflect her connection of mark-making with poetic expression, and also the continuity of that space with more-than-human phenomena and non-verbal forms.

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68 Rankin’s notes include comprehensive biographical accounts and remarks from an interview with Pam Bell, wife of the late George Bell, whose Melbourne students were among Fairweather’s peers working in the 1940s and 1950s after Cubism. Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Series 2 Folder 1: Notebooks and Diary, 1970s. Diary entry, c. January 1978.
Bonny Cassidy

Her understanding of the line links these varied aesthetics with one another in thought-provoking ways, particularly in their relation to one another as Australian representations of place. Harrison notes the unique nature of Rankin’s inclusive response to painterly cultures; a sensibility that recognised “the achievement of the aerial, archaeological viewpoint of white and Aboriginal painters of the post-’60s period—especially painters like Rover Thomas, the Papunya artists, and Olsen, Juniper, Fairweather, Wolseley and Tuckson.”

By objectifying the poetic form into an aerial surface, Rankin extends her cyclic dismantling of linear temporality. Her treatment of form as a more-than-human possibility directly challenges the framework of the romantic sublime. As Stewart remarks, “keeping time” is traditionally considered a necessary convention of poetic order. Without it, she suggests, we seem to feel lost in “ceaseless things”; experiencing “on the scale of human life without the scale of human time with which to measure this encounter”. Likewise, human measure is necessary to Burke’s relative definition of the sublime. Withdrawal of its framework does not so much subvert his categories as annul them. In “Earth hold”, Rankin’s characteristically ambiguous voice cannot be located at a stable, relative point because it is ambient through the poem’s imagery, and is not always identifiable as human. Similarly, Rankin shifts visual syntax, such that a “seed-pod” is both in a hand and in mud. With its unbroken expanse of “items”, the poem’s place cannot be pictured as a framed landscape: the human figure of horror and anxiety is replaced by the “surprising” of earth by itself. In this way, Rankin’s flattening of axes into the line replaces aggressive, self-assertive perception with contemplative activity.

According to Stewart, time is a useful axis because the “immediacy of mere sense certainty overwhelms us with its ‘here and now’”. How does Rankin address an overwhelmed, human response to the texture of the contemplative or meditative state? If it is horror that comprises the human awareness of “there is” or “it is”, then shock, as Harrison suggests, is a more basic response to perceptual immediacy. Shock describes

69 Harrison, “Self, Place, Newness,” 31.
70 Stewart, Poetry and the Fate of the Senses 104.
71 Stewart, Poetry and the Fate of the Senses 104.
Bonny Cassidy

the form, expression and affect of Rankin’s work, and effects its removal from what could be called Romantic meditation:

Traditionally, we take various versions of Wordsworth’s definition of poetry as experience recollected in tranquillity, and so there is some moment of memorising there: if you take that moment literally, there is a moment of framing and in that framing, there is tranquillity. There is an immediacy, where things and the way we deal with things can start to be described. I don’t think she’s doing that. I think the literalism of the process she describes is a bit shocking; she talks about lines literally becoming the axis of her own optical bearing, literally entering the eye, not just her own body but her own apparatus. She is very much a writer who is not doing experience-recollected-in-tranquillity, but doing experience in a way that connects to a sort of shock value and sensation and, of course, paints it in time and time process.72

And yet, as Rankin’s cyclic forms reveal, shock is a spatial encounter rather than a “time process”. She accesses shock as a telluric event, from the surprise of phenomena “popping up” through ground level, to seismic shifts. In particular, the image of the line assumes the guise of cracks and altitude. It’s appropriate, then, that her definition of the line should not only be about continuity but also, simultaneously, about edges. In the following chapter, I will discuss Rankin’s imagery of islands in relation to locality; here, however, I would like to note the fundamentally seismic formation of the islands and coasts that appear throughout her work. Her constant awareness of sea level is in itself a kind of shock. It lingers in the microcosmic evidence of shocks that are particularly linked to the decomposition of the cottage. The walls of the mud hut, eventually revealed for what they are—slabs of earth—are as affected by shifting ground as the “Hard and cold” earth around and beneath the dwelling. In “Seasonal move”, the walls are “bursting / under the jacaranda” as the tree’s roots create their own miniature earth shifts. In “Green ash”, the speaker dreams of “the crack in the ceiling of my room”, while “cracked are the patterns” of shadow about them [RS 24].

In “Koan”, Rankin alludes to Zen tradition in order to explore the line as evidence of profound shock. Beginning with the narrator’s formation of “trenches” and a “mound”, the piece links with the images of ridges and ranges that appear in “Mound

72 Harrison, Personal Interview with Bonny Cassidy, 28 September 2005.
Bonny Cassidy

poems”, “Clear mound” and elsewhere [K 31]. Despite its specific formal conceit, therefore, “Koan” carries on Rankin’s formal and conceptual preoccupations. In order for it to do so, she refashions the Zen koan to her purpose. Clearly, Rodriguez remarks, “the thing she wrote was not a koan in any sense, it was a reflection upon the forest. It did not propose a thought that sent your mind off at an angle”. While “Koan”, a prose poem running to three pages, does not subscribe to the conventionally short riddle dialogue of Zen philosophy, it nevertheless contains its own contemplative force of shock.

There is, of course, horror at the prospect of more-than-human agency:

One wall has been badly cracked since I was last here. Perhaps an earth tremor.
I must warn the seismologists to remove their expensive equipment from the pine forests. [...] The world may disperse today yet the instruments deep in the forest fail to record it!

But in keeping with the omnipresent, ambient voice of the line in Rankin’s poems, “Koan” is aware of a place without distance or scale, a place in which the speaker is aerial: “Bending over the forests and there are a surprising number of forests up and down the coast of this country, not to mention the inland or plateau tableland forests that I have yet to search” [K 31]. Travelling, like the speaker of “Earth lock”, up and down the coastal edge, “Koan” locates shock value in the extensive foundational shifts that lie within the topography. The search reveals that an edge does not equal an end. Cracks and edges uncover what the concept of the dragon vein seeks: “the dragon asleep, under the landscape. And the dragon veins are the calligraphies following that form”. Rankin uses the prosody of shock—abrupt, repetitive and incomplete phrases—to present the discovery of Earth’s elemental and gravitational composition in surface traces:

I make a mental note as the bees crawl out of the mud walls. They are using the crack from the tremor. This interests me. They are crawling into and out of the crack. [...] I search their wall. I search the crack they enter. I search remembering the trenches I have built remembering the pines. And the notches.

74 David Rankin, qtd. in Rodriguez, "Introduction," xvii.
Bonny Cassidy

This process is, of course, a return to the site of the cottage. The image of its decomposition, now linked to the deeper movements of space, does not impel horror but contemplates "this turning, twisting, all-over golden mass that orders itself" [K 33].

As Rodriguez concedes, "Koan" "fulfils three criteria: it is enlightening, its terms are ordinary and it enacts a test of what is true". In its narrative of exploration it represents the purpose of all of Rankin's work: to locate an unrevealed sense of place, and its harshness. She reconsiders the sublime dialectic; concentrating its human responses into a meditative moment that avoids evaluation. "It is", Harrison comments, "as if she had said to herself, 'I don’t want to be a poet of experience, I want to be a poet who relates to a particular kind of positive/negative sensation, pleasure/pain sensation.'"

The meditative relation to those sensations is one of neutralisation. Followed into Rankin's poem, the line is not, as Miller asserts, a way to manipulate the tension of facing up to the void of consciousness. "Settlement has been about making, building and accumulating", writes Brady in response to Wright's poetry. "But what is demanded is an unmaking, letting go and letting be, learning to live in the acceptance of the pain of things". Unmaking: the search, in Rankin's words, for "how to look" with perception that is neither determined nor inherited.

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75 Rodriguez, "Introduction," xx.
76 Brady, "Judith Wright, Australia and the Poetics of Place," 124.
Chapter Six

*Pre-thought: “Island cycle” and “Cliffs”*

I will stand at the cliffs
looking over
I will stand
at the cliffs of a winter country
sea-veiled

I will stand
staring into, looking over,
standing at the same edge of
void.

"Future poem for John Olsen" [CP 208]

Reflecting on John Olsen’s significance as an Australian landscape painter, Rankin noted that his work trades anxiety toward place for an understanding of it. It 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”.¹ The cyclic forms developed by Rankin effectively dismantle the influence of romanticism upon her as an Australian and as a poet, but the American influence of modernist and postmodernist form need not be seen as a substitution of imperial power. Rankin’s pursuit of physicality and materiality in her poetics alludes to fields beyond postmodern form; and her final publication, “The Mud Hut”, realises the political and literary challenges with which she aligned her work. Indeed, the dwelling itself is a manifestation of this purpose. The actual Pine Camp was originally a Victorian

¹ Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Series 2 Folder 1, Notebooks and Diary, 1970s. Diary entry, October 1978.
Bonny Cassidy

residence, which, after burning down, was rebuilt by a bushman as the wattle and daub hut known to Rankin. Its history neatly reflects Rankin’s ideas about Australian poetics and its inherent awareness of place. “For me as an Australian”, she writes in her journal, “a double cultural inheritance” is formed by the “Literature of England” plus the “perceived world of bush and a little Anglo-Australian lit”. However, Australia’s history as “a place to be exploited by a mother colony that has assumed varying guises—England—U.S. of A.—Business” would not limit her development as a poet. In her view, this history had been defined by attempts to overcome an alternative, pre-determined presence—the “tail that wags”:

No. Not this pendulum that swings.
Not this dollar that fluctuates.
Not this industry that declines and fluctuates at man’s whim
and will, wisdom or mistake.
But this great land mass that lives within its own cycle
regardless of the fortune of the small and clever creatures who exist
at points of its surface.

The period of Australian writing in which she worked allowed her to wrestle with cultural influence in a serious and new way, specifically, to regard this unmoveable “mass”. The sequence reflects how that challenge is developed in “Koan”, “Earth hold” and “Mound poems”. Through the dismantling of poetic illusion and choice of a renewed poetic space consisting of the contemplative shocks of spatial perception, these poems move through solid, though uneven, unknown or unrevealed, ground. Heidegger’s phenomenology of poetry argues that this journey is necessary to the function of the modern poet, the tracing of more-than-human existence:

The ground is the soil in which to strike root and to stand. The age for which the ground fails to come, hangs in the abyss. Assuming that a turn still remains open for this destitute time at all, it can come some day only if the world turns about fundamentally—and that now means, unequivocally: if it turns away from the abyss. In the age of the world’s night, the abyss of the world must be

2 Rodriguez, "Introduction," xii.
3 Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Series 2 Folder 1: Notebooks and Diary, 1970s. Diary entry, c.1978.
Bonny Cassidy

experienced and endured. But for this it is necessary that there be those who
reach into the abyss.⁴ Accordingly, for the poet to venture toward and trace the ground that human beings share
with the more-than-human world, she is required to contemplate a space that is not
produced. That is to say, the poem she creates must no longer represent a place, in the
tradition of mimesis, but present one. For Rankin, however, poetic form has a direct
correlation with the question of Australian identity. To what extent is her poetry’s
experience of “the abyss” limited by this? How can we identify, and identify with, the
places that Rankin’s work presents?

A reading of Rankin’s body of work must account for the link between surface
and depth, or, as Harrison puts it, for “the intensity of the singular and relatively minimal
event occurring in a context (whether an air, a weather, a spaciousness) which is both
huge and indifferent”.⁵ “Earth hold”, for instance, is a validation of epistemological
discovery. Its literal itemising of phenomena, on one hand, reduces the poetic space to
the sum of its parts: seed, pod, mud, mangrove, oyster, shell, heron, ibis, sun, valley, sea,
houses, wheat, grass. Each line introduces a new phenomenal moment. The poem’s
ranging attention to particulars fulfils the third criterion of the koan—the test of what is
ture—by slowing the pace of perceptual knowledge: first pod, then seed and pod, finally
seed-pod; first a mud-bed, then a mangrove; first a mangrove, only then a mangrove tree
and root. This is a careful, analytical extrapolation of ambient process that resists
aggressive interrelation with what is encountered. In “Koan”, the dominant word is
“search”; an active movement through space, yet one with a qualitative dynamic, as
Graham Rowlands suggests:

[S]he made the immediate tensions, textures and structures of her poems into a
search for lines of penetration between earth and sea, wind and sky, air and earth,
wind and earth, cliff and sky and all the permutations created by adding trees and
black wings.⁶

The necessity of this active quest is expressed in “The line” (“I look for the line”) and in
“Dragon veins” (“I search for a line”), where the hidden, embedded nature of the line

⁴ Heidegger, “What Are Poets For?,” 90.
⁵ Harrison, “Self, Place, Newness,” 56.
Bonny Cassidy

requires it to be picked up and followed: “Trees gnarl down to sea-pull / tree-roots
wrangle in wet coarse sand” [EH 2]. Also in “The line”, however, and in “Mound
poems”, the line is defined as a momentum prior to poetic voice. In “White earth poem”,
it is posterior to poetic space as the prosodic line literally takes off into non-verbal space,
into and out of Merleau-Ponty’s prepersonal state of intuitive continuity with more-than-
human forms. Does Rankin locate a poetic space that precedes the transactions between
distinct subjects, a kind of amorphous plasma of “there is”? Does her presentation of
place reach behind the conditioned dualism that is unearthed by existential anxiety?

As suggested in the previous chapter, Rankin explores the “connatural” existence
of the singular and indifferent through two types of ground, located at the island site.
For, while an island’s geological and seismic histories are deep places, they are also
crowned (indeed, their form is circumscribed) by topographical possibilities. “Earth
count” assumes the searching process, comparing island exploration with modes of
perceiving that are adopted in other localities:

On later reefs I receive careful instruction
graphs are drawn
I am assessed for accurate description
examination purposes

[...]

I remember to count the growth rings on the palms.
I remember to count the trees.

I look for a new landscape.
How many multiples? [EH 28-29]

As its question suggests, the island place of “Earth count” seems to increase the items
encountered in “Earth hold”. The repetition of “I” becomes less indicative of perceptual
moments and more like a procedural list. But how important to Rankin’s poetics is the
purpose of “accurate description”? Resisting a cataloguing of phenomena, her work does
seek to record what is and, as she states, “how to look” for place. Her island poems
Bonny Cassidy

reconcile the search among local, minimal events with the quest for presenting the huge, "unrevealed" world.

If Jennifer Maiden’s poetic space is a laboratory, I suggest that Rankin’s is a sketchbook. Cumulatively gathering information, the sketchbook acknowledges the multiple aspects of a place, while interrelating them with one another. It is in this form that Rankin recorded her journey to Heron Island between October and December 1977. She lists sea cucumber, Mermaid’s Hair, parrotfish, Serpent Star and Organ Pipe Coral with factual descriptions of their symbiotic relationships. She sketches two, annotated views of an Egg Cowrie shell, notes the pandanus fruit eaten by Indigenous inhabitants, and composes a plan for “Projects” to be carried out. With a sense of what David Carter calls the “public good”, she is particularly interested in the population sizes, breeding locations and “feeding behaviour” of the island’s birds: “Walk same trail at same time of day. Record type and number of birds seen”, she underlines. “Write a guide for general public—how to recognise—where to see”.⁷

Rankin’s sketchbook, preoccupied with how to look and recognise, itself becomes a poetic form. Her responses to the particularities of Heron Island comprise part journal, part poem and part drawing. She once remarked that, “I’ve always enjoyed details and I’ve always enjoyed animals and insects and drawing and botany”.⁸ Her factual notes suggest a naturalistic eye for detail and a studiousness akin to the bee-collecting children in “Daub Wall”. The manner in which she records the minimal details of place, however, is decreasingly taxonomical. Increasingly, on the other hand, the poetic line becomes the appropriate mode for her contact with the island’s contained speciation and condensed biota. For instance, extending her line drawing of birds settled in a tree, their flattened crests speaking of beach wind, Rankin writes a couplet: “White head tucked under / oiling and wiping”. Beside a sketch of pandanus leaves and aerial roots, she notes “A new tree reaching up out of body of old”, an image of continuous vitality that is mimicked by her own drawn line. Forming perceptions through a synchronicity of line and language, these sketched moments anticipate a longer draft, in which an island event

⁷ Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Series 2, Folder 1: Notebooks and Diary, 1970s. Notebook entry, October 1977.
⁸ Rankin, Jennifer, Jennifer Rankin interviewed by Hazel DeBerg, 2 March 1978, Oral Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra. Permission to quote from this material kindly granted by David Rankin.
Bonny Cassidy

is entirely realised in poetic form. The possibilities generated by a serial line structure convey the overlapping and gradual motion of this occurrence:

First the arm of a star
redness jutting from under a rock
The arm was broken off
It fell away from the rock
Sun glistened on the reef
The arm fell away from the body
The body and the arm were not whole
The arm lay stranded
It was lapped by the tide.
Sea took the arm back into itself.
The arm floated beneath the blue sky
[...]
The end of the arm became the centre
And new again wholeness was becoming
The arm was becoming whole
Redness grew out from the centre
The centre radiated (grew itself out) in five directions
and the centre became whole
Now the arm is a new star
It floats in the endless sea
It lies in its cycle
[...]
One arm of the star juts out from beneath this rock.

The starfish arm, both a singular gesture and an indifferent, "endless" presence "in its cycle", is a figuring of "the line". The halting rhythm and dense repetition in this draft reflects her perception of line and space in the actual event itself. It suggests that, even in encounters with particularities like the island and the starfish, for Rankin distinct topographical or minimal forms are not entities but joined, as she notes elsewhere, "all in their own cycle. / Reminding". Her reiterative approach to language constantly returns to a formative moment of shock that recognises or is reminded of the more-than-human. Both the island and the poem remain subordinate to the line's prepersonal, horizontal
Bonny Cassidy

levelling of all earthly forms. "Always coming back to the line", Rankin writes among her annotations, "An island worries the edge / a mote on the surface of the sea lid / where the sky is easing itself down".

Rankin’s process of recording the island is one of trace and palimpsest, immediacy and affect. The repetition within the starfish draft draws and redraws the event’s lines. This effect fluidly positions the poem outside of time, and yet relies upon the present tense of the poetic line. She reconciles surface and depth through the combination of qualitative and quantitative poetic forms. Rankin undertakes a similar process of drafting in preparation for what would eventually be published as “Island cycle”. Initially, she records “a slow settling in / The sky shifts / There is air shift […] / There is wind shift”; crossed-out, it becomes “Here is wind-shift and creaking / and the slow settling in”. Finally, the perception is revised: “Here is windy-eddy and creaking and the slow settling-in” [CP 212]. In this final version, Rankin extends the moment by removing the original enjambment, emphasised by her hyphenation of two phrases, and working in a contrast between eddying and slowing paces.

Like the starfish draft, the studies for “Island cycle” record an event rather than a static image. In this case it is the demise of Heron Island mutton birds caught by the fruit pulp of Pisonia trees. Compelled to endure the moment of contact through poetic form, Rankin always returns to framing perception as atemporal and mobile. Beside the question, “Birds caught in pisonia—what to do?” she translates a more immediate perception of the problem: “Glue from the blossom sticks to its feathers / Here is panic and a small wrestling thing”. Like someone trying to pick their way without a path—halting, perceiving, getting it right—three full pages of her diary struggle with this problem. “Pisonia trees. Pisonia trees”, like a gasping breath of panic, surfaces from the top of a ruled-out page; “Pisonia has strangled the bird” reaches out from the bottom. “Island cycle”, deepens the ambiguity of this voice. At first it is disembodied, camouflaged at the periphery:

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9 Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Series 2, Folder 1: Notebooks and Diary, 1970s. Notebook entry, October 1977.
10 Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Series 2, Folder 1: Notebooks and Diary, 1970s. Notebook entry, October 1977.
Bonny Cassidy

A night-sea edges toward tree-line.
Flat leaves of pandanus cover the earth.
Here is wind-eddy and creaking and the slow settling-in.

Now pandanus itself is shaping the night
thin-limbed it twists and encircles.
Pandanus tree. Etching on sea.

Above leaf-clumps thicken and knot.
They twine with the sky.
I shift. I peer through these lines.
A abruptly, this voice anticipates the bird’s fate by inhabiting its trajectory: “Past black
tree-limb I spin out to the vastness”. It projects itself, from horrified and peering
observation, to indirectly darting about the multiple moments of the event:
On the beach the grey turtle moves out from the sea.
She labours through sand to lay her eggs.

Wind picks its way up and into the trees.

There is a quickening deep in the leaf-mould.
A small bird hurtles out from its nest. [CP 212]

“And now the sky twists”, so that the poem’s voice once again travels with the caught
bird:

There is shuffling.
There is stretching and digging.
There is weaving and swooping in trees.
Now mutton birds wail into memory
and this is the black web of sound. [CP 213]

The island’s cycle presents both the flight and fall of the doomed bird, and the symbiosis
in which it takes place; but it is also “reminding” us of a larger cycle of space from which
isolation is precluded. By resisting the island’s temporal and spatial localities, Rankin
interferes with a poetics of accurate description. While she is able to break down the
perceptual process, her drafts do not represent topographical items as if they were
Bonny Cassidy

disconnected from deeper strata and shock. To this extent, the “mapping out” that Rankin refers to in “Earth hold” is not entirely true of her work’s affects. In its place, she establishes, in Emmanuel Levinas’ phrase, “a swarming of points”:

Space does not accommodate things; instead, through their erasures, things delineate space. The space of each object in turn is divested of its volume, and from behind the rigid line there begins to emerge the line as ambiguity. Lines shed the function of providing a skeleton and become the infinite number of possible connections.¹¹

On the island there is a rendering of points and the connections between them are uneven, faltering, repetitive; and it is through poetic form that Rankin finds the line that adheres to every one. Her line draws the reader into a phenomenological process of recognition, an experience that Altieri has investigated. We need, he argues, to replace the terms of description with “more dynamic concepts involving how we are moved to make identifications or respond to challenges or rest in admiration, or seek more articulate expressions of our own responses”. Rankin’s own seeking of the poetic line as the most articulate extension of such responses demonstrates the peculiarity of her work’s function. Underscoring Heidegger’s contention with rationalist aggression, Altieri proposes that, “attention to such qualities requires our privileging exemplification over explanation more than philosophers or social scientists find comfortable”.¹² Rankin’s island studies interpret the exemplifying acts of looking and recognising to provide immediate access to place and space. Ultimately, her poetic forms reveal phenomena itself as a process. If we agree that human consciousness of that process is traced by language, we can understand that Rankin’s poetry acts as a guide to making contact with tangible and epistemological ground. If human consciousness of that process is traced in language, the poem is a guide to perceived ground: “I find by this poem this place”.¹³

¹³ A solitary line recorded among Rankin’s miscellaneous drafts and notes. Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW @ ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Series 2 Folder 1, Notebooks and Diary, 1970s.
The immediacy of Rankin’s writing and drafting process itself, in which poems are often recorded in one or two clean drafts, poses questions about the critical and hermeneutic terms with which we retrace our experience of her poetics. Gray’s poetry is often praised for its effect of immediacy, however we might also consider how Charles Buckmaster’s approach to working “very very quickly” produced similar formal and structural results to Rankin’s work. Tranter, interviewed about this effect in Rankin’s work, compares her technical approach with a different contemporary, Michael Dransfield:

With Dransfield as an example, people say he had a certain lyricism that was fresh, meaning that he hadn’t worked the poem to death to get it to work properly; and in a sense that’s rather nice, it’s like a good first draft. [...] I think Jennifer’s work’s a bit like that, it’s going for an effect. It’s rather like impressionism, I guess, which was specifically after a particular effect of light.

Michael Dugan notes Buckmaster’s comparable approach to working “very very quickly”—an immediate process that, as we have seen, produced similar formal and structural results to Rankin’s work. Tranter’s placement of Rankin’s technique within a painterly idiom is significant. Comparison with lyricism and impressionism is problematised, however, by my reading of its voice and structure. What else is this “fresh” effect/affect of her work? It appears to be the same quality that I have called meditative or contemplative. It resists the division of phenomena, place, and space from one another. In the same way, it is a poetic space that attempts to overcome thought-produced mediation between language and representation.

A reader’s identification of and with that space may be defined as identification with an Australian sense of place. Brooks, convinced that place in Rankin’s work “is, of course, an Australian landscape”, also feels there is a coincidence between Rankin’s personal experience and the particularities of her local environment. The “eerie familiarity of its behaviour in the poetry of Jennifer Rankin”, Brooks suggests, “perhaps points to a unique nexus between the concerns of the woman as she writes and of the...
Bonny Cassidy

landscape that she writes in". To some extent, Rodriguez has explored this rich argument in her introduction to the Collected Poems. Harrison, too, has remarked upon Rankin's ability "to put anima at the centre of everything". It is not a giant leap from that sense of "anima", to Rankin's own sense of the need for more direct engagement with place. The familiarity of her poetic voice(s) with place indicates her concerns with the politics of local ecology and cultural sovereignty, not as a woman but as an Australian.

Her island drafts comprise an identifiably Australian place, not only via turtles, mangroves and mutton birds, but also in the island form itself. Rankin's general preoccupation with littoral areas of coast, beach and reef metonymically reflect the island-continent. Similarly, the wombat of "The Mud Hut", the bird of "Old Currawong", and the lorikeets in an early poem, "Thatch", represent her work's numerous examples of more-than-human life in local contexts. Less superficial, however, is her work's appeal to what Harrison describes as a familiarly local spatial sensibility—the apotheosis of indifference. The horizontal orientation of the line, he suggests, identifies her work with "the immediate senses of aesthetics in Australia":

Unlike so much poetry written in this country, which seems full of verticalities that are misplaced, she's a horizontalist. She understands that, basically, we are constantly looking at the skyline, we are constantly looking sideways, and that verticality is sedimentary, is about being on top of things and, in a sense, flying over them. It's about having, in other words, that mapping sense of space that comes about when you don't have any, or many, vertical barriers to get over, and you don't have that many eminences to look from.

The stacked, single-line phrases of Rankin's poems resemble tidal stripes or geological profiles, in which a population of "I" stands—like Antony Gormley's skeletal figures installed in Lake Ballard, Western Australia—overcome by sea-level horizontality. Unlike eminences, horizontality permits changeable perceptions and "looking sideways" from peripheral, avian optics as well as from forward-facing perspective. Therefore, once again, "mapping" does not seem to be quite the right term for this mode of

18 Harrison, Personal Interview with Bonny Cassidy, 28 September 2005.
19 Harrison, Personal Interview with Bonny Cassidy, 28 September 2005.
Bonny Cassidy

orientation: Gibson's sense of ambience, in which surveillance can occur from both aerial and embedded points, and Paul Carter's awareness of invisible forms, are more appropriate.

The horizontal mode of Rankin's work suggests that the simultaneity of horror and possibility in the face of the more-than-human is an Australian state of being. Whereas cartography denotes certainty, finality and physical eminence, a perception of embeddedness and far-reaching distance makes contact and acknowledges things unseen and unknown. To reiterate what is by now a well-rehearsed theory of Australian landscape poetry, it's as if the island-continent's distance from the centres of Western rationalism allows the void of the unfamiliar to open deeper in the local consciousness. Yet, if in trying to find new ways to look and recognise place, Rankin's work joins in the tradition of poetic response to that horror, she does so precisely by making a conscious departure from its influence. As Christopher Mooney points out:

Much of our traditional "nature" poetry hasn't been receptive to the landscape in the way that Rankin's is. So often form has dominated, perceptions forced to conform to tight metrical units, often for the purpose of extracting some moral statement about life.  

As Harrison and Mooney indicate, her response not only addresses the more-than-human subject but, concomitantly, considers a more fundamental existential awareness. Anticipating Brooks' reading, Harrison remarks that Rankin's "poems aren't, in a sense, about the Australian coast yet they give me a quite innovative sense of emotion—its rhythm, its size and convergences—which connects with that landscape." Rather than identifying a quality of emotion or feeling, I'd like to define the tenor of her work through the phenomenological terms of consciousness and sensation. Rankin attempts to newly perceive the experience of Australian environment that Marcus Clarke named "Weird Melancholy". Her work re-examines Clarke's realisation that "solitude is desolation" and, yet, that "the dweller in the wilderness acknowledges the subtle charm of his fantastic land of monstrosities. He becomes familiar with the beauty of

21 Harrison, "Holding the Elements (Rev of Earth Hold, by Jennifer Rankin)," 19.
Bonny Cassidy

loneliness”. Rankin’s attempt to record the shock of place is “familiar” with a desire for overcoming the horror of the unrevealed abyss.

Ultimately, this distinguishes her work from Australian poets’ attempts to confront more-than-human being as a dialectical experience. Breaking that experience down to the contemplation of shock in “The Mud Hut”, Rankin’s approach to place is only comparable to Gray’s “amoral and unsublime” poetics. Les Murray shares Rankin’s interest in accessing unmediated sensation through imagistic form, but ultimately contains that interest within a different purpose. In “Escaping Out There”, his fragmentary phrases denote perceived points, and a literally painterly vision involves a vivid sense of colour and surface:

Dried phlegm of lakes
that die of thirst. Burnt umber
dust, wind-smoothed, on glue.
Miles across, cattle-coloured
are the plains of Ryoanji.

Lakes of craze-brick. The salt
detailing around mallee islands
is two brush-hairs thick
(the galvanized salt farther out
sustains mirage islands).

Ivor Indyk suggests that Murray’s “encyclopaedic” view of landscape is deeply associative. His poetic structures reveal “not only the inexhaustible bounty of nature, but the presence of the universe in each and every one of its parts”, a non-hierarchical form with “each metaphoric substitution being no more nor less important than the term it replaces”. However, fitted into the eminence of a train window, this compositional exercise is an act of both representation and mapping. Murray has framed place within a human moral code of nostalgia and ownership:

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Bonny Cassidy

The windscreen is filled half the time with nothing but sky
we are getting well out.
Farm people step down
at Howards and Scobies and Where The Old School Got Burnt.
At All the Bloodwoods
and at the Flying-Fox Cooking-Place
timber people step down.25

Murray’s framework, writes Poacher, is similar to Wright’s poetics, asking “how, or by whom, the space that is Australia might be possessed”.26 In this sense, both poets work in a tradition related to Charles Harpur’s procedural exploration of Australian place. For, while Harpur’s colonial work contains some thrilling examples of affective image, sound and line, it is a Wordsworthian “process by which the speaker registers events and discovers in them a manifestation of both encompassing presence and his own innate powers”.27 Rather than navigating a traditional dialectic of the sublimely “encompassing” and the aggressively “innate”, Rankin’s reader engages in a different paradigm of identification.

The immediacy of recording and returning that becomes apparent to Rankin’s reader can be interpreted from a broader sense of place and a more thoughtful attention to the phenomena encountered in her poetry. I have established Harrison’s view that her poetics moves “outside a European sense of things”, a kind of ground that lives in the work’s ‘meditational range’; a contemplative approach to alterity with nothing “self-consciously ‘eastern’ about it”. Furthermore, rather than circumscribing an enigmatically, reductively Australian quality, I suggest that “she finds another way through to the pattern of feeling which is fully of this part of the world” while, at the same time, indicating its continuity with other parts of that world.28 For the island does not represent a myopic and isolated perceptual experience; it is always “coming back to the line”, as she writes. “Earth lock” and “Island crossing” directly reference this continuity, which equates with the distant perspective points in “Mound poems”.

Bonny Cassidy

Particularly from aerial views, the island form reveals itself to be awash in the binding medium of ocean and the ongoing line of horizon. “Island crossing” recognises the surprising melding of the island into deeper forms, as “I am engulfed in this nothing-ness / I am a black speck in this blue-ness / and the island that glistened in yesterday’s sun / now lies clear and transparent in the liquid of my eye / and is not there” [EH 5]. Like the crows in “Spaces and ink”, the island becomes a “mote” in the speaker’s eye; however, in this case, both the form and the speaker are embedded in space, an experience that Rankin carried from her Heron Island journey:

[...] going into the blueness, in a tiny helicopter with the other people and not being able to see where the sea merged into the sky, and this complete sense of being one speck and just going off into an eternity and then dropping down on this tiny island and into a whole life cycle of the earth [...]29

In her materialist concept of the cycle, forms cannot be separated. In the latter stanzas of “Earth count”, this physics takes over from the taxonomical impulse initially associated with her perception of island “items”. After returning to the forms of life associated with the mud hut (“I fly back to the she-oaks”), the poem uncovers a new way of looking-as-speaking. The two locales of Rankin’s poetry, hut and island — and potentially a third, the coast — are drawn into line:

At the centre the sea has dried up.
Earth itself is burning away out there.
Now I speak a subterranean language
burrowing in beneath the ground.

Moon mix

and dust scratches back off the walls

she-oaks are dying

tropical palms needlessly making desert-shade. [EH 29-30]

29 Rankin, Jennifer, Jennifer Rankin interviewed by Hazel DeBerg Oral Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
Bonny Cassidy

The poem’s earlier question ("How many multiples?") indicates ground’s infinite stretch across varying topographies and landforms. In the posthumously published “Morning poem”, a common and far-reaching material canvases the two familiar faces of Australian place—coast and centre:

And this is the sea.

Edging along
cutting in amongst the hunched rock.
Trickling.

And this is the inland.

Found world.
Stone and red sand.

The sea. Wandering in to this winter day.

Where earth’s skin is thinning. [CP 211]
The poem’s opening “And” establishes the rolling rhythm of that “skin”, suggesting that the inland is an extension of the trickling sea; that the sea extends the centre’s “sand”; and, in light of “Earth count”, that the sand returns to the inland where earth is “burning away” or “thinning”. The poem’s cyclical perception of place once again suggests an aerial view, however both poems also enrich the definition of horizontality.

It is becoming clear that the line is not just horizontal but extensive with all dimensions. Although Rankin’s sense of space reveals the horizontal formation of geography—a process of flattening the vertical axis—the somatic plane of the Earth’s surface is, of course, not flat. When Harrison generalises that Australian topographies are essentially without eminences, we should consider low altitude rather than unimpeded reflexive view. The proximity of sea level in Australia is crucial to Rankin’s line from coast to inland basin. However the possibilities of “wandering” in her work remind the reader that the line is ruled by gravity; and that perception is generated by contact. Paul
Bonny Cassidy

Carter's exploration of contact explains that wandering establishes an ambient notion of perception allowing for different heights, angles and dimensions to be encountered:

We do not walk with the surface; we do not align our lives with its inclines, folds and pockets. We glide over it; and to do this, to render what is rough smooth, passive, passable, we linearize it, conceptualizing the ground, indeed the civilized world, as an ideally flat space.  

In resisting idealised surfaces that have been revealed and described, Rankin’s imagery and use of poetic space encounter the presence of the more-than-human and negotiate the more-than-self.

In 1976, Rankin travelled to Britain where she stayed near Hughes’ Devon farm. This trip is significant to Rankin’s fundamental conception of cyclic forms as revelation of “a whole life cycle of the earth”. More particularly, it sees her extension of earth, rock and coast motifs, already established in Ritual Shift, come to their fuller development in Earth Hold. “Cliffs” is one of the most compelling examples of that movement. Like “Mound poems”, it encounters images beneath the particulars of flora, fauna and climate; they are, perhaps, simply more elemental to earth, and more elementally rendered by voice and structure. “White earth poem”, a place of banksias and sandhills, closed with the cliff’s swallowing of the line; “Cliffs” awakens elsewhere, picking up the line and sending it onward:

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

³⁰ Carter, The Lie of the Land 2.
Bonny Cassidy

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. [EH 24]

While Rankin’s work shifts from burrows to eminences, her cliffs are not foreign to more identifiably Australian imagery. On the contrary, what is striking about both “Mound poems” and “Cliffs” is their familial resemblance to the earlier “Soft track” and other Ritual Shift poems like “Thatch” and “Mainland eyes”. Etched line, flight, aerial trajectory, and faulted and falling motion, are dominant images across her body of work. Moreover, the island identity expands to include Britain, further challenging a notion that the confrontation of alterity, specifically the more-than-human, is particularly accessible in Australian environments. Harrison observes this moment as central to the purpose and function of her poems. They converse with:

[...] Australian poetry and with a sense of Australia, but there is a sense also that this is a writer who is constantly aware that a really significant contribution to poetry will be one that works across all language. There is a way in which, with
Bonny Cassidy

some of those cliff-sides she is looking at, that the poetry somehow reaches out beyond a national territory in a narrow and defined way.\textsuperscript{31}

Her sensibility is less of an innate national identity and more of a physical awareness of, and interrelation with, other living forms in a given place:

[...]. a knowledge derived from it (by looking at its light changes, its weathers, its drynesses and thinnesses of soil, the passage of birds and animals across it, the striations and surfaces which form it) and an intuitive attraction or connectedness with its particulars (trees, stones, houses, slopes).

In other words, what Harrison describes as the "geomancy" of Rankin's poetry is a kind of attention that is unlimited by location.\textsuperscript{32} It is a travelling apparatus—call it the body—that shares a currency of perceptual mechanisms and abilities with fellow humans, and an exchange of surfaces with more-than-human life. If her primary awareness is raised by and attuned to Australian place, she then strips this level of attention to a common human anxiety. Rankin's formative development at the mud hut as an individual and as a poet represents the nature of her work's immediacy. It is a movement from the local to a deeper source, "the feeling of going back into the earth [...] almost primeval".\textsuperscript{33}

In "Mound poems", the reach of the poem's distant peripheries raises questions about the limits of perceptual access. Rankin's sense of "going back" is a complex way of experiencing a place. The phrase connotes the cyclic form that dominates her work, suggesting the key motions and directions figured by her imagery and treatment of language: return, rediscovery, submersion and burrowing/embedding. In the poem "Littorals", Rankin connects images of telluric and oceanic skins with the process of going back:

\begin{quote}
Tucked into this hollow grey-walled crater
there is the belly of an ancient city.

Trace with your finger its walls and monuments
gently lift the skin
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{31} Harrison, Personal Interview with Bonny Cassidy, 28 September 2005.
\textsuperscript{32} Harrison, "Self, Place, Newness," 35.
\textsuperscript{33} Rankin, Jennifer Rankin interviewed by Hazel DeBerg
Bonny Cassidy

letting it fall
clear-wrinkled and dust-thin.

[...]

In some parts clay is colour
sticky and congealed

on your boots drying beside the wood-stove
in this warm and hissing kitchen.

Red cows bred out of red clay.
Men and women recognised by birth.

All places sharing red.
All places and the slit-walled tower.

Finding an ancient city
I find redness

enter earth-memories. [EH 50-53]

Skin, reminiscent of yet inverting the illegible bark in Wright’s “Scribbly-Gum”, presents the possibility of seeking the unrevealed.34 It is no coincidence that David Rankin explains the “essence I longed for” in “thoughts about the Australian landscape and identity” as a desire “to have such a comfort and familiarity with our landscape that it was as simple as our skin”.35 Yet Jennifer’s attention to skin, and its presence in the recovery of familiarity, is neither comfortable nor simple. In “Littorals”, its surface, like that of the page and of the crumbling, shocked earth, is not somatic but permeable, inviting exploration and awareness of its own metamorphic state. The poem’s title “Littorals” celebrates the nature of that surface as changeable and medial, and particularly represents it within Rankin’s typical vocabulary of interaction between earth

34 See Wright, The Two Fires 18.
35 Rankin, David, Written interview, 15/04/08.
Bonny Cassidy

and water. By subtitling the poem “Europe/Australia 1977”, the poet clearly marks the more-than-national significance of her poetic voice.

In this poem, consistent with Rankin’s sense of vitalism and the phenomenological role of skin as perceptual surface, epidermis is used metonymically instead of metaphorically. Like that of whiteness, Rankin’s motif of skin as a more-than-human surface subverts simplistic connotations of race and nation. In “Littorals”, skin is neither a uniquely human material nor a black/white identity. Investigated as both an Australian and European surface, it is a way of going back, but to what—a place from which human modes of identity are removed? In making a case for the more-than-human sense of ground in Rankin’s work, I would reject the notion that her poetics establishes a human/non-human duality. Furthermore, her work’s phenomenology reminds us that going back cannot mean the radical removal of human life from place, even when it accesses a voice that could be so very far above earth. Given her approach to poetry’s spatial possibilities, the economy and minimalism of her poetic forms ought not be interpreted as a search for absolute or original sense of place in the mode of romantic utopianism. “Littorals” accommodates human dwellings within the unrevealed place, so that going back to “earth-memories” means an acknowledgement of how human products and more-than-human life interrelate. In both “Littorals” and “The Mud Hut” (and even, we could argue, prefigured in “Williamstown”), the human product—construction and poem—is rethought in terms of the body, as a penetrable and decomposing form. In “Littorals”, the skin of the city is the same as that of earth, and the way to the coloured, clay texture of that skin is via the city itself. Rankin’s distinction, then, is between the mode of dwelling that invites going back, and the produced space comprised of transcendent verticals and impenetrable ground, which seal off earth-memories:

Around the ancient cities strong walls were built.
Broken they still serve
marking the sites of new diggings.

Now cities are built only of walls.
Between each thin steel fortress
mirrored men and women walk from memory. [EH 54-55]
Bonny Cassidy

In knowing how to go back to a place, Rankin’s poem withdraws from the construction of an objectifying thought-product that is “mirrored” and thus imitative. Her reader passes through the immediacy of affect, a space of presentation rather than representation. Is this space what Rankin calls “primeval”? Mooney offers an interesting definition of her work’s immediacy as “the replacement of the Classical-representational by the *primitive-abstract*”:

> I mean of course not at all primitive in that stupid use of it as opposed to civilised. One means it now as “primary”, as how one finds anything, picks it up as one does new—fresh/first.  

Mooney’s use of the word “primitive” is closer to primeval, and to Merleau-Ponty’s sense of prepersonal intelligence. A “stupid” definition of the term would make recourse to “association of the primitive with either animal simplicity or brutish ferocity”. I have evaluated the absence of both utopian simplicity and sublime ferocity in Rankin’s work; her avoidance of neo-romantic modes serves a purpose of moving away from “a prior discrimination between man and beast” or man and earth. The social and cultural connotations of “primeval” and “primitive” may be less appropriate to Rankin’s poetics than the naturalistic and physical idioms of the primordial and primal. That is to say, going back should involve neither regression, nor horror at the *more-than-self*. As Mooney explains, for Rankin it is an awareness and contemplation of the “*first*”.

I want to examine the significance of Mooney’s definition by investigating what it is that Rankin’s poetry finds “first”. I’d like to articulate what Rankin means by avoiding the “pre-determined” experience of place; and, secondly, to explore the affects of sensation as part of her work’s immediacy. While Rankin was energised by the sense of the primeval that she found in the work of Seamus Heaney and particularly Hughes, her own poetry’s encounter with the undetermined needs to be distinguished from Hughes’ influence on *Earth Hold*. This distinction is centred on voice, specifically, the difference between Hughes’ mythical narratives and Rankin’s searching, experiential cycles. Breaking out of the local culture and, to an extent, its focus on American influence, Rankin sought out the very locales of Hughes’ poetry in order to explore her

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38 Rankin, Jennifer Rankin interviewed by Hazel DeBerg, 2 March 1978.
Bonny Cassidy

attraction to a poetics of going back. His work, David Rankin claims, introduced her “to a darker and more tumultuous level of landscape and animal world”.39 She notes the “life force, life energy” of the bird described in Hughes’ “Hawk Roosting”, an effect conveyed by his will to “become it, and write a poem as if he is it”:40

I sit on top of the wood, my eyes closed.
In action, no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!
The air’s buoyancy and the sun’s ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth’s face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.
It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly —
I kill where I please because it is all mine.41

Hughes’ adoption of the bird’s voice clearly links to Rankin’s ambiguous personal pronouns, and particularly to her interest in aerial view. Yet “Hawk Roosting” also indicates the very different affect of their mutual attempts to understand more-than-human existence. The poem’s inhabitation of the bird’s viewpoint is superficial. Limited by anthropomorphic references to “dream”, “convenience” and “advantage”, it culminates in a synthesis of the animal’s perspective and Hughes’ own poetic voice through the imagining of “Creation”. This can be differentiated from the slippery, motile voice of “Earth lock” or “Island cycle”, in which bird-like viewpoints follow other,

39 Rankin, Written interview with Bonny Cassidy, 14 April 2008.
40 Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library. UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence Force Academy, MS 348, Series 9, Folder 1: Audio-visual, c.1976-1979, Comments and recollections of Ted Hughes (audio cassette).
Bonny Cassidy

shifting positions. In Rankin’s poems, voice tends to dissolve outward, into the space surrounding the poem, rather than consolidating itself as a narrative or dramatic identity, as it does for Hughes.

The sense of vitality in his work is based in its self-conscious attention to the origins of earthly life. This manifests itself in the creation myths of “Hawk Roosting” and the Crow poems, in which the primal is literally a narrative of genesis. The repetitive fragment lists of Crow, as in the poem “Lineage”, are like less cerebral “life force” of Rankin’s work:

Never Never Never

Who begat Crow

Screaming for Blood
Grubs, crusts
Anything

Trembling featherless elbows in the nest’s filth

But the minimalist form of “Lineage”, is ferociously used to convey the violence of visceral and vegetal growth. Indeed, Hughes’ poems seem to thrive on horror, particularly its coercion by language. For Rankin, language can only make primal contact if the poetic line and image return us to a phenomenological experience, through which the dynamic of firstness comes from outside the poem and is contemplated free of lyrical ethos.

Thus the “primitivist intercultural ramble”, in Harrison’s words, that Hughes provided as a blurb for Earth Hold neglects to acknowledge the unique sense of primal ground touched by Rankin.43 Noting that her sense of “bedrock” would be “familiar to the ancient Greek and the modern Hopi Indian”, Hughes perceives that the presence in Rankin’s work “silences both aboriginal and white man”.44 His perspective on the silent, static primitive, and the limited usefulness of that perspective to Rankin’s new way of

43 Harrison, "Holding the Elements (Rev of Earth Hold, by Jennifer Rankin),“ 19.
Bonny Cassidy

seeing place, is reiterated in a letter concerning his visit to the 1976 Adelaide Festival, where he and Rankin had met:

But what a weird ghostly glare they live in—like a primitive painting. Eerie, sinister, desolate, incredibly vivid—everything sits in this ancient sinister air, like a dream of some sort, full of hidden significance & strangeness. The birds are utterly peculiar, prehistoric antics, prehistoric cries, more like flying lizards. I just couldn’t get over a constant sense of amazement. It was all just what I’d imagined, but infinitely more so, & so beautiful. But I felt everybody was completely out of place there.45

Hughes’ overt sense of horror, and his connection of it to a human placelessness, revisits the “stupid” definition of the primitive, specifically its association in Australia with the imperial gaze. In contrast, Rankin’s purpose to advance a planetary sense of place is achieved by her work’s efforts to convey the presence and fluidity of perceptual process. With Harrison’s suggestion of “a sense of the connection between the deep structure of the poem and the nature of storytelling and myth”, it is too easy to confuse Rankin’s understanding of presence—“fresh/first”—with Hughes’ narrative impulse. If her poems are “like little fragments of ancestral myths”, their voice is saturated in immediate and present experience, rather than telling as an absence or loss.46 This is evident in Rankin’s posthumously published “First myth”, one of her most allusively Hughesian poems and yet one that is distant from the Christian teleology of his “Lineage”:

Here is the sky being born.

It breaks away from the earth.

Blue parting from the limestone cave
leaving the desert
seeping out of chasm and mountain.

Red from earth’s clay now stains the sky
each night a reminder of morning.

46 Harrison, Personal Interview with Bonny Cassidy, 28 September 2005.
Bonny Cassidy

Now sky mirrors earth.
The fiery core splits.
It hangs in the sky
It burns out from the earth
it warms the shared membrane.

Yet here where the edge rips away
lip parting from lip
here at the broken seal

Earth’s raw and continuing scream. [CP 185]

While it closes with the primal scream that opens “Lineage” (“In the beginning was Scream”), “First myth” is driven by the voice of encounter and recording that appears in “Earth count” and “Cliffs”. Not only is it rooted in “here” and “now”, but it undertakes the process of exploration found in “Island cycle” and “Littorals” — recognising the clay beneath the earth’s skin, and the continuity of its surface with the blurred metonymy of time, which, as in “Thin tree”, makes night a cyclic “reminder” of morning. The poem’s disorientating images are marked by detail reminiscent of Rankin’s island journal, such as the microscopic “shared membrane”, or the specificity of “lip parting from lip” and “the broken seal”.

It is as if Rankin’s poetic voice must itself be undetermined to fulfil its task; but if “we are through and through compounded of relationships with the world”, how can language possibly be made inalienable?47 The voice of “Mound poems”, “Morning poem”, the island works and aerial poems, and even of the hovering wanderer in “Koan”, is distinct from phenomena, yet somehow fitted around them, as if things were embedded in it. It is reminiscent of Levinas’ insomniac — a voice closer to an articulation of the line than of any single identity. It is able to encapsulate human movement through place, as well as the silent and invisible distances of alterity. The line’s manifestation in language reminds us that, while words are not the phenomena they record, the human experience that generates them is inalienable from the material it encounters. As Abram argues, “it is not human language that is primary, but rather the sensuous, perceptual life-world, 

47 Merleau-Ponty, “From Phenomenology of Perception,” 70.
Bonny Cassidy

whose wild, participatory logic ramifies and elaborates itself in language". The impact of Rankin’s use of primal voice is not that it transcends language but that it awakens us to contemplation, which collapses rigid hierarchical traditions of thought.

The undetermined is a state in which thought comes closer to sense. Rankin’s connection of skin and voice is overtly made in “Scratchings”, where contact replaces the duality of touch and articulation: “I peel back with this light / lifting and tearing old skin. / I touch the dead hide cracking” [CP 169]. Is the voice itself peeling back, or is it doing the peeling? Is it lifting, tearing and cracking, or is this a sensation? This dirty contact has little in common with the eminence occupied by Hughes’ speaker in “Cock-crows” (“I stood on dark summits, among dark summits”), and shares more with the ground-level sounds of John Clare, so often a voice of perceptual ambience and nested places. As Mooney writes, one picks up firstness, in the way that one picks up the line. The immediacy of this contact with the undetermined is accessed by sensation, a level of experience that is not produced but felt first, as an unceasing intake. The confluence of language and sensation in Rankin’s work, and its inhabitation of multiple perceptual positions, is due to her synaesthetic interconnection of spatial and visual line with auditory and oral affects. Abram explains this dynamic:

It is thus that a raven soaring in the distance is not, for me, a mere visual image; as I follow it with my eyes, I inevitably feel the stretch and flex of its wings with my own muscles, and its sudden swoop toward the nearby trees is a visceral as well as a visual experience for me. The raven’s loud, guttural cry, as it swerves overhead, is not circumscribed within a strictly audible field—it echoes through the visible, immediately animating the visible landscape with the reckless style or mood proper to that jet black shape. My various senses, diverging as they do from a single, coherent body, coherently converge, as well, as in the perceived thing [...] By diffusing or “diverging” voice into an open poetic space, Rankin is able to bring expression back to what Harrison terms “the pre-utterance element”.

51 Harrison, Personal Interview with Bonny Cassidy, 28 September 2005.
Bonny Cassidy

Tranter use the word “fresh” to indicate this element. Here is a clear familial link to Gray’s “subvocal” space, although Rankin is arguably the more radical poet in this regard. The nature of the perceptual process undertaken within her work is such that the reader, too, is diffused by the affects of language. We are brought into agency that cannot be produced by the poet.

“Cliffs” is an example of hermeneutic perceptual experience, in which the physical exploration of words is part of an ambient process. Its repeated “hard-edge” of “cl-” emulates the image of the cliff edge (by the long, straight “I”), its abrupt, tactile surface (in the plosive tongue shift from “c” to “I”), and its flinty, crumbling, clattering din (in our internal or external sounding of the word). The fricative “f” and the stressed “heav-” are also dominant and converging effects. “Faulting”, “fold” and “falling” counterpoint the plosive cliff edge, giving a sense of the softening effects of weather and of malleable chalk or sand in the earth. Likewise, “-ff-”, “fly”, “formation” and “flight” convey buffeting air currents and wind dynamics. Enunciation of “h”, an exhalation, denotes the stress of weight and tectonic movement, interrupted by the affricative “etch” that introduces the abrasive twig. This makes a shift from depth to topography that is not only unique to the profile of cliffs and chasms. The poem is also comprised of singular sounds—“through”, “this”, “thinly”, “space”, “twigged”—that are related to these patterns.

In the cyclic nature of Rankin’s body of work, the repeated appearance of “ch”, “sh” and “th” creates an affective vocabulary both particular and common to the phenomena of beach, cliff, pine forest, reef and earth that are imaged in her poems. Moreover, this vocabulary is a current than connects Ritual Shift and Earth Hold. In “Thatch”, soft fricatives carry the sound of wind over she-oak needles and tin; “nightly wiping the she-oaks / tin roof shivering”, “wind still thatches / with cloud, furling days. / I see through the sky”. This then echoes through the poem’s place, where “air thins, / weather for the crow”, to “the clay-floored shed” and “Swathed night” [RS 6].

“Transparencies” reinforces the sensations of that place: “The child / turned / in the shadow / made by the pine / with the shack”, “unaware / that she etched / for herself / in the air”. Rankin’s heterographic creation of place is evident in another early work, “Poem for Hans Arp”, in which “w” is used as a semivowel for the affects of wind. “For
Bonny Cassidy

a week the wind has had its way, "warping, throwing pieces noisily through", and—
declining into the susurrus of graded light and shadow—"watched by the wind a woman /
walks the broad expanse and stooping / sifts the chance patterns of the sun" [RS 16].
Reinforcing the ongoing, expansive edges of place, the reader of Rankin's work is
reminded of previous experiences within its space, such as the relationship between the
close of "Poem for Hans Arp" and the sibilant effects in "Daub wall", where "air still
steamed" and "in summer the mason bees and blowflies mingled / with the kerosene
primus and our whistling kettle". The reader's perceptual memory of this sound is stirred
again by the silky beach wind of "Patonga", its "sand / drawing / you out of the city /
circling", "soon after sunrise" [RS 20].

Contemplating a space that is produced in collaboration with our internal and
external surfaces, using the moment of our own bodies, Rankin's reader participates in an
experience with the parts of language that are inalienable from place. This is a mode of
reading comparable to that cultivated by Gray's "thoroughly 'early' modernist notion of
poetry and its interface with reading":

Gray's poetry denies (is opposed to) the latterday idea of reading which
characterises reading as a form of further textual "writing" among a limitless play
of signs. Gray's reading insists upon a meditative core at the heart of the reading
process.

This remark can be applied to the affective experience of reading Rankin's poetry, but
her work also advances from Gray's "re-imaging of what is felt and seen" by way of a
poetic voice that generates the fresh/first shock of the present rather than vicarious or
narrative re-creation.52

Her reader's identification with a place that is present in the senses nevertheless
remains a contemplation of the unknown. By associating primal shock with sensation,
we recognise the "meditative core" of Rankin's work, in which the self—including the
human—is suspended. Her work reflects Altieri's observation that, "a range of values
can be intrinsic to the affective states".53 Thus the "convergence" of perceptual
information that occurs in response to the affective sensations of her poetry must be

52 Harrison, "Self, Place, Newness," 40.
Bonny Cassidy

open-ended. Stewart has investigated “the prelinguistic and extralinguistic dimensions of sound embedded in the language of poetry” as ground that remains more-than-self. The “sound of poetry”, Stewart proposes, “is heard in the way a promise is heard”, whereby sound is metonymic to the other senses. “Whether we are in the presence of each other or not, the promise exists. Whether you, the one who receives the promise, continue to exist or not, the promise exists”. Rankin’s reliance upon the physicality of an affective poetics is crucial to the planetary identity of her work’s ambiguous locales. Like the littoral place, the inherent other within sense perception makes for a space that “works across all language”. Intertwining skin (somatic and intransitive) and voice (internal and transitive) within contact, Rankin’s poetry presents the unlimited nature of identity that is sought by the senses. Stewart writes:

As happens when we touch one hand with another, we can move between feelings of subjectivity and objectivity, between sensations that are localized and those that are dispersed; we experience a confirmation of our state of being and alienation from it at once. When Rankin asserts the challenge of finding “how to look” at place, she writes not only of how to sense but, subsequently, how to identify and identify with space. Going back requires contact, in the sense of the grounding defined by her work. Carter has suggested that contact means synchronicity with the undulations of ground, a primary awareness of gravity. It is also, as Abram points out, the act of recognising likeness: re-cognition brought about by the sharing of surfaces, which is a state shared by all sensitive beings. Is “the human intellect”, he asks, “rooted in, and secretly borne by, our forgotten contact with the multiple nonhuman shapes that surround us?”

Rankin’s work presents the horizontal kinesthesia of gravity as a source of existential liberty. Initially, “Littorals” identifies the anguish of “amoebic” individual and human embeddedness in space:

54 Stewart, Poetry and the Fate of the Senses 104.
55 Stewart, Poetry and the Fate of the Senses 104.
Here are the cliffs. And the mist. Closing in.

We climb the gate.
Here is the soft smack of wet mud.
We walk on the winding cliff path.

Below. The sea. Black and slow-swelling.
Deep shadow mirrors our path.

And then the rocks break through
soar up. And the cliffs slip. And the mist.

I hear only the deadened boom of the sea
breaking its watery membrane.

I fumble with the outline
close my hand on the stinging gorse
you curse your shape hopeless and vast.

We wobble into late afternoon
myopic, amoebic, arms flailing, alone.

There is both a sense of hermetic containment, “Closing in”, as well as amorphous
dematerialisation by which the body becomes “hopeless and vast” in space. In this
counter, as ground becomes an uncertain “wobble”, the line looks as if it will be lost
(“I fumble with the outline”). The unidentified “we” are no longer collective but “alone”
together. However, as Rankin writes earlier in the poem, anticipating the speaker’s
return, “It is only by going back / climbing in over the boulders / picking at the earth”,
that the line running into the geosphere is found. The search will draw the speaker into
continuity with “earth-memories”:

And again I go back into the darkness.
And again it is the cliffs.

On this cliff of swirling slate
Bonny Cassidy

where earth marks off its own self
black teeth biting at edges
showing its strength
in that last great fall below the sea

I cling where the fog eddies
move crabblike feeling for tussocks

and that wet slap of opening earth
that grips and takes me in. [EH 53-54]

If, as she remarked, Australian experience of place has been "gripped" by inherited
romantic idealism, then in "Littorals" Rankin images a new grip—the earth's hold. In
this return to the cliff, the speaker is now solitary but not alone in consciousness. Taken
in by the Open, they "cling" back in a mutual intertwining. It is only by going back to
contemplate its horror that "we" can enter ground with a new sense of comfort.

The freshness of Rankin's relaxation into ground can be contrasted with the
anxiety of contact expressed by a poet such as Sylvia Plath. Rankin read Plath's work
after Ritual Shift and before the publication of Earth Hold, about the same time as she
read Hughes'. In visiting Devon, Rankin would undoubtedly have gained some
appreciation of Plath's own index of earthly horrors, including perennial locales of harsh
and weathered coast, and the minutiae of vegetable life. The motif of decomposition is
noticeably common to both poets' work. In "Words", Plath associates processes of rot
with repetition and fragmented exclamation:

Axes
After whose stroke the wood rings,
And the echoes!
ECHOES traveling
Off from the center like horses.

The sap
Wells like tears, like the

57 Rankin, Guide to the Papers of Jennifer Rankin, Academy Library, UNSW@ADFA, Australian Defence
Force Academy, MS 348, Series 2 Folder 1, Notebooks and Diary, 1970s. Notebook entry, c.1977.
Bonny Cassidy

Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock

That drops and turns,
A white skull,
Eaten by weedy greens.\(^{58}\)

Like Hughes’ voice, however, Plath uses rhythm and aural affect as incantatory forces, conjuring a similar sense of primitive signification in “The Burnt-Out Spa”:

An old beast ended in this place:

A monster of wood and rusty teeth.
Fire smelted his eyes to lumps
Of pale blue vitreous stuff, opaque
As resin drops oozed from pine bark.\(^{59}\)

Furthermore, permutation and dissolution are sources of deep discomfort and anxiety in Plath’s work. In “The Bee Meeting”, Plath’s use of bees to signal “my fear, my fear, my fear” is very different to the contemplation of bees undertaken by Rankin’s speakers in “Daub wall” and “The Mud Hut”.\(^{60}\) In “The Burn-Out Spa”, the horror of interrelation between human and more-than-human forms is indelible:

The small dell eats what it ate once.
And yet the ichor of the spring
Proceeds clear as it ever did
From the broken throat, the marshy lip.

It flows off below the green and white
Balustrade of a sag-backed bridge.
Leaning over, I encounter one
Blue and improbable person


\(^{59}\) Plath, Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems 137.

\(^{60}\) Plath, Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems 211.
Bonny Cassidy

Framed in a basketwork of cat-tails.
O she is gracious and austere,
Seated beneath the toneless water!
It is not I, it is not I.\(^{61}\)

Whereas Rankin presents the body in continuity with place through real telluric elements including line, space and earth, Plath represents more-than-human phenomena in terms of bodily loci. As well as “the ichor” and “marshy lip” of the spring, the speaker of this poem is extended by an impermeable, imitative mirroring. Illusive continuity is a construct of the poetic space of metaphor and the lyric pronoun.

By exploring ground as a welcoming and familiar space, Rankin does not emulate Plath’s withdrawal (“It is not I, it is not I”) of voice from the deep surface. Ultimately, as Tranter notes, “Plath’s work went in one direction, and Hughes’ went in another, and I don’t think either of them has anything much to do with what was going on in Australia at that time”.\(^{62}\) Interestingly, Rankin’s own divergence from the manner of both Plath’s and Hughes’ writing was, simultaneously, a conscious response to and escape from the contemporaneous concerns of Australian poetics. The earth’s grip is, in her work, a meditative state in which self-consciousness dissolves. The search for that hold underpins the motion of her poems. While Rankin’s poetic voice defies the notion of origin or source, it moves through infinite and invisible foundations of ground. “Old slabs” that emerge from earth in “The line”, and the “old cycles” of “earth-layers” in “Mound poems” indicate Rankin’s awareness of the geosphere as before, beneath and beyond all other earthly phenomena. Going back is always “going into”:

[...] going into the desert, going into any desert, it’s sort of like getting under the earth, there’s always limestone caves under the earth, there’s always this cool room in the dark hut, there’s a surface earth quality, even an aridity of the desert, of the inner area of Australia, what John Olsen calls the void, and somehow beneath that and under that and if you can get into it and be with it, to me it has the solitary room and the place where I can be alone and private and in some sort of harmony or some sort of peace.\(^{63}\)


\(^{62}\) Tranter, Personal interview with Bonny Cassidy, 26 February 2007.

\(^{63}\) Rankin, Jennifer Rankin interviewed by Hazel DeBerg, 2 March 1978.
Bonny Cassidy

Its contemplative “peace” is a planetary space in which “the inner area of Australia”, both water basin and desert, is a metonym for more-than-human place. There, “going into the desert” is “going into any desert”. The anxiety of both human and national identity is suspended by Earth’s cycle, if one can learn to “get into it and be with it”. In Rankin’s work, the meditative affect of reading this space is clearly related to the Zen principle of “Detachment” to which Gray refers in “On Climbing the Stone Gate Peak”, a state in which one’s “mind is / unconcerned”. This method of dissolving self-awareness should be distinguished from the aggressive perceptual acts of separation and detachment. It can instead be directly linked to an awareness of gravity, and the search for ground. As Gary Snyder observes, Zen satori is “a trip to the ground of being, below and more fundamental than any kind of mental content, any symbols or any archetypes or visions”. His reluctance to give a role in that search to traditional aesthetic form or space reflects the affective experience of Rankin’s poetry, which engages in a level of intake prior to language. This explains why “Koan”, though not a conventional koan as Rodriguez points out, nevertheless achieves its purpose of “walking that edge between what can be said and that which cannot be said”. Walking that line, clinging to the earth’s grip, Rankin’s contemplative effects and affects produce a state of incarnation. This is true of the painterly quality of her poems’ spatial and objective properties, and her reader’s hermeneutic experience.

Rather than adopting a Western concept of physical suspension or transcendence, her work’s privileging of the line reflects the phenomenological mode of detachment, in which an embodied experience is reconciled with a common vocabulary of affective impacts. In this process, writes Steve Odin, “detachment is not privation but an act which recovers the totality of self and phenomena in an event of ontological disclosure”. The line that runs through Rankin’s body of work extends Heidegger’s emphasis on the horizon as a portal to recognition of forms beyond the self. This horizon is explored in Rankin’s images and compositions of flatness but also, more importantly, by her poetry’s

64 Gray, Creekwater Journal 23.
Bonny Cassidy

spatial, aural and visual openness, its images and structures of deep surface (including cycles), and her awareness of a burrowed or subterranean perspective. By engaging the reader with these levels of perception and language, Rankin emulates the discovery of yugen, which centres Zen aesthetics and which, as Odin underlines, plays an influential part in Heidegger’s terminology:

A phenomenological analysis discloses the noematic content of yugen as the beauty of hidden depth through a description of “horizon phenomena”, wherein illuminated objects clearly articulated at the foreground focus are seen to fade gradually into a vague penumbral region of darkness and shadows in the surrounding horizon of openness or nothingness at the nonarticulated whole of the background field.68

The result is a contemplative state of Gelassenheit (letting-be) that “affirms things in their concrete particularity without clinging to either being or nonbeing, existence or non-existence, form or emptiness, presence or absence”.69 As Miller remarks, echoing Levinas, this state can only occur “through an abnegation of the will”.70

Some of Rankin’s strongest engagement with contemplative detachment is made in posthumously published poems left out of Earth Hold. “Gibber cry” presents a “twisting” sequence of phenomena, turning invisible forms out from visible ones, and water out from earth, until the poem seems to rest in the grip of letting-be. “Earth cracks. / Trees snake out”, only to “Thin into emptiness”; “At the edge of the plain, scratches. / A river has been”. Typically, the “skin” of “flat cracking earth” indicates the depth of “shadow”, “old canyons” and “a new inland sea”. In “cloud”, the speaker finds “tree line”, yet being suspended in the air only returns them to gravitational contact with ground, “wandering amongst red sand”. “On the surface salt-pans float”, the poem hovers between here and “the underbelly of the desert”, where its “voice echoes through limestone caves” [CP 193]. While Rankin marks the disappearance of the poetic voice, she retains it in the “thin”, flattened form of the line. In “Earth web”, “I grow thin and sky stretches away”, as the poem’s voice undertakes the constant “rolling” movement

68 Odin, Artistic Detachment in Japan and the West: Psychic Distance in Comparative Aesthetics 171, Odin’s italics.
69 Odin, Artistic Detachment in Japan and the West: Psychic Distance in Comparative Aesthetics 121.
70 Miller, Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers 8.
Bonny Cassidy

that ultimately results in the “nonarticulated” field described by Odin. Equalising place into its nested position, “in the mountains I have found this dense sea”; until, detached “over a distanced earth”, the voice has thinned to the limit of form. The “crows cut in” and the edge of poetic space dissolves [CP 184].

The “penumbral” space where Rankin’s voice dwells is a ground of mutual and neutral contact, from which the poem discloses the more-than-self. It is also a space through which the rhythm of language wanders in non-temporal measures, as Stewart describes:

The point where consciousness has no inside, where it is overwhelmed by the world but not in fear of it, is the point of sublimity where time, in the sense of conventional instrumental and socially integrated form, is halted or placed in abeyance and existence takes place in a series of powerful “nows” inseparable from one another.71

In Rankin’s work, Levinas’ “swarming” points of a more-than-human world are no longer sublime in the conventional sense, but are a form of detachment. Rankin’s phenomenological process brings her reader to a state of outwardly turned consciousness, which is trained on perceptual information but flattened into ongoing embodiment.

Several commentators on Rankin’s work have suggested a link between its uniquely acute and abject existential awareness, and her terminal illness. In her foreword to “The Mud Hut”, Margaret Atwood claims it as a “startling” example of prolepsis, an interpretation that Rodriguez has questioned.72 Gray, who looked at the poem’s manuscript after Rankin’s diagnosis, felt that her poetry’s growing visceral and spatial presence was somehow accelerated by her imminent mortality.73 Similarly, both Harrison and Rudi Krausmann indicate that her work’s phenomenological mode was deepened by pain and the prospect of death. For Harrison, there is a “state of anxiousness or relation to the world” in Ritual Shift, which seems to become heightened in Earth Hold and particularly in the later, posthumously published poems. “I can’t help but think”, he reflects, “that, of course, this kind of state connects with being so ill—all of those issues

71 Stewart, Poetry and the Fate of the Senses 104.
Bonny Cassidy

of physical presence, fragility in the world". Krausmann, on the other hand, emphasises the detached mode of her work—the acceptance of horror—as a state of mortality from which normal frameworks of identity such as nationality and temporality are released:

She had become detached from the normal Australian life. She was always in a higher place. You have to be genuinely away from this world to write like this, or you [have to] reach another kind of consciousness.

Her work’s sense of alternative consciousness is, he suggests, what leads to the penumbral shading of its phenomenal “detail” into an undulating space. While Krausmann agrees that her work’s locales make reference to Australia, and that this reflected Rankin’s deep connection to her country, he perceives that “she’s also detached from Australia” at the same time:

She didn’t deal with reality anymore: she had to deal with her own reality. But this is what creates a lasting poetry; it couldn’t have happened if she wouldn’t have been sick, this poetry. [...] She hangs pure in the air, so to speak, and I suppose this had to do with her sickness.

The arc of her work’s development, he comments, reflects that, “she must have gone through transcendence” of “her own being—physically—but she was able to create these images”. The result is a poetic space that “doesn’t date”, so that in the final stretch of work after Earth Hold, “before she’s dying, in style it doesn’t really change”.

It is important to note, however, that fundamental elements of Rankin’s work, particularly its immediacy and economy, are also constant from its beginnings. That solidity is drawn from direct influences locally and abroad, her own observations of Eastern aesthetics and painterly form, travel, and her deep engagement with issues of Australianness, place and human identity. In highlighting the purpose of “how to look”, Rankin carries on Wright’s concern with a planetary change of consciousness that could be reached through the unrevealed, harsh and undetermined aspects of local place. At the same time, she relies on an embodied consciousness that shares perceptual language with others. This differs from a global poetics in which detail is rendered down to a homogenised space. Stephen Muecke has made the important point that “we must respect difference among non-humans” just as we have learnt to do between cultures, and

74 Harrison, Personal Interview with Bonny Cassidy, 28 September 2005.
75 Kraussman, Rudi, Personal interview with Bonny Cassidy, 10 May 2007.
Bonny Cassidy

this links to Rankin’s prioritising of individual bodily experience. Her work’s process of tunnelling beneath the surface, emerging in a fresh place, accepts the “new cracks” which appear in “The Mud Hut”. Rankin’s poetics is a return to “the same edge of / void”, where it makes contact with uncertain ground, reminding us of the continual shock of the first.

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Neither once nor only: the poetic horizon

It was at that Adelaide
(my only one) where I met (only once) Jenny
Rankin, who was elegantly gentle and
slender, and whom I
felt was somehow elite in a way for which
I was too clumsy. Someone had just spilled
soft drink on her summer dress. She couldn't
stay to talk, although I still stupidly
detained her until my husband-at-that-stage
made me feel inconsiderate to her,
which I was. She died
of cancer, too, a few years after. Now I
wish I had spoken with her longer, summer
drink or her soft dress or whatever. We remain
too polite in the wrong way to the living.

Jennifer Maiden, "My only Adelaide"

This study has anticipated tension between the potential of exiting the poetic space and the inexplicable appeal of returning to its source of complexity. It is not only the poet's crisis, but equally that of the reader and the scholar. Ultimately, the poetries of Maiden and Rankin demand that a perceived parallel relationship between the poetic and other encounters be broken down, and that the poems disperse into experience. Poems, writes Herman Rapaport, should "be thought of as other than a singular domain (form, work, experience) in which thinking and poetizing are unified by a truthful correspondence". In this flight from the poetic matrix, what remains of the poem? As

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1 This excerpt is taken from an unpublished poem by permission of Jennifer Maiden.
Rapaport suggests in response to Heidegger, the question demands that we “rethink traditional understandings of how the existential and the ontological come into truthful relation”. In poetry, “the detachment/reattachment of words from a body of language or poem suggests a separability that is clearly symptomatic of a renunciation or rejection of a traditional notion of art”:

It is not so much that the words are wilful and insist on their independence, because that would suggest that the words are of another mind than that of the formal elaboration of thought that is intended to keep them in line. Rather, it would be more accurate to fall away from, or detach from the region where they are poetically gathered or constellated.3

The critical reading, within which one might observe the poem drifting further from bonds of intention, history or form, is a type of such falling-away; yet, by reinforcing its own ends, it also eventually draws the work back together, albeit in a new sequence. It is important, on the other hand, that a response to the poetic achievements of Maiden and Rankin remains at least partly resistant to that closure, by acknowledging the works’ persistent openness and the particular properties of their ground. “Instead of thinking of truth as a content or structure”, writes Rapaport, “we might have to consider it a force that gathers and disperses poetic elements in unpredictable ways”.4

Contemporary debate in Australian literary criticism has shown that the study of Australian poetry can activate this way of thinking about form. David McCoey and Justin Clemens have pointed out Australian literary theory’s uniquely international self-positioning, maintained at the cost of its own identity.5 But perhaps such identification is to be found in the more-than-national politics of Australian literary practice itself. David Carter highlights the redundancy of reading Australian literature in relation to an “'oppressive dominant’ against which difference or diversity must be asserted”. Whether that dominant is imperial Britain or postmodern America, the usefulness of evaluating work such as Maiden’s and Rankin’s poetry within a fixed cultural context is limited. “Most culture”, Carter suggests, “happens below or beyond the horizon of nation”,

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5 Rapaport, Is There Truth In Art? 35.
Bonny Cassidy

through such various and heterogeneous networks of influence and interest as this thesis has identified. It is impossible to read Maiden’s and Rankin’s work (and, possibly, any Australian poetry) without perceiving “a shifting set of relationships—between local, regional, national and international co-ordinates.” The works of Maiden and Rankin do not demand that their historical contextualisation be dismissed, but perhaps, on the contrary, they suggest how “a new (positive) sense of culture within the nation” could be read. I feel that they are able to realise the aesthetic potential within Carter’s notion of the “public good”:

Can we imagine literature not merely as subversive of national identity, but producing versions of national community to which we might give our assent?

Can we take seriously the idea of literature having a role to play in forming good citizens?

Maiden’s and Rankin’s shared sense of ethical purpose draws their works’ historical significance into confluence with its poetic design. Maiden’s purpose to “disrupt conventional aesthetics” by obstructing rhetoric and the incarnate mode of lyric voice, immediately engages the poetic space with time and place beyond its national or generational moment. Perhaps this is what Chris Wallace-Crabb means when he likens the “sacred” effect of Maiden’s poems to “psalms”. She is, he suggests, one of numerous Australian poets who impart confidence “about the fate of poetry”, believing in “comparative autonomy” and idealistically resistant to the commercial and economic condition of the form. Interestingly, McCooey conflates this resistance with the suburban condition of poetic expression, “an expressive act devoid of expression” that, in theory at least, exists for a purpose if not sacred then alternative to consumption. A poetry of autonomy, however, works against the intersection that I perceive between

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6 Carter, "Good Readers and Good Citizens: Literature, Media and Nation," 137.
7 Carter, "Good Readers and Good Citizens: Literature, Media and Nation," 145. This point has been demonstrated in a variety of critical work, not only attending to Eastern and American influences on Australian poetry, as highlighted in the previous chapters, but also to networks of European tradition. See, for example, Hawke, John, "Australian Literary Criticism: An International Approach," Salt 15 (2002).
8 Carter, "Good Readers and Good Citizens: Literature, Media and Nation," 139.
10 Wallace-Crabb, Chris, "In the Pop Age or the Battle Between the Weak and the Strong," Read It Again (Cambridge: Salt, 2005) 55-56.
11 McCooey, "Neither Here nor There: Suburban Voices in Australian Poetry," 102.
Bonny Cassidy

language, interrelation and environment in Maiden’s poetry. As it draws increasingly close to current affairs, appearing with intrepid regularity in daily newspapers, perhaps her work can be better imagined as a poetry of anticipation.

Similarly, Rankin’s creation of a planetary poetics of place is not ignorant of nation but, rather, acutely responsive to:

[...] certain histories we cannot opt out of: here and now, for instance, the history of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian, the history of assimilation and multiculturalism, or the history of Australia’s relations to Asia.12

Her absorption of far-reaching influences, not only culturally but also technically, answers what Harrison sees as “questions of care and responsibility to the world that you are in”. Her ability to interpret place as regional as well as planetary means that Rankin’s work imagines itself into an Australia that would flourish beyond her lifetime. The necessity of a contemplative aesthetics to her understanding of environment could only have been accessed from outside the colonial tradition—before, ahead and alongside it. As Harrison remarks:

Rankin clearly understood that you have to find a kind of meeting place in the poetry. [...] I do think we’re talking here about people in the past, as well as people in the future, and we’re talking about people who may have very different perceptions of that hillside.

This is why he describes her as “that ‘big’ writer” who, akin to Wright, “would have been able to create some sense of dialogic space with indigenous poetics”.13 Rankin’s attempts at articulating perception present, through her poems, attempts to locate Being.14

One way of revealing the ongoing functionality of these bodies of work is to see them as “longpoems”, whose serial extension is necessary to their realisation of open poetic—and thus critical—space. In that space, “the poem’s relation to time is a question that can only be posed in time”.15 We are returned to Adorno’s sense of aesthetic materiality, in which form is necessary to function. Time within Maiden’s and Rankin’s poems sits in comfortable interaction with the readers’ time; the poems’ sustained and yet

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12 Carter, “Good Readers and Good Citizens: Literature, Media and Nation,” 139, Carter’s italics.
13 Harrison, Personal Interview with Bonny Cassidy, 28 September 2005.
14 Brady, “Judith Wright, Australia and the Poetics of Place,” 226.
15 Silliman, “‘As to Violin Music’: Time in the Longpoem,” 4, Silliman’s italics.
Bonny Cassidy

alayed nature “can never be originary in the sense of pretending to be direct speech
motivated by some surfeit of emotion”.\textsuperscript{16} If a common poetics was to be formulated out
of their work, it would be based around the necessity of reading the poem as an unfolding
event, a process that can be likened to the distinction between sensation and affect,
whereby “time functions as a kind of gravity within the linguistic act, holding things
together”.\textsuperscript{17} To find gravity or ground in a poem, we must understand that, “essential for
the truth in art to appear is the trait or trace of the human that […] is postmetaphysical
and posthuman”.\textsuperscript{18} Time and gravity are synonymous with purpose and ground, a poem’s
pull between discovery and recovery. They force us to approach language as a trace, and
reading as a tracing of language: as an act of surveillance and scrutiny, or as a physical
tracking and unearthing. This poetics is akin to Fletcher’s theory of the environment-
poem, “a peculiar mode of realization, a genre even, which would somehow collapse
substance and process together, fusing state and change of state”. The works of Maiden
and Rankin present “a loose and notably inconsistent completeness”.\textsuperscript{19} This challenges
the metaphysical position of the poem:

There appears to be something impossible about this descriptive notion of a
shared conversational poem that simply is an environment. For the claim to be
literally true, the reader would have to be actually living inside a verbal
construct. That can happen in science fiction, but can such living occur in
ordinary life? The answer would be yes, if the imagined union of the poetic form
and the reader’s experience is in fact the most imposing aspect or part of that
experience.

This effect generates “a middle voice” that positions itself as “neither active nor passive”
toward events in the poetic space, and which clearly connects Oppen’s pre-social
expression with Gray’s “subvocal” poetic presence.\textsuperscript{20} By recognising the dual potential
of language as violence/choice or detachment/contemplation, the middle voice frees that

\begin{itemize}
  \item[16] Silliman, "'As to Violin Muse': Time in the Longpoem," 6, Silliman's italics.
  \item[17] Silliman, "'As to Violin Muse': Time in the Longpoem," 3.
  \item[18] Rapaport, \textit{Is There Truth In Art?} 35.
  \item[19] Fletcher, \textit{A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment and the Future of the
  Imagination} 227.
  \item[20] Fletcher, \textit{A New Theory for American Poetry: Democracy, the Environment and the Future of the
  Imagination} 165, Fletcher’s italics.
\end{itemize}
Bonny Cassidy

space for what I, borrowing from reader-response theory, have called its transactional possibilities. The combination of serial and procedural forms creates the “unpredictable” potential found in the works explored here—that “inconsistent completeness” that attends human identity and which is more compelling for post-semiotic discourse than it might be for modernism’s crisis of truth.

If, as Dewey observes, there has been a “complete failure of philosophy to meet the challenge that art offers to reflective thought”, then this thesis identifies poetry’s attempts to revive that challenge.21 The mediatory capability of poetic space can become the supreme site for redirecting an aggressive impulse within the individual; it is a “saving otherness”.22 Its antagonists, terror and horror, might be positioned within or without the poem. Maiden’s poetics attempts to present flawed systems of interaction within a form that allows them to be actively investigated: poetic form is a tool with which the reader evolves toward an improved ethical awareness. Her approach to Vietnam contrasts with that of Levertov, who—despite holding a similar sense of the poem’s utility—emphasises poetry’s ability to “goad” change.23 But whereas the very process of Maiden’s work is to work through, rather than force change, Rankin’s poetry must plunge into the already-altered. Its process works to become reconciled with having returned from the sublime impulse to a primal connectivity. It is only through arriving at the source of horror that her work marks out a space defined by an entirely different reaction to the more-than-human.

Yet the otherness of poetic space risks setting the aesthetic against a problematic reality, reiterating Adorno’s vision of “the world’s agony” as unrepresentable.24 Neither Maiden nor Rankin adopts poetic voice as a way of meeting violence with violence—or otherness with otherness. Dewey highlights this crucial distinction:

The matter at stake is whether release comes by way of anodyne or by transfer to a radically different realm of things, or whether it is accomplished by manifesting

21 Dewey, Art As Experience 295.
22 Elder, Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature 125-126 (my italics).
23 Elder, Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature 125-129.
24 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 6-8.
Bonny Cassidy

what actual existence actually becomes when its possibilities are fully expressed [sic].

By referring the aesthetic experience to human nature, Dewey’s theory reinforces Mohanty’s argument for a more nuanced notion of objectivity than that based in the division of poetic form from incarnate experience. For both Maiden and Rankin, the poem’s “saving” tactic is a metonymic instance of interrelation and contact, which dismisses “the notion that there is such an inherent and deep-seated antagonism between the individual and the world [...] that freedom can be attained only through escape.” Poetry’s otherness is always touched, always diminishing into the almost absorptive sameness that we bring to language.

Maiden’s and Rankin’s work reflects its own negotiation of purpose and ground. For this reason, I draw an aesthetic vision from their poetry that is ready to reclaim the Romantic conflation of poetry and philosophy. Eagleton suggests that if irony is “the fault-line or deconstructive point at which self and world are initially uncoupled, then it can be said to provide a threshold between the aesthetic and the ethical”. The processual nature of the works discussed in the preceding chapters opens the poems to this threshold. Therefore, within this study, process is a more apt term than irony. Like Badiou’s ethics of sameness, these poems can be read as a drawing-together, rather than an un-working (déseouvrement). Is it not possible that they are constructive as well as existing in that lawless space “prior to the future”? Their structures of process break down the dualism of a world inside/outside the poem, and thus have effects on the epistemology of reality within/without ourselves. Have we overcome Adorno’s belief that “the structure of our consciousness obliges it to strive for unity”? Whether or not we have, I believe that the poems explored in this thesis suggest that this can be the case. The processes of becoming disincarnate and achieving contemplation are not antithetical, but can be seen as equivalent states in which moments of non-dualism pierce our thinking and feeling. These are, indeed, a privilege of “being something momentary and sudden”

as an aesthetic form. However, when they can be recognised by criticism, too, the moment is extended.

The affective nature of Maiden’s and Rankin’s work suggests a poetics that is not only “for-itself”. It is work that induces a state of “being-for”, which preserves otherness but seeks sameness:

[Being-for] breaks decisively that endemic separation, which under the condition of being-with remains the baseline from which every encounter is but a temporary departure and to which partners return (or are pushed back) after every episode of encounter; and a baseline from which no full departure, however, momentary, is plausible, as long as the intrinsic fragmentariness of being-with encounters persists. Being-for is a leap from isolation to unity; yet not towards a fusion, that mystics’ dream of shedding the burden of identity, but to an alloy whose precious qualities depend fully on the preservation of its ingredients’ alterity and identity.

Free from an awareness of semiotic play, the wandering reader “seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign”. They come upon a poetic environment or space that exists within the wider ecology in which human experience unfolds. It is inseparable from a rhythm “in which the organism falls out of step with the march of surrounding things and then recovers unison with it”. The reader’s recovery of ground occurs as moments of solidity in sensation, line, space and metonym. Through these forms, the poem is not a copy of reality but an enactment of it. An interactional poetics, partly anticipated by Mallarmé’s hermeneutic playground, offers an alternative to the syntagmatic axis, placing “into question the referential equation of word = meaning”. It is possible to find in Maiden’s and Rankin’s work that “the word has qualities in itself which should not necessarily require either a semantic exchange value or an absolute ground, in order to be appreciated”. Metaphor becomes an unfeasible trope because it pretends to a whole that is not possibly available to human consciousness nor, arguably, to any being located in an environment. An alternative to

30 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 79.
32 Bauman, Life In Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality 51-52, Bauman’s italics.
Bonny Cassidy

Levertov’s poetic truth would be one that creates an experience of inhabitation, occupation and construction, as well as the opening or spacing, of meaning. The nature of its ground would be distinct from the Romantic unveiling of an apparently universal truth, and yet it also exceeds Romanticism’s (and the environment-poem’s) limited access to otherness. This duality is crystallized by Maiden’s heightened, dramatic diction, and Rankin’s synaesthetic and onomatopoeic word-scenes. Here, Adorno’s aesthetic theory becomes useful by describing the aesthetic object in a way that places Romantic vision at a distance:

What appears is not interchangeable because it does not remain a dull particular for which other particulars could be substituted, nor is it an empty universal that equates everything specific that it comprehends by abstracting the common characteristics.36

The “fact” of poetic impact, as Maiden puts it, cannot be sacred. It may be related to a Romantic sense of ethical purpose, but it need not reaffirm a dialectical vision of separate real and aesthetic freedoms.37 This would seem to be directly asserted by Rankin’s note-to-self: “It is”. It refutes Adorno’s assertion that the aesthetic work is “thrown into relief by it – the unlocatable grammatical subject – is not; it cannot be referred demonstratively to anything in the world that previously exists”.38 To this extent, poetic ground can depart from insistence on the arbitrary correlation between ideas and things. Instead of a hierarchical chain of influence, inspiration or impact, and instead of a topographical or indelible map, the poem might be a mobile or a warren.

Aesthetic play is replaced by an understanding of hermeneutic recovery as experiential. A circuit of false time is broken when our perceived disempowerment and passivity as aesthetic receivers is undermined. Read this way, a poem allows our pre-social moral identity of being-for another, and acknowledges the unlimited freedom of reality, which in no way cancels out the various contingencies and limitations that might then be imposed by interaction with another. Altieri has observed that by stressing the fictionality of the aesthetic work and of language we tend to dismiss both the intentional

36 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 83.
38 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 105.
Bonny Cassidy

and affective forces that animate them, undoing the "possibilities for belief" in solidity.\textsuperscript{39} Rather than "seeing beneath appearances or developing symbolic registers" we can shift writing and reading "from hermeneutic views of expression into performative ones."\textsuperscript{40} Thus, types of identification can be ways of developing attitudes without instituting delimiting beliefs. The open work may be serial but it may, at the same time, trace a narrative of one's path through it:

Identification need have no reference point beyond the specific mode of activity toward which one takes a second-order attitude. For identification is not a process of comparing states to see which ones actually belong to me. It is more like a process of extending the self by deciding that this mode of activity engages me to take responsibility for it because of who I become during the time I am engaged in it.\textsuperscript{41}

Returning to the presence of time in the poem, we are reminded that the poem's ability to extend the self, and its fluid involvement within reality are enabled by the foundations of poetic form. Adorno, writes Eagleton, questions the prospect that, "if art smashes through the formal contours which demarcate and estrange it from ordinary life, will it not simply succeed in spilling and defusing its critical contents?"\textsuperscript{42} Yet it seems that Adorno's own emphasis on the materiality of the aesthetic object prevents the formal identification of the work from being lost. By focusing on the objective presence of the work, it acquires what Wolfram Schmidgen calls "a distinctive power that escapes the alternatives of autonomous or determined, idea or material":

The best description of this kind of object force may be "gravitational": a force exerted by a material entity whose peculiar density grows out of a process of selection, combination, figuration that radiates, attracts, constellates.\textsuperscript{43}

In other words, its own identity politics or power relationships — solidified in anything from a change of tense to a lacuna — are as changeable and contingent as its reader's. Anyone who interacts with the work becomes aware that it is capable of "the terror of

\textsuperscript{39} Altieri, \textit{The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects} 114-115.
\textsuperscript{40} Altieri, \textit{The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects} 119.
\textsuperscript{41} Altieri, \textit{The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects} 138-139.
\textsuperscript{42} Eagleton, \textit{The Ideology of the Aesthetic} 350.
\textsuperscript{43} Schmidgen, "Reembodying the Aesthetic," 63.
Bonny Cassidy

identity and immediate sense perception". Consistent with Burke, the poem can present the prospect that:

[...] words are not simply tools of representation, transparent placeholders for the ideas they represent, but objects in their own right, with their own peculiar solidity and a freedom of combination that exceeds, but is not essentially different from, that of other objects.

Words remain ineffable; they are, therefore, a forceful dramatisation of evaluation, revealing, writes Mohanty, "that human solidarities can be grounded not only in common beliefs and historical struggles" but in aesthetic, and specifically poetic, experience.

The identity politics of language present a struggle with the unknown that binds readers together within a state, not of objectivity in its traditional sense, but of disinterest. The nature of language is sublime — this can denote not only the naturalist affective quality of poetry, that “temples, sunsets and deserts, even horrific spectacles that we cannot tear our eyes away from, all have formed the bases for social cohesion”, but, more rigorously, the quality of a poetic experience itself as one that is always partly detached from the present:

Art exists as a public thing, as an extrapersonal reality. Disinterest in this context becomes a deeply interested commitment to allow for meaningful public discourse, to make a public, communal space in which the deepest values of the culture are recognized as more than private — precisely the condition that allows for a release from self-interest.

If it is alert to the “extrapersonal” condition of poetry, criticism can reproduce that condition as a theoretical environment. While impossible for the critic, the poet’s ability to sublimate their identity within the work nevertheless suggests a timely philosophical aspiration to care: the undulating positions of meeting difference and analysing sameness.

Schmidgen’s remarks on the objectivity of words put me in mind of a poem, “In Hospital”, by Gwen Harwood. Its bedridden speaker, unlike her “unwilling” daughter, is

44 Schmidgen, "Reembodying the Aesthetic," 68.
45 Schmidgen, "Reembodying the Aesthetic," 76.
Bonny Cassidy

faithful to a conviction that the relationship between "things" and ideas is quite direct. Appropriately, the poem is centred on a Stevensian jar, but Harwood replaces his image of distortion with one of crystal clarity. Although language has failed in pain's "speechless world", it's this failure that is illusory: the poem remains the world of a speaker, whose collection of words ultimately succeeds in rendering her objects—things that represent more than memory and experience:

My daughter yesterday
unwillingly for my sake
brought here, carried with her
this jar full of odd things,
stones, shells, glass, scavengings
from our last holiday:

sea-toys, child's jewels, rolled
to smooth anonymous shapes. She filled
the jar with water to bring
a gleam back from their chilled
and speechless world. They hold
salt air, soft stone, clear light
and a swallow's ragged flight,
wings closed, continuing

in air between wave and wave.

Like word-objects themselves, these bits and pieces are air, stone, light, animal, flight, and ocean. In this poem, memory is recognised as a present event, so that Harwood is concerned with its enactment rather than with what is remembered. As she comments, poetry is "both the present and the future, so that the experience of a particular time takes on possibilities of infinity". Its solidity is liquid:

The grace
of water rinsed, re-made
these stones. My tongue's betrayed

Bonny Cassidy

by pain. They speak my prayer. 51

Is it also possible that other experiences, including criticism, could “imitate art’s own attempt to be emancipated and emancipating constellations of praxes and interactions”? 52

The ultimate con-textual moment suggested by Maiden’s and Rankin’s work would be the textual one, in which the poem is composed from writing and reading acts. Such moments would not be isolated from their environment, of course, but they could not imagine a world without the poem. For it is true that, “somehow, we always know when we are approaching the space of poetry, even if we are unable to define it”. 53 Making that definition has become more difficult given the dismissal of a “sacred” role for poetry.

And yet, where order has been dismantled, there is poetry’s continuing attachment to arrangement; and where identity has been dispersed, there remains the poem’s strange, sure solidity. A new Australian poetry might be one that diffuses tension between exiting the poem and returning to reality, and that replaces this with movements along a spectrum of form. It would offer a cyclic experience: an unending design of folding back or revisitation. It would demonstrate the redundancy of that tension to an experience of reading that acknowledges the infinite complexity of both language and the identity politics that shape it. Its exemplary poem would be other than a single domain; not only a product but a producer itself. We would not remain polite to it, nor it to us; it would be living, and a conversation with it would be possible.

52 Finlay, The Romantic Irony of Semiotics: Friedrich Schlegel and the Crisis of Representation 171.
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217
Bonny Cassidy


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Bonny Cassidy


