

Julia Randall's Poetic Finitude: Mapping the Infinite onto a Poem

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Abstract

Julia Randall (1924-2005), an important but insufficiently appreciated American poet who spent part of her life teaching at Hollins College in Virginia, and retired to the countryside near Baltimore, was a great poetic musician. She had various strategies for minimizing the “successiveness” of her poem, as if the poem gathered together moments of history or the living variety of a great landscape, into the charmed circle of the poem. In this essay, I note human strategies of mapping the infinite into the finite (in thought and vision) which are familiar to, and formalized by mathematicians. And then I point out where and why they occur in the poems of Julia Randall.

Introduction

In every poem, as in every song or sonata, there is a tug of war between the works's temporality, its successiveness as the reader moves from line to line, from stanza to stanza, from movement to movement, and its spatiality, its shape, as it appears on the page (of the book of poems or the hymnal or the sheet music.) That shape often becomes a figure (both geometrical and literary) for the transcendence of time and evanescence, for the way in which things endure in our hearts and minds. Poets who do not love succession often employ various strategies to escape from the linearity and lapse of time, as well as from the linearity of narrative (driving us from beginning to middle to end) and argument (insisting on the necessary inference from premise, premise, premise... to conclusion). There are two obvious ways to avoid the flow of time, the narrative of human action, and the insistent direction of argument: death and immortality. But neither of these strategies will work for a poet, who must stay alive to sing here on earth, where we still have ears to hear. Rather, a poet typically uses periodicity and more generally repetition (the identification of initially distinguished elements) in various ways, and may also prove especially fond of circles, rings and spheres, the result of various kinds of mental “compactification.” Among these poets is Julia Randall (1924-2005), an important but insufficiently appreciated American poet who spent part of her life teaching at Hollins College in Virginia, and retired to the countryside near Baltimore. In this essay, I will cite poems from her *The Path to Fairview: New and Selected Poems*, with poems culled from her six preceding books [3]. She often tried to minimize the successiveness of her poems, so that they would appear as if present all at once, or as if they gathered things in, as our human vision gathers in the night sky under the dome of heaven, or the forested plains of Maryland within the circle of the horizon. And since our human audition identifies the same note and the same phoneme, so that repetition unifies a song, she also used her skills as a fine verbal musician. Given Randall's project of creating a lively stasis, earthly and divine, finite and infinite, dynamic and timeless, there are a few schemata from our ordinary experience which find expression in mathematics, that middle ground between Being and Becoming, and beautifully serve her purposes.

Human Habits, Mathematical Forms

In traditional verse forms in English, we hear the same metrical patterns repeated over and over: iambic pentameter gives us five feet with ten syllables, the second syllable stressed in each foot. In each line of Marlowe's or Shakespeare's blank verse, despite their studied departures from the ideal form, we know what the form is and we hear it, a kind of aural ghost, behind each line; it is always the same. In end-rhymed poems, the full rhymes, masculine or feminine, are always the same phoneme. Rhymed or unrhymed poems may also include a great deal of alliteration, consonance and assonance. Then our ears register not only the metrical pattern or recurrent patterns of the end rhymes (for example, ABAB) but also the chime that complicates it: three occurrences of sibilance in one line, for example, or a glottal stop in the middle of a line echoing another in the middle of the next. The heart of the pattern is a rhythm or a phoneme that is repeated, always the same, and that pure repetition gathers the parts of the poem together, identifies them. In poems with refrains, the repeated line or lines always sound the same, though their meaning may change, as in the great villanelles of Auden or Dylan Thomas; and likewise in certain hymns, where the first stanza is repeated at the end, we find its meaning may have subtly altered. Yet the identity of sound still works its magic, pulling the parts of the poem together, a kind of aural superposition.

So let us first think of succession as a Euclidean line, marked off with a zero and then the integers at regular intervals, positive integers going off to the right and negative integers off to the left, thus endowing the line with a directedness, rather like the arrow of time. There it is: infinite, fatal succession. What shall we make of it? Well, we can always “mod out”! To say that two integers are congruent “modulo n ” means that if they were divided by n , an integer, the remainder in both cases would be the same; thus the odd primes 5, 13 and 17 (for example) are congruent to, or equivalent to, $1 \pmod{4}$. It is easy to see that every integer n divides up the infinite set of integers into n equivalence classes, $\mathbf{Z}/n\mathbf{Z}$, which can then themselves be treated as elements of a set; indeed, they form a finite group. (If $n = p$, p prime, then these equivalence classes $\mathbf{Z}/p\mathbf{Z}$ form a finite field.) This sorting of the integers by ‘modding out’ a subgroup provides useful information, especially when n is prime, or the power of a prime; but that is the number theorist's concern, not the poet's. In any case, we have packed up infinity into n suitcase-sets, and we are left with a nicely behaved finite group or field [1].

Here is another mathematical strategy. We can “compactify” infinite spaces, by means of various mappings. Thus we can set up a one-to-one correspondence between the infinite Euclidean line and the circle, and the infinite Euclidean plane and the sphere. In the former case, we think of the circle with radius r as centered at the mid-point of the x -axis within the Euclidean plane, just where the x -axis and the z -axis meet. (See Figure 1 below.) Then we map the line parallel to the x -axis, at a distance r “south” of it, onto the circle in the following way. We map the point $P' = (0, -r)$ on the line (directly below the meeting point of the x -axis and the z -axis) to the “south pole” of the circle. We continue the process by mapping each point $P' = (x, -r)$ on the line to a point P on the circle by drawing a line from each point $(x, -r)$ on that line to the circle's “north pole” N and finding the point P where it intersects the circle. This means, if we extrapolate, that the two ends of the line, at positive infinity $P' = (\infty, -r)$ (infinitely far to the right) and at negative infinity $(-\infty, -r)$ (infinitely far to the left) both ultimately get mapped to the north pole. Draw some lines for yourself on this diagram, where P' is very far out to the right or left, and you'll see that P on the circle approaches closer and closer to N , the “north pole.” Here is another way of putting it, from projective geometry: the line goes off in two different directions, forever; but if we add the point at infinity at either end, and identify infinity with itself, we can consider the line a circle. Since the standard way of representing time is as a (directed) line—often, as noted above, a line given direction by assigning numbers to it but sometimes just a line with an arrow-tip—this is another way to both assert and deny heading off into the distance of the past or future, a way to configure stasis [4].

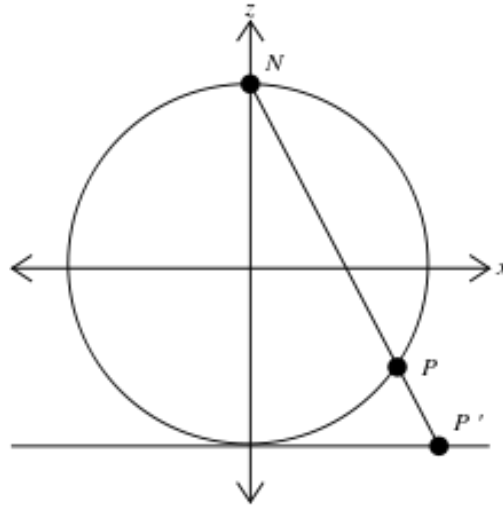


Figure 1 : The Euclidean line mapped onto the circle.

Repetition in Randall's Poetry

Julia Randall had the rare ability to create a phonic texture so rich in consonance, assonance and rhyme, that it holds the poem in your ear, as if it occurred to you all at once. Precisely because the phonic units in a poem have no semantic import, they cannot be developed; rather, they are just the same element whenever they reappear and resound, and so pull all the parts of the poem where they occur back into the same timeless moment. Succession is subordinated to and suppressed by sheer gorgeous repetition, even though this poem, "The Winds," is fifteen lines long.

The Winds

The winds of space, spiced with the latest spring,
 Even stinging on the lips like winter's strong
 Unstoppered breath, are music. But my song
 Stammers and breaks upon the winds of time.
 My love, if you were only of this place,
 Poor as it is, and death to face
 Soon from the windy skies, still I could play
 Notes that would turn black midnight to broad day,
 Wounds to excuse for mercy, want to flood,
 And pay all favors with my lung-driven blood.
 But you go guarded from that tune, wrapped back
 In some old concert of a summer night,
 Or clash of bells against a freezing noon,
 Deaf to the weather where I mark my time,
 And time my enemy I cannot sing.

The ideal song would be present all at once, folded on itself, its elements identified; and there in the song, captivated by the music, would be Randall's lost love, retrieved from time, death, disagreement and discord. Human poets in time must do what they can to escape the winds, the winding and unwinding, of time; so Randall gives us the light words spring, stinging, strong, song, winds, windy, wounds, want,

tune, time, time and sing, interwoven inextricably with the dark words breath, breaks, place, death, face, black, broad, flood, blood, guarded, wrapped, back, clash, deaf, mark, cannot. She calls up her love, and she cannot call him up; nor can she stop trying to recall him.

Randall is thus also interested in the singular occasion which, though it can be revisited in memory, happens only once. We might think of the lightening strike of love; another good example of the unrepeatability act is the creation of the work of art. Then the work itself becomes permanent testimony to the incursion of something absolute which disrupts and questions mere succession. Here is her poem "Giverny," about the visions of Monet, in his own backyard, his *jardin*.

Bearded to match his willow, he sits here
By his pond. It is always summer. Far away
Ice cracks the jetties, holy towers fall,
The Channel rages. Let the world be done.

In the quiet of the lilies, never won
Since Eden rose and the archangel fell,
That battle with the light goes on and on.

What is brought here to steadfast expression is Monet's moment of illumination where subject and object (his beard, the willows; his willows, the painted willows; his inner peace and the quiet lilies; his battle with the light and the painted lilies) finally correspond. And time, in the poem, in the painting, stands fast as a witness, in love with the infinitely meaningful flowers, bathed in water and light.

Compactification in Randall's Poetry

Randall was a stay-at-home, but her poems do not merely walk us through her familiar territory, indicating this neighborhood and the next, and neighborhoods beyond. Instead, she makes one little place, Dulaney's valley outside of Baltimore, an everywhere by superimposing mythical and foreign places on it. She maps an almost infinitely extensive elsewhere on her valley, so that her home becomes a palimpsest, a locus of compounded and superimposed meanings. The layered seeing is not at odds with Descartes' directive to clear the mind of distractions in contemplation: foreign associations may be the key to essence, while ordinary association, the merely local, may distract. (To solve old geometrical problems, recall that Descartes overlaid them with the shadows of algebraic equations and new-fangled Italian tracing devices.) The order of essences is often for Randall, as for many mystics, at odds with customary framework, ordinary perspective. She distrusts it as 'mere,' like appearances, like language. So she writes in "Winter Bloom,"

A cotton snow, and the dogwood
Blooms as in April, but more briefly, to be spent
In a short sun, no berries from this snow. And the bent
Hemlock needs knocking off. This makes me wonder
About beauty and truth.

And truth to tell,
This is a false bloom, ephemeral. But then
If you're still up at ten
To one in Schubert's moonlight, you will cry
On beauty, though it goes
Without saying, like bird cries,
Without translation.

The ordinary phrases “ten to one” and “it goes without saying” leave their echo here, but change meaning completely in the way that Randall wrenches them around, across line breaks, across heartbreak: if you’re still up at ten, beauty goes without saying, and it abandons us silently, aloof, above words, beyond any human language. The moonlight belongs to Schubert and Germany, the hemlock to Keats and England; the winter dogwood brings back April and Housman’s cherry trees; and they are all no less the backyard scenery of Randall’s house.

And again in “First Frost,” note the transition from “fall” to “fell,” delivered by the image of the tomahawk.

Though woods have warned us, we are never ready.
Dougherty’s fields are turnip-green.
The lavender threw up another bloom
Last week, to match the asters in the lane.

Today the tomahawk has fallen—fell
Upon Sennacherib, purple and gold
Gone down, the oldest story in the land,
The oldest question, fashioned in the stone,
But not by stone. By hand. By hand.

Randall’s neighbor’s fields, on a certain day in the onset of cold weather, are also the old planting grounds of the Piscataway Indians and equally the subject of myth, “the oldest story in the land.” The frost is the tomahawk, and the story and the question: such metaphoric conflation, with its beautiful form, stands as the union of inner and outer, what is “fashioned in the stone, / but not by stone. By hand. By hand.”

The same intensively doubled and redoubled vision informs “Hardwood Country”. History is never far away, nor Greek and Biblical mythology; the entrance to the Otherworld lies beyond Hershfield’s Hill and is then Cumae, Sinai, and Dante’s dark wood.

October, cadenza. One would always know,
In this rude land, these colors and their close,
The Indian pomes, Valhalla’s roof ablaze,
Poet and peasant in the glow of things
Reading of earth and sky the finite rhymes.

Randall’s vision does not obscure the particularity of place, but imposes upon it that mark of the transcendent, absolute significance. Her corner of Maryland is, for Randall, the place most rich in resonances, already covered like a coral reef with the accretions of a lifetime. The soul, brought home by the discipline of contemplation, knows where it is in virtue of where it is not, so that Elsewhere may become, by the process of poetic compactification, aspects of the local scene.

There are, however, some aspects of poetic strategy that mathematical schema cannot quite capture, because natural language allows certain ambiguities which the formal idioms of mathematics resist. Mary Kinzie argued long ago, in an article in the *Hollins Critic*, that Randall’s poems exhibit structural stasis rather than argumentative (or, I would add, narrative) development [2]. And she notes how Randall embeds semantic in syntactic ambiguity, so that we must reread and reinterpret a passage, so that we cannot get to the bottom or the end of it, so that we cannot let it go. Randall’s way of forcing us to begin again, to go back and back over a line that will not parse, is one of her ways of achieving structural stasis. This section from “To William Wordsworth from Vermont,” is an example.

On Glastenbury once I saw
The pale moon hesitate, but sky
And earth, divorcing, cast her free
Till cold on Pownal, cold on Bennington,
Her puppet light drained down,
And every eye she praised the valley long
Selected love.
Old puppet of the moon, this mountain night
More sharp with stars and waters than a dream
Of islands conjured in a poet's sight,
Not my eyes bless, but light.

The syntactic ambiguity of the last four lines is a *tour de force*, which generates a variety of meanings for all the important words. Is “old puppet of the moon” a vocative, or apposite to “this mountain night”? Or is “this mountain night” a temporal tag, an indexical, or is it the object of the verb in the last line? Is “light” a noun or a verb? Is the poet asking for illumination rather than blessing, or is she admitting the independence of natural reality, lit not by her own awareness but by the moon? Is she addressing the moon (light), the night (absence of light), or herself? The ambiguity deepens, rather than confuses, the poem's meaning; and this is the magic of natural language. The poem ends,

Old Rydal

Reaper of snows and fountains, every crop
Of every season's seedtime pushes up
Its blades to plume the pocked, perennial landscape.
Tintern, or ruinous
Tintagel, caves of Greece
And Cumae, cypresses
Winging the silver night at Arles, or meadows
Of childish May—low mint, lost irises,
Not light, but my eyes bless.

The poem's ending imposes upon the local valley (this time in Vermont, as the title announces), Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey on the river Wye between Wales and England, Tintagel Castle on the coast of Cornwall, the cave of the Cumaen sibyl in the Greek colony of Magna Graecia in Italy, and Van Gogh's Arles, under the encompassing, compactifying vision of the moon. And the eye of the poet, illuminating circles of experience, penetrates to the invisible, things hidden by night or long grasses, present only to memory.

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References

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- [4] I. M. Singer and J. A. Thorpe, *Lecture Notes on Elementary Topology and Geometry*, Ch. 2. Scott Foresman & Company, 1967.