

## A Mystic in her Garden: Spirituality and the Fiction of Barbara Hanrahan

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### Literature, Spirituality and Women

Australian literature has long been a source of insight into Australian religious feeling and spirituality. Veronica Brady, in her pioneering work, *A Crucible of Prophets: Australians and the Question of God*, argued most convincingly for this practice of interrogation, pointing out that:

Literature draws us to the real foundations of any inquiry into the nature of life in a given society since, instead of tracing around the cultural frame through which we look at it, it attempts to get at the experience itself, highlighting it by setting it in an unfamiliar context, in its own fictitious world (1981:1).

Since Veronica Brady produced her study of representations of God and religion in Australian men's novels there have been further excursions into literature in search of an Australian spirituality, a spirituality which is implicitly, if not explicitly, Christian. The most popular of these studies, written almost exclusively by men who have received formal theological training, include articles by Tony Kelly and Peter Kirkwood in *Discovering an Australian Theology* (1988); Tony Kelly's *A New Imagin-*

ing: *Towards an Australian Spirituality* (1990); various essays in *The Desert is Alive* (1990); Cavan Brown's *Pilgrim Through This Barren Land* (1991); and John Thornhill's *Making Australia: Exploring Our National Conversation* (1992). The poetry and fictions upon which these studies draw are also predominantly by men; Tony Kelly's *A New Imagining*, which includes seven female authors amongst the thirty-one authors cited, is by far the most generous in its representation of women's writing.

There have been other studies too, like those of theologians Gerald O'Collins (1986) and Eugene Stockton (1990), which have been inspired by the Bible and personal reflection, but the picture they present of Australian spirituality is virtually indistinguishable from that of the previous authors. This spirituality is essentially a masculine one, founded on scriptural interpretations by male exegetes and the reflections of male theologians (most often European, sometimes North American), and/or Australian male historians, cultural commentators, writers and artists. Put most crudely, the meaning of all our meanings is located somewhere near Uluru and the quintessential Australian spiritual journey is figured as a pilgrimage to the centre. If the pilgrim is lucky, the land will adopt a motherly mien and lead him [*sic*] rejoicing to the Father; usually he will have to wrestle the barren land, finding God through struggle and hardship. The imagery most often employed is that of the desert, the "answer" is other than where we are, the way to truth is generally the Way of Purgation, tragic male figures are our spiritual heroes and Christ-models, Father God is the locus of power and the feminine, when it is made present, is linked to the land which is to be subdued, or to Mother Mary, the unobtrusive homemaker in the household of faith. While the language is metaphorical, one aspect of Australia's geography has become so entwined with the desert of the scriptures that the metaphor runs the risk of being taken as reality, the desert pilgrimage the only path to salvation. Thus Graeme Ferguson privileges the desert in a passage typical of writings on Australian spirituality:

People enter the desert in order to enter life. There they learn the fragile strength of living and that its emptiness will support them and sustain life. They enter the silence of the desert and hear the call of acceptance, in the land where they may come to belong in the freedom of their maturity. But it is in the desert that they are initiated into life (1990:126).

To say that women's experiences of the teaching and practice of Christianity have been quite different from men's experiences is not to say anything new, but it does bear repeating in the context of Australian spirituality because it is so often overlooked. Women have been taught to mistrust their sex and to see themselves as subservient to men and as lesser players in Biblical and Christian history. Even now Catholic, Pres-

byterian and some Anglican and Baptist women who believe themselves called to the ordained ministry are denied the opportunity to serve as ministers or priests in their churches because they are not men. And, of course, until recently women have had restricted access to seminaries and formal theological training. It stands to reason therefore that women's responses to the divine will differ in some degree from men's responses, and that these differences will be reflected in their imaginative writing, in fiction and poetry. Imaginative writing has offered women a precious forum in which to discuss publicly questions of theology and morality. It is possible that, overall, their literature will prove a richer and more varied source of spiritual insights than has men's literature because men have had the option of channelling their thinking into more formal – and traditional – avenues of theological discourse.

It is my intention here to draw attention to the fact that women are absent from discussions of Australian spirituality, to call for a serious reading of women's fictions for more representative models of spirituality, and to introduce the work of one writer, Barbara Hanrahan, as an example of the richness and variety that is currently lacking in mainstream spirituality. There is little risk that women's spirituality will be absorbed into the dominant model and disappear because it is distinctive – so distinctive that most men fail to recognise its representation as having anything to do with the Christianity which they proclaim. That Barbara Hanrahan, a deeply spiritual writer and artist, has been ignored by religious commentators demonstrates the extent of women's invisibility: although she is unlike other women writers in the intensity of her mystical associations, she is also typical of the women who have expressed their engagement with the divine and yet been excluded from the canon of writers who are regularly plumbed for spiritual insights.

### **Barbara Hanrahan: a Biography**

So I am just a person. Life is important. I want to live it well. There is so little time. I like to think about Death. Death is a friend. This is not a morbid melancholy attitude. I have always felt close to a Spiritual Presence – I call that Presence God. God and Bleeding Jesus and Mary with her flaming heart garlanded with flowers are important to me – I am fond of them.... Death is comforting. I strive to live the little span of earthly living to reach it and the perfection that it will lead to. This is not a fashionable attitude today.

I have always felt close to God. I have a strong belief in what I do – I have always known I was meant to live the life that I do. It would have been wicked – evil – if I had tried to do otherwise, to escape my responsibility to my talents (Hanrahan, personal papers, undated).

Barbara Hanrahan was born in Adelaide in September 1939, and she died there in December 1991, at the age of fifty-two. She trained as an artist in Adelaide and London and achieved a considerable reputation as a print-maker and more recently, as a painter. Hanrahan was also entranced by language and started keeping detailed diaries in the early 1960s: "the habit of writing was comforting, like praying. If I lost the diary, I'd be without a friend" (Mott 1983:38). Although she was brought up in a household of women (mother, grandmother and great-aunt), the presence of her father, who had died when she was one year old, seems to have been always with her. For Hanrahan, her father was the more real for having been unknown, and she mentioned on several occasions that it was for him that she was working, that her writing was almost a religious act, and that she was thereby fulfilling his death (Mott 1983:40). Her grandmother was also a major figure and when she died in 1968 Hanrahan turned seriously to writing, not for publication, but "because I had this great yearning that had to be written down" (de Berg 1982). By 1971 Hanrahan had overcome her belief that she could not be both an artist and a writer and she embarked on the first of her fifteen books, *The Scent of Eucalyptus*.

Hanrahan's literary output can be divided into three categories: autobiographical fiction, fantastic fiction, and biographical fiction. The five books which can be seen to contain a number of autobiographical elements (although Hanrahan would deny strenuously – and rightly – that they are autobiographies) were scattered over a twenty-year period 1971-1991, while the five fantastic fictions were published during the six years 1977-1982 and were succeeded by the five biographical fictions, published between 1985-1992. The three categories of books are quite different from each other: to put it most simply, the autobiographical fictions record the narrator's coming into creativity and self-acceptance; the fantastic fictions are often gruesome meditations on evil; and the biographical fictions, which are mainly monologues based on the lives of people known to Hanrahan, are celebrations of the sacredness of the everyday, the spirituality of the humble. The last of the fantastic fictions, *Dove*, ends with a massive conflagration, a bonfire of the vanities which burns away hypocrisy and false values and clears the way for the biographical fictions, meditations on endurance, patience and loving kindness.

Of particular interest to this study of Barbara Hanrahan's mystical leanings is her need to write, and write again and again, about her past, about the years of doubt and division before she became a published writer. This reworking has irked some commentators who have felt that, in the autobiographical fictions, she was doing little more than repeating herself. But this repetition signals the importance Hanrahan placed

on the struggle to find a unified self, for that is what she was writing about: how to reconcile the inner self with the claims of the outer superficial world, and how to live simultaneously in both worlds without betraying the divine spark of difference.

Hanrahan lived a life dedicated to art and writing, consciously not having children and not getting caught up in the peripheral income-generating activities of literary life, such as awards-judging, reviewing, and writing commercial copy for quick sale. She and her companion, sculptor Jo Steele, led relatively isolated and non-materialistic lives eschewing newspapers, television and all but the most basic consumer comforts. In 1984 Hanrahan was found to have a sarcoma, a malignant lump at the base of her spinal cord. This was surgically removed but she was left with residual nerve damage and chronic discomfort. From 1984 Hanrahan and Steele retired even further from the everyday world, with Hanrahan going deeply into meditation with Ainslie Meares and, after his death, with Vere Langley.<sup>1</sup> The tumour reappeared in late 1990 and Hanrahan was in and out of hospital until July 1991 when she again underwent surgery, in the knowledge that this time she would be left a paraplegic.

Over these last seven years Hanrahan's literary and artistic output was prodigious – it was as though she was determined to keep living so she could complete the work she had been sent here to do. Her last book, the autobiographical *Michael and Me and the Sun*, was completed in the Memorial Hospital in circumstances of great pain and physical hardship in September 1991. Her final diary entry on 5 November 1991 records the possible presence of a new sarcoma, this time in the brain. She died in hospital a month later, on 4 December 1991. Slipping in and out of consciousness her last two coherent phrases were "I'm getting smaller and smaller and soon I'm going away" (Communication from Jo Steele, 4 December, 1991), and "I'm happier than I have ever been and I don't want anyone feeling sorry for me" (Bowman 1992:105). This sensation of smallness is consistent both with Hanrahan's enduring delight in detail and with the desire expressed in her fictions to disappear into, to be absorbed by, the greater whole of creation.

### **Mysticism and Barbara Hanrahan**

While Barbara Hanrahan did not claim to be a mystic, both her life and work were guided by a direct awareness of the divine. Her diaries and public statements show that she had an intense and intimate relationship with God and that her life was structured around fulfilling the gifts which she had been given. Prayer was a continuing practice, the Bible was a constant companion and the mystery of God was forever present.

In comparison with other Australian writers and artists, her perception of the religious nature of her calling was unusually strong, to the extent that art, religion and life were as one:

An artist, to me, is someone whose art permeates every tiny detail of the life they live, so you can't distinguish art from the life. The art is with them all the time, like a religious quest (Austin 1985:159).

William Blake exemplified for Hanrahan the ideal mix of the artistic, the contemplative and the spiritual:

When I read something of Blake's or look at his engravings, I find a world I feel at ease in: his spiritual world was with him all the time, there wasn't any difference between that world and this. That to me is an ideal state (1985:158).

Whether or not Hanrahan consciously located herself within this tradition which links together the disciplines of art and contemplation, it clearly attracted her.

Barbara Hanrahan was born into Christianity, her mother a Protestant and her father Catholic. She was early attracted by Catholicism, primarily because it was the faith of her father, whom she regarded as an heroic figure. While she was not a practising Catholic she treasured his Catholic objects and "educated" herself through reading his Catholic books, the *Child's Manual of Devotion* and the *Garden of the Soul*, "blossoming with immaculate Hearts of Mary and Sacred Hearts of Jesus" (1973:46). According to the autobiographical novels, she also took herself off to the Methodist and Baptist Sunday schools when a child, studied nineteenth-century material published by the Religious Tract Society, and enrolled in Bible lessons through the American evangelical radio program, "The Voice of Prophecy".

Hanrahan's childhood religious life seems to have been split between an inner fantasy world coloured by Catholic imagery, and an outer world of right behaviour, of observing the Sabbath, donating to missionaries and churchgoing. As she struggled to find her own self, this outer form of Christianity appeared to be in league with those other forces of social conformity which conspired to bind the young to the "monstrous treadmill of compromise" (1973:180) and to devalue any sense of difference they possessed. Hanrahan portrayed it as a sham religion in a sham world, but nevertheless it had enough power to threaten the "delicate world of miracles and Virgin Births I had created for myself" (1973:123). As she matured, the inner fantasy world was transmuted into an acute awareness of the mystery of existence, particularly as expressed in na-

ture, and informed her spiritual values, her mode of living and her art. In an interview in 1985 she spoke thus of the natural and spiritual worlds:

I do see the flowers as a mystical or religious thing, I mean the whole old idea of the garden as a spiritual religious place, the symbolic gardens of the Bible or Medieval poems as in the Elizabethan poets. I love reading some of that early poetry.

When I was about fifteen or sixteen, I used to copy down all the early Elizabethan poets into books. There are lots and lots of flowers in those poems and they just refresh me. If you get close to them and stare at them, it is so beautiful. It is a sort of paradise world with all the man-made things pushing against them and there is this contrast between those two things.

I like layers of things and I like contrast of things: where you think you are looking at something straight on and really you're looking at it sideways, and maybe the thing is even looking at you, as for instance the whole world of flowers: the world you are walking upon, that you can sort of squash and tread on, is the flowers' world and not just the world you see as nothing.

The whole fragility of that beautiful world is very strange to me, and to think that these things are just growing out of the earth – to me that is a spiritual world.<sup>2</sup>

For Hanrahan, anything smacking of religious doctrine and dogma was to be avoided, for, as a human construction, it could only limit the experience of the strangeness and beauty of life. Such experience did not need to be mediated through the persona of a god-creator or through concepts such as sin, forgiveness and congregational worship. But Hanrahan did not deny the value of formal ritual and religious practice for people who felt they needed it – the seriousness with which others approached their religion was treated with great respect. Her use of Christian iconography and, most particularly, the naive imagery developed over generations by unsophisticated Catholics to express their visions of the divine reflected her own seriousness of purpose and her appreciation of the beauty inherent in such folk-art, borne out of sincerity and simplicity. She was critical, however, of the think-alike morality of the Catholic middle-class mind, with its rationality and lack of poetry. In her writing and her art Hanrahan stripped away the false things of the outer world in a search for that "huge other world that lies behind and all about the small everyday existence" (Austin 1985:153).

Although Hanrahan drew upon a Christian culture and background, her work is more God-directed than Christ-centred. This becomes obvious when one compares her writing with that of the theologians mentioned at the beginning of this article, particularly those who, like Cavan

Brown and John Chryssavgis, see the *theologia crucis* as the way to come properly to God. Fortunately it is not necessary for a Christian mystic to subscribe to theological formulations for, as the pre-feminist *The Penguin Dictionary of Religions* would have it, the (Christian) mystic is one who "seeks to go beyond the concepts of images presented in scripture, theology, and tradition, and come to God himself" (1984:224). And neither is it necessary for a mystic to present detailed critiques of current religious teachings, even though, in the case of a woman mystic, her own mystical theology might well be at odds with institutional patriarchal pronouncements.

If one adopts the *Penguin Dictionary's* definition of a mystic, it is difficult not to so identify Barbara Hanrahan. One wonders why Australian theologians have failed to notice her presence. Perhaps they would prefer a more narrow definition of the term, so as to prevent all those people who have had even the slightest perception of a consciousness greater than their own from entering the mystical ranks. But surely mysticism is not an exclusive experience. Even Cuthbert Butler in the 1920s was lamenting the fact that Western mysticism had come to be identified as "a quasi-miraculous state of visions, revelations, and extraordinary favours frequently affecting the body" (1966[1922]:131). He attempted to correct the situation by pointing out that

it was the standard teaching in the Catholic ages down to modern times that contemplation is the natural term of a spiritual life seriously lived, and is a thing to be desired, aspired to, aimed at, and not infrequently attained to by devout souls (1966[1922]:131).

Butler's suggestion that mystical experiences should "be expected to be a more ordinary experience of the spiritual life devotedly lived" (1966[1922]:138) is sympathetic to Dorothee Sölle's later plea for a democratisation of our understanding of mysticism and the eradication of false elitism:

[T]his is not something special, for which one must be somehow particularly gifted or have some kind of special "sixth sense"; rather, these are experiences which thousands of people in many other cultures have had: experiences of happiness, of wholeness, of being at home in the world, of being one with God (1981:180-181).

Sölle's observation that most people in our culture have no language with which to name these experiences does suggest one reason why the mystical and spiritual nature of Hanrahan's work has thus far been overlooked: because she did not personify Christ as lover, loved and love in the manner of some medieval women mystics or write books of spiritual instruction like Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila, she has not



readily been cast as a traditional mystic, and, while she *has* named her own mystical experiences, Australian theologians more familiar with the language of the desert have lacked the interpretive skills to receive what she has been saying.

### Barbara Hanrahan and Australian Spirituality

In an article such as this, it is impossible to present a detailed analysis of Hanrahan's work on its own terms so I have chosen to highlight several aspects of mystical consciousness which are important in her life and writing. It should be seen immediately how different Hanrahan's spirituality is from popular accounts of Australian spirituality, even though many of her experiences can be located within standard accounts of Western mysticism such as those by Cuthbert Butler (1966[1922]) and F. C. Happold (1970), albeit with variations which are due to historical and cultural circumstances as well as her own experiences as a woman.

The place to start, because it is so important to Hanrahan, is with her sense of being two people, the pure inner self or divine child and the other social self, trying so hard to fit into the false values of society and prepared to betray her inner self so she can appear just like everyone else. Her family, like most families, was keen for her to find a nice boy, settle down and have children, but Hanrahan was aware early on that she was different. As she wrote of her late teens and early twenties:

At night I'd cry, for I didn't understand myself. I felt guilty, ashamed. There was no one to help me by pointing out my difference.... There was only my ignorant, unstated, belief in myself, and in the feeling of freedom that came potently now and then through my work, and which I felt linked up with what I called God (Dowrick and Grundberg 1980:48).

In all of her writing she is aware of the truth behind appearances, whether it is the artist struggling to escape social conventions, the corruption that is disguised by innocence, or the sacredness of the everyday. In this it is not difficult to recognise that characteristic of mystical experience which Happold identifies as "the conviction that the familiar phenomenal *ego* is not the real I" (1970:48). The true self, he observes, is named in Christian mysticism as "the spark, the centre, or apex of the soul, and the ground of the spirit" (1970:48-49). It is a nice touch that Hanrahan identifies it as the child within, an identification which can be carried through into some of her prints.

Hanrahan resolved this division by focussing her life on her art and by progressively withdrawing from the conventional world and its material rewards. This detachment was not without a struggle, for the ego is always desirous of recognition. It was in print-making that Hanrahan

lost her false self and was united with God or, as she expressed it, "something so much greater than oneself" (Mott 1983:44). In traditional accounts of mysticism, this sort of withdrawal is often figured as the Way of Purgation, a practice designed to bring about "complete detachment from and renunciation of the things of sense, and the death of the ego-centric life, so that the divine life may be born in the soul and union with the Godhead attained" (Happold 1970:58). In Australian terms, the pilgrim is sent off into the silent and indifferent desert where he is confronted by the insignificance of human life and is brought to an understanding of the divine miracle. In both versions there is often an element of self-mortification or self-annihilation borne of self-loathing. In contrast, Hanrahan willingly turns to the divine which is within her and realises union through creativity, through the exercise of her artistic ability, not through its repudiation.

Who or what was the God whom Hanrahan sought to enter? Her books are full of references (usually affectionate) to homespun artistic expressions of piety – bleeding hearts, cushion covers embroidered with Bible pictures, models of the local church set out in seashells or carved in dripping on display in a butcher's window – but in her own art God remained formless.<sup>3</sup> The God she portrayed in her prints is visible only as an eye, the Eye of God, surrounded by birds, animals, flowers, insects and humans – the wealth of creation. Symbols of power and authority are eschewed for images of bountifulness, joy and the coexistence of this world and the spiritual world. In Hanrahan's last Eye of God print a little turquoise figure is centred in the pupil, representing perhaps all the richness and contradictions of nature and humanity held safely within the divine, a coming into union with God.

It is no accident that the Eye of God peers out of creation, for that is where Hanrahan is most aware of the presence of God, in nature, in the garden of the house she grew up in, in the smallest grain of sand:

I have always been fascinated by the small. As a child I loved to lie in the grass and chart the busy path of the ant. I do not want to see in great insensitive chunks. I am bored by generalizations. I prefer to take something small, something overlooked by others and explore it in detail, discover the countless other worlds it contains.<sup>4</sup>

It is worth noting that, while Hanrahan talks of discovering and exploring, Happold, in a similar passage in which he extols the need to "be content, intently and humbly, to 'contemplate'" the mystery of the world, talks of penetrating its meaning and significance (1970:70): the former is happy to be within the mystery, while the latter has to appropriate and interpret it. Australian male religious commentators, writers and historians have also favoured the colonising approach to the land

and its mystery, often expressed in terms of penetration,<sup>5</sup> David Ireland, in his novel *Bloodfather*, carries through the colonisation process to its natural conclusion, ingestion:

He felt very much with all things round him: people, animals, birds, the backstairs, clouds, sky, bush tracks, Brown Rock, insects, grass, earth, his bed on the verandah, stars, trees, and the air of the valley. His eyes reached out, held what he saw, and, as if on the end of a long tongue, touched and tasted it; finally drew it back into himself so that what he thoroughly saw he made his own (1987:136).

One can imagine that Hanrahan's continuing celebration of smallness and her preference for apparently powerless heroines might alarm feminists who have read Sölle's warnings against God-talk which is aimed at oppressing women and which encourages "a sort of 'Uncle Tom piety' based on powerlessness". Sölle calls women to "throw out the role of the little girl" (1981:181), arguing that

God is so strong because we are so weak. It makes God greater and stronger if we are weaker and more powerless. The smaller we make ourselves, the greater he is. We trust in him alone. This way of thinking and speaking destroys our ability to act, our truthfulness, our understanding (1981:181-182).

It must be stressed that Hanrahan does not picture God as a patriarchal, authoritarian figure. In her prints the Eye is genderless and within all that is, while in her books children and childlike narrators are used because of their clarity of vision, their ability to recount the workings of evil without flinching and without offering judgement on the characters involved. Smallness is not an expression of a pre-feminist consciousness but a realisation of the presence of God in all things, while the narrators are independent and self-determined survivors. A similar predilection for finding the divine in the most humble elements of nature, for desiring to be subsumed in nature, and for rejecting a judging God-figure is evinced by Elizabeth Jolley; it is yet to be seen whether these elements of a mystical consciousness are common to many other Australian women writers and to what extent they are shared by men. One thing is certain – they are under-represented in the theological discussions of Australian spirituality I have mentioned, possibly because they bear little resemblance to a Christianity which is described in terms of Father God, Son and Holy Spirit and which places ultimate value on the Way of Purgation.

This is not to say that Hanrahan could not be recognised as a mystic in accordance with traditional understandings of mysticism. Happold identifies two types of mysticism, that of knowledge and understanding, and that of love and union. It is too simplistic to suggest that these

categories are gender-specific, but one cannot help noting as one reads books on (male) spirituality a certain urge, as Happold puts it, "inherent in man, to find the secret of the universe, to grasp it not in parts but in its wholeness" (1970:41). This grasping for experimental wisdom and experimental knowledge of God is alien to Hanrahan's spirituality as it is represented in her writing, but the mysticism of love and union, which Happold describes as being driven by an urge "to escape from a sense of separation, from the loneliness of selfhood, towards a closer participation and reunion with Nature or God, which will bring peace and rest to the soul" (1970:40) is apposite. Hanrahan is not concerned with finding answers but with being in God. And this being-in-God does not occur in some desolate place, physical or spiritual, but in the now-world, with the senses fully engaged and open to intimations of divine mystery.

In prevailing models of Australian spirituality, it is often suggested that redemption will come through identification with the "Suffering Servant", whether it be the poor, the victimised or, most often, Aborigines. In their fictions, women like Elizabeth Jolley and Thea Astley espouse loving kindness, generally starting with family and neighbours, the people closest at hand rather than the abstract oppressed. Hanrahan, too, was acutely aware of suffering in the world but she addressed it in a positive and contemplative manner:

The only way I can influence the "world" is by being small, by being true to me and the real world of nature about me. Like a monk, like a hermit who works through prayer. By praying, by working, by *loving* the sea and the trees and the sky. By knowing God in the goodness of it all. By making my own peace. Not by dwelling on the evil, adding to it (Diary entry, 11 May 1986).

In her biographical fictions especially, Hanrahan brought to birth heroic figures from the suburbs, people who did what they could for others and who were at peace with the world. Instead of adding to the sorry line of explorers and battlers who parade through mainstream spirituality, Hanrahan wrote new myths set in domestic Australia, celebrating the courage needed to stay fresh and alive to the possibilities of each day.

### **Barbara Hanrahan and Women's Spirituality**

But what influence has Hanrahan and her writing had on the world? To put it bluntly, the religious, spiritual and mystical elements of her books have gone virtually unnoticed by male literary critics and totally unnoticed by religious commentators. Male critics, to generalise, do not seem to ask what she is doing in her writing and why she is doing it. They are

more content to comment on surface appearances and to dismiss her work as yet another story of growing up in Adelaide, as yet another grotesque fable of macabre events and irregular sexual conjunctions, or as yet another guide to working-class Adelaide through the great events of the century. John Hanrahan, a Catholic ex-priest, is an exception to this complaint for he does recognise in Hanrahan's biographical novel *Flawless Jade* her wish to present "almost biblically the sacrament of the uneventful life" (1990:81-82). Women critics have been alive to the moral dimensions of Hanrahan's work at least, particularly to the play of good and evil in the fantastic fictions. Typical is Francis McInherny's assessment of Hanrahan: "The most outstanding obsession in all her works and especially evident in *The Frangipani Gardens* is her knowledge of palpable evil within the heart of each individual and percolating through society.... [She is] very attuned to the sense of good and evil in the world" (1981:8).

The most complete assessment of Hanrahan's body of writing has been made by Elsebeth Gabel Austin in a thesis for the University of Copenhagen. She sees a definite progression in Hanrahan's books and writes:

Collectively, Barbara Hanrahan's novels reflect the progression from childhood to adulthood to old age; the progression from ignorance to knowledge to wisdom; the basic human experience reflected in the myths of the Garden of Eden, the Fall and the New Jerusalem: the fundamental pattern of birth-death-rebirth. *The Scent of Eucalyptus* and *Kewpie Doll* represent the innocence of childhood; *Sea-Green*, *The Albatross Muff*, *The Peach Groves*, *Where the Queens All Strayed*, *The Frangipani Gardens*, and *Dove* are allegorical accounts of the loss of innocence and the gaining of experience; *Annie Magdalene*, *Dream People*, and *A Chelsea Girl* convey the integration of the split personality and the attainment of the spiritual state of Oneness or higher innocence. The books mirror the writer's personal journey to the centre of the inner spiritual world which then gives expression to the universality of human experience (1989:104).

How does one account for Hanrahan's absence from any commentaries on Australian spirituality? After all, her books have been published by major Australian and British publishing houses since 1973 and have remained continuously in print, while her prints have been shown in solo exhibitions nationally and internationally since 1964. The explanation could lie partly in the fact that works by women are routinely neglected by local theologians and religious commentators, but then her material is so imbued with religious imagery that its lack of recognition is remarkable. It may be that Hanrahan's invisibility is due to the fact that she is writing from a point outside of – and critical of – institutional

Christianity, but this has not militated against the recognition of male authors who have written from a similar position. Is it wrong to suggest that the basic reason Hanrahan has gone unnoticed is because her spirituality and mystical consciousness tap into a religious tradition quite different to that represented by the desert paradigm that currently dominates theological thinking?

If Hanrahan is read in the context of other contemporary Australian women writers, it will be seen that she is part of an alternative and too long unrecognised theology, a theology of the settled areas which has grown out of the first-hand experiences of women. This is not the place to delineate such a theology in specific terms, but its nature can be gauged by having regard to Hanrahan's contributions to it, including the naming of the Divine Spark as the child within and the honouring of it as the source of creativity; celebration of the sacredness of the natural world, the gardens, the suburbs and the most ordinary of people; recognition that creativity and fruitfulness are as much paths to God as purgation and renunciation; acknowledgement of the spiritual world which is contemporaneous and one with the everyday world; revelation of the true God behind the man-made god of the last judgement; and, above all, the example of a contemplative, courageous and spiritual life lived out of delight in the goodness of it all. Anne Bancroft, in her book *Weavers of Wisdom*, might well have been writing of Barbara Hanrahan when she noted in the work of contemporary women mystics a theme peculiar to them, that of relatedness – "The integration of spirit and flesh, of the timeless and the relative, of the numinous and the self. Above all, of being so related to life and the world that the boundaries have melted" (1989:viii).

But let Barbara Hanrahan speak her own vision through the story *Iris in her Garden*, a celebration of fecundity, of the relatedness of all creation, of joy in death, and of the presence of the divine in the created world. And compare this coming-to-God in the midst of the Paradise Garden with the God-encounter most often cited by religious commentators, that of Patrick White's Voss, who has to learn true humility before he can ascend, a knowledge which, as Laura says, "only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind" (1960:446).

Pink roses everywhere, roses raining from a blue summer sky, and a green beanstalk man reaching down with his leafy green fingers and snatching my grandmother away. Puffballs of Father Christmas thistles, poppies spilling their black birth dust. My grandmother's legs float higher; they're patterned with veins and the stems of an unnatural garden: witch bell, star flower. She is a giant earth mother in the sky; she is the girl she used to be. Black shiny hair full of diamond-bright sun sparks, threaded with

satin ribbon; sleepy almond eyes, forget-me-not blue; all the wrinkles gone away and she's the goddess of the rainbow. She floats, she dissolves. She is just a great white cloud spread across the sky. Iris floating free over all the gardens of Rose Street (1991:59).

May the theologians understand.

## Notes

- 1 In his writings and professional practice in Melbourne, psychiatrist Ainslie Meares established a significant reputation for an innovative and successful combination of spiritual and psychiatric approaches to the management of cancer, which Vere Langley has continued.
- 2 Interview with Elsebeth Gabel Austin, in *Barbara Hanrahan: A Retrospective Exhibition of Prints*, 1992:3.
- 3 The only traditionally religious print of which I am aware is an early (1962) print of the Crucifixion with Christ on the cross, flanked by two women.
- 4 Undated note, personal papers.
- 5 For an account of the way in which Australian men have conceived the landscape, see Suzanne Falkiner (1992). One of the most graphic accounts of the land as female by a theologian is given by Eugene Stockton (1986).

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