

Friend Death

Gendered Perceptions of Death in Australian Writing

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Introduction

My title is based on a note I found when reading the personal papers of Australian writer and artist Barbara Hanrahan. The note set me thinking about the way people approach death. It read thus:

I like to think about Death. Death is a friend. This is not a morbid melancholy attitude. . . . I strive here in the little span of earthly living to reach it and the perfection that it will lead to. This is not a fashionable attitude today.¹

The note is undated, although internal evidence suggests it was written in 1978, some six years before Hanrahan's terminal sarcoma was diagnosed in 1984. The attitude expressed here is maintained throughout her diaries, which she kept until shortly before she died in December 1991.

What struck me most about these few sentences is the idea of death as a friend, as something to be considered and, eventually, welcomed. The process of dying, and especially dying slowly and painfully, may have been something Hanrahan feared, and she may not have wished to enter death until she was ready, but nevertheless she did not fear or revile death itself - Death was a friend.

For some years I have been studying contemporary Australian women's spirituality as it is reflected in fictional and non-fictional writings, and I have been comparing what women have had to say about the divine with what has been written by Australian theologians and religious commentators. The women I looked at were culturally, if no longer practising, Christian and the theologians and commentators, with the exception of Veronica Brady, were male, and all were working out of malestream Christian theology. As it turned out, I found significant differences between the spirituality evinced by the women and the theologians; one area of difference was the way in which they apprehended death.²

To put it most succinctly, ignoring all the qualifications that surround such a proposition, it seems that women, as they reflect upon it, are more likely to accept death as part of the natural cycle than are men who, to judge from their theological and cultural writings, are more likely to regard it as an affront to their person. Women accept death and men struggle heroically against it. Women perceive death as a continuation of existence, men perceive it as climax and end-point.

Now it may be that these two ways of approaching death are just that, two different ways of approaching death, and that the choice one makes between acceptance and struggle has nothing to do with gender, and everything to do with personality type, religious beliefs and individual circumstances. But then again it is likely that one's personality, beliefs and circumstances are all affected by one's gender. I am satisfied, for example, that the Christian church's teachings on women have had a negative effect on the way many women undervalue themselves as creatures made in the image of God. The catch-cry 'If God is male, then the male (and not the female) is God' does have an element of truth to it, as shown in the debates surrounding women's ordination. I think that sexual differences contribute significantly to the way women and men experience both the sacred and the secular worlds and that we still have a long way to go to find out the effects of these differences.

What I want to do here is to bring forward some examples that illustrate differing perceptions of death and ask how well they are represented in popular constructions of Australian Christianity. For the sake of brevity, I am relying on John Thornhill to present the male point of view as his 1992 book *Making Australia: Exploring our National Conversation* is a relatively uncritical distillation of mainstream constructions of Australian history, culture and religious understanding and can therefore be regarded as representative of traditional Australian thinking, untainted by revisionist feminist theologians.³ To finish, I offer a rough sketch of what a faith might look like if it were sympathetic to the alternative attitude to death I find in women's writings. It should come as no surprise that this faith matches well with the women's spirituality that I find shining through the work of writers such as Barbara Hanrahan, Elizabeth Jolley, Thea Astley and Helen Garner.

Gendered Perceptions of Death

The fundamental point of difference I have come across is the context in which men and women speak of death. Thornhill speaks of death primarily in relation to life-shortening events such as warfare and dangerous enterprises voluntarily undertaken, while the women speak of death in relation to sickness, old age and suicide. This has obvious implications for the way in which death is figured - for warriors and explorers, death threatens them in the prime of their lives, while for women death can be seen as a release from physical and mental suffering, and possibly as something desirable in itself. Let me illustrate this.

First, death in *Making Australia*. In his chapter on religious and spiritual matters, Thornhill devotes several pages to Australian attitudes to death, pages which demonstrate just how masculine the 'Australian legend' is. Thus, the Australians he quotes from or cites are the Antarctic explorer Douglas Mawson, the ANZACS and the infantry-men of the Second World War, the war historians C E W Bean and Bill Gammage, literary critic Robin Gerster writing on war literature, and Les Murray

and Richard Campbell, both of whom talk about the 'blood-sacrifice' rhetoric that surrounds warfare. In this discussion of Australian attitudes to religion, Thornhill presents death only in terms of sacrifice and heroic endeavour within traditional male spheres of activity - exploration and hand to hand combat. Thornhill quotes a passage from C E W Bean and it is worth re-quoting as an example of the way in which Australian male commentators have tended to associate death with heroic enterprise, and to almost turn it into a sacrament in itself:

They fought for their own prestige because that would probably be their last cause, they took greatest comfort from their mates because their mates were all they had, they accepted the sight and spectre of death because they were themselves to die, they adjusted to the daily routine of war because they did not expect to know another. They lived in a world apart, a new world, scarcely remembering their homes and country, and grieving little at the deaths of mates they loved more than anything on this earth, because they knew that only time kept them from the 'great majority' who had already died, and they believed that fate would overtake time, and bring most of them to the last parade. So they continued, grim, mocking, defiant, brave and careless, free from common toils and woes, into a perpetual present, until they should meet the fate of so many who had marched before them down the great road of peace and sorrow into eternity.⁴

It might be noted that Thornhill makes no mention of death that is not heroic, or of women's death. Death in peacetime occurs elsewhere in Thornhill's book, in two chapters entitled 'A Wisdom Found in Adversity and Failure' and 'The Land As Our Icon'. Again, death is placed in the context of struggle, in this case against the land rather than against a human enemy. In my studies I have found that Australian theologians draw heavily on the land when they try to describe a peculiarly Australian form of Christianity, one which grows out of (white) Australian circumstances. In this Australian Christianity God is most often located in the desert, the so-called 'dead heart', and the desert functions as a sort of purgatory, a place where pilgrims are purified through physical hardship. In Australian mainstream Christianity the desert is valued over all other landscapes because it is both the dwelling place of God and also the place of trial for those who would seek God. The dramas which are played out there are not only physical but also spiritual: the heroic treks of the early explorers are metaphors for men's search for spiritual purification, and their sufferings - and premature deaths - symbolise men's reconciliation with God.

So, if one accepts John Thornhill's view as typical of the views of Australian theologians over the last twenty years or so, it seems that death is thought of predominantly in the context of struggle, of heroic deeds, and of life unnaturally foreshortened - one cannot imagine one of these theologians remarking, as Elizabeth Jolley did in a lecture on the writer's approach to death, that 'it is sometimes unbelievable that an individual does want more time to live . . .'.⁵

Women fiction writers, however, tend to write about death in the context of sickness, old age and suicide, that is, as part of a natural cycle and as a relief from

suffering. This might well reflect the fact that Australian women's lives have traditionally been different from those of men, that they did not take part in early white expeditions of discovery, for example, or in trench warfare. One is tempted to think also that women have been less willing to test themselves by exposing themselves to physical danger and have therefore been more likely to live into old age when death might be welcomed as a release from a painful and lonely situation. But this does not necessarily account for the joyfulness which surrounds some of the death moments in women's writings.

There is room for only a few examples of such writing, so I will focus on the way death is treated as part of the life cycle and therefore, finally, not to be resisted. This can be seen in non-fiction writing, as in Helen Garner's impassive journalistic accounts of everyday working life in the morgue and the crematorium;⁶ in Elizabeth Jolley's acknowledgement that 'the subject of death is a part of the subject of life';⁷ and in conversations between fictional characters. One conversation I have in mind occurs in Thea Astley's novel *Beachmasters*. It is a conversation between two elderly women, long-term residents of a South Pacific island colony, as they watch newcomers trying to adjust to life there. They might also be talking about coming to terms with death. "They do not understand, these newcomers," says the retired French teacher to the retired prostitute as they sip coffee on the verandah of the bordello - "They do not understand. . . that they must allow the island to devour them. They try to eat it. That is their mistake." "The two women know they will never leave. "I am almost fully digested" says Madame Guichet. "I await the total absorption."⁸ Death, in other words, is anticipated and is represented not as oblivion but as the reincorporation of the self with nature.

In women's writing, death is often linked with the more pleasant aspects of nature, even when writers are dealing with death by suicide. Barbara Hanrahan might liken Meg, one of the suicides in her novel *Where the Queens all Strayed*, to 'Burke and Wills and all the others who'd braved the interior' but the site of Meg's demise is a cool and shady place in the Adelaide Hills, beneath a lemon-tree twined with creeper, a green and leafy room where she and her girlfriend Rina eat poisonous wild lilies and die together with no hint of anguish.⁹ Death is presented as a child's game, something to be entered into playfully.

Thoughts of death and suicide permeate Dorothy Hewett's novel *The Toucher*. The book opens with the death of the husband of the elderly and wheelchair-bound writer Esther La Farge; it gives space to Esther's musings about her own death; notes the deaths of various people associated with her; covers her own half-hearted suicide attempt and closes with the suicide of one of the men who was attracted to her in her youth.

It is noticeable that although Esther fears premature or arbitrary death - 'no memory, no self, nothing; blackness, annihilation'¹⁰ - she comes to see it, by the end of the book, as a way to freedom. When Esther sets herself to drift out to sea in a dinghy, Hewett's writing becomes luminous:

She lay down in the cold bilge-water and stared up into the sky, seeing the flare of the Milky Way, the Southern Cross and the Pot wheeling overhead. She imagined what it must look like, the little boat drifting alone under the stars in all this immensity of black water. Her bones ached but her limbs felt luminous, flowing; a silvery peace seemed to glow in her head as if she were some great fish surging through the estuary to the sea. Between the water and the sky, it was impossible to distinguish which were stars and which were reflections. The sky and the water had turned into one giddy opalescent surface, now this side, now that, with the boat spinning in the centre of a vortex.¹¹

As it happens, Esther runs aground in the reeds and is rescued, possibly to her relief. The final suicide of the book, however, does seem to be successful. The old man Maxie Crowe sails out to sea determined to meet death head on, rather than to waste away in a hospital bed. As he heads out into the stormy Southern Ocean he is accompanied by a pod of humpback whales, a giant armada 'spouting and shining' as they drive through 'the green colonnades of water'.¹² Hewett's final sentences again mark the disintegration of the flesh and the reabsorption of the body into the natural world:

The dawn broke like poured gold over the sound. The islands of the blessed surrounded him, glowing. His gummy jaw gaped. He pissed himself. A drizzle of spit trickled down his chin. The pod was moving, a giant maternal flotilla that drew him past the islands into an unknown light and an ultimate darkness.

like a feather on the wind¹³

In the writings of the women I am looking at, such intimations of the body returning to the elements are relatively frequent - Barbara Hanrahan's grandmother dissolving into a great white cloud that spreads across the sky over suburban Adelaide;¹⁴ Helen Garner's character Maxine in the novel *Cosmo Cosmolino* skimming off as an angel scattering jonquils over inner Melbourne;¹⁵ and Elizabeth Jolley's several women characters who dread old age but who take comfort in imagining, at their funerals, the sound of a soprano voice singing of eternal joy, a voice sweet and tender singing 'through the trees, through the restless foliage and up over the sunlit tree tops for miles, on and on'. It is as though the music, a passage from Brahms' German Requiem, is stored secretly above the trees, and the voice is carried in the wind from 'the shining edges of the clouds'.¹⁶

One possible explanation for this association of death, nature and joy, relates to the way these women suggest that the divine, the numinous, is to be found in the midst of life, deep inside the creative self, in other people, in suburban gardens, settled areas and the tropics. This God does not promise redemption through suffering but through love; nature is neither cursed by God nor a place of purgation but is the proof of God's continuing love, an edenic place, a paradise garden. To be absorbed back into nature is to be reabsorbed back into the life flow, however one might

choose to depict it. In such a scenario, death is not an ending but a continuation. As Helen Garner expressed it on her way back from the crematorium:

... I had, for the first time in my life, a conviction - I mean not a thought but knowledge - that life can't possibly end at death. I had the punctuation wrong. I thought it was a full stop, but it's only a comma, or a dash - or better still, a colon: I don't believe in heaven or hell, or punishment or reward, or the survival of the ego; but what about energy, spirit, soul, imagination, love? The force for which we have no word? How preposterous, to think that it could die!¹⁷

Male Christian theologians may believe that the Australian legend is permeated by death, but secular women's writing such as that examined here, looks beyond death and, paradoxically, offers greater comfort and hope to both women and men.

A Death-Friendly Spirituality

This brings me back to my final purpose, to offer a rough sketch of an alternative Australian spirituality, a spirituality which is in sympathy with this welcoming attitude to friend death - and, by implication, women's experiences of life and their understanding of humankind's place in the scheme of things. One might wish to consider whether this alternative spirituality is also a Christian spirituality.

If people do not fear death, it is reasonable to suppose that they do not fear what will happen to them after death. They fear neither oblivion nor the final judgement, the fiery pit.

If they do not fear oblivion, it may be because they see death not as an ending but as the passage to another stage of life - in Barbara Hanrahan's art works, death is represented by a set of open curtains marking the passing from one reality to another. This other reality is represented in different ways by different writers. Hanrahan, in her writings, seems to suggest that those who have died are still present with us, that in some unexplained way, we are all living concurrent existences. Astley, in her novel *It's raining in Mango*, implies that we become our own ancestors, that we walk back into the time before our own birth; and in *Vanishing Points* there is the suggestion that traces of our lives and deeds are caught for ever in nature and in the landscape.¹⁸ Jolley does not talk of life after death but only of the consolation of being dwarfed by, and finally absorbed into, the life force, the 'force' (for lack of a better word) which causes the sun to rise, the seasons to change and our daily lives to be touched by transcendence. Whatever form this other reality takes, the women whose work I have been reading are united in their view that the body is reabsorbed back into nature, and that this represents a continuation of life, not an ending.

If there is no ending, neither is there a final judgement. It is noticeable how, in their books, these women refrain from judging their characters, either in life or death. They do not, as creators of their own fictional worlds, assume the role of arbiter and judge, weighing up the actions of their characters and disposing of them

appropriately. Their concern, rather, is to understand why people act as they do and, in Jolley's case particularly, to sympathetically portray the perplexity of people in the face of events over which they have no control. These writers demand sympathy and understanding from their readers, not judgement, and they similarly refrain from positing an account-keeping God who has to be won over by the performance of good works or a certain amount of suffering to expiate earthly sins.

If people do not have to make amends for their sinful ways, it is unnecessary to make a virtue of suffering, particularly suffering undertaken for its own sake. Neither does humankind have to be redeemed by sacrifice. It is also noticeable how rarely Christ is referred to in these women's books. There is generally an implication of a divine or superhuman presence but the figure of Christ, particularly the Christ who was sacrificed for people's sins, is virtually invisible. This is consistent, of course, with a lack of interest in a judging Father God.

The guiding principle in these books is not justice or fear but love, most often expressed as loving kindness for others. In Astley's early books, God is unconditional love and calls people to emulate this unconditional love as best they can in their dealings with others. They will necessarily fail because they are human, but they will still be loved unconditionally by God. Jolley similarly praises compassion, while Garner requires of her characters that they care for one another. And Hanrahan, in her autobiographical fictions, as she celebrates the rituals of loving kindness performed within her own family, makes a sacred space of the working-class family home. In her first book, *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, she recalls growing up with her mother, grandmother and mongol great-aunt Reece:

Once they entered the house, and the front door closed behind them, the outer world was lost - drowned in the greenness of crinkled glass. The real world sprang into being as my grandmother, my mother, Reece, and I came close. It was a delicate world that waxed and waned; constantly threatened by my grandmother's depressions and possessiveness, my mother's materialism and secret longings, Reece's stomach that rattled, my fits. It was nurtured and protected by the roses and the grape-vines, the ivy and the lavatory-creeper that clung to the fences; by the arching berry bush, the plant that bloomed once every seven years. The real world came into being round the dining-room fire, as we toasted bread on the crooked fork; it lurked in the porcelain basin as my mother washed my hair with rain-water from the well, bloomed in the fusty bedroom as Reece soothed my head with little pats when I was sick, rose from the earth when my grandmother stooped in the garden and coaxed withered seedlings to life.¹⁹

This sense of the Garden of Eden or a paradise garden is a recurrent trope in these women's books and it ties in with a belief - or hope - in a loving God. If the creator God is a god of love, then surely God's creation must be blessed, not blighted. This might also explain why desert spirituality is of so little interest to these women writers - they suggest that we do not have to leave the comfortable lands behind to find God because God is always present in God's creation. These authors witness

the transcendent breaking into people's daily lives in all manner of unexpected moments, offering, if not the meaning of life, some intimation at least that there might be a purpose, a pattern, behind it all. There is nothing sentimental or feeble-minded about these intimations, which causes me to wonder whether they might be based on their authors' own experiences. Here are two examples of what I mean. The first comes from Helen Garner's *Cosmo Cosmolino* and does indeed have autobiographical origins. Her main character, Janet, is in her bedroom in her run-down Melbourne house when she feels something, some presence behind her:

She felt it manifest, towering, svelte, featureless. If she took one step to the right it would follow: she would be able to see it in the glass: but if she looked, if she acknowledged it and turned to face it, her defences would be breached: without a word being spoken her swaddling of scepticism would burst open, and some appalling and total submission would be demanded of her, a surrender of self with no hope of back-tracking. In terror, she closed her eyes.

The column hovered nearer, almost singeing the skin of her shoulder. She dropped her arm and clung to the table edge with both hands. Tears of bliss pressed behind her eyelids and she clenched, she clenched them back; she held them in. She heard herself panting, roughly, like a wrestler, like a labouring woman: she stitched her lips shut with her front teeth and hung on. How long did she struggle? She felt the vast patience of the thing, its utter imperviousness to argument; but she fought it, with a mad pugnacious hubris she pitted herself; and at last a tremor rippled through the pillar, a slow, long shudder; and then it thinned, faded, and was gone.²⁰

Divine mystery is rarely so concretely expressed in fiction. A less direct moment of revelation is portrayed by Elizabeth Jolley in her novel *Mr Scobie's Riddle* as an elderly man watches the world being transfigured by the setting rays of the sun:

He could not see the sea from his garden at home. His old house was surrounded by a ring of trees. Sometimes the cape lilacs, with their cloud-coloured flowers, a false promise of rain, annoyed him. From his verandah he could see the tip of a Norfolk Island pine tree. He often shook his fist at it. It was like a clock for him. The changing light and shade and colour of the symmetrical tree told him what time of day it was. This tree bridged the middle distance between the earth and the sky. Long after the sun had gone, the top of the pine tree glowed. The tree simply stood endowed with this golden blessing. Every evening the old man watched the transfiguration of the tree knowing that the last rays of the sun would be caressing corner stones and cross roads making them noble.²¹

Transfiguration as a daily event in the world of suburban nature.

Women writers tend to abstain from trying to picture the divine and this may be because they are reacting against all those pictures of elderly men with long white beards which permeated their childhoods. The best image I could find of the sort of divine figure who might be sympathetic to these women writers is that of Annie Magdalene, from the book of the same name by Barbara Hanrahan. Objectively, it is a description of an elderly Adelaide woman sitting in her back garden, but it can also be read as an earth-mother type of figure, a figure who might appeal to those people who were more interested in expressing the sacred as a power of generation, as a generalised life-force rather than as a particular, and therefore limited, deity. This is Hanrahan's Annie Magdalene. She is talking to herself:

In summer, when I have short sleeves, the bees sit on my arm. They don't worry me at all, I think they love me; I just let them stay (if you brush them off they get cross), they're only sitting there to have a rest. The bees often come and sit beside me to die - such a lot do that and I dig a little hole, drop them in and cover them up, rather than let the ants eat them. When I pick off the dead flowers from the daisy bushes, I tell the bees they have to put up with me. But you must never talk loud to the bees, you must talk softly.²²

One might contrast this female figure, tending even the smallest creatures in their death, with another, more widely-known image which brings together gods, insects and death, the observation made by Gloucester in *King Lear* :

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;
They will kill us for their sport. (IV,1)

Conclusion

This is only a provisional foray into the area of women's - as distinct from men's - attitudes to religion as revealed by their attitudes to death. But I hope it suggests that the subject is worth exploring and that, should these differences be substantiated, they might be seen as consistent with a women's spirituality that has up until now received scant acknowledgement by Australian theologians and religious and cultural commentators. This spirituality is rooted in creation, rather than fall and redemption, it recognises the blessedness of all things and it values love and the idea of communal salvation at least as highly as repentance, purgation and the individual God-experience. The women whose writings are examined here offer a more positive vision of life and death than do those Christian theologians who are still influenced by the essentially masculinist 'Australian legend'.

Notes

1. Barbara Hanrahan, personal papers, undated. Published in (comp.) Barbara Holbourn *The Barbara Hanrahan Memorial exhibition*, (Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1994), p. 13.
2. Elaine Lindsay, 'Rewriting God: Spirituality in Contemporary Australian Women's Fiction' (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Sydney, 1996). This article is based on a talk I gave to the Sydney Theological Society in September 1996.
3. John Thornhill, *Making Australia: Exploring our National Conversation*, (Newtown: Millennium Books, 1992). Ideally I would give equal space to material by male and female authors, but as so little attention has been paid to women's spiritual writings in Australia, I am privileging their voices here.
4. C E W Bean excerpt, published in John Carroll (ed.) *Intruders in the Bush* (Melbourne: OUP, 1982), p. 55 and quoted by Thornhill, op. cit., p. 173.
5. Elizabeth Jolley, 'Temporary Residents: The Deathbed and the Chaise Longue (The Writer's Approach to Death)', *Southerly* 2, 1992: 39.
6. Helen Garner, 'At the Morgue' and 'Death', in Helen Garner, *True Stories*, (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1996).
7. Jolley (1992), op. cit., p. 29.
8. Thea Astley, *Beachmasters*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1988; 1st publ. 1985), p.84.
9. Barbara Hanrahan, *Where the Queens all Strayed*, (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978), pp. 174-6.
10. Dorothy Hewett, *The Toucher*, (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble, 1993), p. 139.
11. *ibid.*, pp. 266-7.
12. *ibid.*, p.299.
13. *ibid.*, p. 300. The book ends here, and without a full stop.
14. Barbara Hanrahan, 'Iris in Her Garden', in Barbara Hanrahan, *Iris in Her Garden*, (Deakin: Officina Brindabella, 1991), p. 59.
15. Helen Garner, *Cosmo Cosmolino*, (Ringwood: McPhee Gribble, 1992), pp. 214-216.
16. Elizabeth Jolley, *The Orchard Thieves*, (Ringwood: Viking, 1995), pp.72-3.
17. Helen Garner, (1996), 'Death', op. cit., p. 229.
18. Thea Astley, *It's raining in Mango: Pictures From the Family Album*, (New York: G P Putnam's Sons, 1987) and *Vanishing Points*, (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1992).
19. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press 1993; 1st publ. 1973), p. 183.
20. Helen Garner, (1992), op. cit., pp. 191-2. In conversation, Garner has recounted a similar experience to Janet's in her own life.
21. Elizabeth Jolley, *Mr Scobie's Riddle*, (London: Penguin Books, 1985; 1st publ. 1983), p. 28.
22. Barbara Hanrahan, *Annie Magdalene*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1985), p. 121.