

Land and Identity in Barbara Hanrahan's Writing

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'I looked about me for the sunburned land. In vain.'

Land. Identity. Land and identity. The two words encourage one to think that they bear upon each other; that identity, for instance, is somehow determined by land.

The conference title reminded me of a passage in Barbara Hanrahan's first book, *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, where the narrator realises that the stereotyped version of Australia which she had been fed as a child was not the Australia of her own experience. A second passage from *The Scent of Eucalyptus* also presented itself to me, a passage in which the narrator describes what, for her, was the 'real' world when she was growing up. These passages illustrate Hanrahan's sense of alienation from popular or official constructions of Australian land and culture, and her identification with a more personal, intimate Australia.

In the first passage the narrator describes the Adelaide Hills. She compares this gentle, monotonous grey landscape with the Australia she learnt about at school and asks:

But where were the hills of the history book, stitched with the pathways of Burke and Sturt and Leichhardt?—the hills of the sun-burned earth and budgerigar grass, the azure skies and fiery mountains we sang about at school before the flag spangled with all the stars of the Southern Cross I was never sure of seeing? Where were the old dark people I did not link with the lost couples on suitcases at the railway station? Where were the crocodiles and brolgas, the billabongs and snakes? Where were the flowers that wilted in blistered clay, the rusty leaves of spinifex ...? ... I looked about me for the sunburned land. In vain. (90-1)

The second passage describes life at home as a child with her mother, grandmother and great aunt:

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 ... 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 rainwater 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 ... (182)

Note the gendered nature of these two versions of Australia. The first version, the sunburned land, is the masculine land of explorers, deserts and bush. The second version, Hanrahan's 'real' world, is the domestic world of women and relationships. The Australia that was recorded in the history books when Hanrahan was growing up,

the 'official' Australia, was the masculine one. The female world was for the most part unnoticed and therefore lacked validity.

In a country where land is felt to have such a defining influence on identity, what happens to someone like Hanrahan who discovers there is a gap between 'the land' as purveyed by the dominant culture and her own experience of living? How does she react to this disjunction, and how does she choose to find her identity, stability and purpose in life? What can be learnt from her experience?

Barbara Hanrahan's diaries and published writings reveal a range of behaviours which could have been prompted by this sense of not-belonging, of not being nourished by the public culture. In her first book, a scarcely-disguised autobiography, she records her sense of being split into two warring selves, the public self and the private self. And as one reads her diaries, one is struck by the emotional swings to which she is subject, swings often expressed in terms of wishing to be elsewhere, other than in the country where she is living at the time, and away from the particular people who are impinging upon her.

One is struck, too, by her attempts to create a sympathetic environment for herself, especially in the emotional, domestic and cultural spheres. She anchors herself in memories of her childhood, returning to them again and again in her imagination. She enters into a long-term relationship with Jo Steele and they develop a way of living that enables her to spend most of her time reading, writing, print-making and painting. Together they scavenge through London markets and Cornish villages as Hanrahan seeks out antique bric-a-brac to carry home; together they plant gardens full of European flowers; and together they go on pilgrimages into the past, to literary shrines, to houses once inhabited by Hanrahan's favourite writers, to cemeteries where Hanrahan transcribes the details and designs of headstones into her diaries, and to churches where she records the sensual aspects of folk piety. It is as though she is creating a cultural history for herself.

At the least, she is creating a domestic, private landscape over which she can exert a measure of control. Hanrahan does not modify her identity to accord with stereotyped ideas of her native country; rather, she creates and modifies her landscape, expressing her identity through her physical and spiritual surroundings. Her personal landscape bears few of the common markers of 'Australianness'—which is not to say that she was deracialised, but rather that she had constructed her own profile of Australia, as illustrated in her print 'My Family - My Australia'.

If I were to construct Barbara Hanrahan's life in terms of land, identity and disjunction, I would start with her sense of a divided self; her preoccupation with her Adelaide childhood and the protected life she led with her grandmother, great aunt and mother; her discovery of art as a language to express her interior life, and her removal to London in her early twenties to study art; her curiously old-fashioned teenage fantasies of long-haired girls with old-fashioned clothes, wistful lovers, dreaming poets, mermaids and floating angels; the relative absence of readily identifiable Australian iconography in her art-work; her feeling for the language of the Bible and the psalms, the Elizabethan poets and English writers of an earlier generation; the over-powering homesickness which came upon her when her grandmother died—a homesickness less for Australia itself, than for the old life which died with her grandmother; and her feelings of alienation when she did return to Australia.

I would also note that, by the time she returned to Australia she was as certain as she could ever be that she had a calling as an artist—it was art, and subsequently literature, that gave her a moral purpose and direction in life. It was from this calling

that she took her identity, not from her geographic roots. I would suggest that her bouts of hostility towards Australia and England had less to do with homesickness and longing for a different landscape than with her feeling that her work was not being understood or valued in which ever country she happened to be living at the time.

The intense mood swings to which she was subject seemed less frequent and less intense once her cancer was diagnosed in 1984. It is as though the cancer and its likely recurrence focussed her mind on her task—her God-given task, as she expressed it—to complete the work she had been given to do as an artist and writer (personal papers, undated) and relieved her of the need to worry about the public world. The amount of creative work she undertook in her last years is extraordinary; her physical condition in the last few months was so appalling that it is marvellous she accomplished anything—the fact that she was still planning and researching new books is testimony to her drive to create. In the end, the only things that mattered to her were her relationships with Jo and her mother, the paradise-life of the garden, and her work.

But there is the ambiguity of her final diary entry of 5 November 1991: 'Help me find me, dear God'. Was Hanrahan still aware of a sense of division within herself? A feeling that she had not yet discovered her true identity? Or was she looking forward to finding her spiritual essence in death? In her diaries she expressed no fear of death, but described it as a friend, as the perfection to be reached at the end of life (personal papers, undated). She seemed to regard death not as an ending but a passing through to another stage of life where she would meet up with all those who had gone before, while remaining a presence to those who were most dear to her in this world. I prefer to read confidence, rather than despair, into this plea, 'Help me find me, dear God': confidence that there is a God, and a continuing existence where all things will be revealed. This reading is reinforced by Hanrahan's last words, reported by Jo Steele: 'I'm happier than I have ever been and I don't want anyone feeling sorry for me'.¹

I am trying to show that Hanrahan, rather than taking her identity from the landscape that was presented to her by the dominant culture, actually created, or at least shaped, a landscape in which she would be at home.

What of Barbara Hanrahan's Australia? In a note on her work and beliefs Hanrahan explained her twin allegiances to Adelaide and London thus:

Australia has shaped me. I am an Australian writer. The images of Australia—that are mine—summer, Adelaide, the natural world—are part of my own private mythology. I carry them with me wherever, physically I settle ... Distanced physically from Australia I am able to see it more vividly. All the little hindrances and annoyances dissolve, all that remain are the potent *big* things ... I feel it's of value to divide my life between England and Australia ... Two places, so different that one illuminates the other. London so large that I may lose myself, which means find myself because I can be anonymous. Adelaide—smaller, strange, this place where I began from, the place of childhood, of legend. (personal papers, n.d. 1978?)

'The images of Australia that are mine ...' Barbara Hanrahan's writing and artwork do not immediately strike one as being particularly Australian—there's little mention of sweeping plains, parching droughts, exploration and heroic men, weary women, urban wastelands, contemporary politics or beach culture. The markers which alert one to the presence of an Australian sensibility are noticeable by their absence.

But one should look again, for Barbara Hanrahan's work is impregnated with the particularities of her life in Adelaide, growing up as a girl in the 1940s and 1950s. Her work may not immediately appear to be Australian, but it is, in all its Englishness, rooted in Adelaide—Adelaide, fifty years ago. The minutiae of Adelaide life are suspended,

like fossils in amber, in Hanrahan's books. The level of detail is such that one wonders whether she is trying to prove—to herself as much as to others—that the backyards of Adelaide did exist, did nurture the wildness in her, did have a validity of their own.

Hanrahan's vision of Australia is best represented by her print 'My Family – My Australia', a print which she was working on in London in December 1981 (diary, 8/12/81), although the artist's proof is dated 1982. In this print she makes over the whole of Australia in her imagination. It is immediately obvious that she rejects the mythology of the sun-burned land in favour of her private set of images.

By conjoining 'My Family' and 'My Australia' Hanrahan signals her intention of presenting a personalised vision, highlighting the intrinsic relationship between people and land—the land has significance for the individual when it is seen in relation to the lives of those people who have lived in it. The latter point is made by placing the child Hanrahan and her family in the foreground of the print, with Australia floating behind them. It is emphasised by the way both family and country are watched over by (presumably) relatives, for the most part dressed in clothes of an earlier period; they may well be members of those generations who have gone before Hanrahan but whose presence was still felt by her and with whom she expected to be re-united.

There is an element of ambiguity in the title. Hanrahan could be thought to be staking out Australia much as a land-owner stakes a claim. Or she could be saying that this is her peculiar Australia and that it is as valid as any other vision of Australia. It is just as partial as the sun-burned country and, like it, it should not be confused with the 'reality' of the country or elevated to a position where it is thought to symbolise a common vision, a common experience.

What is to be said of Hanrahan's Australia, floating pale yellow in a sea of black? The familiar shape is there (albeit minus Tasmania), but all the physical features of the continent have been erased.

As in an atlas, there are the grid lines of latitude and longitude. These grids eliminate any idea of linear narrative from the Australian landscape—unlike the explorers' trails which stumble across maps in history books, the grids carve Australia up into little boxes. Each of these boxes contains a picture, but these pictures, unlike cartoon frames, do not reveal a clear narrative thread. There is a sense of repetition, but not development. Hanrahan's Australia looks like a specimen box, where objects—treasures—are displayed, pleasing both owner and viewer.

This Australia bristles with items which symbolise European residence, cultivation and domesticity and which reinforce the idea of cultural and racial continuity with Europe—this is a picture of Hanrahan's Australia, not a representation which tries to be socially, racially, historically, or geographically accurate.

Of what is Hanrahan's Australia comprised? People; animals and birds (mostly exotic—the kangaroos rampant on either side of the banner 'My Australia' owe more to the heraldic tradition than to nature); plants and flowers (introduced species, apart from the labelled waratah); suns, moons and stars; buildings (mostly free-standing suburban cottages); letters and numbers; family names and old-fashioned, sometimes patriotic, slogans; sentimental Victorian keepsakes; and permutations of the Australian flag. Dominating this harvest festival are scattered human bits and pieces: faces, breasts, torsos, feet and hands. This imagery—people and nature in relationship—is typical of Hanrahan's art-work.

What sort of mythology or spirituality can be read into these images? I have written elsewhere of Hanrahan's spirituality, making reference to her untitled 1988 painting of the Eye of God. That painting unites creation, humanity and the viewer

within the eye of God. This print, too, can carry a spiritual reading in a way which is suggested by North American theologian Sallie McFague. Her observations are relevant to the appreciation of visual theology, as distinct from word-based theology. Put most simply, if the God in which one believes is an immanent God (and there is sufficient evidence in Hanrahan's diaries that she had a firm belief in an in-dwelling creative God), then God is present in all that one sees, and everything, therefore, can be seen as a symbol of God. This mode of thought can be traced back to Genesis chapter one where God looks on all that is created and determines it to be good. It is also in harmony with much contemporary feminist (and process) theology, where the world is seen as the 'body' of God. As McFague says, 'a bird can be a metaphor to express God's intimate presence in the world' (67)—so too, I'm suggesting, can Hanrahan's animals, people, plants, planets and languages be seen as metaphors by which she expresses her sense of God's presence.

This returns me to my original concerns with the way land and identity have been mythologised in Australian culture. The opening quotations from *The Scent of Eucalyptus* epitomise the differences that exist between what people of Hanrahan's generation were taught about Australia and the reality of their own experience. I've noted that the former Australia is essentially a masculine construction—heroic explorers, noble indigenes, men defining themselves individually against a land of extremes—while Hanrahan's Australia is more woman-oriented, celebrating domestic and communal values, and less anthropocentric in its willingness to regard all aspects of creation—not just man—as symbols of divine presence.

Barbara Hanrahan's writings, prints and paintings cause one to pause when presented with too-ready assumptions of the role of the land in shaping identity. Whose land? one is prompted to ask, Whose culture? Whose version of reality? Hanrahan's sense of the disjunction between stereotype and experience is acute; her efforts to construct a more congenial private mythology of place suggest how important it is for people to see their own worlds validated by their culture. I would argue that Hanrahan's sense of mission and identity as a writer and artist stemmed from her childhood perceptions of difference, from her loneliness as one who stood apart from 'the wan pretence [of life] fabricated by newspapers and politicians' (*Eucalyptus* 7). When Hanrahan accepted her creative talents she also accepted the responsibility of detailing the lives of 'real' people who, like her own family, were ignored by society. If there is a sense of inevitability about her life, it is not because she was born in a certain place, but rather because she was determined to overcome the disjunctions she perceived between culture and experience, a task which she framed in moral and religious terms: '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.' (personal papers, undated)

Notes

1 Jo Steele, in conversation with Elaine Lindsay, 1 December 1991.

Works cited

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