NOT THE DESERT EXPERIENCE: SPIRITUALITY IN AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S FICTION

Elaine Lindsay

When women gather at conferences on feminist theology and spirituality they say to each other: 'We are the ones who will invigorate religion and who will find new ways to talk of God'. Maybe they are saying this because they are women. Maybe they are eternal optimists. But maybe they also feel there is a need for change, that the language of mainstream Australian Christian theology is tired, that the images do not speak to them as women.

I have been looking at popular expressions of Australian Spirituality contained in books written within the last fifteen years by theologians and religious commentators, books designed for a general audience.[1] At the same time I've been reading fictions by contemporary Australian women writers to see what they've been saying, albeit obliquely, about Euro-Australian spirituality. Much of the women's imagery and understanding of the divine is substantially different from the mainstream spirituality which is found in religious books - hence the title of this paper.

From my reading it seems that mainstream spirituality is most often described in terms of the desert experience, whilst women ignore the desert and offer instead images of Eden, of the Paradise Garden. In the following pages I want to introduce the experience that is not of the desert, particularly as it is figured in the fictions of Thea Astley, Elizabeth Jolley and Barbara Hanrahan, women who write out of the settled areas. My intention is to question the monopoly which the desert holds on Australian religious imaginations and to suggest that women's ways of expressing the divine, although they might be different, are certainly not invalid. Images such as those purveyed by the women here will not only refresh the language of spirituality but may also lead to a new understanding of the way we relate to life, to each other, to this country, and to the divine.

Deserts

In order to emphasise the originality of the women's visions, I should first explain what I mean when I refer to the desert experience in Australian Christianity. What I am talking about is the way in which the real and the metaphorical deserts of the Bible and spiritual writing have become enmeshed with one aspect of the physical landscape of Australia,[2] with the desert treks of early explorers, and with those works of literature which express the spiritual journey as a passage through bleak landscapes to the central core of meaning (or non-meaning), the divinity. There are variations upon this theme within desert spirituality but most have in common the idea that God can be reached only by journeying, and that the journey will be long, hard and solitary, stripping the pilgrim of all his resources - and I use the word 'his' advisedly, there being no women pilgrims in this literature of Australian Spirituality. Rare too are accounts of the encounter with God, or with God's absence, and there is little or no consideration of life after the God-encounter, of the journey back.

Even though they are dealing with a metaphysical experience these accounts are expressed in very physical terms as they urge the intending pilgrim to turn inland from the hedonistic coast and the iniquitous cities and to direct his attention to the centre, to Uluru, where God may be found in the emptiness. This literal interpretation of desert spirituality suggests that God is some place other than where people normally are, that the way to God is a purgative rather than a joyful experience, and that the land is hostile to man.[3]

Eugene Stockton is one of the few commentators who views the land (but not the cities) positively, likening the earth to the more feminine mode of parent God, the Mother who leads the pilgrim to the Father.[4] Most accounts are too sophisticated to attribute masculine characteristics to God but, given the way in which they manifest the landscape as female (mother, whore, lover or temptress) and the seeker after truth and enlightenment as male, it might well be suspected that their proponents subconsciously invest the Christian Father God with male rather than female values.

These are broad generalizations, but they may be found either singly or severally in the books which have informed this paper, particularly Tony Kelly's *A New Imagining*, Eugene Stockton's *Landmarks*, Cavan Brown's *Pilgrim Through This Barren Land*, and various contributions in Graeme Ferguson and John Chryssavgis (eds.)

The Desert is Alive.

But my chief complaint about desert spirituality is the way in which it has captured the market in Australia, allowing very little room for other voices, notably the voices of women. All the commentators I have been able to locate in this area are men, with the honourable exception of Veronica Brady, and all are religious professionals within mainstream Christianity. All of them have been exposed to the ideas of European and American theologians, the majority of whom have been men. There is little or no reference in any of the titles informing this paper to the work of feminist theologians whose books, after all, have been available in Australia since the late 1960s. Further, in fleshing out their accounts of Australian Spirituality with the work of Australian fiction writers, these commentators have chosen to refer primarily to male writers. Brady's ground-breaking *A Crucible of Prophets* set the pattern in 1981 with a survey of the works of male authors; unfortunately none of the commentators who have been inspired by Brady have done much to widen the selection - a few more male writers have been added to the canon, but no women fiction writers. The use of factual and historical material has been similarly restricted, with material chosen to reinforce the more male-oriented aspects of Australian history - exploration, bush-ranging, the Eureka Stockade, Gallipoli, mateship and sport.

I cannot believe that women's experience has been identical to that of men's, although until recently it has either passed unremarked or been absorbed into male experience. It is my contention that many women have been doing their theology in their novels and short stories, and that in these books can be found a new range of images and ideas more relevant to the lives of contemporary city-dwellers and more sympathetic to women's experience. It is as though women have been writing about the divine as it informs their own lives, while religious commentators have written out of their theological knowledge.

Women's Spirituality

What can be said about spirituality in contemporary Australian women's fiction?

The first point I should make is that I am not saying there is one form of spirituality which is totally different from men's spirituality and that all women are attracted to it. Rather, there is a sufficient

number of women who have enough things in common for it to be possible to speak of a shared spirituality coming out of the settled areas and relating to the God-within. This spirituality is not necessarily gender-exclusive - in the same way that many women respond to visions of the desert, so men may resonate to coastal and urban imagery and ideas of an immanent God - but for now it is being spoken of chiefly by women, hence my claim for it here as a women's spirituality.

Is it possible to provide an introductory sketch of this alternative to desert spirituality? To a certain extent yes, although there will be variations between writers and over the course of a writer's career. What follows is my personal interpretation of the aspects of spirituality which lurk in the crevices of Astley, Jolley and Hanrahan's books; it is not meant to capture their personal belief systems but to highlight some of those areas from which they see Australians taking succour.

The most obvious similarity between these writers is their use of the settled areas in which to situate their stories: Hanrahan memorializes the Adelaide hills, houses and suburban gardens; Elizabeth Jolley the Western Australian wheatbelt, the hobby farm and the Perth suburbs; and Thea Astley, Brisbane, Sydney and tropical townships and settlements. The closest one comes to the desert is the scarred landscape around the decaying mining town of Allbut in Astley's *An Item from The Late News*, and that is only 200 miles in from the tropical Queensland coast. None of the writers ascribe gender to the areas they write about, although Astley allows lonely Charlie Lunt to describe the land he loves as bitch country and mother,[5] and heterosexual Macintosh Hope to look at his island, Little Brother, with the eyes of a lover.[6] Astley, Jolley and Hanrahan themselves do not promote images of the land as either male or female.

Because they are writing about places with which they are lovingly familiar, these writers see in them the presence of God (although Jolley prefers to avoid the word 'God' which is not much used in Quaker talking,[7] and is overworked in literature). God is both more amorphous and more immediate in these books because the divine presence is not visualised as being concentrated in one distant geographical area but is present in nature in its entirety and in all people. God is likely to be found within the self through the exercise of creativity (Hanrahan), in the exercise of loving kindness towards other people (Astley), or in the essential goodness, the Christ-spirit, of each person (Jolley). Creation is a sign of God's unconditional love (Astley) and is overflowing with the presence of God (Hanrahan and

Jolley).

As the landscapes are more gentle, so the God envisaged in these books is a loving God, not a harsh, judgemental God who curses land and humanity. Ill befalls people but this is because they are human and self-determining, not because God is displeased with them. These writers do not put a high value on withdrawal or suffering as the way to God, celebrating instead the gift of understanding or unity with the divine as it comes through the company or service of others, through nature and through creativity. The spirituality they portray is life-affirming, not life-denying, and is the occasion of joy.

The best way to demonstrate the alternative ways in which women address spirituality is to look at some specific areas of spiritual experience. What are the holy sites in women's fiction? Do people go on pilgrimages and, if so, to where? What alternative is there to the solitary way? What of redemption and resurrection?

Holy Sites

If women writers do not privilege the desert as the dwelling place of God, what do they reverence? Astley, Hanrahan and Jolley are strongly identified with particular regions and it is these places they hang with clouds of glory.

Astley in her first book *Girl with a Monkey*, makes the most direct connections between God, Christianity and nature as she recalls a celebration of the Mass by a Franciscan priest in a dance hall on Magnetic Island. But it is worth noting that, although the Eucharist, the forgiveness of sins and the Latin chant are integral to this experience of miracle, the event is still staged outside of a formal church building and involves the natural world in a fundamental way. While Astley does not make such a direct connection again between Christian ritual and nature in her books, there is no doubt that nature is regarded as a sign to those who have eyes to see of God's presence in the world. Characters who are blind or hostile to nature will be found to be lacking in moral and spiritual values.

While Astley puts forward the tropics as a potential Eden, she also uses Sydney and Brisbane on occasions. The worst she can say of these cities in her books is that people in Sydney tend to live on the surface while Brisbane, which may be a source of wonder to a country child, is basically bleak, boring and tawdry. Like Elizabeth Jolley and Barbara Hanrahan (in her biographical and autobiographical fictions), and

unlike many male theologians, Astley refrains from condemning the cities as sisters of Babylon.

Jolley's characters, too, sense revelation immanent in nature. Laura in *Palomino* speaks for many of Jolley's female and male characters as she recalls:

> When I was a child I thought if I could only burrow through the leaves and the grasses and the undergrowth I could emerge in some magic place where I would make some sort of fresh discovery. I suppose it is the same now when I feel upon the threshold of discovery, as if I am about to come upon the reason or the truth.[8]

This is not a particularly Christian notion, although it does refer to the mystery force - which may be God - that causes the sun and moon to rise and the seasons to follow one another. Jolley's landscapes are not ringing endorsements of the presence of God so much as tantalizing glimpses of the possibility of meaning and truth always a little beyond human grasp.

Hanrahan not only sees the divine in all created things but also writes of the house as a sacred place, a safe place where women perform the rituals of caring and of new life:

> 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.[9]

In women's spirituality the holy sites are where the people are.

Pilgrimages

There is something holy about the idea of a pilgrimage, the search for the centre of being. Of the women discussed here, Thea Astley is the one most drawn to the conventional idea of the pilgrimage, although her approach is generally critical, bordering on the satirical.

American critic Robert Ross has written of Astley taking on 'the largest of themes, the oldest of all: humankind's spiritual quest',[10] but my reading of her books, especially since *Hunting the Wild Pineapple*, cautions against taking too reverential an approach to her pilgrims and their wanderings. For what Astley is doing is calling into question people's motives for setting off on physical and/or metaphysical explorations in search of their 'real' selves. Astley's pilgrims, in the main, are either sour misogynists, fragile self-obsessives or Southern hippies in search of an hedonistic nirvana where they can sponge off society - none of them have ever engaged with the needs of other people.

One might argue that, because these characters have no active Christian affiliation, their pilgrimages bear no relation to those which are lauded in Australian Spirituality. I would suggest, however, that Astley is not only playing with the convention that Australian pilgrims automatically turn inland, but she is also calling into question the high evaluation given to separation in desert spirituality. Astley's 1992 book *Vanishing Points*, is a perfect illustration of the relative moral weight she gives to withdrawal and to engagement. In the first story retired academic Macintosh Hope is drawn north in search of solitude while Julie Truscott, the betrayed wife of the second story, flees north to try to regain control of her life. Mac sets himself against the world and Julie casts her lot with a trio of nuns and works with them and the Aboriginals on remote Bukki Beach. Mac is routed from his island and, with his soul still hankering after the sterile ideal of 'ultimate perfection', he sails off into the outer ocean, the void. Julie, however, finding herself accepted by the people with whom she is working, discovers 'the ripe kernel in the heart of the life-fruit'.[11] Mac, having given nothing to anybody, disappears, but Julie is able to go back into the world reassured by the love and goodness of the nuns that there is a future beyond the present. There is little doubt as to which is Astley's preferred way and it is interesting to note that it is given to

the woman: the woman engages with the realities of life while the male flees from them.

Elizabeth Jolley and Barbara Hanrahan's characters, too, make their pilgrimages into life. And because everything is invested with the sacred, it is possible to embark upon such a pilgrimage merely by stepping out-of-doors:

> Quietly Mr Scobie set out for his walk. He walked along the quiet side roads and through lost lanes grown over with grass and weeds, hung over by green branches, long leaved and sighing, and interwoven with trailing stems and shining leaves holding white and blue flower cups.
>
> The sun was warm on his back and he heard the rich voices of the magpies. There was a little wind bringing a fragrance of damp peppermint and eucalyptus laden earth. An unexpected light shower had refreshed the garden.
>
> He stopped from time to time to lean on the side gate of some old house to look into the green shade of a deserted back garden. He saw lemons ripe on the trees. He smelled the sweetness of lemon flowers and of roses. He was comforted during his walk by the early morning serenity and the possession of the sun's warmth. He felt as if he was walking inside a halo of blessings.[12]

The Common Way

As these women writers perceive the presence of God in nature and in people, so they see that the way to the divine is through engagement with the world. While Astley's books are studded with hermits in green and leafy 'funkholes', and while the temptation to abandon everything is strong, Astley, in the end, is critical of those men who are motivated by a sense of nihilism, a negation of life, religion and caritas. In Astley's books, it hardly needs be said, there are no female hermits - as one of her characters says, we need people, hospitals, shops, 'we need connections'.[13]

While Australian Spirituality celebrates desert-useful virtues such as courage against the odds and single-mindedness, Astley, Jolley and Hanrahan value survival and fellow-feeling. For Astley selfishness is

the greatest sin and loving kindness the greatest human virtue, while Jolley puts little store in conventional morality so long as her characters show tenderness and cherish each other. But no writer has equalled Hanrahan in honouring the patience, trust and optimism of everyday people who are alive to the sacredness of creation. For it follows that, if the better way is the common way, the way of remaining in life, then it will be the lives of the common people which are touched by the breath of the gods.[14] In her life-tending female characters Hanrahan presents a positive alternative to the suffering male pilgrim and undermines that aspect of Australian Spirituality which portrays the land as a malign female figure. What is there in malestream spirituality to equal the loving care that ageing arthritic Annie Magdalene lavishes upon the smallest of creatures?:

> 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.[15]

In *Annie Magdalene* humanity, nature and divinity are brought together into a unified and loving whole.

Redemption and Resurrection

For Australian theologians, purification through suffering is the prime way to redemption. Women writers, however, have different ideas. Eschewing thoughts of a patriarchal judging God and divine punishment they turn towards the promise of God's unconditional love and the essential goodness of creation. The joy that pervades women's spirituality receives full expression in Elizabeth Jolley's writing, as in her account of the elderly Miss Hailey's entrance into the dance of life:

> Miss Hailey danced a pine tree dance. She danced a dance of the majesty of the pines and of their transfiguration in the changing light of the morning sun. She included in the dance a

> mysterious hill. She tiptoed round its base indicating with expressive fingers and an arching of her eyebrows that, though life was active at the foot of the hill, no one knew the secrets of the hill itself. She danced the promised vision of an open door leading in to a small but neat house. She changed her dancing to a kind of hornpipe depicting three coloured tents nestling close to the house. The movements of the dance became more explicit as the actions of everyday life were enacted, first there was the feeding of the hens, then the planting of the vegetables. Stretching up she picked ripe fruit from imagined branches. She danced a rustic and natural childbirth setting the whole scene in a primitive wash-house. Because this part of the dance, with all its meaningful movements, was so satisfying she danced a second natural childbirth demonstrating the effort and the exhaustion and the rewarding joy of the new mother when a child is born. She danced a celebration of the new life, that of the child, and of the people engaged in their new found way of living. The celebration included her own joy at being about to take part in the new life. Her dance began to include more movements of excitement. She whirled round madly and, with a final fling of exuberance to end the dance, she flung her sponge bag into the massed foliage of oleander and other flowering bushes which crowded the high edges of the verandah.
>
> Miss Hailey, out of breath but ecstatic, gripped the rail with both hands. 'Hailey's Dance. An Idyll', she murmured.[16]

While Jolley celebrates the transfigurative moments of the here and now, Astley and Hanrahan explore life beyond our workaday consciousness. Both offer the possibility that in some form or another life continues after death, but their approaches are quite idiosyncratic. Astley, in books including *It's Raining in Mango* and *Reaching Tin River*, considers the possibility of continuity across generations, of people ageing into their forebears, and of traces of human action remaining in landscape to influence later-comers. Hanrahan, however, is more concerned with the flow of life between the physical and spiritual worlds, between finite secular time and the sacred infinite which is attained through death. Within this writing there is an optimism and love of life which is not always well expressed in Australian Spirituality.

The archetypal God-experience in desert spirituality, the one to which all commentators refer, is Patrick White's description of Voss' humiliation before God and his 'death by torture in the country of the mind'.[17] Compare this with Barbara Hanrahan's raising up of her Grandmother, a paean to the fecundity of life, to joy in death, and to the sure presence of the divine which might well become the archetypal God-experience in women's spirituality:

> 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 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.[18]

Conclusions

If the desert is thought to be fundamental to being a Christian in Australia, what then of the paradise garden? The question must be asked, 'How Christian is the spirituality being portrayed in the writings of women like Thea Astley, Elizabeth Jolley and Barbara Hanrahan?'

Fiction writers are not theologians and it would be silly to expect them to expound formally upon religious matters in their books. Nevertheless a number of contemporary women writers, not just those mentioned here, down-play forms of Christianity which relate to the fallenness of creation and to the virtues of suffering and life-denial. Most have little time for the institutional church and its dogma and place a higher value on intuitive and mystical insights and on experiences of at-oneness with God. The God they relate to is rarely personalized and is not thought of in Trinitarian terms. The divine spark which is within is both Christ and God.

I would suggest that these women are uncovering aspects of Christianity that have been obscured for far too long by the sands of

the desert and, in so doing, they are celebrating the immanent God, the gift of divine love, and the goodness and healing power of creation. They may well be revitalizing the expression and experience of Christianity - this paper is about God's goodly garden, not the desert experience.

University of Sydney

REFERENCES

1. Theological texts used to background this paper include Veronica Brady, A Crucible of Prophets: Australians and the Question of God (Sydney: Theological Explorations, 1981); Dorothy Harris, Douglas Hynd and David Millikan, eds., The Shape of Belief: Christianity in Australia Today (Homebush West: Lancer Books, 1982); Joachim Dirks, The Inner Snowy: Reflections towards pollination of church and culture and Gospel in Australia (Melbourne: Spectrum Publications, 1984); Gerald O'Collins, Jesus Today: Christology in an Australian Context (Blackburn: Dove Communications, 1986); Eugene Stockton, This Land, Our Mother (Surry Hills: The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, 1986) and Landmarks: A Spiritual Search in a Southern Land (Eastwood: Parish Ministry Publications, 1990); Peter Malone, co-ordinator, Discovering an Australian Theology (Homebush: St Paul Publications, 1988); Graeme Ferguson and John Chryssavgis, eds, The Desert is Alive: Dimensions of Australian Spirituality (Melbourne: The Joint Board of Christian Education, 1990); Tony Kelly, A New Imagining: Towards an Australian Spirituality (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1990); Cavan Brown, Pilgrim Through This Barren Land (Sutherland: Albatross Books, 1991); and John Thornhill, Making Australia: Exploring Our National Conversation (Newtown: Millennium Books, 1992).

2. See for example Gerald O'Collins Jesus Today and Eugene Stockton Landmarks. Patrick Dodson has commented that 'You get the feeling sometimes that the White Australian finds it impossible to relate spiritually to the land ... White theologians relate everything back to the Holy Land.' - reported in Dirks, The Inner Snowy, op. cit. p.71.

3. This perception is not peculiar to theologians; David Tacey in his exploration of the psychological structures of Australian society presents numerous literary examples of the Australian (male's?) fear that 'when the Ned Kelly mask of our defensiveness is abandoned, we will be left standing naked and alone, a tiny morsel for mother nature to devour' ('Dissolving into Landscape', Island 56 (Spring 1993), pp. 45-49). For an account of Australians' preference for the fallenness of creation as distinct from the goodness of creation, see G.M. Crombie, 'And God Created Australia', Interchange 44 (1988), pp.13-29.

4. Stockton, Landmarks, op. cit.
5. Thea Astley, A Kindness Cup (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1974), pp.39-41.
6. Thea Astley, Vanishing Points (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1992), p.121.
7. Elizabeth Jolley in conversation with Elaine Lindsay, 30 June 1992.
8. Elizabeth Jolley, Palomino (Melbourne: Outback Press, 1980; reprint ed. St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984), pp.36-7.
9. Barbara Hanrahan, The Scent of Eucalyptus (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), p.182.
10. Robert Ross, 'Thea Astley's new novel searches for "the center" ...', review of Reaching Tin River, Antipodes 4,1 (Spring 1990): 66.
11. Astley, Vanishing Points, op.cit. p.233.
12. Elizabeth Jolley, Mr Scobie's Riddle (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1983), p.162.
13. Astley, Vanishing Points, op.cit. pp.72-3.
14. Hanrahan quotes lines from D.H. Lawrence's poem 'Cabbage Roses' as the preface to Kewpie Doll (London: Chatto and Windus, 1984), p.7.
15. Barbara Hanrahan, Annie Magdalene (London: Chatto and Windus, 1985), p.121.
16. Jolley, Mr Scobie's Riddle, op.cit. pp.211-2.
17. Patrick White, Voss (Eyre and Spottiswoode: 1957; reprint edition, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), p.446.
18. Barbara Hanrahan, 'Iris in Her Garden', in Iris in Her Garden (Canberra: Officina Brindabella, 1991), pp.58-9.