

ON FIRST LOOKING INTO BARBARA HANRAHAN'S DIARIES 'THE TERRIBLE CREATIVE TASK'

Elaine Lindsay

In September 1981 Barbara Hanrahan wrote in her diary:

I go through the oddest struggle all the time in my head, in my body. It is a struggle, I think, to curb my mind — to make my mind and body accept this life. To be ME — so that the world may not be this fearful torment. To accept ME, and my spiritual purpose. To defeat fear and loneliness'.

This entry, written by Hanrahan when she was 41 years old and well into her career as an artist and writer opens the way into a discussion of the way in which Hanrahan viewed her self, her creativity, and her responsibility to God and the world. The complexity of the statement encourages a creative response and that is what I propose here — a peregrination through Barbara Hanrahan's diaries looking at the way she constructed self, creativity and spiritual purpose. I don't want to present a psycho-analytical study of Hanrahan, suggesting why she reacted and wrote as she did, but I do want to focus on the material, all of which is, so far, unpublished. What interests me today is how Hanrahan explained to herself her feelings of being two people, of living in two worlds, and how she built this into what she perceived to be her life purpose — in other words, how she made sense of her life.

What is interesting, particularly in the context of this Conference, is the way she read her life in creative and spiritual terms. She didn't, to any extent, psycho-analyse herself or look to psycho-analytic theories of women and gender to explain why she felt as she did, why she described the creative self as the child within, or why she regarded the moral freedom and innocence of the prepubescent child as the ideal state. Her writings and

interviews provide rich material for those who wish to theorize, but that was not the way in which she gave meaning to her life.

In this paper I'm introducing the Barbara Hanrahan diaries, rather than mounting any particular argument. I would suggest, however, that this material cautions against the easy assumption that the artist's endpoint is necessarily the discovery of the essential Self. Even where Barbara Hanrahan may seem to be obsessed by self, returning again and again in her fictions and diaries to an exploration of her adolescent life, the time when she was trying to understand and balance her two selves, her purpose seems to have been to fulfil a God-given task of bringing before the outer world the goodness of the spirit. In reading Barbara Hanrahan's work — and presumably that by any other artist who has a strongly developed religious or spiritual sense — one needs to ask, as I do here, where the artist places herself in the material and spiritual worlds, whether she regards talent as a personal achievement or as a divine gift, and what level of responsibility she feels towards other people and towards God. In addressing such questions one might well observe that, for the artist, the *endpoint* of creativity is not necessarily the understanding of self.

In talking about the Barbara Hanrahan diaries, too, I'm hoping to reinforce an argument I've been making for a couple of years, that Hanrahan should be read, in part at least, as a spiritual writer, and that her insights should be taken into consideration by those who would describe 'Australian Spirituality'.

It shouldn't surprise you that I believe that Hanrahan, in her art-making, was not obsessed by the search for Self for its own sake, but rather by the search for the state of being In-God. It was from this state of being In-God that she could produce her artwork and utilise the talents she had been given by God. But just to achieve the state of being In-God and turning out prints and books was not sufficient to fulfil her responsibilities to God; her art had to go out into the public world and work for good by bringing people, through its perfection, to an apprehension of the sacred and the spiritual. That Hanrahan took this responsibility seriously cannot be doubted — for her it was a 'terrible creative task', one that, in her more depressed moments, she wished could be taken from her. Thus she wrote on 23 October 1985:

... sometimes it seems I'm like a born abortion. Because I'm different to everyone else. And I just want to be the same. Well, in such a mood I forget my *purpose* in life — and forget that God sent me into the world with the gifts I have and my task is to use them and to guard them.

And she continues a couple of sentences later:

Please help me dear God. Help me to find you and thus myself. And help me have faith.

Before addressing Hanrahan's spiritual world I should place her in the physical, material world.

The Physical World (Placing the Individual)

Barbara Hanrahan was born in Adelaide in 1939. Her father died when she was one year old and she was raised by her mother, grandmother and mongol great aunt. Her mother worked as a commercial artist to support the family and Hanrahan attended a state school where she learnt useful things like typing and dress-making. After school and a brief spell working in a department store she went to Teachers' College and Art School to study to become an art teacher. She taught art at two schools in Adelaide until she had saved enough money to go to London to study at the Central School of Art. Hanrahan arrived in London in 1963; a couple of years later she met and settled down with — although they never married — an engineer and racing car driver from Adelaide, Jo Steele. Steele, with some prodding from Hanrahan, subsequently became a highly respected sculptor.

Hanrahan was very close to her mother and grandmother and to the memory of her dead father. When, in 1968, her grandmother died Hanrahan, prompted by homesickness and a craving to remember the old Adelaide life, began to write out the memories which eventually became part of her first autobiographical fiction, *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, published in London in 1973. From there Hanrahan went on to write another 14 books of fiction which can be read variously as meditations upon the courses of evil in the world, the sacredness of life, and the promised fulfilment of death. Hanrahan also held numerous solo exhibitions of her prints. She and Jo Steele divided their time between London and

Adelaide until the early 1980s. In 1984 she was found to have a sarcoma at the base of her spine. This was operated on and she kept the tumour under control through diet and meditation with Ainslie Meares and Vere Langley for seven years, during which time she worked feverishly on her art and writing. The tumour flared up again and was operated on in late 1991 but Hanrahan died in December of that year.

Hanrahan was also an inveterate diarist and there are in the National Library diaries for 1958, 1960 and 1967-1991 inclusive and it is these diaries that I'm drawing on today.

The Spiritual World (Placing the Artist)

The material world was only a tiny part of Barbara Hanrahan's life. Far stronger was the call of the spiritual world, the world that was associated with true creativity, not the commercial art-making of which she was always so scathing. Any writer or artist who said she or he was in it for the money was immediately cast off by Hanrahan, who believed creativity was not something pursued for material gain but was a calling which one answered and which, having done so, one was obliged to fulfil to the best of one's ability.

The sense of living in two worlds is pivotal to a reading of Hanrahan's work — there is the everyday commercial world founded on materialism, and there is the spiritual world which is of God and which is expressed through creativity. Barbara Hanrahan was torn between the two worlds most acutely in her early life. She was educated into the values of the commercial world, taught that fulfilment comprised good clothes and care of physical appearance, an active social life, a modest job, girl friends, a nice boy, marriage, a home and children. Indeed Hanrahan's late teenage diaries are packed with accounts of clothes bought and worn, of makeup and hair treatments, beauty routines and suchlike. And there are dreams about having girlfriends and good-looking boyfriends, one of whom will be the 'one' with whom she'll eventually settle down. These hopes and concerns reflect her mother's and grandmother's aspirations for her, a girl from working-class Adelaide in the 1950s.

But the diaries are also a record of desperate discontent. The knowledge of the spiritual world which will be her world becomes clear only gradually, while her sense of discomfort in the

commercial world is acute. She has no really close girl-friends, she is shy and awkward on social occasions, she goes through agony trying to find a partner for her debut, and at home she can't adjust to her step-father and his two daughters. At this time of her life, prior to her first spell in London, Hanrahan spends her time wishing she was living in some 'quaint, old-fashioned, country place' (17/1/60) or in England at the time of the Elizabethans (1/2/60). She is at her happiest out in the garden or in her sleep-out, dressed in remnants of her school uniform and her grandmother's loose bloomers, either writing in — or to — her companion diary, painting, drawing and printmaking, and reading Elizabethan poetry, turn of the century *Girls Own Annuals*, the Psalms of David and the Bible.

But Hanrahan wasn't all floating lovers, long-haired wistful virgins and Bible Study, for she also had a healthy appreciation of the more fundamental aspects of life. She has said that it was her crudity that saved her, her unflinching gaze upon and acceptance of the workings of the body which polite society covered up. With her accounts of blackhead-popping, peeing and shitting in the bath, childhood eroticism, and the sexual attributes of adults she believed herself unacceptable to polite Adelaide society, and was thus saved from being incorporated into its stultifying rituals. Hanrahan was sufficiently aware of her own sense of difference — and strong enough — to be able to reserve for herself a private place, a retreat from the world where she could be nourished by her favourite authors and from where she could send out the fruits of her labours.

Hanrahan was extremely sensitive to the values of the outer world. The media's constant retailing of bad news she excised from her private life, neither owning a television set nor taking the daily newspapers. She was also sensitive — while strangely drawn — to books which told of atrocities against humanity. The following entry in her diary, dated 10 November 1987 is typical of her fascination with, and response to, evil:

I was haunted by article in Miami magazine with Saturday paper about Auschwitz (I hate to have the word written here, even) exhibition from Poland at the Miami Public Library. Of course, I always read the article — somehow I seem to feel that if I know enough of how someone who has *survived* went through it ... somehow I will understand the evil. And

somehow I feel that if I read about those poor suffering people I will *share* some of their suffering. And there was a photo on the cover, behind the living people's heads in today, of a most beautiful young frightened girl *they*, the beasts, had routinely photographed. Just her head and shoulders for their records, with her cropped head in her striped clothes. And the poor haunted frightened expression. She had been crying. This beautiful open expression of innocence before them. As I try to tell of it here I ruin it all — and I am afraid I even trivialise the terror, the horror. Anyone would pity her. But to stay unmoved as the beasts did is incomprehensible. And she is such an ordinary young girl.

And I felt haunted by her all the way on the drive [back to Winter Park]. Haunted by what she went through, what happened to her. And then my caring and thinking becomes a mad obsession. I feel I am going crazy. There's *that* world and there's this one. So I *can't* ever again allow myself to read or look at anything about it. I know the terrors and I get possessed by them. I can't help by being mad and obsessed. I can only help by praying and fighting against the evil by creating. Oh dear God, dear Jesus please help me.'

Evil was of concern to Hanrahan and she wrote of the ways it is manifest in several of her novels, always ensuring that, in the end, it collapsed in upon itself and the balance between good and evil was restored in the world. But she was also aware of criticism that she wasn't more politically active: thus she wrote on 11 May 1986:

Do not think because I don't record it that I don't think of terrible outside world obscenities. The awfulness of nuclear explosions, leaks. But to just contemplate that as reality adds to its potency. 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. That cannot be my way. Others can do it and not add to the evil, by making themselves despair, but I can't.

In other words, the words of the 1987 entry, 'I can only help by praying and fighting against the evil by creating'.

How does Hanrahan describe her spirit world in her diaries? Apart from noting the presence of flowers she doesn't, really, at least not in a physical fashion. She does not call it heaven and she doesn't seat God in grand majesty within it. Rather the spirit world is contemporaneous with this world and is accessed either by death, a passing through the curtains from one state to another, or through the inner child within each living person. The spirit world is where one finds all the dear departed as they truly are. It is to God and to those spirits known personally to her (chiefly her relatives) that Hanrahan prays for comfort, strength and healing. And it is as though these spirits are always with her as healing angels — they are not somewhere else waiting for her to join them, but are with her in the present. They cannot be apprehended, however, by those who have no faith in the spiritual world. For Hanrahan it is the inner child who is most open to the spirit world, the inner child who is distinct from the outer self and who still trails clouds of remembering from life before birth, the inner child who is also the centre of creativity.

Self and the self (Being torn in two)

Not only does Hanrahan see that there is a material and a spiritual world, but she sees in herself two people, the social self and the inner golden child. This idea of the split self is not uncommon, and most of us spend our lives in search of the essential self. What makes Hanrahan interesting, as I've already said, is the way in which she talks of this search in creative and spiritual terms. To create, she needed to live most of the time in the world of the imagination, the metaphysical world where she found God, and her natural inclination was to escape from the company of people as quickly as possible — but she had to have truck with the commercial world if her work were to be brought to fruition.

Hanrahan, particularly in the years before she took up meditation, was subject to intense mood swings. In part this was a result of her perfectionism: she couldn't bear to think that she did anything badly and when she received the slightest criticism — or when her work was ignored — she went into a black despair. She seemed to have two selves, the one who aspired to humility and who thought it good to feel small and unimportant in the presence

of a Greater presence (20/2/60, 24/4/60) and the other, who was selfish, jealous, cruel and intolerant of anyone whose values were different from her own. It was the former, humble self that was in touch with the inner child, and it was the latter savage self that she sought God's help in curbing. Hanrahan needed God's help in balancing both aspects of her self, the creating self and the self which negotiated with the public.

It cannot be doubted, however, that Hanrahan's goal was far loftier than the achievement of an integrated self. On 22 April 1990 she copied into her diary a quotation from the English artist Cecil Collins. Collins was talking about the responsibility of the artist and I think his words also stand for Hanrahan's sense of what the Self-in-God might accomplish:

The Saint, the Artist, the Poet, and the Fool, are one. They are the eternal virginity of Spirit, which in the dark winter of the world, continually proclaims the existence of a new life, gives faithful promise of the spring of an invisible Kingdom, and the coming of light.

I've spoken briefly of Barbara Hanrahan's views of the individual in the physical world, the artist in the spiritual world, and the struggle between Self and self. There remains only Hanrahan's ideas on spiritual purpose and her conception of the terrible creative task.

'The Terrible Creative Task'

On 23 December 1981 Hanrahan, in the midst of wrestling with a new book, wrote in some despair:

Oh, why is it so hard for me to write. Why can other people do it and not I? Sometimes now it doesn't seem worth it and I wish I could die because I just want to be with Nan again. I cry in bed now as I write ...

I grow afraid so often — I am weak and want my task taken away. I just want to be a woman in an easy cosy situation with no terrible creative task. And I wish years and years ago that I had been as ordinary as the others — I betray myself. Oh

God please help me now. You made me like this — please help me to do my task.'

These are not the words of a woman who is concerned only with balancing the self as it oscillates between the inner and outer worlds. Instead, they are the cry of someone who felt herself burdened by responsibility to the being she perceived as God. While the writing down of her vision of the meaning of creation was difficult enough, being an activity of the mind, as compared with the intuitiveness of print-making, I would suggest that the task was made more terrible for Hanrahan by the fact that her work had to be displayed to the world, potentially to be misunderstood or ignored. Hanrahan's description of her work as a 'terrible creative task', a description she repeated over the years, is sufficient proof to me that she felt it necessary, in some ways, to sacrifice her own interests to fulfil God's charge to her. If it were not that she had to proclaim, in Cecil Collins' words, 'the spring of an invisible Kingdom', Hanrahan might have led a quietly reclusive life with her Elizabethan poets and virgin lovers, but instead she took up the social responsibility she believed accompanied her artistic talents. As much as she may have wished, in times of despondency, to be 'normal' like other people (at least as she thought they were), she clung to her sense of difference.

Barbara Hanrahan's last diary entry, 5 November 1991, reads 'Help me find me, dear God'. I would like to suggest that she is not calling for help to find the intellectual, self-conscious 'me', but the 'me' who dwells in the presence of God; Hanrahan is calling to be returned to the state of original innocence (2/3/85). It is the cry of someone who has discharged her responsibilities to the best of her abilities, who has given all that she has. It's not a cry of sadness or farewell but a looking forward to what is to come, when the light of her own small candle (17/3/71) will be joined with the greater light and when she will be in the company of all the dear ones, surrounded by flowers (16/9/91), and truly in-God.

University of Sydney.

REFERENCES

1. Chodorow, Nancy J. *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).
2. Canberra, National Library of Australia. Barbara Hanrahan Diaries, M.S. 7754.