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Barbara Hanrahan's Fantastic Fiction

Of all the new novelists to appear in Australia in the 1970s, Barbara Hanrahan is one of the most unusual. Her work challenges conventional orthodoxies, both of out-dated social realism and currently fashionable metafiction, to compel a re-definition of the fantastic as a contemporary genre. Tzvetan Todorov defines the fantastic as arising from "that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event".[1] Such is the central situation in Hanrahan's last four novels—before *Dove*—where neither her characters nor her readers can be sure of the ground they stand on. Australia, traditionally sceptical and secular in its concerns, may provide particularly fertile ground for fiction of this nature, because "faith in the supernatural must be undermined before the sensation of the fantastic can emerge".[2] If, as Eric Rabkin argues, fantasy is an escape from a predominant world view,[3] then Hanrahan's fiction offers an escape from what in *The Frangipani Gardens* she ironically terms "the real Australia"—the sunburnt outback and its predominantly masculine concerns—but also from the predominant rationalism of the twentieth century. This paper proposes to examine the contribution Hanrahan's fiction makes to our understanding of the fantastic as a contemporary literary genre not only capable of adapting to the twentieth century and the advent of psychoanalysis, which Todorov thought would render it obsolete, but also particularly appropriate to a consideration of feminism's concerns with women's culture and experience.

Because Hanrahan is not yet well-known as a writer, some background information may prove helpful.[4] Born in Adelaide in 1939, she realised her dream of attending art school in London, still the great good place for her generation in South Australia, in 1962. After two years of study, she returned to Australia for a little over a year but was back in England by the end of 1965. At this time she first met the sculptor, Jo Steele, with whom she now lives, moving between Adelaide, Mexico and England. Throughout the sixties, she taught and worked successfully at her art. She was an established print-maker by 1967, when her grandmother's death triggered in her a compulsion to write. Adelaide, originally the city from which she only wished to escape, had slowly become during her years of exile a kind of dream world, an imaginary place, which with her grandmother's death receded even further into a disappearing past. *Scent of Eucalyptus*, her first, autobiographical book, attempts to recapture that past and to defy its death by recreating that lost world. *Sea-Green*, also semi-autobiographical, followed in 1974. After a three year break, the fantastic novels followed in quick succession—*The Albatross Muff* in 1977, *Where The Queens All Strayed* in 1978, *The Peach Groves* in 1979, and *The Frangipani Gardens* in 1980. With *Dove* (1982), I see her moving into a new, more realistic phase, deliberately drawing back from the pull of the fantastic.

A number of the circumstances of Hanrahan's life appear to have influenced her fictional preoccupations. The early death of her

father, the remarriage of her mother, her mongoloid aunt, her grandmother, and the strong female community they formed with her mother as a support in Hanrahan's early years, all recur, transformed, in her fiction and no doubt have influenced her decision to write in a gothic mode which focuses both on women and their fears and on the grotesque. But while it would be fascinating to consider the ways in which personal experience influences the handling of literary conventions in Hanrahan's work, this paper must limit its focus to her manipulations of the fantastic.

Todorov's definition of the fantastic stresses the primacy of perception: the fantastic involves "a special *perception* of uncanny events".[5] The network of themes he terms "themes of the self" seems most relevant to Hanrahan's fiction. Todorov summarizes the chief characteristics of this network as follows:

> the principle we have discovered may be designated as the fragility of the limit between matter and mind. The principle engenders several fundamental themes: a special causality; pan-determinism; multiplication of the personality; collapse of the limit between subject and object; and lastly, the transformation of time and space.... We may further characterize these themes by saying that they essentially concern the structuring of the relation between man and the world. We are, in Freudian terms, within the *perception-consciousness* system. This is a relatively static relation, insofar as it implies no particular actions, but rather a position—a perception of the world rather than an interaction with it. The term *perception* is important here: works that are linked to this thematic network constantly emphasize the problematic nature of this perception, and especially that of the fundamental sense, sight ... to the point where we might designate all of these themes as 'themes of vision'.[6]

Not surprisingly for a novelist who began as an artist, Hanrahan's imagination is essentially visual. Like Edith, one of the two central female characters in the antiphonal narrative of *The Albatross Muff*, she sees in pictures[7] and writes both to record and exorcise them. The intensity and accuracy of her seeing provide the greatest pleasure in a Hanrahan novel.

In the autobiographical *Scent of Eucalyptus*, she describes her younger self as being happiest when "a spy, a *voyeur*, an eavesdropper",[8] intrigued, like Patrick White's visionaries, by "the minute hidden facets of things". She writes:

> I was forever walking with my head bent, looking at the ground. I saw an ant picking its way across the earth, the moss at the base of the well, the wings of the bee in the hyssop. I watched the shadow-play the rose leaves made on the fence. I saw the ant run under a leaf, over a stone, past seed-pods into a hole. I peered into the clipped stems of the valerian and saw green....[12]

The verbs characterizing her activities here stress looking, seeing, watching, peering; they are verbs of perception. A disgruntled Seymour describes Edith as a similar creature in *The Albatross Muff*: "Really, he said, it was starting to be a bore—her shadowing them constantly. She'd been there as a pair of eyes gazing through the barred pantry window ... there, as a pale blur of face squashed against a diamond pane...." (127). In *Where The Queens All Strayed* and *The Peach Groves*, Thea and Ida fulfil this same function: they watch everything with the distanced involvement of the voyeur. Although Tom plays a somewhat similar role in *The Frangipani Gardens*, he is less capable of distancing himself from what he sees. He is more the visionary, less the voyeur.

In each novel, these innocent child voyeurs are pitted against evil adult voyeurs. The difference lies in the nature of their perception. The child's innocent eye looks to celebrate and to know, whereas the adult's jaundiced eye looks to control, or failing that, to destroy. They see the same things, but interpret them differently, because the adults have become trapped by social definitions from which the child is still free. Thus Tom, in *The Frangipani Gardens*, sees Charlie as a protective saint, while most of their community sees Charlie as the evil Cockroach. The two adults capable of a more comprehensive vision, incorporating the knowledge of both good and evil, are the artists Zillah in *The Peach Groves* and Doll in *The Frangipani Gardens*, but they cannot maintain such intensity continuously. Finally, the reader herself must employ her own perceptions to form a comprehensive vision from the fragmentary perceptions recorded by the text.

The problematic nature of perception, then, is at the heart of all Hanrahan's fiction, determining its method as well as its matter. Frequently, her characters are more involved in perceiving the world than in interacting with it. Her central characters are observers rather than actors, and her secondary, complementary characters are acted upon rather than acting: Meg in *Queens*, Maud in *Groves* and Lou in *Gardens* are each compared to mechanical dolls. All these characters—both central and secondary—are presented as if caught in a series of stylized poses or choreographed in an elaborate ballet. They never develop; they merely reveal or learn what they already are. But what they see, and therefore allow us, their readers to see, is more important than what they do. Perception, more than action, provides the interest in these novels.

As a result, cause and effect are minimized. To recall Todorov's terminology, these novels are static. The stories proceed through a series of set pieces that recall paintings, slides or the formulas of fairy tales rather than the movement of the traditional *Bildungsroman. The Peach Groves*, in particular, is like a marvellous slide show displaying scene after scene in succession, with little connecting movement between them. Instead of the continuous flow of a movie, there are a series of posed scenes: Tempe floating in her pool, the incestuous brother and sister asleep together after the ball; even Maud's flight from that scene and the mad chase of the climax appear to be without movement.

Like so many of her characters, Hanrahan seems obsessed by the desire to arrest time, to recapture it and freeze it as it was forever. In her fiction, she is able to do this by transforming time into space, thus fulfilling yet another of Todorov's conditions for the fantastic. Oc's Calendar House in *The Peach Groves* is a perfect image for such a transformation. It has "365 windows to represent the days of the year, 52 rooms (the weeks of the year), 12 chimneys (the months), 7 entrances (the days of the week), and 4 staircases (the seasons)".[9] When time becomes trapped in space, it can no longer flow. Similarly, when history is represented by objects rather than events, it loses its kinetic qualities. Hanrahan weighs down her narratives with historically accurate details of the fashions in clothing, decor and prejudice of her chosen periods, yet the effect is to create an aura of timelessness rather than of an historical novel as we usually conceive it. Within a given historical period, she works spatially, not chronologically. Her titles suggest the importance of objects or place over movement in her fictional worlds. Nouns predominate. Only *Where The Queens All Strayed* contains a verb and that suggesting an action which is already completed.

The interest of a Hanrahan narrative, then, lies less in the development of character or plot than in the way her style presents and moulds perception. Such a style tends to be visual, static, concerned with turning time into space and self-consciously aware of the problematic nature of perception. In her first book, *The Scent of Eucalyptus*, Hanrahan's younger self is both isolated and saved by the special qualities of her perception. From being the canker at the heart of the suburban dream, precisely because she could see more clearly and completely than those around her, she finds herself saved, she says,

> by something awkward and unyielding, prickly and resisting deep inside. I was saved by the crudity that made me pee into the bath, and revel in the tar-black shit that poured out of me and stank . . . I fled to a dark world that came alive only at night, nurtured by the very inattention of those others (wireless sets and electricity for them) who bound the day. I became Daphne and froze into the berry bush, Narcissus and gazed into the well. I clung to the iron of the fence and surveyed the desolation of a lane where old Mr. Stone from next but one roamed mad, where strange boys smoked tobacco in the barrel-yard, where someone shed the sanitary pad that lay bloodied and wilting further down. (158-59)

It's all here: the transformation of the self into the other ("I became Daphne", the freezing into the berry bush); the escape from the predominant world view of the day-time into the liberating darkness of night, from the suburban fear of the physical to a whole-hearted embracing of it; the pose of voyeur; the narcissistic looking into the self and then out at a world that is perceived as a whole, where aberration and physical necessity are accepted. *The Scent of Eucalyptus* carries this way of seeing as far as a realistic narrative can. Day

and night time worlds must always remain opposed in such a narrative because there is no way, within this fictional world, of bringing together two selves which should be one. In her later books, after the comparatively weak *Sea-Green*, which I shall ignore here, Hanrahan discovered a more flexible form, that of fantastic fiction, in which her understanding of the problematic nature of perception as fundamental to identity could be explored more fully.

Her discovery was to substitute the hesitation of a fantastic narrative, created by the shifting ground rules of a fictional world, for the certainty of a realistic text. The epigraph to *The Peach Groves* suggests her method:

> And just as on these mornings white silky mists rise and uncover some beauty, then smother it again and then again disclose it, I tried to lift that mist from my people and let them be seen and then to hide them again . . . .

Mansfield's calculated alternations between obscurity and clarity, covering and disclosure, as outlined here, correspond to Hanrahan's shiftings from dream to reality, from the inexplicable to the explicable, from the day to the night time worlds and back again in her best work.

The hesitations she creates in her readers cause them to reconsider the assumptions they bring to the reading of a text and to the interpretation of their world. By setting her stories in the past and presenting them in terms of gothic conventions, Hanrahan conditions her readers to accept her literary, "unrealistic" plots and the traditional assumptions about good and evil on which they depend. The hesitation is never about what is right or wrong; it is always about whether or not there is a rational explanation for what is happening. Whereas much twentieth century writing begins with the assumption that everything is absurd. Hanrahan begins with the idea of an ordered universe, which she then proceeds to undermine. She introduces taboos, so that her characters may break them. But unlike Angela Carter, whose early work Hanrahan acknowledges as an important influence, Hanrahan does not flirt with decadence or with the idea of a moral pornography.[10] Her interest is in the nature of innocence and its possibilities for survival in a hostile world. Her central situation—the innocent young virgin threatened yet attracted by sexual assault as an initiation into the adult world—works because of the context in which it is presented. But this context tends to give an anachronistic feel to her fiction, separating it from the kind of work most of her contemporaries are creating. While Moorhouse and Wilding dissect the new morality and Ireland speculates about the morality of the future, Hanrahan still seems to be exploring the conventions of Victorian morality. Certainly this is the initial, surface impression created by a Hanrahan novel, but it is precisely this impression that is subjected to questioning as the narrative proceeds.

Todorov defined the fantastic as determined by "that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event". In *The Albatross Muff*, the reader experiences this hesitation along with Stella as she wavers between magical and rational explanations for the strange events she experiences. Stella thinks: "Mama saying: Stella, there is that man again—the cripple with the carrot hair, and he looks familiar. (But did she say that? I'm not sure.) And Stella answering No, she didn't see anyone. But he was—he was always there. (But was he?)" (115-16). Here one no longer knows which of Stella's two voices to believe. Is she the victim of madness? of her own psychosis? of her society? She herself is confused. Her companion, Edith, is in a similar position. She writes: "Often I thought Stella was only pretending. She seemed to look at me slyly as she greeted her old companions. I suspected her of trying to drive me mad, not herself. I began to get mixed up, too. I thought it might be I who heard things wrong" (155). Edith is unsure whether Stella is going mad, merely pretending, or whether she herself is perceiving incorrectly, and we as readers share her doubts. Is Moak really magic? Is Stella going mad? We can never be sure. Hanrahan keeps us always in that frontier region of uncertainty between the real and the imaginary that Todorov has identified as the realm of the fantastic.

Our uncertainty about interpreting events extends to embrace the nature of the story. Do the laws of realism or the laws of legend govern the telling of Stella's history? Again, there is a shifting back and forth between the

two. The author constantly reminds us of the tensions that exist between one kind of narrative and another, and between any narrative, which predicts its ending, and the unpredictability of life. In *The Albatross Muff*, Hanrahan asks: "Could a legend have a happy ending? —for it seemed that Stella's might" (116). Within the story, Edith, the would-be writer, vacillates in a similar fashion, as she tries first to disguise, then to reveal, her perception of reality (which is Hanrahan's fiction) through language. "The words weren't any good. The life they sought to disguise, constantly foiled them. It seeped through the nib of Edith's pen and rendered her ink invisible; made the spaces between words stretch out alarmingly long" (145-46). It is these spaces which Edith and the reader must explore to render their silences articulate. As Rosemary Jackson points out, "With time, as with space, it is the intervals between things which come to take precedence in the fantastic".[11]

This kind of self-consciousness typifies the fantastic: the literariness of the form is striking.[12] It's not surprising, therefore, that *The Albatross Muff* is set in Dickens' London and *The Peach Groves* in Mansfield's New Zealand. Because no literary context for perceiving the Adelaide hills yet exists against which Hanrahan may play her own vision, *Where The Queens All Strayed* suffers in comparison. The alternative contexts of fairy-tale and local history Hanrahan uses against the hills setting of *The Frangipani Gardens* in addition to the references to the world of *Queens* make it stronger than *Queens*, but still less effective than the other two at playing off one literary form against another.

Thinking in terms of visual images rather than in terms of traditional notions of character and action may have made Hanrahan exceptionally aware of the composition of her work and of its essentially arbitrary nature. In *The Albatross Muff*, she reminds her readers of the ways in which life is often seen, and even lived, in terms of fiction:

> Even the hyphen, though it might convert the two situations into a tidy single, couldn't make the role—orphan heiress—easier to play. Stella had been cast for heroine, but the part came bereft of its trappings. No petticoats meant no romance. And she couldn't even brighten things up with a pinch of Gothic splendour. There were no portwine birthmarks or doleful rooks or mist creeping up from a river. (107)

This apparent mocking of gothic trappings reassures the reader that Hanrahan is familiar with the conventions she is employing and that she is deliberately modifying them according to her own way of visualizing the many possible interactions between novel and romance, between reality and dream.

The title, *The Albatross Muff*, embodies the central difficulty. By invoking Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner", it implies a fictional world where magic cannot be dismissed as if it were simply superstition; however, there are just enough plausible explanations for the bad luck that follows the killing of the birds to keep us wondering. Stella herself takes on the role of the albatross, of bringing and suffering misfortune. Does she have the Evil Eye, as the servants reckon, or is she simply the victim of her feminine perfection, which necessarily involves an infantile selfishness? The story presents us with a series of alternatives of this nature. Edith, of course, takes on the Mariner's role. Haunted by the tale she is compelled to re-tell and attempting to make sense of its ambiguous message, she represents both the writer and the reader within the text.

The interest of this novel lies precisely in this continuing tension between alternatives, rather than in their possible resolution. Bourgeois London and slum London live in ignorance of one another, yet the existence of each determines that of the other. Stella would not exist without her phantoms, yet eventually they kill her. Neither would she exist without her bookish, unattractive opposite, Edith, who records her story and who loves her. The reader who requires these paradoxes to be abolished and our hesitations quelled is asking for the falsifying abstractions Hanrahan appears to associate with history books. When Stella is sick, she thinks: "Maybe when today —1861—was written down, it would seem as safe and done-with as then: all the sharp colours bleached to a soft dull sepia, all the people—street people like Moak, and proper people like Mr. Hall—reduced to mere cypher by words like Society and Class" (132). Hanrahan's fiction reverses this process. Ciphers

are brought to life, abstractions made concrete, and mysteries renewed. And the mystery depends for its existence on the hesitations the reader experiences in assigning meaning.

Todorov points out that the system of perception in literature of the fantastic is very similar to psychologists' descriptions of the child's and the madman's modes of perception. Madmen and children abound in Hanrahan's fiction. With their eccentric, unflinching vision, they provide constant reminders of the problematic nature of perception and of alternative ways of being. In *The Albatross Muff*, Stella and Edith order what they see according to their notions of what is proper or exciting, but even what they see is largely determined by their education, by their reading, and by their individual fears and desires. Edith's world is matter of fact and chronologically ordered, while Stella's is "hedged with danger". Edith realizes: "We walked side by side, but we walked far apart" (152). In Stella's world, the boundary between mind and matter may dissolve at any time: she wishes Baby dead and Baby dies, the handsome Seymour turns into a monster before her eyes, and any beggar may metamorphose into Tom or Moak. At first, her childishness seems to explain the magic connections and special causalities she reads into events. Then, as she grows older, an explanation appears to lie in a growing mental disorder triggered by her father's violent death and her subsequent dislocation from her antipodean homeland. But the ending of the novel makes such attempts at locating the text simply in a tradition of psychological realism untenable.

As Stella lies dying after childbirth, Edith envisions a realistically probable ending to her story. The smooth flow of her predictions is interrupted by the arrival of Moak. Hanrahan writes:

> For Moak was still so much possessed by magic, that anything might be true. Had she spelled Louise Victoria away? Clare Court might never have existed. Moak was someone out of legend, spirited to Percy Villas from some storm-wrecked headland, some bushland eerie. Queer and brown and foreign, hate—or was it love? had made her strong. (203)

This is indeed a narrative in which anything might be true, in which it is sometimes hard to distinguish between hate and love and where the dividing line of personality is so fluid that characters sometimes change and merge identities. Stella is both herself and becomes a reincarnation of Pensa. Moak's voice becomes Old Nanny's. Hanrahan supplies an ending satisfying in its symmetry: Moak raves about the coming of the Apocalypse and Edith rejoices that "for those lunging moments on the hearth-rug [her papa] had been worthy of Stella and her legend" (205). It is an ending that meets the requirements of fictional form, not truth to life as we live it. The grand finale with its burning house, and escape with the new-born baby to a country retreat far from men are as true to the conventions of Victorian gothic as Hanrahan's historical details of decor and language are true to the Victorian period. What makes her re-working of elements from historical and gothic romance, legend and melodrama most interesting is the way she maintains our hesitation in forming final judgements in order to remind us of the complexity of seeing and the problematic nature—the fluidity even—of what is seen.

The Peach Groves employs these techniques in a slightly different fashion. Again, the journey to a new place represents an upsetting of comfortable assumptions about reality, and again there is an absent father. Jackson explains that "to introduce the fantastic is to replace familiarity, comfort, *das Heimlich*, with estrangement, unease, the uncanny", motivated by a desire to undermine dominant patriarchal and capitalist orders.[13] Ida thinks: "But New Zealand, and now The Peach Groves, had turned everything topsy-turvy. The heroes and the villains had got free of the story-book and stalked the drawing-room carpet. All the old certitudes meant nothing" (141). The dead Linda's haunting and possession of her daughter, Tempe, and the voices Zillah hears may be psychologically explicable. Sometimes Hanrahan seems to encourage this kind of reading, as when she explains a character's motivation in careful detail (see pages 149-151 and 199), but there are also the moments when magic takes over, the inexplicable asserts itself, and the demands of story triumph over verisimilitude, as in the wonderful chase scene at the conclusion.

As in *The Albatross Muff*, it is not always easy to distinguish between "the reality of

illusion and the illusion of reality".[14] The blurred terror the child experiences in the face of the unknown and the confusion about one's proper identity that Oc, Zillah and Tempe all experience in *The Peach Groves* deny the simplistic patterns that Blanche Deans wills herself to see while they affirm the ability of art, whether painting or literature, to comprehend —to contain and to interpret—more effectively. Ida, the child through whose innocent eyes we see much of this story unfold, knows that although "dreams were dependable where reality wasn't" (130), she cannot deceive herself, as her mother and her sister do, by neatly separating her experience into tidy compartments. Most of the characters in this novel prefer dreams to reality. Ida survives the traumatic events of this fictional world by neither confusing nor rigidly dividing one from the other. Not only does she survive, but her way of seeing and of remembering triumphs, because she remains open, even to fear, while everyone else tries to close themselves off, to shut out experience one way or another. Thus the changing currents of the sea are her mother's enemies, but the "waves were Ida's friends" (228). She can embrace the flux and danger of a world where even if it is possible to see clearly, what one sees remains complicated. The book ends with an affirmation of the primacy of the natural world over the social, a theme developed more self-consciously in *The Frangipani Gardens.*

All the stock Hanrahan figures are present in *Gardens*, though with some interesting twists. For the first time, good triumphs almost unambiguously. The wicked witch Pearl is banished; the adulterous brother and sister die together in a suicidal car crash; the nasty, sexually deviant Brother Swells dies a suitably nasty death, one he had designed for another. On the other hand, the fair heroine of traditional romance, Lou, is permitted to live happily ever after with her Garnet; the artist, Doll Strawbridge, torn between her passionate nature and her prissy old maid exterior is allowed to forge a strong, new identity by bringing her day and night time roles together; the visionary Tom resists the temptation to become an ordinary boy, retaining his specialness and his affinity with mystery until the end, to carry on the traditions of folk wisdom passed on to him by Charlie, and to Charlie by old Peg; and finally, Charlie himself escapes this time (as he hadn't during the war) the self-righteous wrath of the mob out to destroy him. His last appearance illustrates the continuing centrality of the hesitations that define the fantastic in Hanrahan's fiction:

> For a moment, Tom saw him, then he was gone. Night took him—or that clump of trees, that bend in the land.
>
> And where was he going, what would become of him? Would he trudge on for ever, an old man from myth, bound for those lost cities that were part of his past, where the wolves howled and snow whirled and the Fat Boy tucked into faggots and mustard pickle, and the Bearded Lady minced forward draped in a tattooed shawl? And would he find peace at last, had he found it already—slumped in tangled grass, sunk away beneath a drift of rusty leaves?[15]

Whether he has simply vanished, supernaturally or naturally, into the landscape, whether he will head for Europe or disappear into another story, we cannot know for sure.

Here too the tyranny of objects in the social worlds of the Duke and Duchess and of Girlie and Boy jar against the chaotic growing plenitude of the natural world as Tom learns to see it. Groves and gardens impose upon a mystery they cannot finally control, just as the writer imposes patterns only to shatter them, and the reader imposes meaning only to find it undermined. Therefore, although Hanrahan's fiction does not employ realism, it remains closely in touch with the real, as indeed the fantastic must in order to interrogate the primacy of such definitions. Hanrahan's interest lies in testing individual experience against conventional wisdom, an interest first displayed in *The Scent of the Eucalyptus*, when the narrator/protagonist looked about her for the sunburned land in vain (91). This regional questioning of national myth extends into the fantastic's questioning of "the irreducible opposition between real and unreal".[16] Todorov calls this subversive tendency of literature of the fantastic, "the bad conscience of the positivist era".[17]

Hanrahan's fiction, however, is more than simply the "bad conscience" of a positivist era she believes still holds sway; a recognition of the "problematic nature of perception" does not preclude a celebration of perception in all its complexity. Like Patrick White, Hanrahan

values an inclusive vision, which pays particular attention to the minutest detail (symbolized in both by the activities of small insects) and which can incorporate opposites (symbolized in both by the grub in the heart of the rose). Yet unlike White, who is so often disgusted when he looks closely, Hanrahan delights so much in seeing that she appears to celebrate everything she sees. In *The Scent of Eucalypts*, she writes:

> I came inside, and found the dust that lay under the mat, the stale hair in the brush, the soap's awful underside like a sweating sore.... I came closer to the three who were important: to the grandmother, and saw the hair in her nostril, the dirt between her toes, dye spots in her scalp; to the great-aunt, and her parting was thick with scurf, she had sax-buds in her ear, a sour handkerchief up her sleeve. And my mother tried not to cry: face all crumpled, eyes gone blurry, ugly mouth square. I watched unmoved. (13)

Pure existence fascinates her here, although it is clearly also important to see what is normally hidden or deliberately overlooked, particularly in the realm of the physical. Conventional distinctions between ugly and beautiful become meaningless when everything is described with such love.

The primacy of perception leads as we have discovered not only to a fascination with what is seen and with how intensely and accurately it is seen, but also with how it is conveyed through language. Hanrahan is very conscious of the words themselves, as objects with an incantatory and mysterious quality as well as a signifying function. Her ear for the nuances of speech matches her eye for composition and colour. For example, most of her comedy depends on the manipulation of cliché, which empties words of meaning. Her characters often define themselves through their sensitivity to language and their habits of speech. In *The Peach Groves*, Cissy views sex through the coy metaphors of her marriage manual, Harry and Blanche through the filters of sanctimonious religious precept, Oc thinks in the simplified oppositions of the fairy tale, and Maud consciously decides to restrict herself to the platitudes proper to a thoroughly conventional young lady. Tempe and Zillah, like Ida, are caught between the languages of two worlds: between the terror of a direct confrontation with experience for which ordinary language proves inadequate and the diminished reality which ordinary language can encompass. Hanrahan's language mediates between these two worlds, chiefly through its ability to recall the conventions of various literary forms—romance, gothic, fairy tale, novel—in order to play them off against one another, and to question the means by which her society establishes meaning.

Having defined Hanrahan's fiction as fantastic, we must ask ourselves what contribution she has made to the genre. Most obviously, she has introduced a new region—Adelaide and its hills—into the landscapes of the fantastic. But much more importantly, she has contributed to a renewal of the genre by disproving Todorov's contention that the fantastic could not survive in the twentieth century, where the "normal" man has become the fantastic being and the fantastic has become the rule, rather than the exception.[18] Furthermore, Todorov argues that "psychoanalysis has replaced (and therefore made useless) the literature of the fantastic. There is no need today," he writes, "to resort to the devil in order to speak of an excessive sexual desire ...."[19] In Hanrahan's fiction we are never quite sure whether she is "resorting to the devil" or not. Sometimes her characters appear to be possessed by evil spirits; sometimes they seem simply to be bearing heavy burdens of guilt. But certainly there is always a generalized sense of evil as a power at work in the world, which no exercise of rationality can explain away. Hanrahan knows that the ability of psychoanalysis to deal with these matters in the "undisguised terms" that Todorov celebrates need not destroy the pleasures of the fantastic, a genre which nourishes our need for mystery and reminds us that rationality cannot exist without the irrational.

Finally, Hanrahan's work demonstrates the appropriateness of the fantastic genre to depicting women's experience from their own point of view. Hanrahan employs stereotyped sex roles to an exaggerated degree in order to use the hesitations of the fantastic in questioning the basis for all our assumptions about what is real and what is not, what is natural and what is not. She deconstructs social definitions of female perfection—the Girlies, the Dolls, the Pearls, the Doves—to reconstruct

the world from the imaginations of her female watchers. Some feminist critics argue that women tend to perceive "culture" as male and their own experience as peripheral.[20] Hanrahan shows us characters who feel this way, but makes their experience of being peripheral central in her stories, thus displacing traditional standpoints as well as ways of seeing and reading. Her eccentrics provide a vision that is ex-centric. Hanrahan's tendency to show both women's friendships and women's love for one another as destructive could be disturbing to the prescriptive feminist critic who would like to see literature provide positive role models. I don't wish to deny that there are some unpleasant conclusions to be drawn for all of us from her vision. The alienated consciousness is her subject, and she compels her readers to experience it directly through the hesitations peculiar to the fantastic as a genre.

NOTES

1. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, trans. Richard Howard (Cleveland/London: Case Western University Press, 1973), p. 25.
2. Theodore Ziolkowski, *Disenchanted Images: A Literary Iconology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 239.
3. Eric S. Rabkin, *The Fantastic in Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 82.
4. For the following biographical information I am indebted to Barbara Hanrahan herself, who helpfully answered a number of questions during an informal interview held in July, 1980. See also Verity Laughton, "Barbara Hanrahan", *Ash Magazine*, No. 6, Autumn 1981, 5-7. I am grateul to Deb Jordan for drawing this interview to my attention.
5. Todorov, p. 91.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
7. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Albatross Muff* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1977), p. 136. Hereafter cited by page.
8. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Scent of Eucalyptus* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 39. Hereafter cited by page.
9. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Peach Groves* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1979), p. 81. Hereafter cited by page.
10. Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (London: Virago, 1979), p. 33. Carter's fiction fits into Todorov's second category, themes of the other, dealing with problems generated by desire.
11. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (Methuen: London and New York, 1981), p. 48.
12. Ziolkowski, p. 254. See also Jackson, p. 84.
13. Jackson, p. 179, and pp. 176-7.
14. Patrick White, *The Aunt's Story* (1948; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 289. The similarities between this novel and Hanrahan's work are striking; she acknowledges it as her favourite of his novels.
15. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Frangipani Gardens* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1980), p. 214.
16. Todorov, p. 166.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
20. Joanna Russ quoted in Cheri Register, "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction", in *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, ed. Josephine Donovan (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1975), p. 15.