

B. Smith *The Catholic Advocate* =
 6 *Selected Essays*,
The Fascist Mentality in Australian Art and
Criticism
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Both aestheticism and the sentiment of nationalism in art comment in Australia took on, between 1910 and 1940, the characteristics of a pre-fascist mentality. These characteristics arose partly from the existing social conditions in Australia and partly from the influence of overseas developments. Melvin Rader, of the Department of Philosophy, Washington University, whose *No Compromise* is one of the best analyses of its ideological features, cites the social origin of fascism in these terms:

Financed by rich capitalists, it attacked chiefly trade unions and workers' organisations. Its development accordingly, cannot be understood apart from the crisis of capitalism. The post-war chaos and world depression meant a rising tide of popular resentment and radicalism. Fascism has been promoted as a counter-movement to crush the insurgency of the masses. It had been growing within the womb of the old order for more than a century, but the world crisis nourished its growth and brought it quickly to maturity.

The features mentioned by Rader—support of rich industrialists, post-war chaos, world depression, rising resentment and radicalism, capitalist crisis—were present in Australia as in other countries. They provided the social basis for an indigenous fascist development in Australia. But, in addition to these local factors, there were overseas influences—the writings of Nietzsche, Spengler and others—who gave a measure of theoretical credence, and the sanction of 'authorities' to the local developments, particularly in the realm of art comment.

It will be possible to deal only with those attributes of pre-fascist mentality that are in some way connected with art comment

and criticism. What are these attributes? Rader has analysed a large number with great care. Some of those which are relevant to our purpose here include: the doctrine of racial supremacy, the belief in society as an organism, a hatred of democracy, the fascist praise of rural life, the identification of modern art with Bolshevism and Jewish exploitation. Have these attributes revealed themselves in the 'culture climate' of Australia?

Nationalism in its heightened forms is usually identified with the dominant 'race' of the nation. In this way, nationalism tends to transform itself into racism. We may note symptoms of this transposition in the phrases of J. S. MacDonald: 'the racial expression of others will not be ours', the supremacy of 'British-blooded stock', and similar statements. The same writer gives evidence of his belief in the possible development of an Australian racial élite when, in dealing with the art of Arthur Streeton, he writes: 'If we so choose, we can yet be the elect of the world, the last of the pastoralists, the thoroughbred Aryans in all their nobility'. Such a statement combines the fascist love of rural life, emphasizes the Aryan myth of racial supremacy, and champions racial purity.

The Caesar-worship and pessimism of fascism owes a great deal to the writings of Oswald Spengler who maintained that 'cultures' were organisms and, as such, had predetermined life-spans. This view has been embraced by P. R. Stephenson, who relates it to Australian conditions when he writes:

The only Spenglerian point worth considering is whether Australia is going to decline with Europe or whether there is some force in us which enables Australians to enter into the 'Spring' phase of an entirely new Pacifico-centric culture. Alas the overwhelming majority of Australians appear to be mentally Europeo-centric, not Pacifico-centric. More, they are Euro-decadents. They prefer, for example, to fall with Britain in the Atlantic than to rise with Japan in the Pacific. 'Save Great Bunyip, save Thy little ones!'

This is no more than a poor attempt to turn the argument of *The Decline of the West* to Australia's benefit. But the argument has weathered very poorly in the light of recent history. The exclamation at the end, 'Great Bunyip, save Thy little ones!' is to be considered, presumably, as an invocation to a new Australian paganism to become a racial religion in a pro-fascist Australian state. This may seem a far cry from the Bunyip worship of the Australian Aboriginal. But here we have another instance of that archaism which has affected many social institutions in recent

years although they were considered previously quite immune from such illogical developments. Rather than be sceptical of such a possibility, it would be well to read Professor Toynbee's warning, written after a detailed analysis of the development of archaism in contemporary society, in connection with Hauer's paganism in Nazi Germany: 'Hauerism is evidence that Western souls were no longer proof against being captivated by a religious archaism even when this offered itself in an elaborate fancy dress'.

But many years before either J. S. MacDonald or P. R. Stephenson wrote these statements advocating racial supremacy, the poet William Baylebridge had written his *National Notes*, which were printed and circulated privately, 'largely to members of Parliament'. That an obscure Australian poet writing before the 1914-18 war was able to advocate a 'philosophy' that was almost completely identical with the philosophy of Hitler and Mussolini, is further evidence that fascism is a phenomenon growing out of specific social conditions; that the nationalism which it brandishes is, in fact, a symptom of international capitalism in decay.

In his *National Notes* Baylebridge states that: 'When the mind of a nation is set free and a direction of research given to it, all the explanatory and hunting instincts are awakened'. The 'hunting instincts' of the nation so aroused, it will then be possible to embark upon an imperial domination of the earth. 'Man's principle in creation we must now posit in himself. Our present goal (to be supplanted when reaped by one of larger touch) shall be the overrunning of earth by Australians, strong-necked, natural men.' These supermen, Baylebridge maintains, can only be bred from Australian women who must help to populate the country with great rapidity, and must eschew any activities that will militate against their sole mission of motherhood. 'When we shall have bred this higher human activity, it is not possible that it will allow itself to be chained up in any particular stall—it will devour the earth.' It may be objected that the idea of a race of supermen Australians 'devouring the earth' is so ridiculous as not to be worth serious consideration. But the stupidity of such 'philosophy' is not in question. We are concerned here solely with the existence of these ideas and their relation to the Australian milieu. It may, of course, be objected that this obscure poet has little relation to Australian thought in general. And this is undoubtedly true. Yet we must not underestimate the spread of 'irrationalism' in the intellectual circles of Australia, as of elsewhere. T. Inglis Moore—who was awarded a prize in the Australian celebrations of its 150th anniversary, and whose book *Six Australian Poets* was published by the Australian Literary Fund, and, therefore can be



Victor O'Connor, *The Refugees*, c. 1942, oil on board, 55.9 × 50.8 cm, The Joseph Brown Collection.

taken as fairly representative of Australian critical thought—selects Baylebridge as one of his six best Australian poets. We are not concerned here with the aesthetic merits or otherwise of Baylebridge's work, but the selection by Moore at least indicates that Baylebridge is not merely an unknown rhymester, but a man with a following and influence. Speaking, not of Baylebridge's poetic ability, but of his thought, Moore insists that, in his poem 'The New Life', 'the poet stands out as a thinker in advance of his time, whose ideas, formulated twenty years ago, are only now

winning acceptance'. It may be remarked at this stage that at the time when Moore's book was published in 1942, the 'ideas' of Baylebridge were not finding acceptance, though, in their cause, Europe was being turned into a concentration camp, as 'blood and soil' rode on its triumphant way. The 'ideas' were finding a grave. For *The New Life* of Baylebridge is an amazing anticipation of the ideas presented in the 'dawn ceremony' of the Nazi storm troopers, entitled *Men, Fighters and Soldiers*. Rader described the ceremony: 'The participants are a band of music, a male speaking choir and three principal speakers, namely the 'Believer', the 'Doubter', and the 'Caller'. The Doubter records the defeats in German history; he is eventually silenced with the dates of victories'. This should be compared with the titles of the early poems in *The New Life*, which include 'Our Task', 'The Mean', 'The Executors', 'The Call', 'The Rejected'.

It must be stressed here that T. Inglis Moore states explicitly in his essay on Baylebridge, after noting the fascist nature of his ideas: 'His creed is not mine, for I hold that the State was made for man, not man for the State'. And this is borne out in Moore's own war poems, particularly his fine 'Festival of Freedom'. But when a critic writes of the illogical *mélange* of quack-theorizing that makes up the great body of Baylebridge's 'thinking'—'It is not only the statement of a metaphysic; it is also the hymning of a faith held with religious passion, or rather, perhaps, of a vision attained through the mystic mood'—then he certainly prejudices his claim to critical integrity. A collection of ideas about birth, love, death, race, war, and so on, may make a 'metaphysic', but before we talk about a poet's thought, it should also make sense.

One of the minor attributes of fascist thought is the idealization of rural life as compared with the life of the city. Rader remarks: 'Fascist literature is full of panegyrics to the spiritual character of rural life. The metropolis, in contrast, is represented as the den of materialism'. This tendency, which might be considered a reversion to the heyday of Australian squattocracy, is evident in the belief held by J. S. MacDonald that Arthur Streeton's paintings:

point the way in which life should be lived in Australia, with the maximum of flocks and the minimum of factories. But we have to be like the rest of the world, feeling out of it if we cannot blow as many get-to-work whistles, punch as many bundy-clocks, and show as much smoke and squalor as places that cannot escape such curses... Let others if they are bent upon it, mass-produce themselves into robotry, thinking and looking like mechanical monkeys chained to organs whose tunes are furnished by rivetting machines.

The conception of the state as an organism or a group-mind is one of the central features of fascist literature. It is to be found in its mature form in Baylebridge's *National Notes*: 'The God that we, as a nation, shall have made ourselves, is perhaps the only one to which man has yet never offered serious worship and sacrifice'. The Nazi ideal of complete and final national regimentation is paralleled when he says: 'Every man then, thinking in a truly national character, will consider himself but as a means and instrument of national service'.

One of the commonest confusions among pro-fascist writers is the identification of the development of modern art with the growth of communism on the one hand, and Jewish exploitation on the other. Writing on *Culture and Commerce*, in 1939, Norman Lindsay says:

To be sure the uprush of communistic principles among all peoples has had one extremely disastrous result, for to their claim to a share of the world's culture the lower orders have taken to practising art themselves; hence the peculiar uproar of disintegrated values labelled Modernism. Later and more discerning generations will undoubtedly define this movement under the heading *The Wharf Lumper in Art*.

Wharf labourers have been blamed for many things, but only a Norman Lindsay would blame them for the art forms of, for example, Salvador Dali. Hitler of course felt very much as did Lindsay in the matter of modern art. He passed laws against it, called it Jewish, international, foreign, degenerate. He forced modern artists such as Klee, Kandinsky, Beckmann out of their art schools, and drove them from the country. Their works were removed from museum walls and hidden or sold abroad.

But Lindsay's statement is not an isolated case; anyone who takes the trouble to go through the material in art publications in Australia in the period between the wars will find ample evidence of the widespread nature of the 'Bolshevik-Modernist' confusion. Before leaving the matter it is perhaps worth quoting E. Wake Cooke's contribution: 'There is a curious parallelism between Bolshevism and the Modernity movements; Lenin promised Russia a heaven and gave it a hell! The Modernists are actuated by the same spirit'. If Mr Wake Cooke had been in a position to examine the facts he would have found the modernist painters, at the time that he wrote his criticism, were far too absorbed in the investigation of their own private heavens and hells to worry about presenting sidereal gifts to the Soviets.

Perhaps the most obvious, because the most terrible and irrational of its tenets, has been the fascist persecution of the Jews. This trait developed much later in Australia than the other Fascist traits that we have noted. But the 1940 Exhibition of the Contemporary Art Society brought a virulent attack upon the Jewish contributors to that exhibition in the form of a letter from Sir Lionel Lindsay to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Lindsay's book *Addled Art* confirms the anti-Semitic nature of his art-criticism. But as several million Jews have been done to death on the altar of anti-Semitism since Lindsay wrote his notorious letter, he has considered it advisable to include a qualification, by which he hopes to attack 'Jewish' painting and at the same time absolve himself from the charge of anti-Semitism. Lindsay patronizingly admits that there are some 'good' Jews: Heine, Disraeli, Einstein, Monash and Phillips Fox. This is not a new qualification.

Sigmund Freud is numbered among the 'bad' Jews, and this is accounted for largely because—quite literally—Lindsay does not like the look of his face. 'Glance at Freud's face. The look of concentration in the eyes is confounded by a general expression of sulky disquietude and their sadness tempered by a vague hostility. It is the face of a man soured and ill at ease with himself or the world.' The sourness, according to Lindsay, following his predilection for racial arguments, is due to one extreme of the Jewish character. If Lionel Lindsay had been a Jew living through the 1930s in Vienna, he may have been able to find other reasons for the 'sadness tempered with hostility'. It is very doubtful whether an intelligent man could feel anything but sad and hostile at Goebbels' 'description' of the Jew to the Nuremberg Party Conference, in September 1937: 'This is the world enemy, the destroyer of civilisation, the parasite among nations, the son of chaos, the incarnation of evil, the germ of decomposition, the plastic demon of the decay of humanity'.

The general tenor of *Addled Art* is strongly anti-democratic. Lindsay has the same hatred of democracy as the leading fascist theorists Gobineau and Chamberlain, and the fascist writer Alfred Rosenberg. He speaks of the 'mob's invasion of art' and that art can only survive this invasion if bad art is discouraged. To Lindsay a democracy cannot produce great art. He objects to art being included in the school curriculum because art cannot be taught. By including art in the curriculum, 'the democracies level and lower all cultures'.

The pre-fascist mentality of *Addled Art*, however, is not limited to its anti-Semitism and a hatred of democracy. There is the same

emphasis upon a natural élite that provides the leaders, to be found throughout fascist writing: 'Natural man, guided by a profound instinct, destroys the weak and malformed at birth. Mistakes of nature, he knows that if they were allowed to propagate they would menace the vitality and continuity of the tribe. The weak chicken is pecked to death.' Like Hitler and Mussolini Lionel Lindsay is also a red-baiter: 'The tactics of the international Communists would serve: (the "bolshhevik-modernist" confusion) corrupt, undermine, flatter the groundlings; put the boot in. The thing was to kick the stuffing out of the aristocrat Drawing'.

Anti-Semitism has not been isolated to one or two critics in Australia. In a statement by Alcedo Gigas in *The Publicist*, we read: 'We Kookaburras think that the Australian community cannot be possibly saved or advanced by Jews: we think the Jews' advocacy of a so-called internationalism and their antagonism to nationalism constitutes a menace to Australians'. Ghettos, Ku Klux Klan Kookaburras, Bunyip gods and Jindyworobaks are some of the archaic fossils left by the ebbing of objectivity in Australian thought and criticism that has proceeded steadily since the 1890s.

The final answer to the increasingly reactionary nature of the 'criticism' proceeding from the pens of Lionel and Norman Lindsay has been written by Jack Lindsay, son of the latter, nephew of the former: 'Wherever we probe this "German culture" we find a regressive entanglement of dark magic thinking and flat scholasticism, which if left to itself, would revert to a barbarous Medievalism. So rapidly can the mass-roots of culture be cut'.

This article has endeavoured to show that there is a direct line of theoretical descent from the aestheticism which grew out of the Melbourne Bohemian circles of the 1890s, and the increasing mysticism associated with the practice and criticism of landscape painting, to the development of an arrogant nationalism, and finally to an arrogant mysticism which takes on all the attributes of the fascist mentality. There is to be observed during the 1920s and 1930s the gradual growth of the anti-human tendencies of fascism in Australian cultural development as in certain aspects of its political development. Nor must we delude ourselves that those same tendencies have been finally and completely defeated. Their reappearance in whatever form must give us cause to be vigilant. For the final common denominator of these 'cultural' tendencies is to be found in the concentration camps of Dachau and Belsen.