

as an example of the 'Fascist Unconscious'.<sup>6</sup> If any further evidence is needed to demonstrate the interdependence of the idealist façade in art and a potentially fascist outlook, Mr Lawlor will again furnish us with an example. In *Comment*, January 1942, Mr Lawlor has an article in which he intimates that Alister Kershaw is the poetic genius we have all been waiting for. Mr Kershaw has in the same issue what he might call a prose poem. Here is a typical extract:

The mediocracies, the less-than-men are marshalled for attack. They, the Many, gods of the golf club and the dance floor, they are at our throats. We, the poets, the natural aristocrats are menaced by the rabble. En garde, En garde: but let us not close ranks, *let us become a group. Let us move swiftly, alone, to crush the infamy.* But it is not so easy as one would think to obliterate these sans-culottes. Consider the latest cackling conceit in the latest cackling novel! Consider the Marxists—those swinish disciples of equality and fraternity—consider the tennis court and the bridge parties! Listen to the insane toccata of talk in the ballrooms and the studios! They are everywhere, these sub-human cretins. Let us get the smell out of our nostrils; they stink, massed pullulatingly together, how they stink! [my italics]

This from Mr Lawlor's genius! If Mr Lawlor knows anything about ideologies he will have known for exactly a year now that the above is a perfect expression of the fascist ideology in Australian literature.

Is this how art becomes the ultimate criterion of your being, Mr Lawlor?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The Australian Quarterly*, vol. xiv, no. 4, December 1942, pp. 33–43.

<sup>2</sup> I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Kegan Paul, London, 1934, ch. 2, *The Phantom Aesthetic State*.

<sup>3</sup> Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic*, tr. Douglas Ainslie, Macmillan, London, 1909, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Gentile, *The Reform of Education*, tr. D. Bigongiari, Harcourt, Brace & Co., New York, 1922, quoted in Melvin Rader, *No Compromise*, Gollancz, London, 1939, p. 266.

<sup>5</sup> Adolf Hitler, 'Lecture on Art and Culture, Nürnberg Party Conference, September 7, 1937', quoted in Rader, p. 267.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Gold, 'The Fascist Unconscious', *New Republic*, July 1933.

B. Smith Selected Essays

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## The New Realism in Australian Art

—1944—

The generation of Cézanne is not our generation. It is just when a civilization or an art movement seeks to canalize the stream of art to its own rules and canons that its influence wanes and the stream breaks over the banks into the forbidden meadows. Yet all societies, for they are social institutions, gather sets of ideas, conventions and finally dogmas. This is as true for modernism as any other art movement. Peter Pan was never more than a beautiful myth. How then can art societies expect to remain always young, eternally contemporary? Most of the idols of the modern movement—Picasso, Braque, Matisse—today are old men. They have painted their pictures, the critics have praised them or abused them, some have made their fortunes, and others have died hungry. The period of their propaganda is over. We have to study and collect what they have contributed of value to art, throw out the rubbish, and not allow the limitations of the aesthetic which bound them to bind us.

Of recent years there has been a definite change of attitude among those who profess modernism in art, and the term includes the varied group of ideas and practices flowing from the Cézanne watershed. In the early years of this century, the modernists' appeal was to archaeology, history and science. Today the emphasis is placed on aesthetic passion and the sanctity of genius. This was to be expected, for the earlier appeal brought with it a crop of bad mistakes. T. E. Hulme, for instance, prophesied that from the modern movement would grow an art, 'hard, cold and linear'. It was to be a geometric art quite different from the organic arts of Europe. Clive Bell prophesied similarly. It was to be an art that would catch the 'spirit' of machinery in its abstract and geometric forms, a modern post-Byzantinism.

But the latest development of contemporary painting has been, on the contrary, a trend towards a realism in which the previous insistence on abstract values has given way to a new representational art quite unlike the illusionist academic painting from which modernism reacted so successfully and violently during its period of growth.

Epstein never allowed himself to be carried away by the excesses of modernism. It was his opinion that 'to think of abstraction as an end in itself is undoubtedly letting oneself be led into a cul-de-sac, and can only lead to exhaustion and impotence'. Whether it is *Genesis*, *Adam*, *Consummatum Est*, or any other of his greater works, the power of the idea has guided the artist's creation. Yet the pure modernist always views the presentation of 'ideas' in art with suspicion. The late Eric Gill, one of England's finest engravers and carvers, was always sceptical about the claims of the 'aesthetic' higher criticism. Henry Moore, leading exponent of abstraction in English sculpture, has under the pressure of war conditions, returned in his pen drawings to the realism of air-raid shelter themes. The Mexican muralists Rivera and Orozco, after passing through a transitional stage of abstractionism and subjective painting, during which they developed their technical equipment enormously, reached realism and maturity in an art based on the life and history of the Mexican people.

In Germany, before the crushing of all creative art under Hitler, modern art was already on the long and hard road back to reality. It may be observed as a reaction from the mysticism of Kandinsky and Klee. Otto Dix and George Grosz among painters, Gropius the architect, Ernst Barlach the sculptor, came under the influence of modernism; all of them later rejected the subjectivism of its aesthetic.

Today in our own country there is a similar restlessness. The paintings of Yosli Bergner, Noel Counihan, V. G. O'Connor and Arthur Boyd among Victorian painters, and in New South Wales the work of Russell Drysdale, William Dobell, Herbert McLintock, Douglas Watson and Geoffrey Collings, all point in the direction of a new realism stemming from the contemporary movement. Even the work of such a highly personal painter as James Gleeson shows a movement from purely subjective themes that characterized an earlier phase of his work. The Museum of Modern Art in the United States, that very respectable Mecca of American modernism, has recently paid lip-service to the growing realist trend by its exhibition of Realism and Magic Realism.

The development of this realist tendency from the ranks of the

moderns should be distinguished from the rise of modernism itself. Like Hellenistic art and Saïte Egyptian, modernist art exhibits all the qualities of a true decadence but in a greater complexity than any of the earlier prototypes. The cul-de-sac of neo-impressionist form provided the technical *casus belli*. But the movement which is affecting art today and bringing new paintings to the walls of recent exhibitions arises from quite a different source, although the most vigorous roots are undoubtedly embedded in the positive achievements of the modernists. Nevertheless, they differ from the conservative modernists. Many artists today want to paint 'about' rather than just paint. This is heresy to the older modernism, for content and subject are still anathema to them, still part of their aesthetic taboos. The new realism in Australian painting adopts rather the humanist attitudes to be found in Brueghel, Van Gogh, Goya, Daumier, and the Australian, S. T. Gill. It is much less suited than modernism to decorate the homes of millionaires with advanced views. Four years ago in this country it would have been a hope or a prophecy; today it is a fact.

Why has this realist tendency developed in the art of almost every country in the world, particularly where previously an abstract modernist phase had gained widest recognition?

It has appeared because you cannot bind artists forever by a theory which does not face up to the facts. For the intellectual tragedy, the tragedy of art, both in this country, in the United States, and in the countries of Western Europe, has been the continued refusal of the bulk of artists of those countries to admit what they had seen enacted under their eyes. They had been witnesses of the political expression of those forces which, once in power, began a conscious and calculated attack on the traditions and the living representatives of Western European culture. They saw the exiles coming out of Europe, the scientists, the writers, the philosophers, the musicians of our generation. But they said it was not their business. These things were not within the ambit of art; these things were not the responsibility of the artist. The forces causing all the disturbance, the intolerance, the murders of Jews and the beatings in the concentration camps—these things were political and social; they were the concern of the politician or of the economist or the propagandist; they could never be the concern of the artist. They comforted themselves with the thought that these things should be left to those whom they concern. The artist should cultivate his significant experiences; his concern was with form, with empathy, with subjective truth. It was their



John Perceval, *Survival*, 1942, oil on board, 122 × 93.5 cm National Gallery of Victoria.

business to see the world from a whale's transparent belly, but Nineveh was not their responsibility.

It was in the face of this aesthetic isolationism that the writers and artists of the world saw a country with a tradition in art, in literature, and in thought, which had given us Dürer, Goethe and Beethoven, trample its past under the heels of its storm-troopers. And they said it was not their business. They saw the expressionist art which had flourished under the Weimar Republic hung up in an exhibition of Degenerates, and they still said it was not their business. The Bauhaus of Walter Gropius became a Nazi drill hall. The writings of Thomas Mann were officially burnt. Twenty years before, in his *Memoirs of an Unpolitical Man*, Thomas Mann had written, opposing in the name of freedom and culture, the artist's participation in political activity. After he escaped from Germany he wrote: 'I see now that the German bourgeoisie erred in thinking that a man could remain unpolitical...for the political and social are parts of the human: they belong to the totality of human problems and must be drawn into the whole'. The Spanish war brought from Picasso the cry: 'I am on the side of the people', and it produced his *Guernica*. It brought the greatest Catholic thinker, Jacques Maritain, to a condemnation of fascism in Spain. But Garcia Lorca is dead; Rolland recently died in a Nazi concentration camp; Stephan Zweig committed suicide; Einstein is in America; Freud in an English grave. We have witnessed a 'Decline of the West' that was not a prophecy but a political programme. These things are more than matters of military strategy or political opinion.

Today, in this country, it is important for us to know the conditions which made the destruction of Western European cultural tradition a possibility. What aesthetic policies were used *before* the political coup d'état, *before* the wholesale persecutions of artists and writers, the exodus of the scientists, and the *autos-da-fé* of National Socialism?

For their own purposes the fascists built up a spurious façade of 'culture', a metaphysical creed, a *Weltanschauung*, and a medieval mysticism which stressed the 'spiritual' and spurned the material. The material conditions of life and production, environmental factors, economic conditions, the advances of technology—all these were secondary and unimportant manifestations of the spiritual qualities manifested in religion, war, patriotism, nationality, and art. When the fascist talks about art he is a mystic and an idealist. Their 'idealism' is manifested very plainly in the various aesthetic theories which they have embraced to

further their purposes. The official fascist attitude to art derives largely from the theories of Croce and his follower Gentile. Croce maintains that art is intuition; the artist's feelings and expression are in fact his art; the art-work is only a practical activity, a method of publicity.

It may seem strange that a regime as callous as fascism should adopt an idealist attitude to art. But this attitude has served its political purpose for them. It derives from Hegelian thought in Germany, and in France from the theories of Bergson. The approach is anti-intellectual; emotional values are all-important. Art is a personal emanation, always a thing of the individual passion. It was this attitude that Julien Benda criticized in 1929, when he pointed out that these attitudes would eventually undermine the complete fabric of French culture. He was a reliable prophet.

Others, too, saw the danger of such a theoretical approach to art. They reasserted a vigorous humanism, and something of the anger of Morris and Ruskin, Tolstoy, and Cherneshevski. Such an attitude is at the base of the art of Grosz and Gropper, Barlach and Dix. It is in the writings of Ralph Fox, John Cornford and Christopher Caudwell. They saw that isolationism in art led to disastrous implications. Behind these theories, enunciated by all kinds of respectable people, was the fascist who drew his revolver on hearing the word culture, and behind him the dancing witch-doctor with his bones and spells; and in the final analysis, the idealist theory of art, the fascist and the witch-doctor, have always been inimical to the growth of art, as they have been to the growth of science, and those factors which constitute human progress.

Today it is necessary to choose between these two attitudes to art as a social activity. Too many artists have been murdered, too many books have been burned along the primrose path that leads the intellectual towards the passive acceptance of fascism, wherein blood and race become the source of all artistic intuition. Today the artist cannot honestly serve the forces of social decay, he cannot embrace those theories which can be so easily turned to the destruction of art itself. He cannot be passive in the face of these things, for it is not a school of art that is threatened but the survival of art as we have known it as an aspect of human sensibility and human freedom.

And so to accept realism is not to retreat. It is simply to be prepared to do what Swift, what Milton and Voltaire would have done under similar circumstances. Once Milton could write in anger 'On the Massacre of the Piedmontese'. Today a whole race

in Europe is in danger of being exterminated. And this is not all. Today art that is honest will be still capable of anger, though it has been diluted for years by a thin asceticism.

Yet among artists we have mostly witnessed a strange indifference not unalloyed with a strange fear. Those who refused to do anything to resist this threat to their existence as artists could only stare in hypnotic satisfaction at the forces threatening to engulf them. They were prepared to analyse their fears and to write about the mysterious universality of the death instinct. The only thing they were not prepared to do was to meet force with the force of their own beliefs, to defend the cultural tradition, to use their brushes and pens as weapons.

George Grosz, brilliant German artist and satirist, before he fled Germany, flung a charge at his brother artists: 'Your brushes and pens which should have been weapons are but empty straws'.

Today there is a Nazi flag flying from the top of the ivory tower, and the Hamsuns, Pounds, Kershaws and Lindsays who still keep apartments there, pay, in effect, their rent to Dr Goebbels. Today calls for a Milton or a Goya. It was in a somewhat similar situation that Milton once wrote: 'I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies forth and seeks her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat'.

It is because there are artists and writers in the various countries of the world who are prepared to accept the dust and the heat, and risk the sadism of the concentration camp that we have this new development in writing and painting, this tendency towards a new realism. For art can do many things, but it cannot exist for long upon the patronage of a lie.