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978-0-521-58355-8 - Imagining the Antipodes: Culture, Theory and the Visual in the Work of Bernard Smith

Peter Beilharz

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER 1

## BEGINNINGS

## THE BOY ADEODATUS

Who is Bernard Smith? We do not need to accept his version of the story, but he has left us one. In 1984 Bernard Smith published his autobiography. Just this side of seventy, his life's achievements were already remarkable. Smith had written the two most significant works of Australian art history, and had travelled to London to work at the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes on the thesis that became one of the most respected in the field, *European Vision and the South Pacific*. He had coordinated the controversial Antipodean Exhibition in Melbourne in 1959 and had established the Power Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Sydney. He had taught at a bush school, painted and stopped painting, walked up the hill between Potts Point and the Gallery of New South Wales, promoted public art education, had a family, served as art critic for the *Age* and he had loved his first wife, Kate – not bad for a ward of the state, a bastard for whom things might have turned out differently. Yet none of this triumphal public path, so much itself the stuff of conventional biography, was to figure in *The Boy Adeodatus – The Portrait of a Lucky Young Bastard*. Indeed, the charm of the book has to do with its focus upon that with which we empathise – youth, suburbs, kitchens with fresh linen and Vacola jars, fences to be climbed, worlds to be discovered or constructed, childhood, not the success of adults; the city, the bush, the self, new worlds, rather than suits and grave men and seriosity.

The charm of Smith's approach in *The Boy Adeodatus* is also disarming; he knew that there were things about which we should

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remain silent. *The Boy* stops in 1940, when Smith was twenty-four. As he tells, this was a moment of transition. He had made three momentous decisions – to stop painting and to begin writing about art, to join the Communist Party, and to marry Kate Challis. Already we sense something powerful about Smith’s modesty, about the unspoken, even as we are also reminded of the significance of childhood and youth, before it all gets bitter and jaded as we discover ourselves to be surrounded by schemers or idiots. And he wrote it in third person, a difficult strategy, suggesting as it does somehow a divine interpreter who looks over the shoulder or a neutral voice of documentary, as in Trotsky’s attempt at an autobiography. But through Smith’s pen the strategy works, and brilliantly; together, perhaps, with Drusilla Modjeska’s *Poppy* and Robert Dessaix’s *A Mother’s Despair*, *The Boy* is a work as evocative as Australian autobiography gets (though it also connects back, given Smith’s duration, to other works like Jack Lindsay’s *Life Rarely Tells* and Donald Horne’s *Education of Young Donald*). Perhaps the difference, more than any, is that Smith was writing as an historian, as an act of memory; later he was to describe himself not as an art historian but as a cultural historian with a primary interest in the visual. *The Boy* is certainly an act that Ruskin would recognise as word painting; but it is more than that, for it is anthropology as well as aesthetics. The book follows the traces of the women who made his life, his natural mother and his foster-mum, the first who gave him life by following the unexpected pregnancy through rather than terminating it, the second who raised little Bennie in the Sydney suburb of Burwood until teaching and art drew him to the city of Sydney. *The Boy* is a kind of personal memoir to the social, it is a hymn to dependence, to the others who helped make Bernard Smith. The implication about meaning and context would not be lost, for like Marx and Freud, Smith knew that history’s tales were not self-evident, that you had to look sideways and back to see or at least to understand what was apparently in front of your face.

This is one implication of *The Boy Adeodatus*, that vision needs to be lateral if it is to connect. Another message was that of happy complexity, together with the usages of naming. Bernard Smith had two mothers, and a father who walked, who disappeared. His book manages to pass over the latter with grace, but to celebrate both mothers rather than mourn the loss of the original and bemoan or

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belittle the substitute he ended up with. What this suggests is that already Smith as a boy was made aware that we each possess significant others who persist in seeing us individually in different ways. Even as children, before we are inserted into social divisions of labour, our friends and relatives construct us as possessing different personas, or pick up on different aspects of our personalities. Young Ben already had more than one context or family; and in connection with this he had various different names. Bernard William Smith – he copied his father’s name, even in his father’s absence; Joseph, in parentheses, was added to the baptismal certificate. To some he was Ben, Little Ben, Bennie – later, always Bernard, momentarily, in the Communist Party, Bernie; his mum was Rose Anne Tierney, his minder Mum Keen. When he painted in the 1940s and again briefly in the 1980s, he used the name Joseph Tierney, as a sign to his other mother, so he could be all these things to all these people, and carry all these names. Thinking back on his past, in writing *The Boy Adeodatus*, Smith came to encounter the same theme which in a sense animates *European Vision* and his books on Australian painting. Perspective, experience make for difference; naming is but the act of mortals striving to capture momentarily the ephemeral and the fugitive of life’s meaning. We see what we know as well as what seems to present itself to us; and we name things differently, depending on where we stand, from whence we come, which side of the blanket, antipodes or centre, margin or metropolis.

*The Boy Adeodatus* plays on its connection with Augustine, and his unwanted son, but it works more powerfully on the theme of the enclosed garden, the suburban paradise of childhood lost. The book opens with Little Ben in the garden; it is somewhere around the end of the Great War, though the image could just as easily be in the 1950s or 60s. Mum Keen minds him; Dad Keen insists he read the Bible, and it is the Bible and Marx, he says in later life, which become the major texts for his life. The optic of Bernard Smith’s life opens thus, in the backyard, but then the narrative steps back, to cover the lives of his mothers and their people. He finetools the opening, for words are important. Addressing the National Book Council on its award for 1984, Smith indicated that he wanted to avoid stereotypes of success or failure, of triumphalism or the god or gods that failed. ‘Disillusion is a variety of self-pity and I wanted to avoid all forms of self-pity. Because for bastards self-pity is fatal; our natural strength lies in a kind of

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detachment', which in turn explains the reliance on third persona. The images were carefully tuned: 'He would remember the garden', the opening line, evoking the backyard, and Eden, and the pastoral in William Morris' *News from Nowhere*; the second sentence, the Japanese plum in the garden indicating the thing itself, the symbol of his St Theresa in Rome, and his mother's bridal photo; the green and yellow loquats symbolising again the setting, but also Bernard and Valerie Welsh, the two state wards growing up together in the house called Braeside at Burwood.<sup>1</sup>

Little Ben was nine months old when he arrived there. The household became his world, Mum Keen at its centre, Dad Keen marginal, his natural mother nearby, up the road, trying to make ends meet. But there is little blame, or cause for blame in the narrative; reflecting back upon the story Smith knows that Rose Anne suffers, and suffers more than he does for her inability to provide. When later his mother married and changed name, she wrote to the boy, addressing the letter to the new name, to Bennie Kahl. 'She hoped it would help him to realise that he was one of the family . . . But when he received it he did not like that name at all. His name was Smith. He knew who his real father was. He had gone away. So he sat down, and with Bertha's help, wrote his first letter', signed it Bennie Smith xxxxxx.<sup>2</sup>

His new lot were Congregationalists, read Charles Kingsley, so Bernard attended the Salvation Army Sunday School, learned about the importance of service, and independence. Bernard encountered some good schoolteachers and initiated a lifelong relationship with libraries. Already discussion became serious, socialism, religion, Douglas Credit, communism, fascism, the New Guard, almost anything in the papers. He read Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Darwin, Huxley, Haeckel, did well, won a teacher's scholarship, was disappointed in turn with those who taught teachers, but met May Marsden, an inspiring teacher of art, met the images of Cézanne, the Dutch genre painters who somehow reminded him of home, the household and its matriarch. He visited Queensland, where his natural mother now worked the land and lived in rural poverty, and he learned something of the difference between the European garden within which he grew and the Australian garden in which he found himself, tonally, texturally different, different in density and (as everyone came to say) in colour. Then Smith's story leads to his bush school in Murraguldrrie, outback of Wagga in New

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South Wales, where he painted landscape, read again Ruskin's *Elements of Drawing* as he sketched and pondered the difference between vision and nature and struggled with the will-to-power of his hormones.

Now he discovered surrealism. Protected from the Great War by his years in Mumma Keen's backyard garden, he knew nothing yet of its roots, in arguments about crisis and decay, Dada and futurism. Still in the sticks, now schoolteaching, he read Herbert Read's *Art Now*, and André Breton's *What is Surrealism?* Surrealism was a rupture, a symbol of movement and a sign of the times, of the realms of imagination and politics. He wrote in his diary in November 1938: 'I look at the world with greater confidence and with less desire to compromise with it. Surrealism recently has pointed out a new path to me in art. It is the thing for which I have been unconsciously waiting'.<sup>3</sup> Did Smith then become a surrealist? Not quite, for that was an honour to be carried in Australia very largely by the lonely figure of James Gleeson. For Bernard it worked more like a can-opener, and certainly he painted in its shadow, as of the darkness of the impending war. But for Smith the attraction was somehow more to political dissidence than to the aesthetics of dissonance alone. He read Joseph Freeman's *American Testament*, subscribed to the realist *New Masses* which Freeman came to edit. Now he struck up a relationship with Lindsay Gordon. Parts of their correspondence appear in *The Boy Adeodatus*; the originals are in the Mitchell Library where Bernard liked to work in those years. Gordon works as an irritant; his letters to Smith are often inflammatory, he helps goad Smith out of his still too-innocent respect for art. The global situation was one of decline, and Gordon was one who spoke his mind; jaded, indeed bitter, he helped Bernard to realise that the conventional, Clive Bell distinction between art and society was becoming increasingly irrelevant. Poets and artists were already dying, in Spain.

But Australians still largely felt too far away from this. In Sydney they were too smug, in Melbourne too dull. Smith visited Melbourne for the first time in Easter 1938, to look at the holdings of the Felton Bequest in the Gallery and to visit Heidelberg; but the canvas of the local impressionists had already given way to asphalt. He had read William Moore's two-volume catalogue *Story of Australian Art*, and was depressed that no audience existed for the book; it was remaindered, he picked it up cheap at Dymocks in Sydney. He read another big book which appeared in two volumes and sold well to the

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faithful, *Soviet Communism* by Beatrice and Sidney Webb. Like Spengler's *Decline of the West*, these were two volumes given to civilisational analysis. He felt compelled to choose. And so, on returning to Sydney he joined the Teachers' Branch of the Communist Party of Australia, for communism was a bastard tradition; somehow it called to him, though the attraction did not outlast the war. The others in the branch called him Bernie; this time the habit of naming generated some confusion, at least for the secret police, whose file blurred Bernard with another Bernie Smith, known to frequent bars with young seamen at Circular Quay.

Now came the famous Herald Art Show organised by Keith Murdoch. Modernism arrived in Australia, or at least its European precedents were aired locally, Gauguin, Dali. There was even a painting in the collection by a lapsed Australian called John Power. Bernard read one of the few available keyholes into the European situation, in Peter Thoene's blue Pelican book *Modern German Art* (1938). No sooner had the optic of modernism opened than its enemies sought to close it down. Thoene's was a response, a cry of anguish among other things against the 1937 Nazi anti-art exhibition of 'degenerate' work in Munich; Thoene was a pseudonym for Oto Bihalji-Merin, who lived under this other name to tell the story. Yet for Smith the situation was different to Gleeson, perhaps more like Thoene; you needed to write, to educate, to contribute to some kind of critical culture which might help to resist the barbarians. And then there came his third big event, Kate.

But there *The Boy Adeodatus* stops. Why would a writer of distinction exercise such discretion as this, and stop now? As I have suggested, Smith's work is dynamic, personal and personable, but it is also modest in scope; he knows when to remain silent. His purpose in *The Boy Adeodatus* is not to present the tortured soul of romantic biography but to indicate something about common experience as well as different. For the kinds of difference or dissent with which Smith aligned himself, in aesthetics or in politics, were also obviously shared by others in Melbourne and Sydney, Madrid and Berlin. Smith was attracted neither to romanticism nor to the idea of the avant-garde, though of course the Communist Party veered between popular front and vanguard politics. As he wrote in a manuscript on 'This Culture Stuff' in 1939, against the cult of the avant-garde: 'Small groups of individuals cannot hope to make any appreciable difference to a

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change in the cultural standards of any country, unless they are in harmony with these determinates of change'.<sup>4</sup> He had not yet joined the Communist Party, but the thinking was pre-eminently Marxist – context rules, as Marx had put it in the *1859 Preface*, people make their own history but not as they please in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.

What was true of history was also true of art history. Discussing the 'poets of decadence', he wrote a year later that 'no form of art can, I believe, maintain itself solely by the continual refinement of its own conventions'.<sup>5</sup> Lindsay Gordon had relieved Smith of any final sense that art was, or could be, autonomous. Of course, it had its own institutional life and logic, galleries and dealers; but its autonomy was nevertheless illusory, not least of all in periods of social decay and crisis. This did not mean, however, that art was merely an aesthetic level corresponding to the pertinent stage of capitalist development. As Smith put it much later, in his inaugural lecture for the Power Institute in 1968: 'If you will permit me a high level of generalization I think it is broadly true to say that over the past two hundred years the artistic tradition has been consistently antagonistic to the values and structure of modern industrial society'.<sup>6</sup> Capitalist society and economy, ironically, had been unable to generate its own autochthonous cultural forms. The new society was industrial, consumerist and passive; art in general remained romantic, even to the extent later that postmodernism also replayed vital themes of romanticism via surrealism. Art, in other words, was as often inclined to negation as to affirmation, and this especially in periods of decline. As Smith read Thoene's text he marked the passage in the margin: 'An atmosphere of catastrophe in the social sphere, the division of the ego in the private sphere; brooding revolt against fate, narrow morality and an ecstatic, almost religious individualism; these are the essential marks of German expressionism'.<sup>7</sup> Yet Smith resisted the apocalyptic, partly because he was already drawn to the idea that history is patterned, however differently. Surrealism attracted him more as an aesthetic than as a politics. Its politics could be suitably radical, but already he encountered the awkwardness that some artists seemed to have with politics; they wanted to preserve the image of their autonomy against the stain. It was a problem he was to encounter again, later when it came to the controversies surrounding the politics of art in *The Antipodean Manifesto*.



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On 16 October 1940 Smith gave a paper on surrealism to the Teachers' Federation Art Society. He argued that surrealism was a comet, but a significant one. It represented the new, and as such was bound to be rubbished by those who knew better. It was received as rubbish in the same way that impressionism had been in the 1890s, new, therefore not art. For Smith, such developments begged questions about the nature of modernity and of history; they needed to be viewed globally or civilisationally. 'Being a world phenomenon it can only be considered by taking a world view. At this point I shall state definitely that to my mind western civilization has experienced a breakdown and is now undergoing a process of degeneration'.<sup>8</sup> Smith's view was personal, but it was not only that. He summoned three varied but representative thinkers to make the case. Marx, Spengler and Toynbee all pointed this way, representing respectively the viewpoint of history according to communism, fascism and democracy. To introduce the theme of decadence, however, was not to await the apocalypse. If there was decadence now, in the midst of war, then the theme raised the issue of previous periods of decadence. Decadence implied resurgence, not the end of the world. Speaking trans-historically, Smith argued that decadent periods were typically marked by paintings possessing surrealist qualities; the paintings of Bosch, in this regard, anticipated the work of Dada. Decadence called out a new spirit, was positive in this way; and the innovative turn often involved a new source or point of perspective: 'the new art forms which arise after a period of Surrealism generally flourish upon new soil away from the older cultures which originally fertilised them'.<sup>9</sup> Surrealism, for Smith, was then like modernism, nothing new, at least not in the sense that Dada supposed. Surrealism was a generic phenomenon, a cyclical trend which became manifest trans-historically. Or to put it more precisely, surrealism, like romanticism, was part of a great cultural repertoire which humans in different places periodically felt compelled to draw upon. Smith was suggesting that a general theory of history, in the manner of Marx, Spengler or Toynbee also indicated something about art; decadence returned, and so did surrealism. The conclusion was obvious: faced by the experience of the world wars and the interwar years, 'we have to realise that we are either witnessing the birth of a new social order or the end of civilization as we know it'.<sup>10</sup> Sensitive critics of the period often observed that somehow the old was dying, but the new was not



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born yet; still, as Smith insisted, this scenario involved the end of civilisation as we know it. All the same, surrealism was about endings rather than beginnings. And it internalised the world, by insisting that the problems before us were in the mind more than the world.

Smith's conclusion was different. The dream world was fascinating but it was not primary. The social was primary; in the beginning was us, not me. More, if surrealism was cyclical, so then must realism be. Modern realism or social realism also had its antecedents – in Swift, Voltaire, Milton and Goya. Somehow Smith had managed already to think of the long run of civilisations, rise and decline, and to grasp the dominant frames of the twentieth century, those two world wars which brought with them communism and fascism. Fascism, communism, crisis, decadence, the possibility of renewal hang over his thinking as they still do. Surely it was his intimate childhood contact with the Bible that helped to plant this sense of history as the long run. But then came Marx and Spengler and Toynbee, and others.

Bernard Smith read voraciously into the 1940s – Eliot, Nordau, Daiches, Sir James Frazer, Freud, Christopher Caudwell, Herbert Read, Fry, Ruskin, William Morris, Jack Lindsay, Joseph Freeman; and he talked. He talked with Dale Trendall, the classicist, and with Tom Rose, his philosophical connection to John Anderson, the libertarian philosopher at Sydney University. He argued with Lindsay Gordon. He read classics, Aristotle, Lessing, Longinus. Obviously these things were encountered in different ways, for insight can be as accidental as it is systemic in arrival. Lindsay Gordon pushed Smith hard about materialism; 'truth can only be realised through practical activity'.<sup>11</sup> He harangued Smith on what today we would call philosophical anthropology, using terms of reference reminiscent of Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, where labour and creation are the context of art and culture.<sup>12</sup> Smith wrote to Lindsay on the eve of his first departure from Australia, 10 May 1948, from Potts Point: 'I shall always remember your letters to me at Murraguldrrie, precious things they were to me . . . they meant more to me than anything I have read since'.<sup>13</sup> In the meantime he did the hard graft. He read Marx and Engels' *The German Ideology*, Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* and Engels' *Origin of the Family, the State and Private Property*. The works of the young Marx, the famous *Paris Manuscripts* were unavailable to him. He found some good theoretical support amongst the flotsam of authorised Dialectical

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Materialism in the superior work of Max Eastman and Sidney Hook, especially Hook's *Hegel to Marx*, which focused on the young Marx and the young Hegelians, Ruge, Bauer and Feuerbach. He read Marx's throwaway lines about the appeal of Greek art and sat through *Capital*. He persevered with Spengler's massive two-volume study, *Decline of the West* and the slighter book on *Man and Technics*. And he worked through Toynbee's *A Study of History*, especially volumes four to six (picked them up at David Jones' Book Corner in 1942). He read Sorokin's fat volumes on civilisation in the Mitchell Library. What was the substance of all this, where did it point, the content and message of all these big books?

Spengler became, as Smith had observed, complicit with Nazism; but he had a theory of history that was worth taking seriously. Spengler's message, in this way like Smith's, was that decline meant something else as well; his theory of history was not one of unilateral demise, but of cyclical return and reformation. Toynbee's optic was structurally similar to Spengler's; civilisations rise and fall, reach peaks and collapse; in this there should be no surprises. The more interesting question becomes that of how change occurs, whether it is internal or externally triggered. Toynbee was bound to appeal more to Smith, for even though Toynbee spat at Marx at the same time he drew on his thinking. Toynbee took on the language of class as an analytic device. It was simple: the breakdown of civilisation involved class war, even if this did not lead, as Marx sometimes imagined, to socialism or the end of history. Class war, for Toynbee, works as the trigger of history:

thus the breakdown of a civilization gives rise to a class-war within the body social of a society which was neither divided against itself by hard-and-fast divisions nor sundered from its neighbours by unbridgeable gulfs so long as it was in growth . . . [therefore] the nature of the breakdowns of civilization can be summed up in three points: a failure of creative power in the minority, an answering withdrawal of nemesis [following] on the part of the majority, and a consequent loss of social unity in the society as a whole.<sup>14</sup>

Toynbee's lines were first published in 1939; during 1942 Smith took them in. In 1937 there was the Munich Degenerate Art Exhibit, in 1939 the 'phoney war': plainly Toynbee spoke to Smith and to his moment.