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## Hegel's Owl: the life of Bernard Smith

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## Book Review

*Hegel's Owl: the life of Bernard Smith*. By Sheridan Palmer. Melbourne, Power Publications, 2016. 415 pp., illus., notes, bibliog., index. ISBN 978-0-9943064-2-5. (pbk). \$AU 39.99.

The praise given this book by the blurb on its cover, is entirely deserved. It is indeed a terrific biography, 'an elegant and powerful study, finely crafted – fully worthy of its subject': the great Australian art historian Bernard Smith (1916–2011). Smith is not long gone and the significance of his life and work has been in discussion for some time. In the last two decades of his life, and the one following, there have been a string of tribute conferences, academic studies and assessments of his legacy. There was also his own late output to contend with: the second of a two-part autobiography and two feisty books, still arguing the terrain of modernism with new challengers, the postmodernists (a thing in the 1980s and '90s). Sheridan Palmer characterises this last confrontation in almost mythical terms: the spectacle of the 'father of art history' in Australia attempting to devour his own sons and daughters, like Chronos or Father Time, whose image (in a painting by Poussin) adorns his last autobiography. These debates have dissipated now, but the figure of Smith, the great 'culture warrior', battling to the end, challenging the discipline of art history from beyond the grave, makes a lasting impression in Palmer's book. Of all the posthumous acknowledgements, it might be the great achievement of *Hegel's Owl* to have finally put his perturbed spirit to rest.

I found this a very moving book, with an almost mythical quality. Not because Palmer inflates her subject's reputation or mythologises the story of his life. The quality emerges rather from a combination of the empirical richness of her narrative (drawing on Smith's personal archive of diaries, letters and papers) and the extraordinary perceptiveness, clarity and compassion that Palmer brings to bear on that life. Why that should feel mythical I'm not sure, but perhaps it has to do with the enormous ambition of Smith's intellectual, scholarly, critical and artistic project; his Hegelian, Marxist, modernist, art historical, Antipodean and very 20th-century quest to wrangle the significance of art in the times he was himself living through into some meaningful historical shape. Underlined in his copy of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, Palmer tells us, is the following passage: 'What does our great historical hunger signify ... our clutching about us of countless other cultures, our consuming desire for knowledge, if not the loss of myth, of a mythic home' (p. 176). The phrase 'our historical hunger' in the passage is indicative of Smith's deep immersion in a European account of the artistic culture of modernity, even as he tried to turn it on its head. Today that account is being increasingly 'provincialised', a trend Smith himself encouraged in his support for Indigenous art and art histories, and the development of new academic formations such as Pacific Studies and Imperial Studies. But these gestures, important as they are, were peripheral to the main battleground Smith occupied in his career: the terrain between Australian settler culture and Europe.

Palmer's bead on Smith is apparent from the very first chapter called 'Origins' about his birth and childhood. It's a riveting story – especially if, like me, a non-Australian, you were unfamiliar with it – of a bastard child born from a passing liaison between a young Irish Catholic migrant woman and a much older Australian man. The child is abandoned by his father and given up by his mother to foster care. Although utterly contingent, Palmer sees in these circumstances of Smith's 'origins' a kind of psychological structure, a permanent wound, a personal existential setting that ramifies through the rest of his life. The transgression at the heart of his conception, the absence of a father, and above all the fact of his illegitimacy, the sense of being forever an outsider – these are the 'hidden seams of his life, the secret closet of his mind and past' (p. 2) that Palmer makes visible. They underlie his intellectuality as a scholar and critical historian:

For Bernard Smith words and the intellect were used to atone for the guilt of the flesh – that of his mother and father – and his own. Later he transferred his reliance on words for interrogating invasion, conquest, morality, dispossession, Indigenous genocide and national consciousness, and defining anti-podeanism and modernism. (p. 3)

That far-reaching insight sustains and unifies the story Palmer tells as she tracks Smith's life through its various phases and episodes: the young Darwinian convert; the zealous Communist; the precocious critic, exhibition-maker and self-made art historian, shaking up the hotbeds of Australian modernism in Sydney and Melbourne in the 1930s and 1940s; the family man and lover; the 'black swan' in post-war London and beyond, wired into a network of world-leading art historians at the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, where his masterwork *European Vision and the South Pacific* (1960) was first written; the cosmopolitan colonial contesting the terms of relation between the 'centre' and its 'antipodes'; the rising academic star; first director of the Power Institute, when his grip on the narrative of Australian art, if not Western art history as a whole, began to slip and fall apart in the face of new directions in contemporary art and revisionist challenges to precisely those paradigms he had invested his life in: modernism and art history. But while Palmer admirably captures the nature of his intellectual achievements and the critical, contested milieu in which he operated, they are never allowed to run away with the narrative; Palmer always brings them back to the person at their centre, his character, his situation in time and place.

One of the most revealing aspects of Palmer's biography is the role of women in Smith's life – as carers, partners, friends and lovers. Indeed, relations with women constitute a kind of counter-narrative to the culture- and history-making ambitions that otherwise consumed Smith, a world dominated for most of his life by men. The relations were contradictory. On the one hand, Palmer shows, women – or certain women – anchored him, inscribed his moral boundaries, invested a level of faith or optimism in his life that sustained him, and that he needed. Others – lovers, prostitutes, sex partners – served the opposite role. They were figures of unbounded desire or unfettered autonomy. Given Smith's adulteries, and his anti-feminism, it's a wonder Palmer did not write a harsher book. She is far from blind to the gender politics that underlie these relationships, but the fact is, it is a remarkably compassionate portrait. Palmer is attentive to the full range of their play in Smith's life, from the Sisters of St Clare who tended him temporarily as an abandoned infant to the gathering of women around him after his last public lecture at the National Gallery of Victoria at the age of 92, one of them sharing a knowing joke: 'You know Bernard, writers are better in bed than painters' (p. 332); from his deep relationship with his wife and 'soul mate' Kate Challis, who bore the silent 'wound' of his adulteries, to his charming solicitation of Palmer herself to write his biography.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book is the strange way that biography shadows history, especially when it is the biography of an historian. Palmer's task as a biographer is not unlike Smith's as a historian in her effort to find structure and coherence in the vast archive of documents or to establish distance and perspective in crafting an artful portrait. Her subject, however, is not the history of modernism but of a *modernist*. What does a biography of a modernist tell us about modernism? Read *Hegel's Owl* to find out.

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