The Land's Meaning and the Image of Man in the Work of Australian Artists

John A. Henley

I have never undertaken a course of study in the visual arts, nor have I been a regular visitor to art galleries in Australia or elsewhere so it ill becomes me to be presenting this report on the insights gained in the workshop conducted by Prof. McCaughey.*

At the beginning of the second day, however, Prof. McCaughey enquired whether any of the participants had taken a course in the arts and it became apparent that none had done so. In the absence of Prof. McCaughey, then, I can derive some comfort from the thought that at least some of those who attended the workshop would be no better qualified to present the report.

When I informed my wife which of the workshops I would be attending during this Conference, she replied "Good, you might even learn something!" Whether she intended to cast any doubt on the usual value of theological conferences I am not sure, but I do know that Prof. McCaughey managed to illuminate an aspect of Australian culture about which I have hitherto been very much in the dark.

* A. P. McCaughey is Professor of Visual Arts, Monash University, Melbourne.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to convey a clear impression of the workshop without the aid of the many Australian paintings that Prof. McCaughey presented to us. All I can therefore do is to outline some of the main themes and issues that were brought to our attention and try to bring these into some kind of theological focus by asking a few questions.

First, I want to mention something that became fully apparent only towards the end of the workshop when the paintings of Arthur Boyd were being considered. The point is analogous to one made by Professor Tulip. It concerns the difficulties encountered by any Australian artist who seeks creatively to explore religious themes and to present religious images in his paintings. There is no Australian tradition of creative religious art and the patronage of churches has been restricted to artists who could be relied upon to produce paintings and other kinds of work considered suitable for display in church buildings. In other words, the churches have done little to encourage artists to relate Biblical subjects or the symbols of faith to the local culture and the sensibilities of the faithful have therefore remained unchallenged.

When Arthur Boyd sets out to create an Australian vision of a subject such as the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden, in which the setting is the bush of the Mornington Peninsula, it is thus a case of an artist, who does not identify himself with the church, producing a work for exhibition in and to a secular, largely non-believing society. The painting is hung in a public gallery.

Although Boyd has entered works on more than one occasion for the Blake Prize for religious art, participants in the workshop were dismayed to learn that he had never been awarded the prize and that works which had been judged superior paled into insignificance alongside his attempts to relate religious subjects to Australian reality.

The question this seems to raise for the churches and for theologians is simply the reverse of that which confronts the Australian artist. Is not the problem of the former that of relating to, of discerning and fostering, the creative potentialities that are to be found in the context of Australian society? Failure, or inability, to do so in the past is surely a major factor in the choice of the theme for this Conference.

The question is quite an obvious one but it is worth mentioning, because it indicates that we have to beware of foisting traditional religious interpretations on Australian art and also be alive to the possibility that the artist may confront us in a fresh and invigorating way with questions that we are not yet able to answer. For the questions have not been framed according to our perspective and therefore, like the new insights of the 'exact sciences' to which Prof. Reist referred, they may drive us beyond our prior assumptions and clarities by requiring us to participate imaginatively in the passionate struggle of the artist to discover a new way of looking at our world.

At the turn of the last century there was a Heidelberg 'school' but, for the most part, the images and meanings conveyed by Australian art are variegated because they represent the creative vision of individuals — of a Dobell, a Boyd, a Nolan, a Pugh and so on. Common concerns and themes can be

70

identified, of course, but only in retrospect, by a historicising analysis. This is not to say that such matters are unimportant — and I shall mention some of them shortly — but it does remind us that by the time the generalising intellect has caught up with them, the creative artist and the vision have moved on.

One of the things that distinguishes Australian art from the wider artistic world this century, and especially since the Second World War, has been a willingness and capacity to explore 'the image of man' and what is found, therefore, in Dobell, Boyd, Nolan and others, is a range of individual and changing images.

This point may seem fairly obvious but when one begins to probe beneath the surface, realizing that the artist is not very interested in the superficialities of physiognomy, it poses afresh the radical question raised by materialist philosophy and the kind of anthropology and sociology that derive from such a philosophy. These modes of comprehending reality question whether it now makes any sense to seek for wholistic myths, visions, images, representations, or accounts of man and the world or cosmos.

This is the radical question of pluralism, a question which remains largely unanswered because it has hardly been confronted by the churches or any of the other traditional institutions of society, and not just of Australian or Western society. We Christians usually deal with this question in an evasive way by assuming that there is some eternal Gospel that not only can be embodied in the cultures of Africa and Australia but also somehow floats above them. Hence we pretend that the only question raised by pluralism is the more or less consequentialist one of the extent to which we can tolerate differences in life-style and in moral values and options. This way of dealing with the question seems to be based on the false assumption of a cleavage between kerygma and didache or, as Prof. Cone and many others would now put it, between theory and praxis. As I understand the difference between Prof. Cone and Dr. Mbiti, it comes down to saying, on the one hand, that the Gospel makes no impression unless it is concretely embodied in praxis or, on the other hand, that the Gospel can make an impression, not apart from this, but in addition to this. With Ben Reist I would have to say that the latter conception of the Gospel makes no sense to me. If God were to leave himself without a witness, there would be no God. I am also sure that most of the 'secular' members of my tennis club would agree with this view, while still rejecting the kind of impression that the Gospel has been seeking so far to make in the Australian context.

This leads me to ask how the Gospel can and does transcend culture. I doubt whether a final answer can be given to this question, especially if it is conceived in general or abstract terms. It is possible to suggest why the Gospel can and sometimes does transcend culture, however. This possibility exists in virtue of the simple capacity of a people to say a radical No to the terms in which the Gospel is presented to them and to represent this negation in symbols and images of an ultimate counterpart of faith.

Having thus begun to indicate some of my theological convictions, I have also begun to reveal a predilection for certain kinds of artistic images. In order

to avoid serious misrepresentation of the content of the workshop, then, I shall now outline the major themes of the two days and raise some further questions.

1. The Land's Meaning

The first day was spent tracing the way in which Australian artists have sought to convey 'the land's meaning'. It became apparent that, from the earliest days of convict artists such as Lycett and Watling, there have been two main themes in the Australian tradition, one of which has what may be regarded as a subsidiary theme.

There is an optimistic vision of the landscape, in which it is represented as stable, secure, abundant, golden and well watered, an environment in which man can find a home, meaning, and pleasure. Beyond this, but related to it in the Australian context, is an arcadian, romantic theme of the grandeur and even sublime nature of the landscape. Not surprisingly, we found that the latter theme sustained little creative power beyond the nineteenth century.

The most distinctive representation of the optimistic theme occurs in the work of the Heidelberg school — Streeton, Roberts, Conder, and McCubbin. These painters entered into their environment of 'suburban bush' and sought to appreciate it for what it really is. While its harshness is not ignored, especially its light and heat, it is depicted as a place fit for human occupation and endeavour, although the latter has to assume heroic proportions on occasion — in Tom Roberts' "Breakaway", for example.

The other main theme is pessimistic and reflects what Marcus Clarke, in "For the Term of his Natural Life", described as "the weird melancholy of the bush". Here the landscape is either thick and impenetrable or barren and deserted, always antagonistic and even annihilating. It is a landscape out of which, according to Boyd's "Expulsion", man is driven by the ruling god or demon. Cityscapes often reflect the same theme, although there is also the more optimistic vision of a vital, self-renewing environment to be found among them.

The work of Australian artists thus reveals a deep ambivalence about the environment which suggests that we are a most unsettled people. We may well ask, therefore, what the Gospel can offer persons who neither feel at home nor know where to go. For people who desire to escape the city and stretch and relax in the countryside or seaside only to discover, all too soon, a desire to return to the domesticity and activity of the city, the Biblical images of the wanderer and the pilgrim, Jerusalem and the kingdom, can have no unambiguous appeal.

2. The Image of Man

On the second day of the workshop we considered 'the image of man' in the works of various Australian artists. The duality to be found in the portrayal of the landscape is, of course, represented in the images of man but the latter also

have something of a common thread in the figures of the heroic (or anti-heroic). Thus the interposition of the stock-rider in Roberts' "Breakaway" has some affinities with Nolan's vision of "Burke and Wills at the Gulf", except that the latter dramatically depicts the radical opposition of the environment to the explorer's quest for a way to find meaning and identity. The confidence of the former is more clearly shown in "The Shearing of the Rams" where the artist presents us with a picture of the strength, vitality and equality of democratic men — youth, adults and the aged — working together in the shed, an environment that man has defined for himself. Nolan replaces this with a metaphysical portrait of man in the limit-situation where the environment will not quite annihilate him but will either bestialize him by degrading him to its own level, which is what happens to Mrs. Fraser, or confirm him as hero at the point of death. Nolan seems convinced that the former is the more likely and so the grotesque starts to become the iconography of the human.

The question that seems to emerge here is whether an optimistic image of man can be sustained for very long. Critical appraisal of the human seems invariably to lead to an image of total dislocation (Augustine), total depravity (Calvin), total bestiality (Nolan and Boyd), or, in more recent art, and a deal of psychology, total confusion. To put it mildly, this is an unattractive view of the human but, just as Boyd places a doomed half-caste before our eyes and Mbiti, Cone and Reist paint verbal pictures of the black and red victims of oppression, so the Gospel presents us with the image of the crucified.

These images of the human cannot be dissociated from the self-understanding of the modern artist who, like Clifton Pugh (1954), so often portrays himself as an outcast. If it is true, as Ben Reist has reminded us, that a heightened sense of the demands of the covenant between God and man leads to a new way of looking at creation, then it will also be true that there is an earlier phase of development in which the suffering and agony of individuals who struggle to discern and identify with the reality of the human condition leads to the emergence of prophetic figures. Since the prophet is a social figure, as well as a 'religious' one, this raises the question whether, in an Australian context, he is more likely to be found, not among churchmen, but among artists and others who move in circles with which the churches hardly overlap.

Finally, I must report that, among all the images presented in the workshop there is one that haunts and disturbs me, just as I find the impression that Jim Cone has given of the Gospel haunting and disturbing me. In one of Nolan's Kelly series we are confronted with a hero seated on a horse in armour alone, with a head that is square vacuum. So I conclude with the question: what do we have to offer empty-headed heroes?