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**Review of Sheridan Palmer, *Hegel's Owl—The Life of Bernard Smith*,
Sydney: Power Publications, 2016**

When philosophy paints its grey in grey, then has the shape of life grown old... The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk.

- G.W.F. Hegel¹

Sheridan Palmer's recent biography of art historian Bernard Smith (1916–2011) begins with the above quotation by German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). This quotation—which inspired the book's title *Hegel's Owl: The Life of Bernard Smith*—not only places the biography in a scholarly context, but also its subject as a key player in Australia's intellectual history. The so-called 'father of Australian art history', Smith is credited with having had a transformative impact on the humanities in Australia and abroad, particularly with regard to the notion of the 'Antipodean' (a term he favoured over 'Australian'). This long-awaited biography provides context to this position. At the same time, it addresses the impact of Smith's personal background, including his illegitimate birth and professional challenges. The academic rigour of Palmer's biography matches Smith's own profile as an intellectual giant of national and international significance.

The significance of Smith's origins underscores Palmer's book. For the Palmer, Smith's humble childhood circumstances played a key role in shaping his Marxist outlook and determination to rise above the social injustice of his birth. As she writes:

Born with an innate sense of his boundary, imposed by his illegitimacy and state-ward rearing, the foundation to Bernard's character was determined by formed resilience—to society and to others, but not to himself (p. 3).

The son of unmarried domestic workers who did not have the means to support a child, he was raised by a foster family in greater Melbourne during the grim years

¹ Hegel, 1949, p. 13, as quoted in Palmer, 2016, front endpapers.

between the First World War and the Great Depression. Although he fared better than many in his situation (who grew up in orphanages), Smith was always an outsider, even within his foster family. His sense of being different also coloured his relationship with his birth parents, although as an adult he developed a bond with his mother. Smith's was the experience of many who exceed the expectations of their families, who find themselves always on the periphery; belonging neither where they have come from nor where they have chosen to be. It was this very position, the uniqueness of his perspective, Palmer maintains, that facilitated Smith's intellectual prowess. Crucially, it allowed him to interrogate what it meant to be Antipodean from the sidelines.

The early chapters recount Smith's remarkable rise to intellectual greatness and are a particularly compelling aspect of the biography. A gifted student, he won a scholarship to a teacher's college and began his career as a primary school teacher. Those achievements alone were remarkable for someone of his background, but Smith was hungry for much more. Required to write a thesis to complete his education training, he chose the subject 'Tendencies in Modern English Verse' and tackled a complex topic that spanned key aspects of Western thought from the late-eighteenth to the early-twentieth-centuries. Palmer paints an image of a somewhat reclusive Smith studying at night while teaching in a rural area, feeling at home amongst the intellectual giants whose work he devoured. His approach paid off as acclaim for his dissertation helped him develop a profile as an intellectual. It led to his employment as an educator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. It was the publication of his first book *Place, Taste and Tradition: A Study of Australian Art Since 1788* (1945), however, that established his reputation as a major art historian. Research trips overseas provided a physical distance from his homeland that expanded his conception of being Antipodean. These trips informed Smith's pivotal works such as *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768–1850: A Study in the History of Art and Ideas* (1960) that was based on ground-breaking research for his 1957 doctoral thesis, completed at the Australian National University, Canberra.

Smith's marriage and the devotion of his first wife is another significant thread in Palmer's biography. While living in Sydney he met and married Englishwoman Kate Challis. Their bond was forged on a shared sense of being an outsider, as Challis was

adopted into a privileged yet complex family and sought a new start in Australia. Her cultivated manners and tastes helped to smooth her husband's rough edges and establish vital connections within the art world. She carried out the roles of translator, research assistant and societal conduit, as well as that of friend and loving wife: 'In her calm English manner, Kate transformed him into a cosmopolitan and provided him with an environment that sustained his intellectual labour' (p. 75). Quotations from Challis' diaries offer a different perspective on Smith's life, and assist in showing the impact of his intellectual pursuits on those closest to him. The minimal reference to his children and home life also indicates that it was something that often played a secondary role to his work. The poignant account of her death from cancer in 1989 and the depth of her husband's grief reinforces the extent to which their relationship provided a strong foundation from which he was able to tackle countless intellectual challenges.

The rigour of this biography reflects the complexity of its subject. It is as 'a metaphor for him as an historian', that Palmer reflects on Minerva's owl, which spreads its wings at dusk (p. 5). Smith looked back over the past, understanding his own time as ripe for historical endeavor. This too connects with her concern for Smith's origins and argument that his peripheral position facilitated his development of fresh perspectives on the past which informed his contributions to the humanities in Australia. Her consummate research is evident, concerning not only Smith as an individual and an intellectual, but also the social and philosophical forces that inspired him. She has evidently tried to get inside his mind and understand his philosophy on art and ideas, as well as his motivations and anxieties. These ranged from Christianity and Darwinian theories of evolution to communism and contemporary art.

Palmer's respect for her subject is evident throughout the biography. He personally asked her to write his biography towards the end of his life, an invitation she describes as a 'weighty challenge' (p. 2). While she addresses his flaws—including his controversial handling of the Directorship of the Power Institute of Fine Arts in the late-1960s and early-1970s, infidelity, and his coinage of the term *formalesque* to refer to modern art—there is a sense that she seeks to redeem him by explaining these shortcomings. For example, regarding the Power Institute for Fine Arts Palmer observes that 'in spite of his misapprehensions, he had achieved a great deal...' and

provides a list of key achievements, followed by an observation about the difficulty of establishing a new institution (p. 261). Palmer clearly developed an unrivalled knowledge of his personality as well as his life and work through numerous interviews and because she had access to his personal papers (which are mostly held at the National Library of Australia, Canberra). Her ability to tie together the various strands of his life story is a strength of the book. At times, however, her inclusion of quotations from other intellectuals interrupts the flow of the narrative.

Hegel's Owl is not only a biography of Smith, it is also a fascinating account of intellectual life in Australia that spans most of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty first. The maturation of the humanities in Australia, its embrace of contemporary art from centres such as America, and contemporary Indigenous art all feature in Palmer's book. She shows that Smith's intellectual flexibility allowed him to develop new ways of seeing historical and contemporary art, and of reappraising the past. The biography is a reminder of the breadth of Smith's legacy and of the major transformation in the cultural and intellectual landscape of Australia that has occurred since the Second World War.

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Bibliography

Hegel, 1949: Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. (Thomas Malcolm) Knox, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1949.