

## ABORIGINAL SPIRITUALITY

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'Spirituality' is a fashionable word. What it refers to, however, is beyond fashion, even beyond speech. Kees Waauman links it with the scene in the fifth chapter of *John*, to the healing of the cripple and to the reference to the angel 'stirring up the water'. Spirituality, he says, has to do with disturbance, disturbance by 'something beyond our world, our situation...[the Spirit] that blows wherever it pleases'. It therefore has to do with the in-breaking of the other and thus with transformation.<sup>1</sup> The growing interest in Aboriginal spirituality may therefore represent a moment of grace, of this kind of inflowing from within ourselves, from some hidden spring, but also from beyond our world and our situation.

If we are to talk about it, then we need to move beyond the surface, the mere appearances, to this inwardness. As Waauman goes on:

Spirituality cannot be correctly described without taking into account the actual 'Gestalt' of full experience ... In many respects [it] resembles what we call 'style' ... Style has to do with inner coherence, with the 'inscape' of things, however elusive.<sup>2</sup>

Yet this experience occurs within a particular culture, in a particular place and time. 'Experienced spirituality has to do with forms, actual life-forms'.<sup>3</sup> That is why literature matters, because while it arises out of these actual life-forms it takes us to the heart of the dialogical process, the interaction between the Other and the familiar, expressing the moment of transformation and its dialectical tension with its actual historical and social context which this evokes and in which it acquires its 'face'.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I want to focus on one text, Kim Scott's *True Country*, which is not only about this moment of transformation but also about it as the result of its encounter with Aboriginal culture - its protagonist, Billy, discovers that he is in fact Aboriginal. But the novel's two epigrams suggest that this encounter matters for the rest of

us also. The first is from Midnight Oil's 'The Dead Heart':

We carry in our hearts the true country  
 And that cannot be stolen  
 We follow in the steps of our ancestry  
 And that cannot be broken.<sup>5</sup>

For Scott's semi-autobiographical Billy this is easy, even logical. But how is it that we non-Aborigines, separated from the land and its people not only by culture but also by the burden of history, the blood that has been shed and the offences committed, may find this country and this ancestry? As Douglas Adams points out, our culture has largely lost the ability to see what is Other. Kevin Gilbert, for instance, has written of the experience of Aboriginal people as a 'rape of the soul so profound that the blight continues to the present day'.<sup>6</sup> Seen through Aboriginal eyes our interest in their culture can seem like just one more invasion, one more appropriation. It can also seem like play-acting, running away from the real issues between us. Listen, for example, to Aboriginal poet Debby Barber:

Do You Know What You're Saying

Do you know what you're saying  
 Have you heard it yourself  
 How much do you practise  
     What you said

Do you know or think you do  
 You sit there talking and preaching  
 Patting yourself on the back  
     Have you been through it

If you sat and listened to one  
     that had  
 and to someone that was  
     themselves  
 that's when you will  
     learn something.<sup>7</sup>

It is a tricky business also because Aboriginality is fashionable - as Mudrooroo Narogin remarks, Aboriginal culture is perhaps our main

growth industry, overseas especially. Aboriginal T-shirts, paintings, artefacts and so on are becoming articles of Kitsch, of cultural cliché, objects of cultural consumption, of 'the farcical resurrection and parotic evocation of that which is already no more', part of the consumer society which lives by 'the exaltation of signs based on the denial of the reality of things.'<sup>8</sup> There is a gap, that is to say, between the culture of the Same and the existence of the Other.

The second epigram, however, suggests an answer to these problems:

[then why]...this sense  
of gain and loss, the now I am  
not there, then, despite the giveaway  
smile? I am a born exile, or they  
are tokens of infinity; and distance  
like love is a necessary fiction.

This sense of distance, of gain and loss and of exile, the feeling that where we are is not where we want, even ought, to be, characteristic of our culture may be a token of infinity, of the God whose being is in his coming, as Eberhard Jürgel so finely puts it. As he also goes on to say, this God:

goes on ways to himself [herself] even to that which is not  
God. God's ways of himself [herself] include something like  
distance from himself [herself] too.<sup>9</sup>

Distance, as we all know, is an integral element of Australian experience, and with it, self-irony - remember, for instance, the sense of infinity and self mockery with which *Such Is Life* concludes: 'Such is life my fellow mummies'. *True Country* echoes this sense of ambiguity but it links it also with Aboriginality:

This whole big Australian land binds us and we fragments of a  
great...

A Dream time. A maybe rented time. A time the fabric of  
which is torn and rent and now not holding together, like a  
torn flag fluttering.

Like magic carpet falling.  
But we never had. (167)

Our existence is open, full of a sense of absence, of loss. But Aboriginal people, Billy realises, 'got something to tell. To speak into this absence because they were here first. For a long time.' (167)

There is a dimension of depth in their culture which we seem to lack, a sense of emplacement, of belonging in space and time and not being dragged along by some giant evolutionary machine labelled 'progress' and/or 'economic growth' which actually eats up people. Despite sentimental views to the contrary, they also have a sense of evil, an ability to recognise and come to terms with violence - as *True Country* shows. As Lyotard has famously said, contemporary Western culture no longer acknowledges any grand narrative to live by and provide a general context of meaning. But for Aboriginal people every significant event echoes and derives its significance from its archetype of the beginning of time, the Dreaming, which is always present, the still point of the turning wheel of history.

Neither the objects of the external world nor human acts, properly speaking, have [for them] any autonomous intrinsic value. Objects or acts acquire a value, and in so doing become real, because they participate ... in a reality that transcends them.<sup>10</sup>

Certain objects, a stone for instance, places or people, are sacred because they are seen as 'the receptacle of an external force that differentiates it from its milieu and gives it meaning and value', the force of the holy, the 'mysterium tremendum et fascinans'. Incompressible, invulnerable, it is that which humanity is not. It resists time; its reality is coupled with perennality.

This sense of the holiness of the world and of our place within its sacred pattern is the heart of Aboriginal spirituality. Their culture is thus essentially reverent, acknowledging

... no act which had not been previously posited and lived by someone else, some other being who was not [merely human]. What [they do] has been done before [their] life is a ceaseless repetition of gestures initiated by others.<sup>11</sup>

'Reality' thus involves the imitation of some divine archetype and

meaning comes from this imitation the other end of the scale from our culture whose hero is Prometheus who remade the world to suit his own desires.<sup>12</sup>

Aboriginal culture, then, is essentially contemplative, based on listening *dadirri*, a state of wordless contemplation, and thus an obedience - the root meaning of obedience is listening. It is also essentially communal, the self is part of the community of all living things. So the traditional Aboriginal wise man, Bill Neidjie begins his reflections:

Listen carefully this, you can hear me.

I'm telling you because earth just like mother  
and father or brother of you.

That tree something.

Your body, my body, I suppose,

I'm same as you ... anyone.

Tree working when you sleeping and dream.<sup>13</sup>

This has a great deal in common with the king of contemplation St John Chrysostom, for instance, envisaged:

It were indeed meet for us at all to require the aid of the written Word, but to exhibit a life so pure, that the grace of the spirit should be instead of books to our souls, and that as these are inscribed with ink, even so should our hearts be with the Spirit.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, then, Aboriginal culture has what Western culture seems to have lost, a sense of reverence, obedience and community. Obviously, therefore it thus matters for our culture which threatens on the one hand to destroy the planet and on the other seems increasingly unable to provide the happiness which it claims to be its *raison d'être*. But at this point the problems posed earlier return. We are not Aboriginal and our culture is very different from theirs. It is other, a sign perhaps of the Other, not the same. A life-style geared to competition, possession and consumption militates against our achieving the reverence, receptivity and sense of sharing on which their spirituality is based. It has precious little sense of the Other, is liked into the same. Indeed, Aboriginal people, even traditional people, are themselves struggling to preserve their culture from the effects our ours - TV and video, as one old man said to me, threaten to complete the work begun

by alcohol.

Is it therefore mere romanticism, what Bonhoeffer calls 'cheap grace, sold on the market like cheapjack's wares',<sup>15</sup> a source of consolation and comfort demanding little or nothing from us, to talk of accommodating ourselves to Aboriginal spirituality? There is also the further problem for Christians that for us it is 'by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth... [that] we must be saved.' (Acts 4, 10-12). Syncretism may be fashionable but it may not be true to the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The answer, I think, lies within our own tradition, precisely in the problem as we pose it, in the gap which lies between us, the wilderness of incomprehension, bitter memories and fear. In the Biblical tradition, the desert is the place of revelation precisely because it is here that we come to the end of our human resources. As Erazim Kohak remarks; if the wilderness is lost there is nowhere for pain - or language - to find its transformation.<sup>15a</sup> It is important for us to be taken away from our self-confidence, from the imperialist's dream of power and supremacy.

A world that is ordered is not *the* world-order [Martin Buber writes]. There are moments of silent depth in which you look on the world-order fully present ... no content may be secured from them, but their power invades creation and [our] knowledge... beams of their power stream into the ordered world and dissolve it again and again.<sup>16</sup>

Interruption may be the best definition of genuine religion. It is certainly the prelude to genuine spirituality. For us the first effect of Aboriginal culture and thus spirituality then may be negative, a rupture of the myth of progress and development by which we live; an interruption by the voice of the Other. Listen, for instance, to Aboriginal poet Kevin Gilbert's 'The New Time National Anthem':

Australia oh Australia  
 You could stand proud and free  
 We weep in bitter anguish  
 at your hate and tyranny  
 the scarred black bodied wilting  
 humanity locked in chains  
 land theft and racial murder  
 You boast of your gains  
 in woodchips and uranium

the anguished death you spread  
will leave the children of the land  
a heritage that's dead.<sup>17</sup>

or again, from 'The Same Old Problem':

Remember the hate  
the mortality rate  
the tumble down shacks and the rain  
the children you bury  
the pain that you hide  
the despair and denial out-back.<sup>18</sup>

This is a long way from the image of 'The Lucky Country'. But according to Jean Baudrillard recognition of the 'Power of Evil' is the only way to interrupt the 'permanent ecstasy' of consumer society.<sup>19</sup> In Judaeo-Christian terms disaster has a religious dimension which good fortune does not. It teaches us our need of God. Acknowledging the sufferings of Aboriginal people which is the consequence of our success means acknowledging our need for the costly grace which 'comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and contrite heart'<sup>20</sup> and calls us to live in obedience by the values of Jesus and thus calls us not only to reconciliation with those we have wronged but to find God there in these least of our sisters and brothers.

For the Christian, J.B. Metz argues:

Resurrection mediated by way of the memory of suffering means the dead, those already vanquished and forgotten, have a meaning which is as yet unrealized. The potential meaning of our history does not depend only on ... the successful and those who made it. Meaning is not a category that is only reserved for the conquerors.<sup>21</sup>

The difference between us and our Aboriginal sisters and brothers will bring us to stand together on the ground, which is no ground, place which is no place and time which is no time, in community with the crucified one who in his death became our peace, making

...us both one [having] broken down the dividing wall of hostility...that he might create in himself one new [person] in

place of the two, so making peace, that he might reconcile us to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. (*Ephesians*, 2, 14-16)

At this point, then, what appears negative becomes positive. Aboriginal people may represent for us the Suffering Servant 'wounded for our iniquities and bruised for our sins', rejected by us for sharing their goodness and the truth of ourselves with us precisely by means of their suffering, calling us to conversion, not just to that cheap grace which involves 'the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner...[so that] the world goes on in the same way.'<sup>22</sup> Real conversion means the reconstruction not only of our world view but of ourselves.

This brings us - at last! - back to *True Country*. Essentially it is about a process of initiation, of liminality, of being led cross the threshold of all that is familiar into strange and at first terrifying new country. Billy, the young teacher, arrives on the north-west mission Kalumburru, thinly disguised and full of confidence. Gradually, however, the strangeness of the place begins to work on him. In profane space there is no fixed point or centre. It is mere extension, *terra nullius*, empty until we fill it with things, make it productive or mine it. But here he begins to see purely, properly and to sense a power pressing on him. Sitting around the table the group of white people seem somehow suspended in a void, strangely fragile and their purposes irrelevant, 'looking at one another as if in the midst of a battle. Huddled within these walls, in this country and in the great expanse of night'. (126)

This note has echoed through Australian literature since the beginnings. But what Marcus Clarke characterised as a feeling of 'weird melancholy' as 'the trim utilitarian civilisation' of Western culture shrinks into insignificance before 'the contemptuous grandeur' of the land,<sup>23</sup> here figures forth the power of God, reminding us that we do not receive our significance from the richness of our own resources or merely within our cultural context but from this sheer otherness. Aboriginal people know this. Next to them, we look 'sickly white, tiny, as if about to fade and dissolve in the powerful sunlight' (29) - the sacred is dangerous for those who approach it unprepared.

What Aboriginal peoples know, the novel suggests, is what our self-confident culture has forgotten but what the sheer power of the land insists on, that:



'To be created after God's image' does not mean that we are icons of God, but that we are following in the track of his footprints. The self-revealed God of Judaeo-Christian spirituality retains the full infinity of his personal absence.<sup>24</sup>

Thus in the novel Billy undergoes a series of encounters, 'showings' of sheer power, of the divine I AM. The first occurs when he is deep-sea fishing and his boat is surrounded by 'a savagery of sharks, the water boiling and bloody, dark and silver flashes in the depths', as they fall on a school of fish and birds 'squawking diving from the low steel-grey sky' (223), a showing of 'God's grandeur' - and cruelty, if you like - the God:

... past all

Grasp God, throned behind

Death with a sovereignty that heeds but hides, bodes but abides.<sup>25</sup>

After that, he has a further glimpse of the divine terror in a huge crocodile in the river and later in its decaying carcass. But his final and definitive experience is an ordeal of gain and loss, of death and rebirth, when, crossing the flooded river, he is swept off his feet, overwhelmed and drawn into the darkness, as if into a vast throat. 'Quiet, warm, soft darkness...swallowed and within' (253) as he realises, the mystery of the Rainbow Serpent, the Aboriginal figure of divinity.

This kind of spirituality is far from the one which can be seen as a kind of spiritual Linus blanket, a projection of our emotional and social need. It interrupts, takes us beyond the time and space defined by common sense, the time and space of power and security. But if I am right in my analysis of our present situation it is where we actually are at the moment, predominantly Western in our culture at the end of the Western era, the era of the Enlightenment, in a post-colonial world.

Billy's experience takes him out of this culture. But it does not take him into a new enclosure. He is rescued from the river and when he comes to there are dark people in the room but also his wife, 'the pale woman with flaming hair who sits beside the bed'. Together they 'listen to the patient's sentences rambling and breaking.' (254) God shows himself obscurely, 'only by footprints, as in chapter 33 of *Exodus*. [But] to go to him is not to follow [the] track of his footprints.' As Levinas observes, it is rather 'to go to all the others who follow in this track of deity'.<sup>26</sup> We need to rethink the divine, as

Kevin Hart says, in terms of loving rather than of being as knowledge.

So the novel concludes on the note of freedom - Billy has passed under the dark waters - and release into community. He seems to see his long-dead father in work-clothes and his grandmother, both Aborigines, at the end of his bed, as well as the elder Walunguh, who died shortly after he came to the mission. Watching them, he feels himself drifting out of the window with him:

Lifted by a desert wind, high in a moonless sky, they're drifting in silence, each as if alone, but all the time looking, trying to see, searching for a place to land. (254)

But now Billy knows who he is, released from the cramp of self and of possessing and being possessed. The 'having passed' of his experience of the transcendent remains transcendent. But following in its track, he loses the weight of self. A new self is born in which his sense of individuality dies and he enters into the fullness of communion with others and with creation.<sup>27</sup> He is home at last in the reality for which, like so many of us, he has long been homesick:

Just living, just living is going downward lost drifting nowhere, no matter if you be skitter-scatter dancing any kind like mad. (255)

But Billy has discovered his 'true country', which is always in process: 'We gotta be moving, remembering, singing our place little bit now, little bit special, all the time.' (255) The living God remains beyond us. But we discover ourselves and our world as his trace, which means:

...relinquishing all weight other than that of being transformed by God's love; being insignificant vis-à-vis one's own course of life; being insignificant vis-à-vis one's own historical context; even being insignificant vis-à-vis the countenance. There must only be the richness of being a 'trace' and living in it.<sup>28</sup>

Coming to terms with Aboriginal spirituality may mean discovering this richness on the one hand and our need on the other, learning this mystical poverty, 'looking for no other significance than the transformation of love itself.'<sup>29</sup> The last words of *True Country* suggest that Aboriginal people may be waiting for us there: 'We are serious. We are grinning. Welcome to you.' (255)

Billy is a lapsed Catholic. But one of the mission priests, points Billy to this hope:

I think God is changing. He must stay alive in these people [the Aborigines]. Perhaps we need to think of him as a great spirit, a creator spirit, an artist, a creative force behind the world, living in the world, and giving ceremony and the land. (221)

It is this, he, argues, not what we call 'reality' for which we are homesick. He and his story are seeking its traces;

Maybe they, we, will end up with a new God here, some sort of major spirit from the Dreaming who named everything and us - or should I say the Aborigines? - and created his special relationship, people, creation, the land.

Or just nothing. People shrivelling in this inhospitable land, within a inhospitable wider society. (221)

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