

## Keynote Address

### QUICKSILVER: Reflections

Nicolas Rothwell

*The Australian*

In my childhood, now so distant from me that the precious sights I saw then take on the hazy contours of a dream, I went often with my family to a resort in the High Tatra mountains of Slovakia, Tatranska Lomnica, and stayed for months on end, throughout high summer, in the rundown fastness of the Praha Hotel. The Praha, in those last years of the Czechoslovak People's Republic, was an institution struggling against its own identity. It was an elaborate creation: gabled facades, grand balconies, high-ceilinged ballrooms lit by chandeliers. It had been built at the close of the Nineteenth Century, when the region was still under Habsburg rule, and the spa towns of north Slovakia were the chosen destination of a select coterie: bankers, opera singers, tycoons and provincial landowners from all across that corner of the fading empire. But with the change in regime had come a change of guests. Now those long, dark-carpeted corridors were trudged down by regional communist party secretaries, factory representatives from the valleys of East Slovakia and favoured members of the national ice hockey team. The portrait of Emperor Franz Josef above the fireplace in the smoking lounge had been replaced by a blurry, impressionistic rendition of Karl Marx at his work desk, pensive, pen in hand, sporting a red bow tie, the forces of the dialectic wheeling inside his head. Outside the buildings, there had been little progress in the construction of socialism. High above the hotel, beyond pine-covered spurs and valleys, rose the mountains, their dark stone blades reaching up into a deep blue sky; and their lower slopes were covered by a fretwork of regimented, well-kept walking trails.

How often I picture in my memory those winding paths, and the peaks above – and, high up the flank of the highest mountain, the observatory at Skalnaté Pleso, its twin domes gleaming in the sun. It was there, in mid-1939, that the astronomer Antonín Bečvar set up a high altitude scientific station, and began his long-term program of cometary research. Of course nothing, in those years, was free from the touch of war and politics: the observatory had been born from the Munich agreement, which obliged the Czechoslovak state to surrender its north-eastern lands – but in this disaster lurked a rare opportunity: at Bečvar's urging, the large reflector telescope from Stará Dolá in the frontier region was relocated to the high Tatras, where the atmosphere was thin and the seeing was ideal: and for some while, the astronomers worked there quietly, above the tree line, among the golden eagles and the chamois, quite removed from the Wagnerian struggles being played out in the world beneath them, close though those dramas and sufferings were – until May 1945, the very last days of wartime, when Bečvar, at the risk of his life, stood guard at the entrance to the observatory and warded off the retreating German army's demolition squads. He had only five more years: five years on the mountain, until the new communist regime dismissed him from his paradise – but that was long enough for him to complete the

majestic sky charts that bear his name – Becvar's *Atlas Coeli*. Those 16 maps, hand-drawn, were works of art as much as jewels of science: nebulae and clusters, variables and double stars, the elusive outlines of the milky way and its dark, obscuring interstellar clouds – all are shown by Becvar in the most subtle detail: the night sky comes alive; it is ordered in its beauty, made comprehensible. No star watcher who gazes into the *Atlas Coeli* fails to wonder at its maker's precision of eye or delicacy of hand: but Becvar's gifts went far beyond his capacity to map the random scatter of the stars. He was a student of pattern, a seeker of form in nature. He made another atlas, equally splendid, but much less well-known, of the cloudscapes visible from his eyrie in the Tatras. He produced a book of austere photographic studies of the mountains; he even wrote, during the wartime years, a novel, "Last Summer," which bears the strong impress of that languishingly romantic region, where so many nostalgia-laden books have been dreamed into life.

He left the mountains: his death came early, the result of a recurring bout of pneumonia which he tried to resist by drastically increasing his workload. A detailed obituary was written by his great heir in the literary-accented tradition of Czech astrophysics, Zdenek Kopal: it was on display in the little museum at the observatory, which one could visit after a short walk from the midway station of the funicular that ran to the Lomnický peak, and I remember seeing it there, behind glass, elegantly framed, and standing on tiptoe to read it, and being overwhelmed. How not to be struck by the character of the scientist sketched out in Kopal's words? "He combined the true idealism of a dedicated soul with indefatigable zeal and modesty which endeared him to his friends, now greatly saddened by his passing, the circle of whom was never very wide owing to his shy and retiring nature: - yet although he never travelled abroad and was not personally known to many, the renown of his cartographic work spans the seven seas." That last phrase seemed especially beautiful to me. I repeated it to myself. It stayed in my thoughts down the years, it would surface inside me like a token of the past's mysterious persistence - and perhaps it was this unusually precise memory from childhood that spurred me on, one weekend at the height of the upheavals of late 1989 in Central Europe, to make a trip from Bratislava to the mountains, and revisit the Praha Hotel.

Those were days when almost anything seemed possible: when foreign correspondents chasing from city to city had the sense of being plunged into an unending dream. Dictators fell, dissidents prevailed, agents of the state betrayed their masters, the structures of a generation gave way. Life itself seemed quite molten; the future was too lightning-bright to see. I remember feeling permanently light-headed, and also watchful, fearful, on edge - and those were the colours of my thoughts that weekend morning as I took the main road north, early, my photographer half-asleep in the passenger seat alongside. We passed a set of unmanned checkpoints; we overtook a slow-moving column of armoured cars. With me I had a little shortwave - I listened to it almost constantly during those months. I tuned it to the Radio Free Europe signal. I held it up against my ear to catch the news: demonstrations in the central square of Sofia, in front of Aleksander Nevsky cathedral; pleas for calm from the leaders of the protest movement: in Berlin, first talks between the leaders of East and West Germany after the opening of the Wall: clashes in the Romanian border town of Timisoara, gunfire heard: and in Czechoslovakia, what? Chaos, vacuum, murk. I drove at speed: through Trencin. Through Zilina: there, ahead, rising from the smoky, dirty swirl of cloud were the high peaks of the Tatras, shining white from early falls

of snow. At which point the photographer, whom I had come to admire, both for his sang-froid and for his air of graceful reticence, turned to me.

"Take that road," he said: "Please" – and so urgent was the tone in his voice that I complied, without a word, and we headed east, on a winding forest route. It followed the curves of a river channel. Another turn, and then another. He made a sign: we stopped. We were at the entrance to a ruined graveyard: the tombstones were tilted at odd angles; their surfaces were dark and damp. I walked through, still clutching the radio, making my way between the graves. The photographer was kneeling down beside a headstone: it was cracked: he traced out with his fingers the emblems carved onto it: the sun, the moon, even the planets - Saturn and its rings. The letters on the stone were Hebrew.

"My great-grandfather's tomb," he said.

"He was an astronomer!"

"More a magician. More a man who studied the stars."

"Strange," I said, then, "to find a Jewish graveyard, so far from any town."

"It's not a Jewish cemetery," said he: "It's a Frankist one."

I looked at him.

"You know that story?" he asked me. "The story of the Frankist movement?"

"Vaguely," I said.

"There's nothing vague about it" – and he began to tell the tale.

I settled back, and listened, leaning against the headstone – and though years have passed since then, I have never wholly broken free from that day, when empires were falling all about me, and I first gained a sense of what the darkness at the heart of religion could be.

Jacob Frank enters the historical record in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. He emerges from Podolia, a frontierland on the south-eastern fringe of Europe, with the river city of Vinnitsa at its heart. He was a trader and traveler; his journeys took him deep into the Balkans, and it may be it was in Ionian Smyrna, the first centre of the Sabbatean movement, that he chose his path in life. In those years the Judaic archipelago of the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe was still convulsed by the upheavals left in the wake of Sabbatai Zevi, the would-be Messiah who preached a doctrine of profanation, was arrested by the Ottoman authorities, held captive in Gallipoli fortress and there, in the year 1666, converted to Islam. The various sects that sprang up after his death in exile elaborated a cryptic set of theologies: they contain echoes of Christian belief, intense forebodings of apocalypse and redemption and a relentless focus on the need to overturn all laws and lay bare all secret doctrines. A fierce, electric energy courses through the Sabbatean era in Jewish history: it was a time when disputes and rivalries broke out across the face of Europe: diaspora communities in Spain, Italy, North Africa and the Levant were swept up in these dramas and set on edge. How, indeed, to explain the apostasy of a Messiah? How to follow a saviour who betrays his faith? The solution found was ingenious: it had a mesmerizing logic. So dark was the fallen world that it had become necessary, on this reasoning, for the Messiah to abase himself, to enter the house of darkness, to take on the false religion of the infidel. The ideas of the medieval Kabbalah were lurking in this script: simple versions of those ideas are well enough disseminated in our day: they still have a potency, and a poetry, even when removed by translation from their true linguistic field. They stem from the notion that a fall came after the first creation; the primal order of the world has been shattered, it lies in fragments; the sparks of the divine are spread over the expanses of the earth, and it is essential to gather them up: each last scintilla; to go down into the

darkness where they are disseminated: down into the furthest reaches of the world – and there embrace sin and falsity. Such paradoxes had a natural appeal, in a time when the adherents of the faith were constantly persecuted; when established rituals brought nothing; when God's protection had so manifestly failed – and it was this climate of ideas that paved the way for the religious cataclysms ahead.

During his journeyings down the Black Sea coastline, Frank married, in Nicopol in Bulgaria, the daughter of a well-connected merchant: this tie brought him into contact with extreme Sabbatean groups. He was a man of will and charisma: he assumed the leadership of the sect, and proclaimed the new revelation. It was he who was the reincarnated Messiah, the pure embodiment of God's power in the world of man. His cult had distinctive, indeed scandalous features: it involved religious orgies, and the mass conversion of his followers to the outward forms of Catholicism. Frank made a triumphant progress through Podolia and through the kingdom of Poland, where he engaged in public debates and contestations with leaders of the church. His fame grew rapidly: to control the unrest that spread in his wake he was confined to Czeszochowa, where he established a lavish court: with the breakup of the Polish kingdom he moved his entourage to Brno in the Habsburg lands: he was received in Vienna by the Empress Maria Theresa, and may well have initiated espionage ventures through the south Slav region in concert with her diplomats. Eventually he came under the protection of the German princely house of Ysenburg, and took up residence in the Rhineland town of Offenbach, near Frankfurt: he lived there in great state surrounded by an ever-growing band of acolytes. His daughter Ewa, famous for her beauty and sophistication, was the chatelaine: it was put about, and widely believed, that she was in truth a Romanov princess. Frank died in December 1791. Europe was in the grip of war and revolution: behind him he left communities of believers throughout Bohemia, Moravia, the eastern marches and the Balkans, and many of the darkest, most nihilistic trends that mark out modern thought seem prefigured in the beliefs he spread.

Few bother very much with Jacob Frank and his visions of disaster today, when disaster has been visited upon the borderlands of Europe, and the communities where Frank found his believers are no more – but there are certain exceptions, chief among them the leading modern scholar of kabbalistic literature, Gershom Scholem, who was the professor of Jewish mysticism at the Hebrew University, and is known in the wider world for his close friendship with the critic Walter Benjamin. Scholem was strongly drawn to the Sabbatean phase in Jewish history and its aftermath. His most extended piece of writing is a reconstruction of the lives of Sabbatai Zevi and the prophet of the messianic movement, Nathan of Gaza – but it was in one of his much earlier essays that his involvement with the dark absolutes of Frankist thought comes most clearly to the surface of his work. "Redemption through Sin" was published in a Hebrew journal in 1937, when the shadows were looming over Europe, and Scholem's epistolary and imaginative engagement with the messiah-like figure of Benjamin was at its height. But Benjamin had chosen the path of dialectical materialism in preference to the Zionist cause: he was by then a well-established freelancer in the orbit of literary communism; he was in exile: his life would end in flight from the Gestapo and suicide: illumination through darkness did not come his way. Scholem's exploration of Frank begins at the notorious core of the doctrine: the idea that the secret truths of religion must be exposed: that violation of the law is its truest fulfillment; that the route to the sacred is through the profane: This is the classic

antinomian stand: one comprehensible only against a background of disappointments and deepening religious crisis: one born from the tide of pogroms and persecutions then sweeping, as they did so often in the past millennium, through the heartlands of European Jewish settlement: for there must be an oppressor if a religion is turned, in this way, so utterly against itself. Jacob Frank left an unusual manuscript, the “Sayings of the Lord” – a heretic’s testament, little read in our times, until Scholem plunged deeply into it, and found there vigour, imagination and poetic fire. The picture he paints of the messianic leader has a striking immediacy about it. Scholem had combed through the Frankist doctrines: he ordered them; he gave them a glimmer and a splendour. His “Redemption Through Sin” is not only as masterpeice of theological exegesis - it is a driven, haunted piece of literature as well.

And here we come close to the paradox at the heart of religious revolutions. They have the energy of sacrilege: they make the future unstable; they hold out the promise of rebirth: even to those of a settled temperament the appeal they make is sharp. There could have been no figure more redolent of the established academic world than Scholem, a scholar commanding the airy peaks of his obscure discipline, a porer through manuscripts, a man of the study and the library: and yet his sketch of Jacob Frank is much more than just an ambiguous, half-sympathetic biographic portrait: it is the record of a fascination. Thus Frank is at once “one of the most frightening phenomena in the whole of Jewish history” and a figure of tremendous, if satanic, power. He is a strongman, perverting whatever will to truth and goodness remained in the maze-like ruins of the souls of Sabbatean believers: but he also dreamed of reconstructing Jewish national existence, much, indeed, like the Zionists among whom Scholem lived in pre-war Palestine. He is unlettered, he boasts constantly of his own lack of culture – but he displays a talent for “the pithy, the illustrative, the strikingly symbolic expression”. He is a nihilist, and one of primal ferocity, yet his teachings yield up a genuine creed of life. No sensitive individual, reading the excerpts from his testament, could possibly contemplate them without emotion, says Scholem. There was, in short, a heroic element in him, and this was the pull that drew his adherents. Those who followed him had deliberately chosen to follow a path along which nothing is impossible: “Here was a man who was not afraid to push on to the very end, to take the final step into the abyss, to drain the cup of desolation and destruction to the lees until the last bit of holiness had been made into a mockery.” The odd echoes of Christ’s passion on the cross and the prefiguration of the Shoah in Eastern Europe are hard to keep from one’s thoughts as passages of this kind occur with increasing frequency in Scholem’s synoptic account of Frankist belief: a system conceived specifically to destroy a religion because its God had failed: to profane, to empty out, and by so doing, to trigger – what? A fresh creation? A revelation? A new law? – the secret words of a higher faith, lying unread beneath worn letters on old biblical scrolls, hidden in the ark of the covenant’s black light? The new Messiah had a dark picture of the cosmos: Our world, he taught, was not God’s world. No: it is one made by evil powers, malign angels and demiurges, the beings who brought death among us: the only way to truth is to smash this false world’s laws; pollute every religion and every positive system of belief. Here, then, is a message of unrelenting bleakness, which was propagated as secret doctrine among scores of thousands of believers, and held them fast: a belief which lived on for decades, and may even have kept its hold in various Balkan communities well into the century just past. Mankind must go into the pit of darkness, into nothing, and believers must maintain the mystic burden of their silence all through whatever sufferings may come. “It is better to see

than to speak, for the heart must not reveal what it knows to the mouth.” Understanding, reflection, enlightenment – these, to Frank, were playthings. Conventional religious observance was a waste of time: the pursuit of havoc was his goal. Here is the promise Frank held out in his ‘Sayings’ - “Wherever Adam trod, a city was built - but wherever I set foot all will be destroyed, for I come into this world only to destroy and to annihilate – but what I build will last forever.” What theology is this, with its dream-like vision of a remote utopia, when the old order and its sacred words have all been swept away? Is it religion at all? Frank himself provides a brisk, baffling summary: “It is one thing to worship God – and quite another to follow the path that I have taken”.

At which point, having sketched in the briefest outline some aspects of one of the most perplexing and least-remembered episodes in European religious history, an episode that stands, nevertheless, in strange fashion at the centre of the continent’s past, and makes a connecting hinge between the early centuries of Christianity and the age of revolutions, let me swiftly spin the globe, and transport you, far away, again, in time and space.

In the summer months of 1937, the same year that Scholem was completing “Redemption through Sin” in his book-lined office in a fledgling university in a nation that had not yet come into being, Captain Leo Frobenius, the great impresario of German imperial ethnography, was on holiday at his villa on the shore of Lago Maggiore, planning his last expedition. Frobenius, whose chief interests in life were espionage, absinthe and black women, had conceived the idea that the Kimberley region of North-West Australia could serve him as a window onto the fast-vanishing primeval past of man: its corpus of rock art of varying styles, which was then being described for the first time by missionary researchers, was the focus of his attention. The relevant permits were obtained. The Frobenius Institute expedition arrived in Broome by circuitous route early the next year. Under the leadership of a young specialist in Aboriginal and Oceanic societies named Helmut Petri the team then traveled from Walcott Inlet deep inland through the territories of the Worora and the Ngarinyin. Their discoveries were spectacular; their timing was poor. They had only just returned to Germany after their lengthy field investigations when war broke out: the frayed ties of academic co-operation between Germany and the English-speaking world were promptly severed: much of the material Petri and his team had gathered up was destroyed in the allied bombing raids that leveled Frankfurt-am-Main to the ground. It was only nine years after the end of World War II that Petri was able at last to publish an abbreviated account of his findings: “Sterbende Welt in Nordwest Australien” is a production of great beauty, shot through with overtones of mourning and grief. Petri regarded it as no more than a damaged torso, a fragment of the book he planned to write – but that fragmentary quality gives the work much of its force. Although it is ostensibly concerned purely with ethnographic description of remote tribes and their social adaptations, it is in fact a study of a culture under stress and in collapse, and when I first came across it and made my way through its pages I at once felt it held the key to any truthful understanding of north Australia’s first civilizations and their fate. “Sterbende Welt” is written in a smooth and understated German: it was translated at the insistence of the rock art scholar Grahame Walsh, who entrusted the task to a notable specialist, Ian Campbell, of the University of New England: that translation, completed several years ago, has just appeared in print, and offers to a wider readership in this country the unsparing details of what Petri learned and saw:

things so disquieting they drew him back to the Kimberley and the desert fringe repeatedly, and made him into a kind of nomad, or pilgrim, constantly haunting the mission settlement of Lagrange on the north-west coastline, where the large Aboriginal community of Bidyadanga stands today.

Petri paints a picture of a world in dissolution, but he also records the startling, furious energies of creation at work in the societies he came to know. The established religions of the north-west were failing, new cults of extraordinary vigour were sweeping through: they were imbued with danger, they involved acts of profanation and the speaking of secret words, they had a messianic, despairing edge. Chief among them was the Kurangara, which Petri, like his colleague on the Frobenius expedition Andreas Lommel, understood as a response to the pressures of invasion and colonial subjection. The Kurangara resembles a range of other such cults recorded during the same period across frontier Australia – but the detail with which it is captured in this German text allows us to see into its heart – and see there something critical about the thought-world of Aboriginal north and central Australia – an element that was present in the middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and persists in disguised fashion to this day.

When Petri began his work, the cult was at its peak and was spreading fast across the Kimberley. It dominated Dampierland and had a firm foothold in the country of the Ngarinyin, the Worora and the Unambal – it was on the march towards the east. But its origins were in the Centre, in the deserts, in some imagined pure domain where Aboriginal societies still possessed strength and magic force. It had been brought north by the Djanba: spirits of the inland, creatures of aridity, fearful beings. They lived in the dry heart of the continent: it was there, in distant country, that they kept their subterranean camps. They had emerged from the red soil at the start of time; they were shape-shifters, they knew everything and could do anything – they could travel on the waves of thought, and see for endless distances. The Djanba were fair-skinned, and had long beards – but Kimberley people rarely saw them, for they travelled at speed, leaving no footprints where they walked, not pausing even for a moment's rest: they were most active on moonless nights, or in the haze-tormented midday heat, when their bodies cast no shadows: and they were thirsty – inordinately thirsty – both for water, and for the blood of humankind. Dances, songs, cult objects and potent rituals were associated with these beings – but no one except the adepts of the cult could understand their mysterious desert language. There are many features of this ritual complex and its associated sexual practices which Petri describes and which I will pass over, but certain other tell-tale aspects of the Kurangara, provided by Lommel, point to the well-springs of the cult: thus it is very striking that the Djanba spirits are described as having horns on their heads just like a bull's horns: when they come into the Kimberley they live in houses of corrugated iron like station homesteads: to hunt they use sticks like rifles; they point them – then thunder sounds, lightning strikes, the earth trembles and everywhere many kangaroos fall dead to the ground. There is an “end of the world” atmosphere about these anecdotes that must be put down to Christian influence – but the essence of the cult's origins are plain: in the Kurangara the new experiences flowing from the encounter with white civilization have been transmuted; given artistic form.

Such were the symptoms of crisis and dislocation Petri found awaiting him: signs: signs that spoke of revolution in the realm of belief and God: and it is clear that there is a two-fold movement under way: resistance, and co-option. Defiance, and surrender

to the seductive play of influence. The German ethnographers, who were watching this tableau unfold before them even as a deathly cult swept through their own world, knew very well what they were witnessing: the end of an epoch: a time of dreadful instability; the first seeds of a new accommodation being sown. They realized that the sacred never vanishes: it flows, wave-like, through men's lives, moving smoothly from form to form. Lommel saw these shifts through the prism of psychology: he felt the Aboriginal societies of the Kimberley somehow needed a living, strong magical atmosphere: a magic cult gave people a spiritual focal point lying outside themselves: without such an atmosphere a total disintegration, a great spiritual disorder and disorientation must occur. Petri, for his part, grasped the essence of the phenomenon almost at an instinctual level. Perhaps it needed an outsider's eyes to diagnose the process. "It is a well known fact," he wrote, "that European colonization upset the spiritual equilibrium of the Australian Aborigines." The religious compact at the heart of life had failed. The relationship between the generations had been overthrown: the young, seeing the white world in all its destructive potency, had lost faith in their own traditions; but the workings of western civilization were impenetrable to them: they found in the spirits of the new cults the inner support that old beliefs could no longer give.

How to miss the lurking pattern? Millenarian cults and religious uprisings share a straitforward grammar: the old law fails; it is overturned, a new law is preached, and that law is founded on the shock of sudden revelations. It will tend to borrow elements from the oppressive, threatening new master power abroad in the world: it adapts, it assimilates, it resists – it proclaims year zero, and awaits a dawn.

This pattern, when it appears in Australian frontier history, as it has often, is rarely seen for what it is: for that frontier is viewed and understood through mainstream eyes – and our picture of past events in both the deserts and the tropical and savannah country is a picture freighted down by sentiment and perspective bias. Few frontier dwellers and specialists in the area really understand that the frontier has another side. Few historians of the inland and the encounters that have occurred over the past two centuries against that backdrop realize that men and women in traditional societies still half-expect non-indigenous Australians to leave their country at some point, when certain ritual cycles are complete. For outsiders in the bush do not, on the whole, think magically, or see the ceremonial logic of that world and the compelling force it exerts upon those plunged within it. The ideas western observers apply to the Aboriginal realm come, rather, from social science and cultural frameworks: they are the ideas of the Bohemian, the intellectual, the aid worker or the enlightened functionary, and they bring confusion in their wake. Strangely, the first generations of incomers in the remote world were much better equipped: the missionaries, with their belief in divine providence, were on the same wavelength as the tribal groups they moved amongst and were at pains to convert – and the relative harmony and happiness of the missionary era may well be largely due to this confluence of understandings and views of life. Two generations ago that system of frontier management fell into abeyance: another order was imposed: an administrative order, elaborate, with constantly shifting priorities.

It was at this very point that one of the most widely studied and most elusive interactions between traditionally-accented Aboriginal society and mainstream



Australia unfolded: the western desert art movement, which was born in Papunya settlement exactly 40 years ago – and it is to this landscape, this remote community grandly set in the folds of the purple Ulumbara range that I transport you now.

The foundation story of the painting movement is well-entrenched, and widely known: the presiding genius was a young, highly-strung, artistically inclined teacher named Geoffrey Bardon, who encouraged a group of men he had encountered during his brief stay at Papunya to paint their traditional designs – at first in the form of a mural on the schoolhouse wall, then on small boards and scraps of masonite. This activity was taken up: it became popular with a number of the men, who poured out a set of complex images. Word of their paintings spread through the neighbouring settlements of the desert region: the news ignited intense controversy. Fierce conflicts over this disclosure of sacred emblems and its likely consequences began: those disputes lasted for several years, until a solution was devised: dots and linear patterns were used by the painters to mask the secret symbols on their boards and canvases, and, as with Kafka's parable of the leopards in the ancient temple, soon those surface decorations became the heart of the work. The outside taste for the art of the desert slowly grew. The visual vocabulary of the painting men was transmitted across Australia – dots, circles, radiating lines - it is a familiar part of the cultural landscape today. All through this anniversary year large exhibitions in state galleries have told triumphalist versions of this story, replete with odd, almost messianic overtones: the humble origins, the slow advance, the accelerating acceptance of indigenous work, the final storming of the high art citadel.

What was the true nature of this foundation episode? What transpired in those first days when art flowered at Papunya? There is the standard, "official" account, as given in a hundred vapid art catalogues. The Aboriginal understanding is quite different. Those who were present and remember those weeks at Papunya recall that when the mural of the honey ant design was first sketched out on the school wall a wail of lamentation sounded through the settlement. There was a degree of coercion involved: it was a time of grief; sacred symbols had been shown to outside eyes. But that was, in some sense, the point. It was not simply, or not only, a story of oppression, it was yet another fluid, frontier episode: ambiguous in the extreme – and the more I turn over in my thoughts that time, so near to us, so shrouded by the veils of testimonial narratives, the more it seems to me that we should view it as a further instance of upheaval in the realm of belief. This sequence of events, so pivotal for Australia's new conception of the national story, so central to the culture's self-reflection in art – can we not see it in the same light as the Sabbatean and the Kurangara dramas – as a gesture of religious rebellion, born of defiance and of despair? It was an act, above all, of revelation: the artists were displaying their designs: they were profaning them. There they were, poised on the frontier between worlds, between two times, testing the powers of creation. For Bardon, it was a blissful experience of artistic fulfilment: for the painters, an experience of holy dread, when things held secret since the world's creation were uncovered, one by one - and there were complex expectations in view. Perhaps westerners would now recognize the grandeur of the symbols stretched out before them, and the domain of thought and ritual they brought to life. Perhaps some new compact of more even-handed association might be possible between the different people in the landscape. Perhaps ancestral powers would be

stirred, and the face of the desert would be transformed. But one thing the first painters and their associates among the senior men at Papunya could not have anticipated is the large-scale pursuit by outsiders of their sacred knowledge – a pursuit we now see in full cry.

How multiplicit the ironies have become! The first paintings made in the desert in 1971 fitted neatly into the category of ethnographic art: their deeper meanings were little studied. Today, they are priceless treasures, and much contemporary desert work is viewed, at least in Australia, as fine art, of permanent significance, worthy of detailed attempts at scholarly interpretation. As a result, a vast research effort is under way to uncover and record as much Aboriginal tradition as can be extracted from its custodians: and this campaign is heavily backed by museums, universities and cultural institutions. There is both prestige and monetary value to be gained from the brokerage of Aboriginal culture: that culture the first painters at Papunya dreamed of revitalizing and keeping strong. It has been greatly weakened in the intervening decades: by the familiar suspects, welfare, television, drugs and alcohol – but also by a sense that its secrets are gone and its sacred power has begun to fade. The outsiders who watch that world and expend their affections on it know: they can tell: and there is a deepening conviction among them: that what lies behind work of such beauty must not be allowed to vanish: it must be archived, transcribed, saved. Hence the data transfer: a last-chance gold rush, as art historians, anthropologists and culture theorists rush to map the contours of indigenous beliefs. Western scholars like to portray this as “two-way” research, respectful collaboration, a product of inter-cultural understanding. But given the hieratic nature of the ritual that underlies much desert culture, this appetite for “inside” knowledge about paintings and their subject matter creates a tension between the makers of the art and the would-be interpreters of their work. That stress-line has been sharpening over recent years: it is a new version of the same fault-line that opens up when the sacred is in play. We are back: back on the frontier. Worlds clash. Beliefs break. They are shattered, then swiftly reshaped. The forces that undo them can come in very different guises. The persecutions of Eastern Europe; the sweeping land seizures of the North’s first pastoral decades, when all was guns and violence; the invasive encouragements of the modern art market as well. The secret realm of desert ritual was breached 40 years ago. The pressure from outside has only grown since. This creates dilemmas for its guardians. They have learned a strange lesson: that love can be the most disruptive force of all. These questions are much discussed by desert men, above all by men from the Pitjantjatjara language region of South Australia. They were the chief critics of the first disclosure of traditional designs in the early 1970s, and their country is the present target of the knowledge quest. One of the most senior men from those lands, Frank Young, chairman of Amata community, made the journey to Darwin in mid-August this year for an exhibition of new paintings from Tjala Arts: he gave a speech there which touched in glancing, desert fashion upon these themes: he spoke of the power in men’s work, and the dangers caught up in their art: and much of what he had to say was in Pitjantjatjara, a language of precision and elegance:

“Tjukurpa kumpilpa tjuta putu Anangu tjutangku tjakultjunanyi canvas-tjanka munu putu tjakultjunanyi panya Tjukurpa pulka mulapa ngaranya kumpilpa Tjukurpa unngutja Anangu tjutaku.”

Something comes through, even in a translation of his words: – “There are things in the canvases people cannot talk about because the sacred Tjukurpa is really deeply inside us - it is us.”

Of course Mr Young was speaking for the old traditions: of course he was trying to redraw the sacred line. Of course he was pleading for secrecy – but once the first transgression has been made, once the sacred, that quicksilver, has been put in play, you can never tell where it will go.

It is always receding in our world: it is always present, like the background shell of radiation from the day the universe began. It is constantly coming into being and constantly being extinguished – its essence is to be beyond reach, beyond stable form: a gleam, a fire in the bush, a mirage of water on the horizon's edge – and this was brought home to me forcefully in the course of a brief journey, now some years in the past, which I made with a pair of desert men from the remote community of Karilywara, John Ward and Mr Giles: two men who were complete in themselves, and poised in their worlds of thought: two men whom I had long felt close to and admired. It was the hot, stormy season in their country: they wanted to head west, both to inspect the distant rockhole site of Tartjar and to visit the ranges in its vicinity. They had the desire: I had the Toyota Four-Wheel-Drive, already in a state of near-collapse after a series of imprudent transits down the back tracks of the Gibson desert. I also had a broken arm, but this injury was of no concern to them, though it was in the forefront of my thoughts: changing flat tyres had been proving something of a problem, and I had the odd sense that I was encountering a wide range of similarly wounded desert creatures – limping bush turkeys, hawks fluttering on the roadway with broken wings. Were they portents? Were they protective beings? We headed off: we passed the hill of the porcupine, where the desert's most intense wild tobacco grows: we left the tracks behind: all round us the plumes of vast bushfires were rising, their smoke columns stained dust-red by the sunset's gleam. Night fell. We drove on – to my great surprise: I had long since internalized the western wisdom that old desert men like to be in their swags by sundown, and fear the dark.

“Keep going,” they chorused: “Keep going, it's close.”

“You're not afraid?” I said: “Afraid – of the spirits out here?”

“I am a spirit,” said Mr Giles, rather disconcertingly: “So is Mr Ward. You know that.”

“I do?”

“Yes,” they both said, very firmly: “Yuwai! We control the water, the rain and the fire – they're ours. You know all that” – and we ground our way up a sudden ridge, and down: there, right in front, was the rockhole, full of water, shining in the night. We stopped; we clambered out: and as we stood there, suddenly a shooting star plunged across the sky, gleaming and flaring as it fell and the different layers of its surface were burned up. I counted: one, two, three, four, five – I half-felt I could hear those detonations in the silence, reaching me across the distance and the dark – and at once the two men beside me began singing, in low, rhythmic voices, together, singing in old, high language – a chant that went on, rising, sinking – they were staring up towards the sky where the star had fallen, tears in their eyes, their chests heaving up and down: they were singing with all their might. I listened as their voices filled the dark around me – and it came to me how little I grasped of their world and its structure: nothing: I had never heard them say a single word about the stars, and the sky, and how they might be sacred – though they are sacred in every culture where men look up at the great silence of the overarching night: they are the screen where we most clearly see the scale of the cosmos, and the slightness of our world, all our dreams and loves and fondest thoughts – and realize in the same instant that those

thoughts and dreams are all we have. But even as I form this idea it occurs to me that the one western study of the desert world written truly on Aboriginal terms touches often on this realm: C. P. Mountford's "Nomads of the Western Desert" is an exorbitant production, full of photographic images captioned purely in terms of their local meaning - thus a stone headland might be listed simply as "a basking perentie in the sun" - and interspersed throughout the mazy chapters of the narrative are stories of the stars and sky - and it may well be this, as much as its depictions of a handful of sacred places, that led to the withdrawal from sale of "Nomads" on cultural grounds shortly after its publication in the year of the author's death, 1976 - since when it has been sunk in deep obscurity, little looked at, hard to find. It took me years of searching before I tracked down a copy in that centre of intellectual contraband, North Terrace, Adelaide. It was a dishevelled first edition, with a broken spine, its pages torn and creased and stained here and there by reddish sand: it had clearly been the prized possession of a desert community, though it had begun its life in the Upper Goulburn regional library system, and made its way through several stages to my hands - and I pored over it with the attention Gershom Scholem gave his manuscripts, looking for shards of secret knowledge there, and coming on brief mentions of the constellations and the glowing, pulsing southern stars - and at those moments my mind would leap back to the time of my childhood, in the Engadine, and in the Tatras, when I used to walk the slopes towards Skalnate Pleso observatory by night, alone, gazing upwards at the great arc of the Milky Way - and I would be back at once at the beginning of my journey, beneath the quicksilver of youthful skies.

---