



The spirituality of one Australian artist –

Sir Sidney Nolan (1917-1992)

By Peter Mudge

Introduction

In my first two articles I focused on two topics that represent the foundations of this present article. The first was concerned with the process of walking with the artist, who is capable of teaching us new ways of ‘seeing’ and ‘doing’ spirituality. The second concentrated on how to look at an artwork, and in so doing, develop one’s own spirituality.

This third and final article is devoted to one famous Australian artist who has helped to develop a spirituality linked to art – Sir Sidney Nolan. I am not concerned here about whether this awareness or relationship was explicit or deliberate on Nolan’s part or in the writings of his various commentators. Rather, I wish to argue, from a religious and Christian perspective, that Nolan’s life and art can serve as a rich source of, and a lens on, the nature of a personal and communal spirituality founded on the arts.

Sidney Nolan – a brief “this is your life”

The recent 2008 Nolan retrospective website provides a good synopsis of this artist’s staggering legacy: “[He] transformed our view of the Australian landscape, creating spectacular and original compositions. His work was unpredictable, imaginative and poetic and led him to become our first internationally acclaimed artist” (AGNSW website, Barry Pearce). How can one hope to sum up the rich life and contributions of such an artistic luminary as Sidney Nolan? Here is a man who is the most internationally famous of non-indigenous Australian painters, and has been referred to by some, such as Sir Kenneth Clark, as one of the most important artists of the twentieth century.

Yet such a synopsis must be attempted in order to situate his contribution to art and spirituality against the complex fabric of his own life. When Nolan died in 1992 aged seventy-five he left behind a fertile and extensive record of his philosophy in the form of notebooks, diaries, letters, interviews and poetry, not to mention a prolific output of over 35,000 paintings. His written records contained his varied and often challenging views on the process of art making, as well as on friendship, travel, music and literature.

Sidney Nolan was born in 1917 in Carlton, Melbourne. During his youth he was variously engaged as running a pie shop, working for a gold mining company, and competing as a racing cyclist, until he

began attending night art classes in Melbourne and opted to become a full-time painter in 1938, aged twenty-one. He painted abstract works while serving in the Australian army (1941-45) and then throughout his career completed works linked to the Wimmera in Victoria, Ned Kelly, the Eureka Stockade, Eliza Fraser, Leda and the Swan, Burke and Wills, African Animals, Antarctica, and many other subjects (Chilvers, p.357; cf. Underhill's chronology, pp.451-561; for images of Nolan's paintings to accompany this article refer to the AGNSW, NGV and Wikipedia web sites provided below).



Nolan's life of art, spirituality and transformation

In the context of Sidney Nolan's art making, I am using the word 'spirituality' to refer to 'a conscious way of life based on a transcendent referent' (Mason et al, 2006, *The Spirit of Generation Y*, p.2). This implies the primacy of the spirit or soul in the process of knowing, which is not simply limited to cerebral knowledge of physical nature or matter. It also assumes the notion of 'spirit' as 'breath' (Hebrew *ruach*), which is central to all that we do, think, feel and are. In this sense, spirituality is as simple and complex as what gives us life, what we choose to breath in and out each moment of our existence. Nolan himself hinted at this spiritual dimension and ultimate 'conversation with God' in an oblique comment during the last year of his life (1992): 'If the Lord said to me well, have you had a good innings, I'd say yes, how about you?' (Underhill, p.304; see also art implied as coming from God in Underhill, p.296).

A spirituality of art linked to the transcendent or 'the beyond'

There are two particular areas, chosen from among many I have researched, in which the intersection of art and spirituality is particularly evident in the life and work of Sidney Nolan. The first of these is what I choose to refer to as Nolan's link between art, spirituality and the elusive domains of the transcendent or 'the beyond'. This is despite or perhaps due to the fact that Nolan refers to himself as a 'think painter'. In 1981 he reflected: 'You see I am not a sort of abstract painter, I am a kind of "think" painter. The emotions are the heat to make the steam but the steam is in the thinking' (Underhill, p.239).

Yet in stark contrast to this 'thinking' or cognitive function of painting, Nolan was continually open throughout his life to the ineffable – to those things that could not be touched or apprehended, the 'something more' of human existence. In an ABC 7.30 Report interview he observed: 'So art was always to me a means of getting in contact with another world;...possibly, but you could never see the other world; you were never told about it but art seemed to be always kind of touching it' (c.1992).

This sense that art contained the capacity to touch another world was linked in Nolan's life to a type of mystical transport in the act of painting. Barry Pearce, for example, contends that Nolan, at peak times of immersion in painting, experienced 'an alternative inner state that was as close as thought itself, and reflected in his method of painting'. This was manifested as a type of 'violent displacement' so that the image that engaged him effected 'a vision split as it were, into one part optical reality, the other mystical, separated from the former only long enough for Nolan to seize it and work at it later through memory and imagination' (Pearce, p.17). Clearly, such narratives record Nolan's ability to use art and painting as a vehicle for experiencing a mystical perspective on the world, or at the very least to receive a transcendent viewpoint as a result of being open to such an image and sustaining aesthetic immersion in particular works.

A spirituality of art linked to dispersal, disconnection and 'not knowing'

The second associated and concluding area of Nolan's artistic spirituality relates to his experiences of dispersal, disconnection and ultimately 'not knowing'. To be an artist, for Nolan, was equally an experience of confusion, uncertainty, and 'being lost'. Whether he was painting, listening to music, travelling, or writing poetry, Nolan was convinced that the arts led us to confront and experience those 'levels that we don't know much about' (1961; Underhill, p.257).

On other occasions, Nolan connected this experience of desolation, danger and 'not knowing' with his iconic Ned Kelly figure. For him, Kelly shared obvious parallels with Friedrich's famous painting 'Monk by the Sea'. Nolan comments: 'This [painting] shows a single figure of a man looking out by the sea; he's seen from behind. That's the same as Ned Kelly in that key painting where he's on the horse looking out into nothing. I don't know what causes this psychological state: I do know it's a highly dangerous one' (1988; Underhill, pp.349-350).

Part of this 'looking into nothing' for Nolan was his determination to avoid an 'automated response' to painting. In 1964 he averred that: 'Painting is only worthwhile if you don't know the outcome. When you start a painting you must never know what the end product is going to be. You should end up with something looking at you which you have never seen before. And this is the only thing which makes it worth while' (Interview with Barber; cited in Klepac in Pearce, p.83).

In the final analysis, however, art and the act of painting for Nolan were in large part an attempt to grapple with the Mystery and the Transcendent. There are some indications that perhaps he would have expressed this experience as: 'getting the outside world in and levering the inside, hidden part [of himself] out into the open'.

Towards the end of his life he conjectured: 'I think the world isn't only coal, minerals, fruit on trees, or things necessary for geological survival; it's also a kind of map or a kind of image that you can look at. It can tell us things about ourselves which are hidden, which are inside us,...' (Pearce, p.58).

Sidney Nolan's art was truly a living testament to a man who sought to reveal his inner emotions and intuitions, and at the same time to touch on what Christians would apprehend as the Ultimate, Ineffable Mystery. His legacy is not only what he painted and said, but also what he mused about, intuited, and left unsaid. These are the enduring sources of his spirituality from which we can draw today.

Sources and further reading suggestions

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