Arnold Shore: The Man and the Myth

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Figure 1: *Near the Yarra Kew*, 1959, Oil on composition board, 32.0 x 40.5, Estate of Arnold Shore

`Man is the creature that cannot come forth from himself, who knows others only in himself, and who, if he asserts the contrary, lies.`

Proust {n.p cited} quoted in Samuel Beckett’s 1931 essay on Proust, p.66

Picasso’s quote raises a core issue; art is a representation or pronounced differently, a re-presentation. In short, art creates an illusion of what it represents. A painting fabricates an image on a two-dimensional surface, at least in conventional terms. Whilst aware of contemporary practices where painting can be on any imaginable surface and performance art can blur the distinction between art and life, I will not be pursuing that line of enquiry in this article. Rather, I will extrapolate from Picasso to examine issues related to fabrication and veracity through a discussion about the life and work of the Australian artist, Arnold Shore. At the same time, I draw attention to the challenge of biographies and autobiographies to tell the truth about a person’s life. The cultural theorist Raymond Williams observed that a lived culture within a particular time and place, in becoming a recorded culture, leaves a legacy in its art works and everyday material. Williams argues the resultant artefacts are subject to a selective tradition (Williams, 1975:66). Such a tradition promotes, acknowledges and ignores aspects of the lived and recorded culture of a defined period. In essence, it is not only
a selection but an interpretation. A provisional truth can also perpetuate a provisional lie. Selectivity can be a conscious process in a biography.Arnold Shore was born on the 5th of May 1897; he died of a coronary occlusion in 1963 aged sixty-six. An austere and often unhappy childhood plagued him throughout his life- his parents bearing the scars of the 1890s depression. Shore’s mother was domineering and his father frequently absent, in a quest to obtain any form of employment. On completing his Merit certificate aged ten and a half, he had to remain at school until the legal working age of twelve. Leaving school he was apprenticed to the stained glass company Brooks Robinson in 1909. At Brooks Robinson he was attracted to design work. Against his mother’s wishes, and ultimately without her knowledge, he pursued working in that section of the company. He was encouraged to study drawing at night at the National Gallery Art School. Surprisingly he convinced his mother of the importance of such studies and laboured over slavish copies of plaster casts for several years from 1912. He left the School before completing his studies and studied under the tonalist painter, Max Meldrum in 1917, for five years. After assisting Meldrum in teaching classes, he ultimately rejected the master’s approach due to its limited application and rigidity.

After exposure to the works of Cezanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh in late 1923, via Orpen’s Outline of Art journal, his work changed radically. Shore read voraciously, and from 1924, with his friend Jock Frater, embarked on a study of European modernism which was counter to the prevailing conservative mood in Melbourne at the time. From this study he experimented in his own painting and in 1929 staged the first exhibition in Melbourne with, as he described it, ‘any pretension to modernism.’ Despite not venturing outside Australia, Shore went on to write on art for all of Melbourne’s newspapers. In 1932, he co-founded Melbourne’s first modernist art school with George Bell, known as the Bell-Shore school. He gave authoritative talks and lectures on ABC radio and at the National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. In addition, he gave many talks at regional centers throughout New South Wales and Victoria. He was well-informed and passionate in his presentations and his knowledge covered all periods in art history. The artist-activist Adrian Lawlor described Shore in 1937 thus:

Arnold Shore leaned his head on one side above us in gentle irony, chipping off every now and then a sharp-edged shard from the wise sphinx he carries about with him in his private innards

The bright, luminous nature of stained glass provided Shore with an intense experience of colour and light which he later applied most effectively to his paintings. Shore, like his artist mentor, Vincent van Gogh, was a sometimes brittle man who was dogged by depression, which today we would describe as a bi-polar mental condition. When depressed he experienced great difficulty painting. Conversely, when the depression lifted he painted bright, exuberant and lively work. His private demons, therefore, were never reflected in his art. He became adept in the alla prima technique of direct painting. Towards the end of his career, his landscape paintings were created entirely with a palette knife. The paintings were the result of urgent jabs and shafts of fragmented coloured paint or in other cases gouged through paint layers using a staccato, sgraffito technique.
Arnold Shore lived art in his teaching, his relationships, and in his capacity to engage with fellow-painters and supporters of the arts. He was well liked by both modern and conservative art world figures. He maintained strong enduring friendships with people of wealth and influence when living at Mount Macedon during the war. These people included: Sir Daryl and Joan Lindsay; Sir Russell and Mab Grimwade; Ursula Hoff; John Brack; Lady Maie Casey; Mario and Teresa Vigano; Gino Nibbi; Basil Burdett; Adrian Lawlor; A.M.E. Bale; and Jock Frater. He mentored the painter John Perceval at an early age and inspired Noel Counihan to become an artist. He was in regular correspondence with Cynthia and Sidney Nolan.

Artists at some stage or other tend to be neglected. Shore certainly has been. Time has left him as a footnote in history, known more for his teaching and writing, despite winning several prestigious art awards and plaudits for his paintings from his peers. What has been reflected is a tiny part of the fragment. My research therefore has attempted to illuminate and expose the significant part of the fragment and provide a more complete picture that recognizes the contribution that Arnold Shore's painting has made to Australian art. In particular, his innovative approach to landscape painting has for too long been overshadowed by his predecessors, the Australian Impressionists and his immediate successors, the Angry Penguins.

The limited perspectives on Shore's work highlight the limitations of official art history.
Are we given a history that is a lie? Is there such a thing as a definitive history or are we subject to delineating a provisional history? Raymond Williams’ "selective tradition" by its very nature includes particular works that have been separated out from others. Thus any selection also excludes works. Alternative art histories regain territory and provide a more balanced perspective of a cultural period. Curthoys’ and Docker’s book *Is history fiction?* (2005) argue that a space exists, between history, that is rigorous and attentive to documentation, and history, that is located within literary forms. It is this space that allows for flourish and interpretation. Both aspects highlight what Curthoys and Docker describe as the doubleness of history. The authors also defend post-modern and post-structuralist writers such as Derrida and Foucault from the claim that characterizes their view that any interpretation is as good as any other. Derrida’s process of deconstruction of texts created a scenario whereby truth became elusive and indeterminate, as absolute structures dissolved into a series of interpretations and varied structures (Derrida, 1978: 278-93). Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1974) enunciated a methodology that contrasted the history of ideas, with what he described as, archaeological analysis. As Foucault postulated `Genesis, continuity, totalisation: these are the great themes of the history of ideas` ( Foucault,1974: 138). By contrast, Foucault noted that archaeological analysis differs from the history of ideas in four ways. Firstly, `it is not an interpretative discipline: it does not seek another, better-hidden discourse. It refuses to be allegorical.‘ (Foucault,1974: 139) In short, it examines the discourse itself and the rules that underpin it. Secondly, `it is not a doxology : but a differential analysis of the modalities of discourse.‘ ( Foucault,1974: 139) In effect, Foucault argues for analysing the contradictions evident in discourse itself.

Thirdly, Foucault observed that `The authority of the creative subject, as the raison d’etre of an ouvre and the principle of its unity, is quite alien to it.‘ ( Foucault,1974: 139) Rather than drawing upon a unified discourse, Foucault’s approach therefore, facilitates comparative articulations. Finally, Foucault showed concern for a `mapping of contradictions ‘ ( Foucault,1974: 138) that incorporates a `systematic description of a discourse – object.‘ ( Foucault,1974: 140) Whilst Foucault’s archaeological approach facilitates contradiction and therefore undermines absolute certainty, it does not necessarily sabotage the enterprise of history. Foucault is opposed to seeking the origins and supposed roots of our identity. In an essay *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, Foucault writes, `the purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation….it seeks to make visible all those discontinuities that cross us.‘ (Foucault, 1977:162) However, the notion of ‘anything goes’ in writing a historical account is too simplistic an interpretation of Derrida and Foucault’s view. The excesses of such a view lead to an argument, for example, that the Holocaust did not exist. Instead Curthoys and Docker argue that the views of both Derrida and Foucault have been mischievously misrepresented. They add that post-structural and post-modern ideas add a potential, imaginative richness through a self-awareness of the operation of historical writing. A provisional truth can also perpetuate a provisional lie. Selectivity can be a conscious process in a biography. However sometimes it is ignorance or misinformation rather than a premeditated action that filters out material. A biographical study could be likened to capturing a kangaroo in a spotlight; the subject is naked and exposed ready for the hunter to take aim. The writer weaves a story around a crafted character who becomes a fixed entity. The thought occurs, what if that character or characters came to life, as happened in Pirandello’s play *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Would that character be doomed to fixity or as Marshall McLuhan described glibly as ‘label/libel’? OR Is it possible that a character could come to life and be capable of varied identities. Shore is the character in my book. Would he recognize my portrayal of him? Would he argue against my interpretations? Could he gain new insights into his character from my observations?

My initial starting point focused on three unpublished autobiographical manuscripts (AMSA, AMSB and AMSC) and one published autobiography all written at different stages in Shore’s life. I will refer to these as A, B and C. ASMA was written in 1940,
ASMB in 1962-63 and ASMC (undated) and the published autobiography titled 40 Years Seek and Find, the official catalogue for an exhibition staged at Australian Galleries in 1957. If one accepts the premise that an autobiography is an authors’ view of how they wish to be remembered, then what can one deduce from four attempts? Are the manuscripts a farrago of lies to promote Shore as something he is not? His good friend, the artist Jock Frater, had no qualms about fudging dates and promoting his own interests. Was Shore afflicted with the same propensity? Which version was more accurate and truthful? ASMA? - As it was presumably the earliest, there is a strong sense of immediacy evident in the events, particularly around his mother’s death in 1938. ASMB? - Because it refines any errors and could filter out any distasteful elements evident in the other two although early events can become distorted over time. ASMC is aberrant when examined against the other two. Written in the third person it essentially covers early childhood experiences. After reading the other three manuscripts the subject is identifiably Shore. It is also typed, unlike the other versions which were handwritten and more diaristic. Because handwriting is often considered more personal, are ASMA and ASMB therefore, more accurate?

40 Years Seek and Find leaves out much personal detail that emerges in ASMB. It is written as a personal account but the deeds tend to be objectified. Surprisingly 40 Years included two works; one an early 1920s painting deemed too much like Matisse and hence destroyed by Shore, and an almost full length portrait of his elegantly clothed lover surrounded by objects in a room. The latter painting, much to the horror of his friends, was cut down by Shore to just include the head and part of an arm, and was bought by the National Gallery of Victoria.

ASMC goes into more detail on Shore’s childhood experiences than the other two texts, but is very limited in scope. All unpublished manuscripts are candid accounts but ASMB, whilst more confessional, is coy about some of the names mentioned. He refers to a Lady ----- , and uses a nickname for his first lover, a relationship that lasted eight years until her death. A painted portrait of the same person is given another name in order to further muddy the trail. Fortunately the references are not too obscure, and the pieces of the jigsaw are easily put together. Shore’s writing is not boastful but instead is self-effacing, and at times, self-deprecating. His feelings about events are expressed personally which allows entry into his private realm. Candid, but not lurid accounts of his sexual problems – sibling molestation, a prudish and prurient upbringing, his attraction to older women, loss of virginity when aged forty to a woman in her sixties – are aspects noted but not analysed. They are like parcels for the reader to examine and to perhaps make sense of why he remained at home with his mother until she died when he was forty-one years old. He married in 1950, aged fifty two,
Agnes Scott, aged thirty-nine. His intense love of his son, Malcolm, born in 1952, remained strong throughout his life. Battles with depression left their imprint; it was a marriage that was doomed early, consisting of two independent older people unwilling to compromise. His manuscripts not only deal with these issues with clarity, but also reveal that his heightened sensitivities, compounded by severe depression, were further impaired by guilt and a desire to act honourably at all times.

Understandably ASMB is more comprehensive as it covers material beyond 1940. Similar events are covered in ASMA and ASMB although ASMA is more focused on his artistic activities than personal feelings about relationships. ASMA was begun with a view to being published. Unfortunately paper rationing due to the Second World War, and a view that Shore’s story was too Melbourne based, resulted in the manuscript being rejected by publishers. ASMB is written with a freshness which suggests that it is not a refinement or reworking of ASMA. It is clear that each manuscript was written with different audiences in mind.

ASMC represented a more distanced approach, focussing on his childhood. Being typed, AMSC may have represented the beginnings of a draft to be taken to a publisher. In the case of ASMB the manuscript was sub-titled ‘Learning to Live’. It is curious that a few days later he added ‘and to Die.’ Written at a time when he was distressed in his personal life, it reads like he needed to articulate feelings and attitudes difficult to express any other way. His public life was frenetic. He threw himself into painting, and wrote extensively researched and lengthy articles each week for The Age Saturday supplements, as well as writing critical exhibition reviews during the week. ASMA and ASMB both dealt with the split that occurred between Arnold Shore and George Bell in 1936 that led to the demise of their modernist art school. This event was a watershed one for Shore in that it forced him to confront long-standing issues. In 1932 Shore approached Bell and proposed that they both start a modernist art school together. However, the two men were opposites. Bell was a respected art critic for the Sun-News Pictorial. He was wealthy and well connected, had studied in Paris, was well grounded in classical art training and aged 53 was twenty years older than Shore. Shore was struggling financially after a failed gold venture on his Warrandyte property, had not travelled outside Australia. He had taught himself modernist strategies and approaches, not from primary sources but books, journals and poster reproductions. Bell was grappling with modernist elements and recognized that Shore had much to offer. Bell left for London in 1934 to, as he described it, ‘find the golden key to modernism.’ He immersed himself in an Anglicised version of modernism, studying the writings of Clive Bell and Roger Fry through the practical interpretations of their theories by Iain McNab at the Grosvenor School of Art in London. Shore was left in charge of the School for sixteen months and took on Bell’s
duties as art critic, as well as other art history lecturing commitments outside the School.

Bell returned eager to try new approaches. Shore remained cautious and reluctantly attempted to absorb Bell’s new ideas. Shore’s confidence and notoriety had been advanced considerably amongst the wealthy, more liberal minded members of Melbourne’s society during Bell’s absence. The relationship between the two men became strained over several issues and led to the partnership being dissolved in 1936 under Bell’s insistence. Shore’s recall of the events are generally straightforward. He doesn’t apportion blame to Bell for what transpired. Bell on the other hand mounted a spirited campaign to discredit the conservative Australian Art Academy which Shore joined. Shore made it clear in his writings that he believed he could reform the Academy from within and gain a voice for modernist art. Bell was not convinced and helped establish the Contemporary Art Society in direct opposition. Shore’s manuscripts do not attack, criticize or make judgements about Bell. After all, Bell had assisted Shore greatly by advancing him into high society. The notoriety of the School and Shore’s standing as an art critic had strengthened his reputation. They both had mutual friends and Shore did not want to jeopardize those alliances. Shore had much to be grateful for and showed no bitterness in his writing. Several people associated with the School noted, when interviewed years after, that they believed Bell was jealous of Shore’s enhanced standing amongst Melbourne’s social and artistic circles. Bell was respected rather than liked, whilst Shore made friends easily. Shore’s non-judgemental writing gave the impression of being bemused about what had occurred. Each iteration in the manuscripts appeared to map out the issues in an attempt to understand them, but an all-encompassing assessment is never made.

![Figure 6: Arnold Shore painting ‘en plein air’ on the roadside at Mornington, 1963 shortly before his death. Photograph courtesy of Estate of Arnold Shore](http://www.doubledialogues.com/archive/issue_nine/haysom.html)

Whilst the manuscripts are generally insightful, the plethora of correspondence written by, or to Shore, confirm aspects, and in many instances, reveal a much more complex human being. Personal letters written by wealthy and influential people indicate the warmth, affection and high level of esteem in which he was held. A picture emerges of an apolitical figure who loved nature and painted with a religious zeal. He distanced himself from the destructive art world skirmishes that characterized Melbourne, during and after the Second World War. His art writing and lecturing was passionate and informed; he set out to educate not obfuscate. He placed his audiences into the painter’s shoes These insights emerge separate to the autobiographical manuscripts. But like all research, some published facts can be erroneous due to poor editing, tardy data gathering or the deliberate spreading of an untruth or lie by people who knew him. Sometimes described as the Father of History, the Ancient Greek Herodotus has also been called the Father of Lies (Luce, 1997). His fabrication of events and reliance on the dubious accounts of others, and his partisan attack on Greek life, highlights the difficulty, if not impossibility, of an objective truth. Newspapers are notorious for
perpetuating inaccuracies. Writers who rely on the research of other writers can take a false date, which becomes a self-fulfilling and sustained lie when repeated countless times.

To condense one's life into a short autobiography is to accept the shadows on Plato's cave as the truth and only reality. A biography, on the other hand seeks to tell a greater truth by gathering a wide amount of evidentiary material. In some instances, and for a range of reasons, biographies can become contested fields. At best they provide provisional truths. For example, there are three biographies on Samuel Beckett and four on Graham Greene. Both biographies and autobiographies are potentially doomed to failure as they condense a life between designated pages. They are the Readers Digest, or at worst, a Readers Digress version of a life. The surrogate does not become the other. They can be insightful and aspire to the truth, but are not the whole truth. Samuel Beckett succinctly put it when writing of the paradoxical human condition:

'Even on the rare occasions when word and gesture happen to be valid expressions of personality, they lose their significance on their passage through the cataract of the personality that is opposed to them. Either we speak and act for ourselves – in which case speech and action are distorted and emptied of their meanings by an intelligence that is not ours, or else we speak and act for others – in which case we speak and act a lie.' (Beckett, 1931:64)

References

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Michel Foucault (1977) Nietzsche, Genealogy, History , (pgs. 139-164) in Foucault, M, Language, Counter – Memory, Practice: Selected essays and interviews (Oxford, Basil Blackwell)


Arnold Shore (1940). Unpublished manuscripts, A


Arnold Shore (Undated). Unpublished manuscripts, C

Arnold Shore (1957). 40 Years Seek and Find (Melbourne: Australian Galleries)


Paintings

The Little Hill (Wahrooga, New South Wales) 1947 Oil on board, 36.0 x 45.0, Estate of Arnold Shore
Chrystobel Crescent, 1952, Oil on canvas, 45.0 x 55.0, Estate of Arnold Shore

Path through Ti-Trees, Flinders, 1958, Oil on composition board 31.5 x 40.5, Estate of Arnold Shore

Seaside Bush, 1959, Oil on composition board, 35.9 x 39.9, Estate of Arnold Shore

Near the Yarra Kew, 1959, Oil on composition board, 32.0 x 40.5, Estate of Arnold Shore