WHAT, MANY PEOPLE ASK, has politics to do with art? What right has the Communist Party to meddle in the realm of imaginative literature? Surely the function of books is to provide entertainment. Surely the reader ought to derive from literature some solace in this unhappy world, some means of temporary escape from the vicissitudes of real life.

It is true that the best works of literature give satisfaction to the educated reader. In a sense, all great art is produced for enjoyment. But it is the kind of positive sensation aroused by the discovery of new insight into human life, the development of a deeper appreciation of the feelings of one's neighbours and a fuller understanding of the unity of the human race. And since man does not live in a void, serious literature has, necessarily, a social character. It may not always deal with recognised social problems, it may be concerned entirely with matters of an intimate, personal nature, but any literature that tends to make people think and to question the underlying assumptions on which the habits of social life depend, has political consequences regardless of its outward appearance. Anything that challenges established prejudice, that exposes hypocrisy, that tears away the veneer of culture from a fundamentally barbaric social order and replaces its false values with new ideals may give a satisfaction to the reader that transcends mere pleasure. Here let it be said that humanist art may not necessarily be realistic. The most improbable fantasy may carry a great spiritual force just as abstract painting may be profoundly moving. It all depends on the aim of the artist. Realism, as such, has no special virtue. The artist must express himself in his own way. Non-realist art cannot be identified with counter-revolution, any more than realist art can be said to be always revolutionary.

Gordon Adler is a Doctor of Medicine, and has had short stories published in Overland, Southerly and Realist.
The genuine artist, however, is always motivated by a concern for the fate of man, regardless of the means he finds to express this concern. Most artists have felt, in some way or other, a sense of involvement in the social movements of their time. Many have been led, by this feeling of being involved, to identify themselves with radical social forces, and to take political action on their own account. In the years immediately following the second world war a number of the most talented writers and artists joined the Communist Party. The war had shattered many illusions about bourgeois society, and the victories of the Soviet Union aroused a new interest in socialism, especially among the young. A new generation of writers emerged, with a strong sense of political commitment. Socialist ideas had a major influence on the course of Australian writing over the next two decades, and some of these writers produced their best work while members of the Communist Party. And yet, with certain notable exceptions, almost every one of these writers later left the Party. Some stopped writing altogether.

This process of change was complex, and to understand its causes requires an appreciation of the work of these writers, the activities of the Communist Party and its relations with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the influence of the cold war, the cultural isolation of Australia, and the changes in Australian society itself. What was characteristic of the period before 1956 was the enthusiasm and the diversity of talent among the socialist writers and artists. They all had a belief in the value of their own particular contributions. There was, at that time, no sense of coercion in any way by the Communist Party.

Overland

In this atmosphere of intellectual ferment and artistic activity the emergence of the literary journal Overland was an event of far-reaching significance. Originally appearing as The Realist Writer in 1952 the journal began as the organ of the Melbourne Realist Writers' Society, edited by Stephen Murray-Smith. Taking Joseph Furphy's words "Temper Democratic, bias Australian", Stephen Murray-Smith and his associates produced a journal of a new type that quickly aroused wide interest among the reading public. Overland was the most tangible expression of the new, progressive literary movement that arose from the efforts of the considerable body of writers centred in Melbourne. The enthusiasm it engendered derived from its high quality, from the variety and talent of its contributors, and from the imagination, the cultural background and the political commitment of its editor. Adopting a policy of encouraging new writers, Stephen Murray-Smith was responsible for publishing the work of a number of writers of undoubted ability who later achieved considerable distinction. Literary soirees, social activities, fund raising parties, informal meetings with authors
created a sense of elan among writers, a belief in themselves, a conviction that their work was important. It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of Overland in developing Australian literature between 1950 and 1960. Anyone associated with the journal in those years will have experienced the encouragement given by Stephen Murray-Smith to writers who showed any promise, and the ideological influence of the journal was considerable.

The work of the socialist writers

Frank Hardy's spectacular rise to fame through the publication of Power Without Glory opened a new chapter in Australian writing, and has been told in detail in his book The Hard Way. Eric Lambert, in his novel The Twenty Thousand Thieves showed a keen perception of the strength of anti-militarist sentiment among Australian troops during the war, and contrasted this democratic mood with the ideology of many of the officer class. Walter Kaufmann, in Voices in the Storm created a vivid picture of life in Nazi Germany. Ralph de Boissiere brought to Australia the rich talents he demonstrated in his West Indian novels Crown Jewel and Rum and Coca Cola, Judah Waten established his reputation with a collection of stories about migrants in Alien Son. John Manifold made an outstanding contribution to Australian cultural life as poet, musician, inventor of musical instruments, collector of bush songs, and literary critic. Aileen Palmer and Laurence Collinson both, in different ways, produced poetry of high quality in a more private and reflective style, writing on the universal themes of love, death, war, and loneliness. John Morrison became widely known for his waterfront stories. Vance Palmer, James Aldridge, Dymphna Cusack, Jean Campbell and Alan Marshall, while not members of any political party, were close to the socialist movement, and formed a literary school that was essentially realist, politically progressive, socially oriented and conscious of its democratic heritage.

Not all of these writers chose to express their political ideas directly in their art. Some, like Judah Waten, achieved their finest moments in works that had ostensibly no political theme whatever. The enlightenment of the isolated Australian community about the culture of immigrants and the struggle to break down racist prejudice must be at least as important as depicting the militancy of Melbourne waterside workers.

There were some, however, who did set out to use their creative ability in a highly partisan manner. One of the most successful in this respect was David Martin. David Martin, the Hungarian born Jewish journalist who served in the International Brigade in Spain, came to Australia and achieved renown as a poet, novelist and short story writer. He was not a better artist than writers
like Katharine Prichard, but he succeeded in expressing the aims of the Communist movement in his writing in a way that few others have done.

Katharine Susannah Prichard

Katharine Susannah Prichard was thirty four at the time of the Russian revolution in 1917. In 1920 she joined others in forming the Communist Party, and remained a member of it for over fifty years until her death at the age of eighty six. She wrote twelve novels, several books of short stories, poetry, drama, and many political articles. In her time she won a number of literary prizes. She devoted herself wholeheartedly to the cause of communism, and sought to develop her art in the service of what she firmly believed to be a great cause. More than any other Australian writer she set out to use her art to win support for communism through her stories and novels.

“All my life,” she declared, at the Communist Writers’ Conference in 1959, “I have been guided by Marxism-Leninism, and I have tried to express this in my work.” To Katharine, this was not cause for apology. She said this with pride, and was as frank as she was when she boldly proclaimed her party membership in her pamphlet Why I am a Communist. It was this unashamed declaration of loyalty that was one of her finest qualities. Yet in 1956 she was more understanding of the writers who became disillusioned and left the party, and she was more genuinely distressed than almost anyone else. She was particularly grieved by the loss of David Martin, whom she regarded as one of the most gifted of the party writers.

Despite her efforts, however, it was not in her more tendentious novels that she achieved her highest artistic level. Her finest work derived from her insight into the lives of women, and in 1930, with Haxby’s Circus she reached the summit of her creative endeavours. “I wrote this novel,” she said once, in reply to criticism, “because I wanted to show how hard life uses women.” In this novel, as in her aboriginal stories such as The Cooboo and the novel Coonardoo, she writes with tremendous conviction, yet none of these works is political in character. She appeared to realise that great art is profoundly revolutionary, and that its influence transcends the limits of polemical writing. She seemed, at this time, to be completely free of the restrictions that later plagued the socialist movement and in time affected even her own work. It was only later that her work became to a considerable extent stultified and artificial. Though still a writer of importance, and unquestionably sincere, her work became influenced by the ideas of Zhdanov without her knowing it. She tried very hard to be worthy of inclusion in the school of new socialist writers, but she
never again succeeded in creating the profound and moving stories of her earlier years.

**Socialist Literary Theory**

At this point, socialist literary theory requires some consideration. For many years, the contentious matter of partisanship in art aroused much heated debate. There were those, on the one hand, who claimed that literature was of value only to the extent that it propagated revolutionary ideas, while others denied the validity of writing that expressed any political aim at all. These two divergent trends became very marked in the late sixties, and in their most extreme forms were regarded by most Communists, and indeed by the great majority of other people, as the true expression of “socialist” and “bourgeois” ideas in literature. The traditional values by which the art of many centuries had been judged, and by which it had established its worth were obscured, and this whole process was accentuated by the cold war. Realist art became identified with socialism, and abstract art with bourgeois ideology. And in this period of sharp controversy Soviet views on art dominated the Australian scene, at least in left circles.

After the founding of the Union of Soviet Writers under the influence of Maxim Gorki in 1934 the philosophy of Socialist Realism was adopted as the only legitimate basis for writers in the Soviet Union. This had a profound influence in the Communist movement throughout the world, especially in Australia. As the ideas of Socialist Realism became interpreted in an increasingly narrow sense, following the pronouncements of the Soviet theorist Zhdanov, the work of almost every Communist writer in the world became affected in one way or another.

The elements of the theory of Socialist Realism were simple. The literature of any society was considered to be determined by its class character. With every revolutionary upheaval in history and the birth of a new social order, literature changed accordingly. Human conflict resulted from the contradictions of class society. Hence with the elimination of classes there could be no conflict. Human conflict was a survival from the past, and the duty of the writer was to point the way to the future. Every story must have as the central character a positive hero, every novel had to end on an optimistic note. Tragic love affairs no longer occurred in socialist society. In the capitalist countries, of course, the mission of the writer was to portray society in decay, and to show the inevitability of its replacement by socialism. The highest form of society, socialism, released the creative power of the people and established the basis for the greatest literature of all. The task of the Soviet writer was to give expression to the noblest aspirations of man under the conditions of the new society.
Whilst there was some validity in this analysis, and whilst it is undoubtedly true that much fine literature has been produced by Soviet writers, the narrow, rigid application of Socialist Realist theory by people in positions of authority with little knowledge of literature did great harm, and the claim that nineteenth century realists like Pushkin, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were less important than modern Soviet writers was patently absurd. These officials were suspicious of every new idea, they feared dissent in any form, and they did much to stifle creative initiative. Conformity became the order of the day, and the Soviet Union acquired a literary establishment with a similar mentality to the literary establishment of the West. Those who conformed were rewarded with prizes and mass publication, those who could not conform found their work suppressed, many were imprisoned, and some were punished by death. It was the ideas of these myopic bureaucrats which became the model for literary criticism in the socialist movement in Australia, with quite tragic results.

The Party Crisis of 1956

The Hungarian uprising of 1956 created a profound crisis in the Communist movement, even though most parties emerged without serious organisational divisions. The causes of the uprising were complex, and reactionary forces certainly took advantage of the opportunities presented by the chaotic situation. The Khrushchev party had not long been in power, and had only a marginal control of the leadership of the CPSU. There were major divisions in the CPSU leadership on the question of military intervention, and it was only when, after ten days of heavy fighting, it appeared that the Hungarian government would be overthrown, the Soviet government decided finally to intervene. In retrospect the Soviet government of 1956 appears as a model of prudence and restraint when compared with the Brezhnev-Kosygin government of 1968!

In the storm that followed, the CPSU leaders were able to convince most Communists that they had no alternative, at that critical moment in the fighting, if socialist power was to be preserved in Hungary. On the more fundamental causes of the crisis, and the responsibility of the Hungarian Communists under the Rakosi leadership, however, they had little to say. Many Communists held reservations about the causes of the rebellion, but in the face of the onslaught of international reaction they closed ranks and made no criticism of the CPSU. On the whole, the CPA suffered relatively small losses, but the casualties were particularly heavy among the intellectuals. In the bitter polemics that followed, most of the writers and artists were driven out of the party. The official view was that their vacillation reflected their petit bourgeois class origins, and
that the party had done well to purge itself of opportunists elements. For many, the problem of whether it was possible for a person to be both an artist and a Communist was posed in very harsh terms by the march of events, and a number of the most gifted writers resolved this question in the negative. It was a time of conflicting loyalties, and there were no simple answers to any question.

That the relationship between communism and art is complex, however, is shown by the fact that among the artists who remained with the party some produced their most mature work in the years that followed. Noel Counihan moved away from the more formal realism of his earlier years, and continued to develop his art, expressing his most profound ideas in the mural in the Healy Memorial Hall. Judah Waten produced his best novel *Distant Land* and won the Volkswagen prize in 1965 while an active member of the party. The claim that artistic integrity and fidelity to the Communist movement are incompatible has been clearly disproved, but it cannot be denied that many artists of outstanding merit found it impossible to reconcile their party membership with freedom to develop their art in their own way.

Those who left the party because they would not accept the majority view about Hungary were all grouped together in the eyes of the party under the banner of revisionism, though there were important differences among the "revisionists" themselves. This term having been applied by others to Lenin, Khrushchov, Dubcek and the present Soviet leaders, it is a hat that might well have been worn with pride, but in 1956 it was freely bestowed on those regarded as having crossed into the enemy camp. The final test of political integrity that was ultimately applied was the ability of the individual concerned to express agreement with the views of the leaders of the CPSU.

In 1959 the Australian and New Zealand Disarmament Congress was held in Melbourne, with a section devoted to the arts. It was attended by the English dramatist J. B. Priestley and his wife Jacquetta Hawkes, who on the final night received a standing ovation from an audience of 800 for resisting intimidation and pressure from the Federal Government and the daily press. In this rousing atmosphere the Arts conference could very well have been the rallying centre of the Congress, with considerable influence in widening its appeal. Yet very soon it became a battleground over the action of the Soviet government in Hungary, with the debate centring on the case of the writer Tibor Dery, at that time imprisoned by the Hungarian government. Dery's associate Tibor Meray was visiting Australia, and his presence in Melbourne provided the poet Vincent Buckley with the opportunity to use the Hungarian events to attack the Congress.
The Communist writers at the conference refused to allow any criticism of the Soviet government to be incorporated in the resolutions of the meeting, they formed a solid phalanx, and rejected the appeal for Dery's release. The majority group at the conference used their numbers to defeat all resolutions dealing with artistic freedom and the final statement merely acknowledged that "in some countries" writers did not enjoy the freedom to write as they chose. At the conclusion of the conference Stephen Murray-Smith described the resolution as "chicken-hearted" because it said nothing important about this question. The Indian novelist Dr. Mulk Raj Anand expressed the opinion that the Communist writers were too rigid. Although the Congress was, in the main, a success, it was marred by the generally negative effect of the Arts conference, which resulted from a fear of real discussion of the great issues of the day.

Cultural Exchange Visits With The Soviet Union

In 1959 the Soviet Writers' Union invited the Fellowship of Australian Writers to send a delegation to the Soviet Union. James Devanney, Judah Waten and Professor Manning Clarke were elected, and the following year a return visit by Oksana Krugerskaya and Alexi Surkov opened up the possibility of a general improvement in cultural relations between Australia and the Soviet Union. A number of exchange visits followed, with considerable success. Peaceful coexistence appeared to be strengthened. But, like the albatross that followed the ancient mariner, the Soviet visitors were dogged wherever they went by the Pasternak affair.

Boris Pasternak had been generally acclaimed in the Soviet Union as a great poet and translator of Shakespeare. His novel Dr. Zhivago was in the process of being published in the Soviet Union when Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize. The Soviet Writers' Union saw this as an act of the Cold War, and the novel was suppressed. The Italian Communist publisher Feltrinelli, however, had already agreed to publish the novel, and insisted on doing so, as a matter of principle, when the Soviet Writers' Union urged him to reverse his decision. Surkov travelled to Italy in a vain attempt to persuade Feltrinelli to change his mind, and when he visited Australia he was credited with being the instigator of the whole affair. He was followed everywhere by an army of press men and photographers, all asking the same question. Why? "If I were paid for every question I answered about the Pasternak case," said Surkov, "I would be a millionaire." But no answer he could give would satisfy any of his interviewers. He described Pasternak as a great poet, a gigantic figure, a man with a vast imagination, one of the really good writers of our time. Why, then, was the novel banned? Surkov's task was unenviable, and he performed it with dignity, but he had
no success in accomplishing his chief mission in Australia. The fate of Pasternak was by no means as grim as that of other writers like Solzhenitzin or Daniel and Sinyavsky, but it was more significant as it came at a time when it seemed that artistic freedom in the Soviet Union was rapidly extending.

Australian Communists did their best, in the following years, to explain what Surkov had been unable to explain. They stoutly defended the action of the Soviet Writers' Union in expelling Pasternak, and campaigned vigorously against those who criticised the official Soviet viewpoint. Issue No. 14 of *Overland*, containing two views on the Pasternak affair, one by Katharine Prichard supporting the Soviet action, and an opposing view by Maurice Shadbolt, aroused the most intense and bitter accusations against *Overland*. By publishing the opinions of both sides Stephen Murray-Smith had proved, finally, that he had defected to the camp of the class enemy. In a full page article in *Tribune* headed “Overland — Where the Hell’s it being Taken?” Rex Chiplin expressed the official view of the CPA at the time, with the clear implication that *Overland* was party property. A new journal, *The Realist Writer*, described as “militant, partisan, and aggressive,” was launched to counter the defection of *Overland*.

Whilst early issues of this new journal were by no means discreditable, it did reveal, at that time, a marked tendency to judge literature on political rather than literary considerations. The thinking of Zhdanov dominated the outlook of very many of the publishers of left journals and books of fiction, the most notable being the Australasian Book Society. The ABS, having earlier published a number of fine novels, now turned out a long line of Socialist Realist books, the chief result of which was a steady loss of subscribers and a decline in interest in literature altogether. Later, the wheel turned full circle, and in a reaction against this earlier trend the ABS became more influenced by the values of commercial publishers, with the tendency to judge books largely on their conformity to prevailing literary trends.

The socialist writers were not the only ones influenced by the polemics of the sixties. Just as left literary criticism became intemperate, so did the judgments of the more officially recognised critics. Despite the recent awards of literary fellowships to Judah Waten and Frank Hardy, Communist writers are still not readily accepted in official literary circles. McCarthyism still casts its long shadow over the scene. There are, however, other reasons as well for the rejection of the work of these writers.

Firstly, there has been a catastrophic decline in the publishing of novels and short stories, due to the economics of mass culture,
take-overs of publishing houses, and the changing cultural values of society. Secondly, humanist-realist literature has become unfashionable. Thirdly, the legacy of the conflicts of the last decade has rendered all forms of social commitment suspect in the eyes of publishers, who seek more and more the writers with something shocking or sensational to say. This craving for spectacular literature blinds many to the fact that the most profound truths often find expression in the simplest writing. The sharp polarisation of literary criticism that developed in the late sixties had done much harm to Australian culture, as is well illustrated by the case of Patrick White. For a long time condemned by the left as the exponent of reactionary ideas in literature, his work was just as blindly hailed by the literary establishment with lavish, uncritical praise. His work was denied the balanced, objective criticism it deserved. In view of White’s consistent stand against the Vietnam war, a further study of his work would be appropriate for socialist literary scholars.

What conclusions can be drawn from these experiences? Through an understandable reluctance to make the mistake of interfering in cultural matters the Communist Party could neglect to engage in the debates and conflicts occurring in this important field. Indeed, there are some communists who feel that literary polemics are too complicated and better left alone. Others no doubt believe that it may not matter at all what happens in this neck of the woods. But the struggle for the acceptance of humanist ideas by the Australian people does matter. It is as vital as the struggle for one’s daily bread. This struggle will continue, and the progressive forces will draw sustenance from the growing strength of the new generation of young writers and artists who have rejected the values of bourgeois society and who have been inspired by the heroism of the people of Vietnam.

Australian literature has proved very hard to kill, and there are great reserves of artistic talent and idealism among Australian youth. The Communist Party would do well to give them its full encouragement. The mistakes in the past arose from the unqualified acceptance of the views of the CPSU in all matters of art, from the view that literature was of value only as polemic, and from the rejection of art that did not conform to the narrow concept of Socialist Realism. The fact that Australian Communists gave their unflagging loyalty to the people of the world’s first socialist state is no cause for shame. The shame lies with those in positions of power who used this loyalty cynically, brutally, and stupidly for unworthy ends, and who answered this self-sacrifice and devotion with secret trials, suppression of honest criticism, and the gaoling and even murder of some of the most talented and sensitive writers of this century.