

A CRITICISM OF ADELAIDE'S "ANGRY PENGUINS"

(VIC O'CONNOR)

AUSTRALIA is experiencing a great increase in cultural activity and interest, and as many of its younger artists are seeking the source of their creative problems and imagery in the life about them, the next decade promises to be a vital period in the development of an Australian cultural tradition.

Most younger artists depend entirely on magazines of local circulation to publicise their work. Because most such publications are limited in their objectives and circulation, the announcement in 1942 that the Adelaide magazine, "Angry Penguins," was to be enlarged to serve as a forum for local creative work and criticism, was received with great interest.

Three issues of the new "Angry Penguins" have proved that it has nothing to offer Australian art, and that its effect will be to destroy, not raise Australian standards.

The fostering of a high level of cultural development and mature art traditions are integral factors in the struggle to advance standards of social and economic life in Australia, and the editors of any cultural magazine have a responsibility to its contributors, creative workers, and the public arising from this fact. Editorship is a serious and responsible task, and it is from this point of view that "Angry Penguins" must be judged.

The editors of "Angry Penguins" are in fact completely indifferent to the existence of this responsibility, and consequently critical standards of any type are lacking in the magazine.

In the editorial to the first enlarged edition, Max Harris says, "The policy of the magazine is to stand for no brand or branch of culture—neither pseudo-modernistic nor retrogressive. It will be purely a forum for the highest literary and art level emerging from this country."

If we examine the last three issues of "Angry Penguins," we find that the bulk of the work published has little literary talent. This in itself is not a bad thing—if the editors accepted the fact and sought to stimulate and attract better work. However, Reed and Harris, far from acknowledging the faults of the work of their contributors, publish it with praise grotesquely disproportionate to its value. We are told that Harris' novel, "The Vegetative Eye," "has already taken its place in Australian literary history and will exercise a profound influence wherever it is read." Poets are measured against the "Angry Penguin" writers, e.g., "Here, perhaps, he (Ern Malley) transcends ANGRY PENGUIN writers and contemporary English writers." We read that Ern Malley and the late Donald Bevis Kerr (whose work was also published by Reed and Harris), "are the two giants of contemporary Australian poetry." Harris surpasses all these efforts, however, when he speaks of himself in relation to the editing of the poems of Ern Malley. "I have been placed in somewhat the same quandary as was Max Brod in disposing of Kafka's writings."

By way of contrast, artists who do not come within the sphere of "Angry Penguins" activity are treated to "relentless" criticism and ridicule. We are pompously informed by John Reed, when he speaks of a work of the artist, Josef Bergner, "he does not long deceive us by the use of a soft and delicate pink which appears for the first time in his work and charms one into a momentary oversight of the weakness of what lies underneath."

Such an editorial policy must destroy any prestige which the magazine may have earned, the self-critical qualities of its more credulous contributors and cast ridicule on all people associated with it; and, from the number and range of contributors, it is clear that its character has already limited the serious material which authors will make available to the paper.

An exception is the article, "Has Australian Aboriginal Art A Future?" by L. Adam, the serious and scholarly character of which is a welcome change from the general atmosphere of the magazine.

A situation of farce developed when in the latest issue, the editors published with such a fanfare, the spurious work of the supposed "late Ern Malley." Only the complete lack of talent, common sense, and critical standards of the editors, and their blind obedience to an art ideology which exalts obscurantism and fantasy above meaning and profundity made possible the success of this unscrupulous attack on experimentation and cultural development.

The most culpable aspect of the matter was not the publication of the work, but the attitude of John Reed and Max Harris on being taxed with the hoax. Then their complete spiritual bankruptcy became apparent. In the circumstances, there was only one honest answer—to admit the deception, but to make a stand and expose the hoax as a "hoologan" attempt to discredit experimentation in art, and to demonstrate that it was simply another way of implying the things stated last year by Sir Lionel Lindsay in his reactionary and anti-Semitic book, "Added Art."

Unfortunately for Australian art generally, the only answer the editors were capable of giving was that, while they did not acknowledge either of the two people responsible for the hoax as good poets, they confirmed their earlier judgment that the fictitious "Ern Malley" was a good poet! Or translated into Adelaide parlance, "The myth is sometimes greater than its creator."

Further evidence of this irresponsibility is the editors' lack of regard for publishing standards, insinuated by such things as the continual mis-spelling of contributors' names, the mis-printing of quotations in arguments, and the interminable personal and domestic references.

"Angry Penguins," which is claimed by the editors to be "the authoritative statement of immediate Australian culture" is in fact the private vehicle of a small number of contributors whose work and outlook form only a small section of contemporary Australian art and writing. Instead of helping to broaden Australian creative work, the editors are attempting to create a cult of obscurantism, more insular, and more artificial than has hitherto appeared in Australian society.

Worse than any other aspect of the magazine, is its growing anti-working class sentiment.

The editors began by professing some sympathy for class-conscious art. John Reed speaks as follows early in 1943, "A large percentage of the world's finest paintings have been devastating indictments of society and . . . if a painting is not to convey social criticism, then painters must eschew everything related to poverty as subject matter for their art." By the time the last copy appeared (May, 1944), the magazine had become a reactionary vehicle for provocateurs, and a channel for their expression of anti-Marxist, anti-Communist and anti-Soviet propaganda. Any attempt to refute the allegations of these writers is met with hostility, not only from the contributors in question, but also from the editors. In the latest issue, Communism is subjected to hostile criticism in no less than four articles—but we find no mention of fascism from these champions of "liberty."

We are told that, "At the present time, a Soviet composer's duty is to compose suitable and reasonably simple music for the benefit of the Russian people." (Alice Brown—The Leningrad Symphony), and that "Scientific investigation for its own sake unrelated to social utility is frowned upon; and art, that fragile bloom of the spirit, is reduced to the role of a peashooter in the political armory." (A. Tucker).

To begin with, such statements are based not on ignorance, but on a deliberate disregard of fact.

This second-hand lie (second-hand because it has been the tool of every provocateur, informer, and forged document writer since the establishment of the Soviet Union) of Tucker's has been disproved by actions showing the attitude of the Soviet people towards its creative workers, by the prestige they are accorded, and the products of Soviet culture itself. To give one example: The Soviet, early in its struggle against the fascist invader demobilised all its poets, writers, painters, and musicians, contending that their work as creators and executors was of greater importance to the Soviet, and world culture than their physical participation in the struggle. The "Angry Penguin writers" are horrified that so many Soviet artists should dedicate their work to a people who hold such a magnificent opinion of man's spiritual worth! Because these Adelaide quacks have never paid more than lip-service to progress, they cannot understand that people of integrity and real talent believe in the fight for man's advancement and seek ways of expressing this in their work. The works of Shostakovich, Prokofieff, Sholokhov, Ehrenburg, Alexei Tolstoy, and Gerasimov, to name only a few artists, give proof of the high standards of Soviet art.

However, for these Adelaide critics, creative merit does not depend on the profundity or universality of an artist's statement. The florid, fantastic, exotic utterance, no matter how slight, seems better to them than the most profound reflection on human existence. All this other-worldliness, their false show of erudition, is simply an easy way of avoiding facing the truth of their own mediocrity, and the very concrete problem which faces any serious artist of speaking originally and creatively through the conditions of his own time and locality.

This attitude in the field of art is echoed in their approach towards the people and the class struggle.

Unable to reconcile their personal ambitions and comforts with the conditions of the fight for progress, they seek to justify their position with self-righteous, hypocritical platitudes. "We should, perhaps, be tolerant in the interests of an important economic goal, but unfortunately it is enveloped in such an active and deadly form of spiritual vandalism, that those who don't think with their stomach can be excused if they cease fighting for that form of socialism." (A. Tucker). These people will never be creative, for although their talk is full of spurious references to "man," "humanity," "freedom," "liberty"—they have no conception of the dignity and qualities of man, and no honesty or responsibility towards the struggle for his economic and spiritual liberation, as this last quotation from Tucker's article shows.

This is not a new tendency in Australian culture. Its appearance in this magazine, and the contempt and distrust expressed for the working class in such references as that to the "Australian Marxist-in-the-street" (Sam Dunn—"The Leningrad Symphony") demonstrates the magazine's social and spiritual link with other groups which they claim to oppose on esthetic grounds — for example, the "Lindsay tradition."

In attempts to justify this attitude, their arguments, like their painting and writing, descend to mysticism and "quackery." Like their more weighty, but still insignificant English counterparts, Read, Treece, Lehmann and Co., they will end up indulging in esoteric religions, and spiritualist table-rapping for Tucker's "superwave formation." ("After all, who can say that the numerous gods that dot the mythological history of man are not clumsy, intuitive personifications of a superwave formation?")

If "Angry Penguins" continues on this path it must finish in open alliance with all the worst and most reactionary sections of Australian society, in opposition to the development of a free society and a free art.