

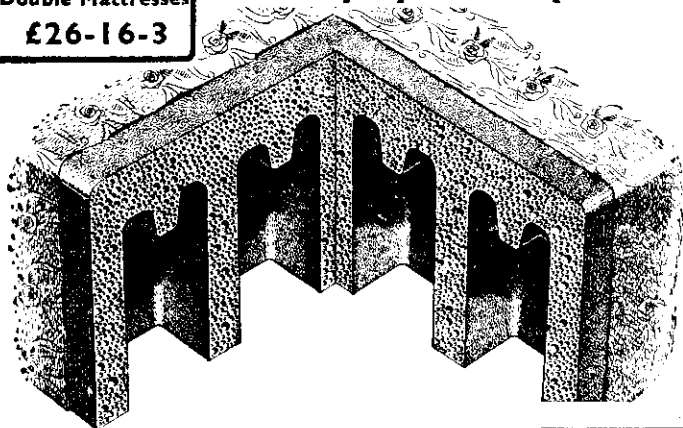
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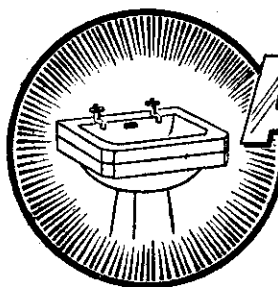
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Writers Militant

PEACE appeals and demonstrations, of which much has been heard from different parts of the world, are symptoms of anxiety not to be treated lightly, even when they are organised by people whose motives may be questioned. If millions of people speak for peace their rulers cannot afford to disregard the genuine feeling beneath the propaganda. There is, however, a danger that honest aspiration can be exploited; and the method of collective protest and appeal demands closer scrutiny when it is used by groups whose work makes them influential. The perfect example for this purpose is the Authors' World Peace Appeal. It was started in England, where writers were asked to put their names to a declaration, the main part of which is as follows: "We writers believe that our civilisation is unlikely to survive another world war. We believe that differing political and economic systems can exist side by side on the basis of peacefully negotiated settlements. As writers, we want peace and through our work will try and get it. . . We condemn writing liable to sharpen existing dangers and hatred. . ."

These are fine sentiments, not unfamiliar to people who have never written a sentence for publication. Well-known writers who signed the appeal—including some in New Zealand—probably felt no need to examine it closely. If they had, they might have asked themselves if there could not be occasions when it would be their simple duty to speak out against evil things, even though in doing so they might well "sharpen existing dangers and hatred." Truth can be uncomfortable, even perilous; but there are times when it must be spoken. Writers who accept any sort of curb, with the best of intentions, are limiting their intellectual freedom. What this can mean is already becoming apparent. A bulletin just issued by the A.W.P.A. describes the "first effective steps" it has taken "to increase its pressure" against writing "liable to sharpen, etc."

The phrase "to increase its pressure" is significant. Writers who are thought to have offended are to feel the disapproval of their fellow-artists. It is an easy step from protest to coercion, and from coercion to persecution. And who is to judge the offence? The answer, presumably, is that judgment is formed by the A.W.P.A. But what is the source of its collective wisdom? A large group cannot speak with undivided mind: there must be an executive body to speak on its behalf. Such bodies are generally composed of active and managing persons, often with strong political feelings. Eminent writers may sign the document, and return without further thought to their proper work and interests; but the men who later speak for them may be neither eminent nor wise.

"First effective steps" by the A.W.P.A. include a protest to *Colliers Magazine*, which recently devoted an entire issue "to the aftermath of a hypothetical war projected in 1960." The protest was deserved, but its value is doubtful. And the potential danger of collective action, tending to censorship, is seen more clearly when it is used against individuals. "Strong protests," says the bulletin with unconscious humour, were also made "at the attitude of men like J. B. Priestley and 'Pendennis' of the *Observer*, who called signatories of the A.W.P.A. 'Mugs'." This may seem to lean more towards nonsense than danger, but the danger is visible beneath the absurdity. Writers are poor creatures if they are unable to accept disagreement. Artists must be free, even though freedom is sometimes misused. Pressure intended to bring about conformity in belief or opinion is already too prevalent in the world today. It becomes an ugly symptom when writers band themselves together to judge their fellows. The best service they can perform is simply to do their work. A single writer, speaking out with conviction or indignation, can be far more influential for peace than the largest group organised for admonition.

N.Z. LISTENER, APRIL 18, 1952.