

Mark Strand
at the Meridian House International
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"First I would like to say something about cultural exchange, which is central to my allegiance to the 'Société Imaginaire'.

With all due respects to governments, I don't know about other governments, I know my own; and they do a very poor job with cultural exchange. My government has the United States Information Service (USIS). People like bureaucrats - men, women - who know nothing of the culture of their country nor do they know the culture of the country to which they have been sent. They are merely the propadanga of the lowest sort.

I have never in my travels met one intellectual nor have I met one person in USIS who is interested in meeting with intellectuals in the country to which they've been sent. They suffer the job of sheperding visiting writers around, but show no curiosity about them. They may have glanced at a book about them, but only superficially. At any rate, I've written letters to the USIS complaining. And this is what I really want to say: The 'Société Imaginaire' strikes me as an important alternative. It is not only something that could be helped along by governments but by universities, that is, it's effects can be very far reached.

Something happens when writers get together and are left to their own devices. They have interesting conversations, especially when they're in places like Berlin, or a place like Washington, where there is a kind of cultural valency which brings out the best. In other words, when we were in Berlin, we were very responsive to our immediate sorrounds: Not only the museums, but also East Berlin. I had interesting conversations with writers I might never have met had I not gone, because I live in Utha and nobody passes through there.

One writer, one Sanchez Pelaez I am going to translate and I know, he is already translating me. There were others, for example the Gulf War was about to begin and there were many discussions about what was going to happen. And I remember talking to Ivan Klima who had a different view. Here was a czech telling me what he thought was going to happen, and he was absolutely accurate. He had a clearer sense of what was going to take place. In all respect, he was more clearheaded than I was.

One of the other things I wanted to say about government, my government. There seems to be an agenda they have in mind. They want you to go around and speak well of the United States and say nice things about ourselves. Now it's very unpolite to do that, to become a kind of bull. As if to say "look at me, we do well. You poor people, you haven't heard of so and so, well may be one day it'll be translated." I just resist all of that. And I think the 'Société Imaginaire' says - let's let the writers talk about what they will write, let's have them translate each other, let's create an archive for ourselves. And that archive will be the effort of the 'Correspondence', the translations, the portfolios that they make in collaboration with artists, etc. And you, the university, you could be the beneficiary of such an archive, be part of the 'Société Imaginaire', of what goes on and what transpires, what's begun and what will continue. And since practically all of these writers are illustrious and famous, it would grace any university's cultural program to have them speak. As a gift of the 'Société Imaginaire' they would talk or give a reading.

There are ways to make use of writers without inhibiting their discourse, without creating an agenda for them. Why writers you may say, because writers have, as I indicated in my letter from Berlin, they have a relationship with truth. Perhaps many of us remember that, but are forced somehow, sometimes to put it aside because it's not the most expedient term. For writers it is the most expedient term. It is demanded. Their use of language, the connections with the language is one that demands they use it correctly, clearly. He doesn't talk and at the same time disguise what it is that he has to say. He talks in order to be understood. And when you speak on behalf of an institution that sometimes isn't possible. I mean, you want to be understood but you want to be understood in a particular way, so language is forced to do something that might not ordinarily be forced to do. More ambiguous words are used instead of accurate ones.

I want to stress something that I indicated earlier and that is the importance of the participation of the cultural centers. I think that's very important. I think it's okay for a writer or a few writers to go off and work on a campus together but I think if you get a dozen writers together there's something about being in a cultural center that sets everything, that sets a tone, is a stimulus. Washington is such a place; Berlin was also."

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