

# HARVARD REVIEW



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In the last issue of the *Harvard Review* (Spring, 1994) several authors expressed their concern about the ability/inability of our sophisticated communications systems to deal with culture in general. They even questioned its appropriateness as simple communicator as transmitter of cultural statements. All of these authors agree on the necessity to seek out more effective and personal ways of communicating. Butor, for one, proposes a "bottle-mail" in his letter to an "unknown friend." In the current issue the dialogue on this matter is carried even further, a step that at first glance may have startled us, but upon closer examination we discover that it is simply (solely) the other side of the coin of Butor's "bottle-mail:" a desire, a desperate desire to communicate sincerely, directly, personally in spite of all of these great and overly technical communications systems.

The texts of three well-known authors show an intense burst of liberation, a sincere wish to get rid of a "Name," a name which is *no longer their own name*, but a seal, a trademark of celebrity, an unwanted burden. Their anonymous texts allow them to be liberated from their cage, an imprisonment which our age imposed upon them, pinning them down to an unwanted and untrue definition of a "Name."

We feel their joy and a new energy in these writings. What is more, they come amazingly close to us in spite of their "anonymity" or precisely because of it. Here a "Name" with all its implications does not speak with us: just another Human Being.

No Signature

Dear friends and brothers in Apollo, on the other side of the road, of the border, of the ocean, don't you find that our names are becoming more and more burdensome to us? They pursue us and bark at us like a pack of dogs. How difficult it is to throw them off! But who set them on us is hard to say. The media, of course, always the media. They are held responsible for everything. True, they need us, they use us up with their incessant palaver from which nothing is safe, not art and not even poetry. Naturally they are not in the least interested in what we are doing. What one says, paints, writes is of no value—only the signature, the name alone, has value. When it has been dropped often enough its bearer becomes a celebrity. Woe to the imbecile who confuses celebrity with fame, who *believes* in his name. He does not realize that he has become a sandwichboard carrier, a perambulating billboard. Celebrity shares the fate of advertising posters: it peels off with the next rainstorm, overnight becomes a garbage problem, like the products they advertise. There is nothing objectionable about that.

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But the faster this happens, the more irresistible the temptation to disappear becomes. Even as children we delighted in the tale of the magic hood which renders us invisible. Maybe we did not take that story seriously enough. Some time or other we were careless enough to sign our own names to what we produced. But why, really? Because of vanity? Ambition? Naivete? A fatal blunder, never to be corrected with a pseudonym.

Maybe we should save what remains to be saved: by sabotaging, at least when we are among ourselves, to our amusement, the terror of identity, and in our conversations simply omit that which bothers us, the name tag that only repeats the same thing: I, I, I—a rather meaningless assertion—and instead send our messages in bottles, so that they have to speak for themselves.

No Signature

My dear colleagues in the Parcae:

From this side as well as the other side of the foolish barriers that man has invented to make a prisoner of himself, I seek to join the voice of some of you who, with ample reason, condemn our sad condition as commercial products: that's what we've become. Our own name has been turned into just another item for sale in drugstores and supermarkets. Our work itself is nothing; nor is it worth anything if it doesn't have the trademark that imparts its rather debatable value.

Since we live in a world that is one half a huge department store and the other half a suffocating "gulag," and since we ourselves have allowed and even created this world, we can't say anything credible in the end that would be of any consequence upon the thin layer of conscience that still remains among our brothers and sisters, our fellow human beings.

I turn to the greatest possible example of anonymity one can call upon in the literature of the Occident: the author of the two greatest works from that part of the world, *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*. WE DON'T KNOW WHO WROTE THEM. We have had to invent the name of Homer in order to convert these marvels of human genius into products which can circulate in the marketplace. I propose the elimination of authors' names on books printed from this day forward. No one will pay any attention to me in this. I know it, and perhaps I'm a candidate for the insane asylum. Imagine the heresy: to conspire against the sacred institution of the BEST SELLER! Only a madman would propose such an absurdity.

We mustn't complain though; we have no right. In one way or another we have been accomplices in fashioning the nightmare that now pursues us. The only possible hero of a novel would be a man without a

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country whose name recalls nothing and means nothing to anyone. Someone has already created him, and he's also a victim of that terrible "celebrity." The media take our lives into account; we owe them everything, even our not knowing who we are anymore, nor what we are doing writing in an age without ears, without eyes, without voice. In an era where the word belongs to publicity, that is, where the lie is king.

We may fill the sea with our S.O.S.'s inside of bottles, and nothing will happen. We have already filled it with toxic waste, another bit means nothing.

Dear colleagues in the implacable Parcae, let us recall that beautiful maxim of Rimbaud, one of the last who really knew the way out: "There is no greater poem than silence."

No Signature

Dear colleagues:

I am writing to you from the Czech Republic, a country whose prohibited writers you sympathized with once, either in a vociferous manner or silently in your heart, during the period of communist domination of Prague.

I lived without my passport for nearly twenty years. I was not allowed to travel abroad, freely receive foreign visitors, nor exchange letters.

Let me share with you my first foreign travel experience. It was almost like attending a revelation with several dozen other Czech authors. President Havel provided the plane because none of the participants could afford to pay the regular air fare. On the first night some of us were invited to a party held in an apartment of a great writer, so great that it took my breath away.

I would be a bad guest if I disclosed my host's identity and the name of the country. However, today I know that thousands and thousands of similar parties are being held. There were about sixty people, and it was possible to exchange a few words in the short period of two hours.

My first conversation started in a fantastic way: a famous artist stopped in front of me, a man my friends and I had been invoking for thirty years in prayer, the "God" of our young reflections on the world and its tragic comicality.

I spoke spontaneously, in a paragraph as long as four normal sentences. "God" smiled and said: "Very interesting, thank you," and walked away politely to approach somebody else.

I was afraid my exaltation had affected him. Only after our third

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conversation did I understand what I had done wrong: my confession was an exposition inviting him to a longer conversation, which would have meant detaining this great man for a period considered impolite and impractical. This would have prevented him from greeting each and every guest. The purpose of that evening was not conversation, but the evening itself.

I realized how many artists were addicted to the "spirit" that addresses us from stereotypical video clips: bizarre images precipitating in rapid succession so that one can perceive them collectively, as a whole, but not in particular. The creator and the spectator design and watch for other reasons than to see.

What is to be done about that? I often hear—alas as a politician—people saying that this world, deprived of genuine relations among individuals, must be remedied as a whole, i.e., collectively. But I, as a Czech playwright and citizen, have had bad experiences with this view. I do not believe that the best thing to do is to protest against the dark. Moreover, there is an old wise saying calling upon everybody who suffers in the dark to light up a single candle.

I am happy to learn that you also are members of that loose community that Batuz has gathered in Société Imaginaire, to which he has also invited me. I am sending you my words as a message, saying that here in Prague and in Central Europe people converse as before, and some people meet regularly and exchange letters because they like each other or just because they wonder what the others are doing.

No signature

Translated from the German, Spanish, and Czech

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Note: the names of the authors of the above four texts have been disclosed to the editor of *Harvard Review*, who will in turn release them to any reader upon request.

