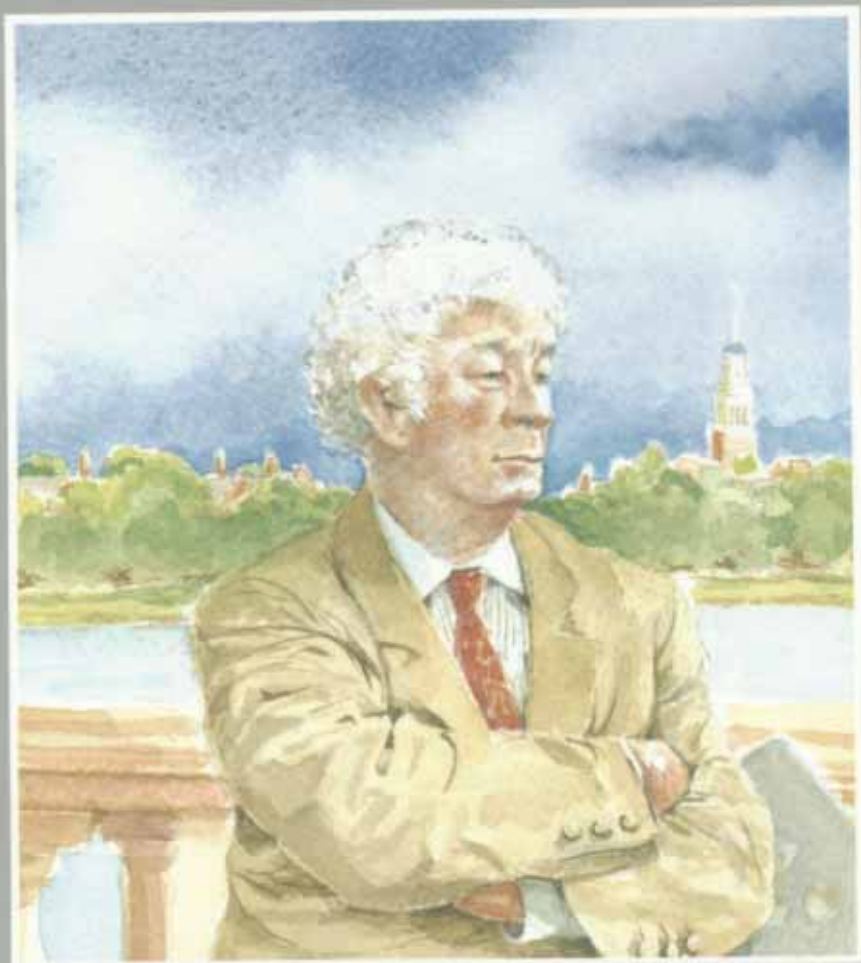


HARVARD REVIEW

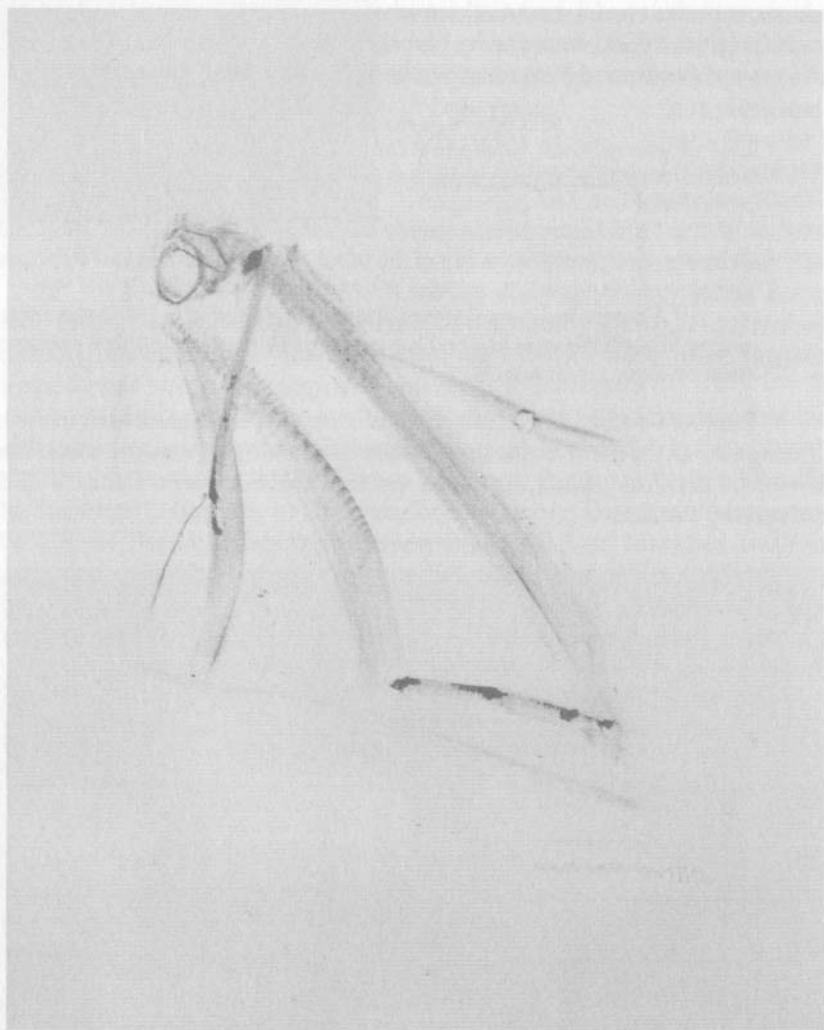


homage to seamus heaney
1995 nobel prize in literature



NUMBER TEN
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Société Imaginaire



Drawing by Mark Lammert.

Société Imaginaire

Letter from the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Hand-Delivered)

Eleven years ago, an international group of writers, artists, and elected government officials, summoned by Batuz, created a forum dedicated to overcoming barriers of direct communication between artists and intellectuals around the world, and to the exchange and exploration of ideas: the *Société Imaginaire* (God-fathered by Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz). On its 10th anniversary, Ferdinand Protzman wrote in *The New York Times*:

One way to conceive of the *Société Imaginaire* is as a dream state, a kind of international, intellectual Oz, with a movable Emerald City and a wizard born in Hungary, seasoned in Argentina, and residing in upstate New York.

Then again, there are many ways to envision an organization that, as its name suggests, is mainly of the mind, with no institutional structure, permanent headquarters, or rules of order.

Despite its ethereal nature, the society, founded in 1984 by a painter calling himself Batuz, is real and has become a flourishing cultural phenomenon on three continents.

Last November, the Kennedy Center invited the *Société Imaginaire* to Washington, D.C., for a week-long series of meetings, presentations, and exhibits of art and photography, as part of the Kennedy Center's 25th Anniversary Season.



Participating members of the *Société Imaginaire* at the Kennedy Center.

Photo by Inge Morath, Magnum Photos, Inc.



Michael Morgner
Inge Morath, Magnum Photos, Inc.

We arrived at the Cosmos Club, where a number of rooms had been reserved for participating members from Switzerland, Germany, Slovakia, Poland, Lithuania Columbia, and several U.S. cities. Friends and acquaintances from the previous *Société* gatherings at Dresden and Altzella, Germany, reunited or shook or hands with newcomers, trying to memorize names, vocations, countries of origin, and the extent of spoken English, which in one of our meetings prompted a tongue-in-cheek remark by the past president of Columbia, Misael Pastrana Borrero. He had just discovered of a new universal language, and on November 10 it was properly quoted in an article about the *Société* in *The Washington Post*: "It is called Bahdeenglaze," Senor Borrero

said. "Everyone who has spoken here today begins by saying, 'Forgive me for speaking bahdeenglaze' [bad English]. Why do we need to be forgiven? We're developing a language that will replace Esperanto."

Multilingual Batuz was there; Polish poet Julia Hartwig was there with her fellow countryman, fiction writer Jacek Bochenski; Lithuanian poet and Visiting Professor at Yale, Tomas Venclova; Professor Walter Schmitz of the Technical University of Dresden; Jochen Boberg, Director of Museums of the City of Berlin; exhibiting German artists Michael Morgner and Mark Lammert were also there; and the editor of the *Inter Nations Humboldt* magazine, Margarete Kraft. U.S. participants included Mark Strand, poet; Henry A. Millon, Dean of the Center for Advance Studies in Visual Arts at the National Galley; Olga Hirshhorn, art collector; Professor Steven Mansbach, Director of the American Academy in Berlin; Timothy Keating, Dean of Franklin College Switzerland; and photographer Inge Morath-Miller (Magnum), among others.

The week-long fest was opened with greetings by Lawrence Wilker, President of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and the participating members met informally for discussions on topics such as "Universities and the *Société Imaginaire*," "Politics and Culture," "Publications in the *Société Imaginaire*," and "The Graphic Portfolios and Manuscripts of the *Société Imaginaire* in the Collection of the National Gallery of Art." There were visits to the Hirshhorn Museum, the Phillips Collection Museum, and a private tour of the Vermeer exhibit at the National Gallery; formal and informal lunches (one at the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany); a "Permanent Workshop"; and the annual meeting of the Board of Directors of the Batuz Foundation, Inc. (USA), an unprecedented formality!

Finally on Friday, November 10, there were exhibits in the Kennedy Center Library that included works by the (formerly East) German artists Michael Morgner and Mark Lammert, photographer Inge Morath, and also of the *Société Imaginaire* portfolios.

MICHAEL MORGNER

"Ecce Homo," a shrouded figure, the "Burning Man," and the "Strider" have been three of the predominant motifs in the work of Michael Morgner. Referring to the "Strider," Morgner wrote: "Why do so few attempt this walk? Is man perhaps not the creature blessed with reason and erect bearing? Why do those who are bent, stooped over, find it so hard to bear the sight of an attempt at walking upright?" Ironically, the figure of the "Strider" came into being when the artist returned to his studio following a skiing accident, still incapacitated from foot surgery. This figure, walking upright with raised arms, emerged "on a first attempt, without forethought and completely automatically," Morgner wrote. By 1985 a good number of variations had developed on that theme, and an exhibition was installed in the Gallery Oben Karl-Marx-Stadt (which reverted to its original name, *Chemnitz*, after the reunification). Morgner says that friends understood this as a symbol right away, but so did enemies, with 120 spies going to work, shadowing "The Worm" (the code name under which the artist had been classified by the STASI since 1976) as well as his family and his friends. But within four years, millions of East Germans were walking upright again, and the commissars of the ancient regime were so taken by surprise that they capitulated without a fight. During this time Morgner completed five 250X200 mm pictures with the figure of the "Strider," and thirty drawings of the "Strider" and the "Burning Man." He dedicated these to the 9th of November 1989, the day the Berlin Wall came down. Long before then, an etching of the "Strider" had been carried across the Wall by Dr. Werner Schmidt, Director of the Dresden Gallery of Etchings, in exchange for a work of contemporary American art with the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

MARK LAMMERT

Jochen Boberg, Director of the Museums of the City of Berlin, spoke about the exhibition of the work of Mark Lammert as follows:

There are only a few ways in which to escape the prescriptive totalitarian systems, and all of them are filled with obstacles, to say the least. It is therefore astonishing that so much authentic art could be created in the niches of a GDR society. Only now are the contours of



Mark Lammert. Inge Morath, Magnum Photos, Inc.

this treasure becoming evident.

Among those who managed to resist the pressure of the state and the exigencies of the times was Mark Lammert, who quietly but unmistakably articulated an independent image of mankind. His conception is an individualized image with a focus on the head, on the human figure. As Michael Freitag wrote of Lammert, "His drawings are inventions of a pure reality of image-making. They are governed by a rational process of recognition that affirms that the visual reality can itself only be comprehended as process." The superficial motive of the observed object is therefore superseded by his art.

By these characteristics Mark Lammert and his art can be connected to the *Société Imaginaire*, which, as Mark Strand said, only represents the result of the activities of the individuals of whom it consists and to whom it is obliged. This sense of obligation is traceable even more strongly in artists living in communist societies than in western democracies, and it demands our special attention when it is fulfilled. We exhibit the works of Mark Lammert in the context of the *Société Imaginaire* for that reason also.



Inge Morath by Peter Baum.

INGE MORATH

In June, 1995, a major exhibit of photography opened in the restored "residence" of the King of Saxony, in Dresden, marking the ever-growing reputation of a great American artist. It was entitled, "Inge Morath and the *Société Imaginaire*." It had all begun with Ms. Morath's photographs accompanying Michel Butor's essay "Meditation sur la Frontière" about the painting of Batuz, and especially one photo depicting both Batuz and his work "Omen I," which is acknowledged as having established the relationship between the development of his ideas in the context of esthetic expression. Intrigued, Ms. Morath went on to work on notable subjects in the artists, writers, and political leaders who gathered at regular intervals to participate in the

deliberations of the *Société Imaginaire*, thus creating an entire gallery of portraits, and in a way becoming the *Société's* photographic chronicler. A brand-new museum of photography bearing her name is scheduled to open this year at Altzella, Germany, where a complex of buildings that once comprised a medieval monastery is currently being restored as a permanent repository of art and literature and as shelter for related symposia and international festivals.

THE GRAPHIC PORTFOLIOS

Another form or medium of documentation of the *Société's* "Dialogue in Context," is a series of oversized, bound portfolios, each one an

international anthology of poetry hand-written in its original language and in translation, as well as works of visual art. The heavy "rag" paper, itself an object of art, is hand-made and bears the watermark of the Société's own Heyer Workshop.

Clearances 14

When all the others were away at Mass
I was all here as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one
Like solder weeping off the soldering iron.
Cold comforts set between us, things to share
Gleaning in a bucket of clean water.
And again let fall. Little pleasant-splashes
From each other's work would bring us to our senses

So when the parish priest-at her bedside
Went hammer and tongs at the prayer for
the dying
And some were responding, and some crying
I remembered her head bent-towards my head,
Her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives,
Never closer the whole rest of our lives.

Seamus Heaney

The first of these portfolios was put together in Argentina, where five local artists who participated in a gathering sponsored by the *Société Imaginaire*, met with several poets and writers from other countries, and set about to illustrate their texts. Another collaboration and compilation took place at Hartwick College, Connecticut, with a number of Polish artists illustrating North and South American writing. Still another portfolio was created in Uruguay, with President Julio M. Sanguinetti and Batuz sharing the job of selection and editorial coordination. In addition, Sanguinetti contributed a hand-written introduction to the portfolio, pointing to the role of the *Société* not only as a facilitator of interaction between culture and politics, but also a conduit of creative cooperation. The President of the Federal German Repub-

lic, Richard Von Weizsacker, contributed his own hand-written introduction to a portfolio, in which ten artists from the "new" German states illustrated original texts of world literature. Among the poets found in these portfolios are Milosz, Mutis, Enzensberger, Krynicki, Baranczak, Sanchez-Pelaez, Heaney, Merrill, Snodgrass, Strand, and Simic. These portfolios, while bear-

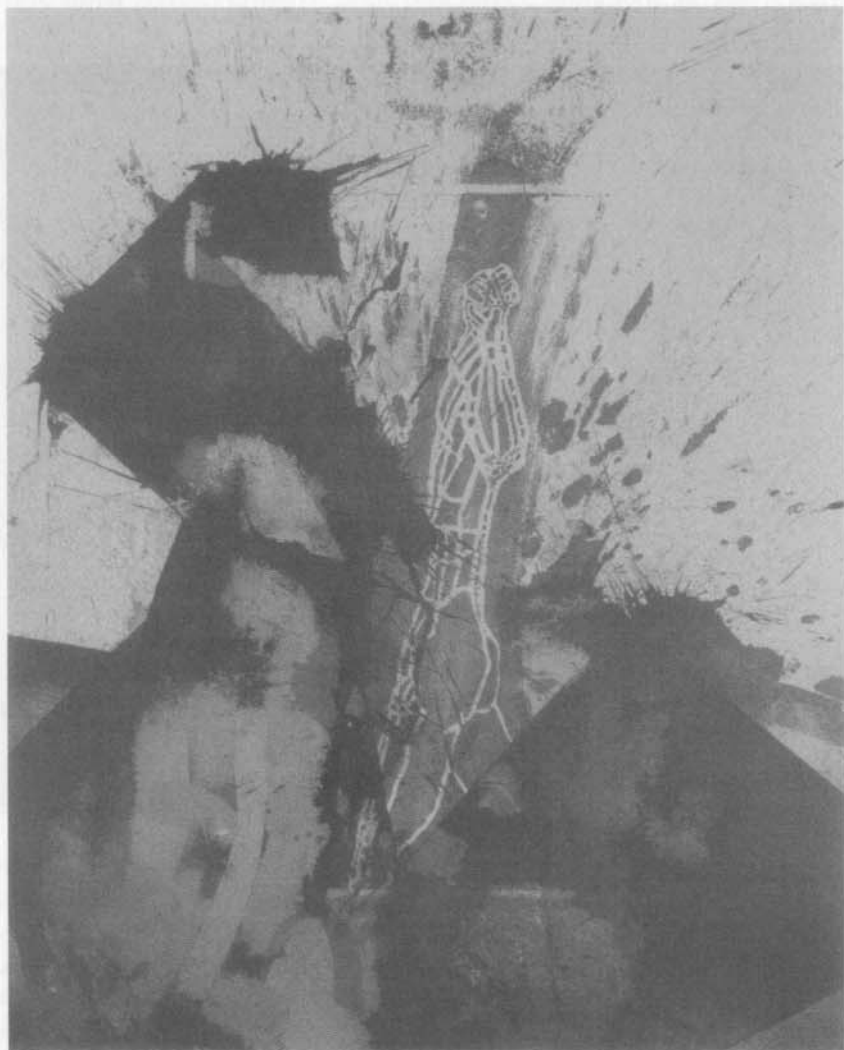


Illustration for Heaney's "Clearances III" by Igor Rumansky.

ing active witness to this great and awful age-in-transition, faithfully document the ever-evolving role of the *Société Imaginaire* as an assertive intellectual presence armed, against the sword, with brush and quill and, yes, lens. Yet another portfolio, matching central and east European artists with western European and American poets was soon afterward made in Slovakia, with the President of that country, Mihal Kovac, contributing his own hand-written preface. These portfolios, deposited at the National Museum of Art and several other museums and libraries, are currently valued at \$10,000.00 each.

The formal program on Friday, November 10 began at 5:30 P.M. in the Library of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, with the display of works by Michael Morgner, Mark Lammert, and Inge Morath, and the portfolios of the *Société Imaginaire*. At 6:30 the participants moved to the

Atrium, where Larry Wilker, President of the Kennedy Center spoke briefly, welcoming the members of the *Société* and the audience, following which the



"The Strider" by Michael Morgner.

designated moderator John C. Carr, a refined and witty speaker, introduced the participants.

The program proper was opened by a statement by Batuz, entitled "*The Société Imaginaire as Method.*" which is quoted here in its entirety:

Man's spirit oscillates between the desire to reach the absolute and disillusionment with the meager results he achieves in this effort. Despite inevitable, repeated failure, each individual, each culture, attempts over and over again to define its own world by its desire to achieve another, different from what already exists.

There are historians who compare cultures with plants — with something organic that is born, flowers, and dies. Others present cultures already in dialogue, interpreting them as a response to a challenge, an incitement brought about externally. In the latter case there is a *gestation period* for absorbing and eventually integrating what is new into one's own culture. The *Société Imaginaire* proposes a third scheme, better adapted to our contemporary, anti-traditional era.

Highly advanced means of communication have radically changed the way we gain our information about the world. News of events does not come to us as before in a linear and successive form, but rather all at once, from everywhere in the world. So it is that thousands of new and living cultures seem to us like parts of an enormous electromagnetic field. It becomes difficult if not impossible for us to grasp all at once, even less to establish values. The problem facing us is not ideological but methodological. We have to focus on it with a new form of apprehending, one that responds to this simultaneity of events and the news about them.

A visual example will perhaps clarify. All of the prior visions of history could be conceived of in figurative terms. Ours, however, can only be visualized abstractly. Let us imagine a huge abstract painting where innumerable differing shapes and intensities advance toward each other in apparent disorder. This disorder is only apparent, however, because there exists an intimate relation between forms that *correspond*. That is to say, each form shares something in common or possesses something which another form is precisely lacking, and this relation pushes them to communicate with each other. This is not exactly a dialogue, since all of the parts function in this manner. There is a permanent play between these forms that incite each other, challenge each other, collide and attract at the same time, thereby establishing an interaction of direct correspondence.

The *Société Imaginaire* reflects in its real and daily tasks that which is understood in the painting. In reality, it is the painting.

Something to ponder at—or, as Sheldon Schwartz, the Kennedy Center's Director of Programming was quoted as saying in *The Washington Post*, "It's wonderfully crazy. They're all on another planet. Maybe it should be called Planet Imaginaire." In the end, of course, it all depends on how you look at it. Some times even the writing on the wall is a painting.

Batuz's method, what Baranczak calls "a new context for dialogue" (Harvard Review #2, Fall 1992), seemed more palpable as the program moved on from the theoretical plane to the physical stage, i.e., the stage of the Kennedy Center's Atrium auditorium, where Mark Strand read "Poem XI" from his poignant, book-long poem *Dark Harbor* (reviewed by K.E. Duffin on page 186):

XI

A long time has passed and yet it seems
Like yesterday, in the midmost moment of summer,
When we felt the disappearance of sorrow,

And saw beyond the rough stone walls
The flesh of clouds, heavy with the scent
Of the southern desert, rise in a prodigal

Overflowing of mildness. It seems like yesterday
When we stood by the iron gate in the center
Of town while the pollen-filled breath

Of the wind drew the shadow of the clouds
Around us so that we could feel the force
Of our freedom while still the captives of dark.

And later when the rain fell and flooded the streets
And we heard the dripping on the porch and the wind
Rustling the leaves like paper, how to explain

Our happiness then, the particular way our voices
Erased all signs of the sorrow that had been,
Its violence, its terrible omens of the end?

There followed Julia Hardwig's reading of the same poem in her Polish translation—a language that few, if any, in the audience spoke, yet hardly anyone missed the idea of a "dialogue" that another tongue's sounds and rhythms can generate after the original poem has been heard. Strand's reading of "Poem III" from *Dark Harbor* was likewise repeated by Tomas Venclova in Lithuanian, a language even more remote to us than Polish but utterly affecting, considering the warm response of the audience. Next came Timothy Keating's reading of "Nocturno" in the original Spanish of the Columbian poet Alvaro Mutis (in absentia), matched by Strand's reading of Robert Bensen and Timothy Keating's rendition of the poem in English:

NOCTURNE

Tonight the coffee plantation turns again to rain,
rain upon the leaves of the plantain
and the high leaves of the *cambulo*—
persistent rain returns, an ample, vast rain—
rain that swells ditches and crests rivers
groaning under their load of clotted leaves and mud.
Rain on the zinc roof sings me from sleep
and makes way in me for its restless current
in the freshening night, in the night that streams
under the vaulted coffee trees
and seeps down the huge, infirm trunks of balsa.
And now suddenly, deep in the night

rain has returned on the coffee plantation
and within the swollen voices of the waters
something of the life of other days reaches me intact,
salvage from an alien work of those years.

And when Jacek Bochenski read in English a story he had written (in Polish) for the occasion, it was as though one of the portfolios of the *Société* had come to life.

President Sanguinetti, who had been at previous *Société* gatherings but this time reasons of state prevented him from joining us at the Kennedy Center, FAXed his greetings (read to us by Enrique Iglesias, President of the Inter-American Development Bank):

Para Batuz

Presidente de la República Oriental del Uruguay

Las migraciones excitan conflictos étnicos
Los fundamentalismos revivirán el terrorismo. El
narcotráfico es delito. No hay guerras entre
los estados pero sí entre los hombres.

Concepción tiene una mayor globalidad de
medios de comunicación y sin embargo, abra-
za los particularismos étnicos y nacionales,
a veces con fanatismos.

En el mundo, la *Société Imaginaire*
tiene una red de intercambios entre personas
e ideas que, más allá de la cultura de
cada uno, guardan gran espacio de intercam-
bio real, sin verborreos dogmáticos ni repeti-
ciones mecánicas, un grado de libertad dentro
del arte y espíritu.

Juan José Sanguinetti

Montevideo, noviembre de 1985.

For Batuz

Migrations awaken ethnic conflicts. Fundamentalisms revive terrorism and narcotraffic, crime. There are no wars right now among nations, but there certainly are among men.

Never before have we seen our means of communication reach such a global scale, and yet, ethnic and national particularisms are on the increase, at times with fanaticism.

Within this world, the *Société Imaginaire* extends a network of interchange among people and ideas, beyond each other's culture. Thus, it creates an open space for real interchange, without digested truths or mechanical repetitions: an open field where the spirit runs free.

Montevideo, November, 1995
(Translated by Timothy Keating)

Following, Professor Keating read his translation of a statement by the first elected President of Columbia, Misael Pastrana Borrero, who had left Washington the day before, still improving on his new universal language.

I don't think that anyone who first hears about the *Société Imaginaire*, so simple in Batuz's creative mind and dynamic will, does not at first feel very skeptical about it. This is logical when one is faced with ideas that break with rigid, traditional schema. At the same time, I am quite sure that there are very few who, having penetrated into the logical conception of the *Société Imaginaire*, are not captivated by the conviction that there is no force like an idea that interprets the changing winds of the times. Recall, for example, the realization of the youthful rebels of Paris in 1968 as they graffitied the walls, history's witness: "Power to the imagination!"

Imagination is a faculty which becomes a cardinal virtue when it is moved by a noble and generous ambition, and if Batuz with imagination can succeed in having its fertile seed germinate in more and more minds, the society of this coming century will indeed be more imaginative and less dogmatic, because in the final analysis, imagination is impregnated with dreams, and as the writer from Spain's Golden Age, Calderon de la Barca declared: "Life is a dream, and dreams are dreams."

Washington, November, 1995

And the program concluded with three more statements, mercifully brief, by Dean Millon, Prorector Schmitz, and the author of this article.

It wasn't easy illuminating and entertaining a Washington, D.C. audience, but the program was a success, and the *imaginary* members, joined by some 100 invited guests, repaired to the Center's South Opera Tier Lounge for dinner and lively conversation.

Departure the following morning ensued for points north, south, east and west, with plans already taking shape for a debate about the future of Germany and the Jews (triggered by playwright Arthur Miller's essay, "Uneasy about the Germans," in *The New York Times Magazine*), to be held in Chemnitz on March 31, and after that a retreat in the Konrad Adenauer Villa at Lake Como, in May, for further dialogue (and some good Chianti) in context.

Stratis Haviaras

Société Imaginaire

The Night of the Libraries

Diderot's Cat, Selected Poems by Michael Krüger. Braziller, 1994. \$14.95 ISBN 0807613436.

The End of the Novel by Michael Krüger. Braziller, 1992. \$17.50 ISBN 0807612758.

The Man in the Tower by Michael Krüger. Braziller, 1993. \$19.95 ISBN 0807612979.

Himmelfarb by Michael Krüger. Braziller, 1994. \$18.50 ISBN 0807613630.

"The present must be here somewhere." Krüger

If not for translations, we would know nothing of such fine writers as Michael Krüger. We'd be condemned with no appeal to our academic and literary provincialism, which professes multiculturalism while continuing to have little knowledge of foreign languages and foreign literatures. The true multiculturalists have always been the little-known, miserably paid and underappreciated translators, and the few publishers who continue to enrich our libraries. Our gratitude must go, therefore, to George Braziller for publishing Krüger's three novels and selected poems.

Born in Wittgendorf in 1943, Krüger belongs to a generation of German writers which includes such well-known figures as Peter Handke and Botho Strauß. The three novels appeared in Germany in the two-year period, 1992-1993, and the volume of the selected poems, "*Diderot's Cat*," derives from thirteen collections of poetry published between 1976 and 1990.

Krüger's selected poems show us a poet of astonishing range. There are short lyrics, long meditations and sequences, love poems and elegies in this book. A poet of small occasions and diary-like observations, Krüger is also not afraid to address the most complex philosophical questions. Art and literature are present in his poems in ways that are no longer possible for American poets, who rightly worry that their readers know little of the past. The consequences are obvious. It is difficult for us to have the kind of meaningful dialogue with the past that the German poet does. We Americans only have our biographies to fall back on and little common memory of our grandparents' experience. In contrast, Krüger's poems take on the entire European cultural tradition.

Of course, it's not just art and intellectual history that the poet today inherits. This is a century of death camps and the mass slaughter of the innocent. What is the fate of our most cherished philosophical and theological ideas in the face of so much evil? What happened to all the projects for a better world that were still around only a few years ago? It is "the night of the

libraries" we are living in now, in Krüger's lovely phrase. It is as if the pages of all our beloved books have become dark and illegible. A shadow falls over them. "Literature, I see myself write, has got used to Misfortune," Krüger says.

Today in the Pantheon, as I sat down,
downcast, on a bench, set on translating
the daily murders—falteringly—into German, a shaft
of sunlight, came through the open dome, transfixing me,
and two birds, strident, screeching, measured the arch with their wings.
Somehow we will survive, in spite of
all the pat maxims that quake with impatience.
Evil endures too. Soon drowned my shout
as I reached the center, lifted my arms,
and bent back my head between my shoulders;
then ran out laughing, into the dark.
What a day it was for the beggars!
(From "Diderot's Cat")

Richard Dove, in the introduction to his solid translation of the poems, calls Krüger's project "The Anatomy of German Melancholy." Still, the fix the poet is in is familiar to us. We are all a bit like those gallery visitors, in Saul Steinberg's old cartoon, who are scrutinizing carefully an exhibition of blank canvasses. We are absorbed, we are making a huge effort to see clearly, but there is nothing there to see. Besides, as the poet says:

One fine day, the museum will open—
instead of painting, there'll be just thin air,
and one shining mirror on every wall
to reflect your face in the panic moment;
mirrored a thousand times, a single shriek
in the second the angel strikes the ground.
(From "Diderot's Cat")

Like a modern-day pilgrim, Krüger's poet makes his slow and uncertain progress across a landscape of cultural debris and ruins of old ideas. Only ghosts of what Krüger calls "the whole litany of imitation of God" make their occasional appearance. There's Virtù personified, wearing a weary smile. Good and Evil, Hope and Justice, Beauty and Memory, as in old illustrations of Christian allegories, are shadowing the poet. Who am I? Who was I yesterday? What am I today? He mutters as he tries to find his way. In the world of endless role-playing and self-disguises, the question of identity is the supreme one for the poet.

You've lost your way in fairy tales. Your only escort:
crossbills that tried (in vain) to extract
the nails from the hand of the Lord. You pass
uninhabited villages by where ramblers
darken the doorjamb and lintels, where moss

has crawled its way over the roofs, carpet-thick.
Saints are sitting wearily on spotted clouds,
counting Poverty, Meekness, Charity
on their fingers, loaded down with privileges.
Skulls grow out of the loessial soil,
look at you, melt back into the mist.

No soul for miles around; the washing
is loudly reeling about on the line, and fungi drying
away on the insides of weathered window cavities.
On the church—with its incompatible towers—
the crumbling doves are being fed seed,
al fresco, by some wrinkled fingers.
There on the corner, bleached, the black rat
from childhood, turned almost white by the dust
that's rising like smoke. I start, as though
I'd been under a spell, an evil spell,
and see the dove, a rusty nail held fast in its beak.
(From "Diderot's Cat")

There are things poetry can usually do better than fiction: it can voice the solitude of the individual human being; it can convey what it's like to live in the moment; it can make little mean a lot. It's hard, therefore, to imagine a lyric poet writing a thousand page novel. There are exceptions, of course, but in the majority of cases when poets turn to fiction, brevity is the rule. If less is more, as the lyric poets proclaim, why go to great length? The use of images, figures of speech, and symbols encourages conciseness.

For such reasons, perhaps, when poets stray into fiction, they are greeted by almost universal suspicion. The reviewers inevitably use terms like "poetic prose" and "poetic novel." For critics who have already decided what reality is and who think of the short story and the novel exclusively in the great realist tradition, poetry is a flight of fancy, or even worse, a perverse exercise in futility. In their view, lyric poetry is the mortal enemy of good prose.

If the realist novel is a variation of the historical narrative where time can be represented as a line moving irreversibly into the future, the poetry's time is the cyclical time of myth. To combine the two would appear to be an impossible undertaking, and yet such marriages of incompatible cosmologies are responsible for works of literature we regard as most "modern." Prose borrows poetry's view of eternity. I have in mind, of course, Kafka, Joyce, Borges, Marquez, Woolf, and so many others who make narratives that circle back on themselves like lyric poems. In fictions written by poets, likewise, time turns into image, imagination rules. It's not only the stories that these writers tell that we remember, but more importantly it's their odd and original way of seeing the world that stands out. Eccentric vision of commonplace things and events is poetry's house specialty.

Under a crucified man a naked Indian woman was sitting
at the Singer machine sewing together large, bloody
scraps of skin.

(From "Himmelfarb")

So I wander through the city that is empty of cars, empty
of people. Only in the darkened bistro is a waiter
polishing the counter, whose shine through the window
acts like a signal.

(From "The Man in the Tower")

Prose narrows meaning, the poetic image multiplies it. The origin of language is the abyss of the eye. The image is, perhaps, as close as we ever get to things themselves. Clear ideas are not the province of poetry, the ineffable is. Poetry is most itself when it eludes paraphrase. A powerful image brings the narrative to a stop. It's not what the world is that poetry is primarily concerned with, but what the world feels like. The novel relates; the poem tries to leave unsaid as much as possible.

This is how Krüger writes his novels too.

My favorite work of his fiction is "The Man in the Tower." It tells the story of a well-known German painter who has rented a tower near Toulouse in order to paint the changing seasons. Weighed down by his past life and grave doubts about his art, he's unable to begin painting and instead spends his time translating the "Divine Comedy." A chance meeting with a mysterious woman, who leaves him after two happy days without an explanation, taking his car and leaving him no forwarding address, involves him as a possible accomplice in the murder of a policeman. Despite the turmoil, he begins to paint well. Eventually, he receives a phone call from the woman asking him to meet her in Florence. He obeys. There he encounters several equally mysterious characters and acquaintances of the woman, but she does not keep her appointment. All he ever finds out about her is her name. She's called Beatrice and, like Dante's own Muse, she is unattainable.

In an important scene toward the end of the novel, the narrator waits for his beloved in an apartment in Florence. As he waits, with little hope of her coming, his sight clears. He begins to notice minutiae, specks of dust, doorknobs, the pattern of the grain in the tabletop. Nothing changes in his circumstances but the way he experiences the world. "Everything becomes a significant sign that needs clarification," he comments, in that heightened state of consciousness. Like anyone who has experienced that state, he feels himself on the verge of a profound vision and a great truth.

Is this the belief that distinguishes poets from prose writers? Can one be a poet and not subscribe to some version of Dante's visionary quest? Isn't the love for the unattainable "Other" the reason most lyric poems get written? The poet may be, as Stevens said, a "metaphysician in the dark," but clearly the yearning for transcendental vision has not abated even in such a seemingly intellectual poet as Krüger. "O Love," exclaims Catherine of Genova,

"can it be that Thou has called me with so great a love, and made me to know in one instant that which words cannot express?" This is "love in which life is bathed," Von Hugel says, writing of the mystic's experience, and both their words strike me as an apt description of what happens in this novel and in some of the most moving of Krüger's poems.

CAHORS

Someone who's come unannounced is standing
deep in the twilight; making
the silence grow
beneath the ploughed-up clouds.
We understand him,
understand his unreasonable joy.

As though beneath trees in the winter
when the final leaf,
only moments ago the world's mirror,
spins down, spins down,
strikes the ground.

Cathedrals like trees.
Hugging the trunk like a lover,
unasked, someone's
standing there and decoding the boughs.
(from "Diderot's Cat")

In the night of the libraries, do we still believe what books tell us? Not unless they're written by a poet as fine as Michael Krüger undoubtedly is.

Charles Simic

Société Imaginaire

The Continuous Life by Mark Strand. Alfred A. Knopf, 1994. \$14.00 ISBN 0679738444 (paper).

Dark Harbor by Mark Strand. Alfred A. Knopf, 1994. \$11.00 ISBN 067975279X (paper).

In Mark Strand's poems, light, in all its varying forms, is a dramatic and defining presence, if not the real protagonist. Often the world is portrayed in chiaroscuro, from a great distance, as remote and yet revealing. Or presented as a series of sudden darkenings and intense brightenings, each promising some coveted but elusive insight. Strand has a particular affinity for the crepuscular, those defining

moments of transformation when the shapes of the world, and our lives, are given their starkest outline:

The polished scarlets of sunset sink as failure
Darkens the famous scene: nature's portrait of us
On the shore while the flooding sun soils the palms
And wooden walks before the rows of tiny summer houses.
(*"The Famous Scene"*)

Indeed, what Strand has said of Edward Hopper's painting could easily be said of Strand's poetry:

His paintings frequently take place at dawn or in late afternoon in a twilight of few or no people. Again, the focus is the transitional. The times which combine elements of night and day paradoxically give the world greater solidity than it has when it is fully illuminated.

(*"Crossing the Tracks to Hopper's World,"*
Poets on Painters edited by J.D. McClatchy)

In *The Continuous Life*, these moments of insight are conveyed by a voice so neutral and oracular it seems to have access to some hitherto inscrutable Platonic text. Oscillating between question and declaration, momentum and cessation, it achieves universality by evading particularity. It often begins in the middle of a story, like someone surprised into articulation, yet utterly in control. Like the realist painters he admires in *Art of the Real*, Strand does not provide an "exhaustive rendering of topographic details," but instead establishes a link between the existing, and the wished for. Along with Stevens, whose cadences he often echoes, Strand believes that "Reality is the beginning not the end,/ Naked Alpha, not the hierophant Omega,/ Of dense investiture, with luminous vassals" (Stevens, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"). In "The Idea," the night wind's directive, "Go back to the place you belong," leads to a cherished cabin that can be possessed only by not being possessed: "But that it was ours by not being ours,/ And should remain empty." (The rhythm is reminiscent of Frost's line "The land was ours before we were the land's.") The poem announces, in its last two lines, an aesthetic of possession through distance, which contributes to the brilliance of this entire volume by diminishing the claims of insistent selfhood.

Even the figures that make their brief appearances are often generic, and therefore representative, like the girl and her mother in "Velocity Meadows." Devoid of the limiting particulars of time and place, they attain an iconic grandeur that manages to be intimate. The philosophical underpinnings of such divestiture and restraint are evident in the conclusion to "A.M.," which echoes the end of Bishop's "Filling Station": "How well the sun's rays probe/ The rotting carcass of a skate, how well/ They show the worms and swarming flies at work,/ How well they shine upon the fatal sprawl/ Of everything on earth. How well they love us all." But here gratitude has turned away from the maternal toward the inanimate, as if Strand has indeed taken up residence in Stevens's "old chaos of the sun," and become a worshipper of the indifferent light that bathes both beauty and decay.

The problematic boundary between art and life is a recurring theme. "Orpheus Alone" declares how "The third and greatest" poem "Came into the world as the world, out of the unsayable,/ Invisible source of all longing to be." This longing, and all the mutable forms it generates, is our home and our fate. In a prose poem, "Two Letters," Strand brings us a magnificently restrained epistolary treatment of the

adventure of Kafka's Gregor Samsa, one that reflects upon the tragedy and the promise of rebirth: "Do we not, if we are lucky, live many lives, assume many masks, and, with death always imminent, do we not keep hoping to be reborn?" "Chekhov: A Sestina," provides a rebirth of sorts for the sestina itself, which is granted, at last, the oxygenated space of prose, a thing it always seems to crave. "Fiction" asks us to reflect upon the rules of containment within different worlds, and the possibility, or impossibility, of traffic between them: "I think of the innocent lives/ Of people in novels who know they'll die/ But not that the novel will end. How different they are/ From us."

The title poem, "The Continuous Life," is in the form of an ontological primer, with calm imperatives for the simplest and gravest of lessons. It reminds us of what we conceal from children, and how we help to create the very innocence we marvel at. How, then, do we "confess" the lineaments of life to children at once watchful and unknowing? Modestly, with a kind of abashed patience: "Explain that you live between two great darks, the first/ With an ending, the second without one." Here are gentle rules for the perpetuation of perplexity.

Strand displays an original and refreshing impulse toward a kind of epistemological slapstick, which is the plausible underside of his more sober meditations. For the *verso* of profundity is often silliness, with its cruder and more colorful carpet weave. "From a Lost Diary" reflects upon silent anonymity, even as it provides a sly rebuke to our false intimacy with the greatness of the past, that depopulated village bequeathed to us by school, where we imagine we might stroll. Here is written justification for not writing, a prose skit compounded of ironies utterly appropriate in a world governed by vast erasures: "Why even write this down, were it not for my going on record as not having lived." "Narrative Poetry" presents us with the sheer implausibility of the mind's life in the everyday world, through a kind of sit-com with dialogue balloons filled with the hyper-articulate discourse of a graduate seminar. The "Grotesques" are weird anamorphoses of fairy tales; "The Couple" is a rollicking Audenesque exercise in trimeter veering recklessly toward (a dramatically punished) copulation. These comedic forays, with their clever timing and concision, are shadowed by the bold alternate theology of "Always," which imagines the "great forgetters" erasing what is known; they are as probable an oligarchy as any, and quite in accord with the facts of the world. These puppet masters of negation are glimpsed behind the vast scene changes geology promises: "'And only the cold zero of perfection/ Left for the imagination.'" But for Strand, what remains is "The blaze of promise everywhere."

Strand's spare and elegant language leaves us, in the end, with an astonishingly beautiful fatalism, one conditioned by the claims of a vanishing, ever-shifting, neutral world with its transient weather and brilliant light shows. Mortality does not occasion struggle so much as clear-eyed, unavoidable wondering at the inevitable:

When the weight of the past leans against nothing, and the sky

Is no more than remembered light, and the stories of cirrus
And cumulus come to a close, and all the birds are suspended in flight,
Not every man knows what is waiting for him, or what he shall sing
When the ship he is on slips into darkness, there at the end.

("The End")

Dark Harbor, whose title is taken from a painting by William Bailey, presents a stylistic contrast with *The Continuous Life*, because it takes the form of a Dantesque journey into the past to trace the formation of a poetic self. All forty-five poems are

made of tercets, a pleasing array of chinning bars for the philosophic mind. First and second person flourish, and distancing seems sporadic rather than inescapable. "Proem" robustly declares the origin of Strand's critical and creative enterprise: he will "begin to mark, almost as a painter would,/ The passages of greater and lesser worth, the silken/Tropes and calls to this or that, coarsely conceived,/ Echoing and blasting all around. He would whip them/ Into shape. Everything would have an edge. The burning/ Will of weather, blowing overhead, would be his muse."

Uncertainties and asides are part of the voyage. Ardent queries, playful reflections, and philosophical declarations all coexist the way objects do in a William Bailey still life. But the more conversational urgency of these poems, and their subtle expectation of an immediate listener, often make the music of the line less memorable than in *Continuous Life*—here, idea may take precedence, evading the chill harmonies of a more distant view.

We are at work on the past to make the future

More bearable. Ah, the potential past, how it swells,
How it crowds the days before us with feelings
And postures we had dismissed until now.

(IX)

The least successful poems are those that flutter too close to the personal; they seem flustered, perhaps, by the appearance of those details that haunt the less profound forms of realist painting. But Strand's voice, which achieves a kind of apogee in *The Continuous Life*, still weaves its spell in *Dark Harbor*. The past must be cajoled into yielding its secrets: how the self was formed, how art intertwines with life, how a style of expression begins to emerge. The boundaries between past and present become permeable, but only within the strict regimen of art. And still, the limits of the cryptic journey, and of memory itself, remain the ultimate subject:

The sheen of the possible
Is adjusting itself to a change of venue: the look
Of farewell, the sun dipping under the clouds,

Faltering at the serrated edge of the mountains,
Then going quickly. And the new place, the night,
Spacious, empty, a tomb of lights, turning away,

And going under, becoming what no one remembers.

(XV)

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