



POETRY AND LITERATURE CENTER

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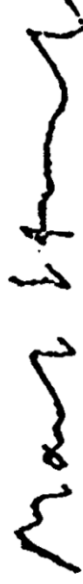
Dear Batuz:

It is now more than two months since the visit to Berlin, so I've had time to consider what happened there. My response to the city itself is shamefully superficial. East Berlin was an abyss of ugliness, hopelessly sad not only in the way it has institutionalized banality but in the way it has monumentalized it. West Berlin was sad in another way, in its forced cheeriness, in its American showiness, in its strident materialism, in the beaming tastelessness of its neon. What I remember with pleasure are the paintings in the museum in Dalem. What I also remember with pleasure is talking with some of the other writers. I believe that some of the friendships, though barely begun, will endure, that conversations and collaborations will continue. Which brings me to the point of this letter. What I noticed among my colleagues during those days in Berlin was a certain uneasiness about what the Societe Imaginaire was and what their role in it would be. It was odd that writers, so used to defining everything else for themselves, could not come to terms with the S.I. And I must admit, it was not clear to me what the S.I. was until I returned from Berlin and realized that it would be only what I made it and only what each writer who met in Berlin made it, that the responsibility for its identity and its continuance depended entirely on us. It would assume the shape of whatever our communication might be, and its vitality would be indistinguishable from that which animates each of us individually. In other words, our one obligation to the S.I. was to be ourselves. The S.I. put us in touch with each other and urged us to go about our business, believing that whatever communication we had with each other would be important, important enough to be preserved. So what is it about us that we deserve

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to be prodded into letters, translations, conversations? Well, we are writers. Our passion is language. It is the way we know ourselves. And because we have no institutional affiliations, at least none that could replace the commitment we have to language, we are free to speak for the way we experience our lives. Because each of us makes his language his own, we have no reason to lie or even to compromise. Nothing stands between us and language, none of us has to please an institution, whether the institution is a church or a government or any other abstraction. Such freedom is a rarity in our world. I think this is why the S.I. is encouraging us to speak. Most people speak through or on behalf of institutions, and what they say, as a result, suffers a degree of distortion, a tenuous relation to the truth. I don't mean to suggest that we don't identify with others or share their aspirations, that we don't have a sense of place or nationhood. I mean, rather, that the terms of our association with S.I. are entirely our own, and of our own making. The S.I., in its refusal to identify itself for us, is asserting its non-institutional character. It is up to us, if we feel the need, to identify it for ourselves.

Sincerely yours,



Mark Strand
Poet Laureate