Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org

Anonymity.

An Essay in Three Parts. I.

A. Coward

«Criticality» is important in the art world, maybe even indispensable. «Criticism», not so much. The days in which a Clement Greenberg could canonize or curse an artist's career are long gone. Could it be that it's time for journals to go back to publishing anonymous criticism?

To start in the middle: In general—we are not here talking about art writing, although we will get to it later—there are two kinds of anonymous writing. There is the anonymity that a writer has when they actively conceal themselves under a pseudonym, an alias, a *nom de plume*. And then there is a second kind of anonymity, a kind of camouflage that is more common, and less notorious, the kind of anonymity in which the name of the writer has no place at all.

In the first kind of anonymity, the writer intentionally creates a false identity for themselves. Perhaps paradoxically, this is sometimes done in order that they might be completely honest. The eighteenth century, partly thanks to the proliferation of small presses, was an era of constant anonymous pamphlets. Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, and Jonathan Swift all published anonymously. Their letters were colorful, sometimes evil-minded, and always entertaining. Such letters were also, historically, one of the precursors to what we call the free press. Perhaps the most important set of anonymous pamphlets, the *Junius Letters*, contained a defense of individual liberty, and a series of attacks on corrupt government ministers during the reign of King George III. Even after multiple court cases, the crown was unable to discover the author. Some forty or so English political figures of the time have been considered as possible candidates, from Edmund Burke (who taunted the government for being unable to catch the writer) to Edward Gibbon. The very fact that the author managed to remain anonymous, and unpunished, did much to encourage free speech. And not only was the speech free, it was also marvelous to read. Johnson's and Swift's texts were designed to be read, unlike those 19th century academic books whose authority was measured more by the weight of the volumes then by the speed at which the pages turn.

The Monthly Review, the first journal dedicated to reviews, was also anonymous. The first issue, published in 1749, contains an article denouncing, but also subtly promoting, de La Mettrie's atheist manifesto *The Man Machine*. Extraordinarily wicked, but very interesting, the *Review* implied. These well-known journals and articles were not alone. Between 70 and 80% of the publications of the 18th century was anonymous. For quantitative studies see, for example, Leah Orr, «Genre Labels on the Title Pages of English Fiction, 1660–1800», *Philological Quarterly* 90.1 (2011), 80–81; or James Raven, «The Anonymous Novel in Britain and Ireland, 1750–1830», in *Faces of Anonymity: Anonymous and Pseudonymous Publication from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, edited by Robert J. Griffin (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 145.

In addition to needing protection from enemies, or worse, reprisals from the state, there were other reasons why an author might wish to write under an alias. There are, for instance, those autobiographies that tell dishonorable truths about being alive, declare secret loves, or protest against universally accepted moral norms. For female writers, the revelation of any kind of interior life often needed to be done from under a mask. Jane Austen initially published *Sense and Sensibility* under the title of «A Lady», and *Pride and Prejudice* was published by «The author of Sense and Sensibility». Austen even invented a new grammatical form in order to make her characters more empathetic. Called «free indirect speech», it allowed the narrator to blur the distinction between first and third person, between «I» and «she». This kind of anonymity is essentially confessional. A mask makes it possible to speak the truth. Even those cases in which the intention of the author is wholly libelous, such as poison pen letters intended only to cause harm, draw on this confessional tradition for their plausibility and effect. So we can include smear campaigns in this category; even if the texts are sometimes full of lies, a smear campaign needs to be read as non-fiction in order to function.

The second kind of anonymity is quite different. In this second kind we might include the press release composed by a public relations consultant, the annual report, the statement on behalf of a political party, the ministerial whitepaper, the instruction manual. These are types of writing that are also anonymous. They could be called corporate or professional anonymity, for they belong to the kind of writing that comes from a position that cannot be attributed to any single individual. Almost all of them belong to that vast domain known as «gray literature», that world of texts that are produced by organizations whose main role is not publishing. Even if such a text is attributable, is *onymous*, the authorship of the text does not abide with the person who composes it. It is not *their* writing, the author writes on behalf of other individuals, or collectives. What is written reflects professional obligations, not

personal opinions. Here, we are in a space beyond honesty or lying, we are in a space of indifference, in which language has efficacy, but no commitments, and by extension, no honor. Gray literature is almost never critical, and it is very often boring. It is transient, neglected, and often lost. At the same time, there is an enormous amount of it. The majority of the published material on this planet is gray literature (don't ask me by what margin), and yet it remains barely researched.

These two classes of anonymity are very different, different enough that they seem barely related, and yet this shared status of anonymity allows for the possibility of some interesting transitions. This can be shown with an example. At the time of writing, in the early twenty first century, there are only two significant forums for anonymous writing in English outside of the internet: Private Eye, and *The Economist*.

Private Eye has transformed its position by refusing to change itself at all. Established in the 1960s as a satirical magazine, it has always featured anonymous articles. By refusing to modify its tone, or even improve the quality of the paper it is printed on, it has become the most important political publication in the United Kingdom. As the media landscape has changed and trivialized around it, *Private Eye* has become one of the more trusted sources of political news. Even when it has lost cases of libel (the magazine is constantly being sued), its accusations have often turned out in hindsight to be true. At the time of writing, there is a cheerful retraction of the claim that Mikhail Alenkin is an «arms dealer» that makes it completely clear that the editors are more convinced than ever that he is one («Mr Alenkin has confirmed to us through his lawyers that he has never been involved in arms dealing, including in relation to brokering the sale of any military helicopters. We are happy to accept Mr Alenkin's assurances and apologize to him for having wrongly described him in this way.»)

Private Eye's perpetual insolence is interesting to compare to that of the well-known magazine, *The Economist*. Established in 1843, from the earliest days it had something of David Hume's empiricist enlightenment about it, and its current address, a brutalist building by Alison and Peter Smithson in the center of London, appears to continue the tradition. The content of the magazine—economics—would seem at first glance to offer little in the way of fun, but the anonymity of the magazine allowed it to ruthlessly satirize powerful people and organizations. Editors for the magazine were sometimes—rather like the contributors to *Private Eye*—suspiciously well informed about decisions made in the corridors of power, with information drawn from so close to their source that the anonymity of the authors was necessary to protect them and their sources. Implicit in this anonymity was also a kind of objectivity, for the authors were able to base their economic arguments on no more authority than the reasoning they displayed in their articles. In this, *The Economist* was both a kind of scandal rag and a scientific journal, and it was this combination of characteristics that granted it a kind of literary charisma.

The charm of the *Economist* was reflected in strange ways, such as the almost bizarre captions that were routinely attached to its photographs (a random example: the headline «A Tsar is Born» for an article on Vladimir Putin). The tone is convivial, the slight cheekiness implies that the official euphemisms can be dropped here, that the truth will be told to you unvarnished. It is also noticeable that, for a magazine whose truth claims are based heavily on quantitative statistics, the prose is extraordinarily purple: abstract entities ride roughshod over flourishing numbers and tumbling graphs. Economies are down for the count, and sanctions deliver knock-out blows. If you read an *Economist* article without the nouns, it may read as if it was describing a boxing match, not the banking sector, which itself is a kind of honesty (more on boxing matches and criticism below).

In all this, the magazine draws on the traditions of pamphleteers and whistleblowers, on a combination of a suggested intimacy with the corridors of power and with the practice of the dismal science. However, what is also strange is how the magazine has changed. Over the last couple of decades, its position on ideological topics has become more consistent, and more predictable. *The Economist* endorses free trade, flexible labor markets, mass migration, and a capitalism less trammeled. It is on the left as far as gay marriage and open borders are concerned, and on the right when it comes to the sanctity of private property. It is, in so far as it is possible to be, a neo-liberal publication. The anonymity of *The Economist* has evolved over time from the anonymity of the pamphleteer, of the anonymous essayist, to the anonymity of the lobbyist speaking on behalf of unnamed clients. It is in no individual article that the magazine reveals that it is «owned», but rather in the consistency of these articles. What had been a dissonant, unpredictable, and interesting rag on the dry topic of economics has become a harmonious, and also fundamentally boring, magazine about globalization. Cumulatively, reading the *Economist* produces the same slight nausea that is caused by reading world bank reports, and the anonymity of the authorship feels like an evasion, not a declaration of independence.

The importance of *The Economist*, and *Private Eye*, is that leafing through them shows something of the value of anonymity to journalism, but also the difficulty of sustaining it. Anonymity suffers from a kind of catch-22: it has credibility, but only when it is not too serious. When it attempts to achieve respectability, it rapidly becomes indistinguishable from that gray literature that strangles the spirit of the word.

Continued in Part II

A. COWARD

doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13930238