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Opening speech at the 4th international literature festival

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House

of

Scientists

Dear friends, readers, and colleagues! Ladies and gentlemen!

The organizers have asked me to say a few words of salutation at this year's festival, for which I am sincerely grateful. For the first time in my life, I feel like I am greeting a ship coming into port.

The feeling is apprehensive, yet somehow, in some way familiar, as if from a forgotten film or dream: You stand on the wharf, the wind from the sea tousles your hair, a concert band (for full effect) plays behind you, the crowd is anxious—and here comes the ship into the bay. It's one of the most beautiful sights in the world. There's movement and commotion on deck: The chains are clanging, the anchor falls, the ladders are coming out. And the ship's cargo, to which the crew (that is, the festival organizing committee) has devoted sleepless nights and countless hours of work so that it may arrive at its destination, is finally brought forth from the cabins and the hold for the public; it becomes *visible*.

Ukrainians are a maritime people, so it's no surprise that this image was lurking within me—on the firmware of collective unconscious—to be activated right here and now in Odessa. For Odessa is undoubtedly a magical city: a city of mixed heritage, a city of *Surzhyk*, like all Mediterranean cities from Casablanca to Istanbul. The blood of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Republic of Genoa, of the Crimean Khanate and the Zaporizhian Sich have mixed in its sleepy veins along with half a dozen now extinct state formations varying in degree of antiquity and mythologizing. And such cities, just like high-born beauties, continue to enchant even when all that remains of their former beauty is wrinkles and ruins for the simple reason that they are *inexhaustible*. The concentration of stories in one square kilometer here has always exceeded human ability to tell them. For nearly the entire last century, Odessa, and Ukraine in general, was furthermore denied the opportunity to speak for itself in all its own, natural voices. Rather than the cultural polyphony native to these shores, a monody was imposed on it, and now the scope of the untold that has accumulated in the meantime teases it like the invisible vestiges of the Khadzhibey Fortress, which it is said lie two meters deep somewhere beneath Prymorsky Boulevard in the the middle of downtown like a treasure under the floor of an old house. No more than a month ago, the newspapers informed us that thanks to ground-penetrating radar, it was finally possible to determine its exact location, and new debates about the city's history broke out in Odessa: Did the city start with the destruction of the castle (which would make it a very young two-hundred years old), or with its first written mention (immediately making it six-hundred years old), or perhaps from the construction of the castle (in which case, the castle would need to be dug up to ascertain the precise age)? Despite the surrealism of the plot (are there many cities in Europe that don't know for sure how old they are, two-hundred years or six?), no one can deny that this is precisely that magic that leaves no writer indifferent: This is literature *in fluenta*, in the process of being created, where

Odessa is at once the hero and the author who decides what the hero should be. It is precisely this state of *unfinished myth-making* that makes the city the ideal humus for literature, regardless of how many writers have been born here and how many have left.

I understand why the most recent Odessa novel, written by the young Odessan Ivan Kozlenko and published just last year, takes its title, *Tangier*, from the William Burroughs epigraph. And why, in the book, our day and age is stitched together with the extinct 1920s and the “Ukrainian Hollywood” of the Odessa Film Studio, where unjustly forgotten geniuses worked alongside the authors of other, also unjustly forgotten Odessa novels. To this day, the museum at the Odessa Film Studio does not mention anyone whom the Soviet authorities had identified in their day as untrustworthy. Their disembodied shadows now rustle around in that space in vain, pretending to be sycamore leaves underfoot. So a whole throng of them readily invades a text that is open to them, rushing to speak after all these decades of silence, choking the text, tearing the film, demanding footnotes, and in this way creating what is either a remake of the 1920s or what in the future might become the “new Odessa style,” but which for now best conveys this state of *unfinished myth-making*.

And I, although in no way an Odessan, also have my own shadows here. These are my literary forebears whom I now imagine standing behind me like an excited crowd at a celebration, here at the Odessa port to greet our festival ship. One hundred years ago in spring 1918, the seven-year-old son of a midshipman’s helper strolled here with his mother, staring at the new flags on the ships of the Ukrainian fleet. Later, he, Mykhailo Stelmakh, became a writer with a tragic fate of his own, never mind that he was a Soviet laureate and a recipient of orders. After the defeat of the Ukrainian National Republic and the arrival of the Bolsheviks, the Stelmakh family fled Odessa for the interior, pretending to be peasants, and the writer lived with this scrubbed biography his whole life. That is, until in the 1970s, when a wave of repressions against the Ukrainian intelligentsia threatened to again cast into the hinterlands—not him, this time, but my parents from Kiev—that he deployed all his authority as a laureate to save our family. It is to him that I owe both the first foreword to my still childish poems and my first publications. In my mind, I’m standing up straight, sensing Stelmakh’s presence behind me; I know he would have been ineffably pleased to see his hometown as the final port of call for a landing party of international writers.

A bit earlier yet, 105 years ago, a woman in a white hat and black lace arm warmers (there is a photo) took her final walk along Lanzheron Beach. By her pedigree, she was perhaps the most “Mediterranean” writer of the 20th century—my beloved Lesya Ukrainka, in whose worldly biography Odessa, to be fair, remained an unrealized project (at one time, she hoped to become the editor of the local newspaper *Yuzhnye zapiski* [Southern notes] and seriously considered moving here with her husband). But in her texts, always facing the sea, a careful reader will recognize the scent of the acacias here, the Khadzhibey Estuary, the Shabo grapes, and even the famous catacombs she descended into with her Odessa friends. Without a doubt, the Roman catacombs that hide the heroine of her dramas on the history of early Christianity came from here, from Odessa. Who, if not she, our great “Europeanizer,” who in her plays and poems rewrote all of European mythology from a woman’s point of view—from the Trojan War (in

*Cassandra*) to the chivalric romances and legends of Don Juan (in *The Stone Host*)—could take greater joy from the fact that the city in which, as a young girl, she made plans to translate Western literature into the forbidden Ukrainian and with her girlfriends did translate Maupassant, Hauptmann, and Leconte de Lisle, has for the fourth year in a row now welcomed a festival of new contemporary writers who represent twelve world literatures?

One more character: In that very same 1913, one of the long-standing pillars of the Odessan literary scene, Mykhailo Komarov, publisher, critic, bibliographer, and owner of a unique Ukrainian library, which he left to the city of Odessa—although Odessa was not able to preserve it, just as it could not even preserve his grave (the Second Christian Cemetery where he was buried was destroyed by the Bolsheviks, and out of the entire large Komarov family, of seven children, only one son, Bohdan, survived, who, without waiting for an extension, fled to Tajikistan after his first exile)—stared out at the sea for the last time. Despite numerous petitions from the public, the Komarovs' names still do not appear on the map of Odessa today, but they are all in my crowd waving and joyfully greeting our ship: the beautiful translator Marharyta-Gretkhen with her husband, a professor of mineralogy at Odessa University; the clever Liuba who studied medicine at the Sorbonne, defended her doctorate, and disappeared without a trace in 1937; Halia, the talented poet and translator who disappeared in 1938; and the aforementioned Bohdan, the outstanding botanist, the only one to die a natural death, having lived to old age without ever being rehabilitated during his life or allowed to return to Ukraine. In their youth, they all worked on making Ukraine a full participant in the intercultural dialogue, for which they were all destined to be destroyed. Therefore, regardless of the fact that their return home has taken so long, today is their holiday as well.

Why am I telling you all of this? I often get the chance to travel to literary festivals of various kinds, and I see how at all latitudes doubts are gradually growing as to the effectiveness of this format for literature's existence—as to the festival as a cultural institution. It's understandable: More and more people are coming to realize that we live in a time when a new world war is unfolding—you can, of course, choose not to see it. You can convince yourself that it is “somewhere far away”—in Georgia, in Syria, in Ukraine—and that “nothing like that could happen to us.” But juvenile incantations against reality are good in their time; being an adult, however, is something else. This means understanding that, without exception, whatever has already happened to someone can happen to anyone. And here a question inevitably arises: What can (could) culture do under these conditions, and why hasn't it prepared humanity for the reality currently nipping at their heels, dully rumbling like the top of a volcano? And from there comes the unpleasant suspicion that we, perhaps, have been fooled. Did we not revel in the niches of our festivals like children at a fair with our smart conversations and good wines, forming around ourselves that which on social media is called a “filter bubble,” while beyond the borders of our niches, entire nations first stopped reading en masse and then voted for such blatant swindlers that it is truly hard to believe how it could have happened to us, we who are so beautiful and smart?

Recently, I heard a decisive verdict from my Polish friends who, for a few years now, have been unable to recover from a very cruel awakening: Basically, all these festivals

are for naught if there aren't any systematic government programs to promote reading. But my country's experience is different. I come from a culture that, for the entire modern and post-modern age, hasn't been able to tally even ten years of systematic state support put together, and which instead, for generation after generation, learned to survive *by circumvention and in spite of* all the government programs, since for the majority of history these programs were aimed against it. Paradoxically, today, under conditions of global crisis, this seems like rather decent training in Realpolitik (do what you can, and it is what it is!). It is no accident that in the country's "peaceful" territories, today's Russian-Ukrainian War revolves around a burst of cultural activity and simply feverish revival of festival life. Ukrainians are used to seeing every available form of communication (and there's no sense in denying that the literary festival has communication as its goal) as an advantage in itself, a sort of seed for a Maidan. For wherever people gather united by common values, the reign of swindlers ends. And only where there is an exchange of living human energies is there a chance to give birth to something new. So we are not simply having a festival, we are building horizontal ties in society beyond extant institutions—we're investing in the future.

So it is with my whole heart that I applaud the brilliant German-Swiss cultural intuition that a few years ago gave birth to the idea of bringing a beautiful, hand-selected ship of world literature to the Ukrainian shores of the Black Sea every year. Odessa needs this ship. And this ship needs Odessa.

Good luck!

*English translation by: Ali Kinsella*