

Ladies and gentlemen, friends, writers and readers – all those who cherish and value literature!

I find it odd to address you today not face to face, but rather, through a computer screen. Unfortunately, I am not able to join you in Odessa. For over half a year now the world has been facing a health crisis, and this has restricted travel. In addition, the pandemic has overshadowed other, no doubt, even more urgent crises. Countries are compelled to lock themselves inside their borders; people – to lock themselves inside their homes, within their family circle. And yet, at the same time, it has become ever clearer that we share one world and one fate: what happens in remote places, immediately resonates globally. I do not know which public health measures have been implemented in Odessa. In Lithuania, one must maintain social distance from others and wear masks; at a certain point, one was only permitted to go outside for a short walk. But such distancing rules highlight the simple fact that now one must speak even more clearly and choose one's words even more thoughtfully; otherwise you won't be heard or understood. To be permitted only a short walk means you must take in the outside world even more attentively. As for masks, this is nothing new for a writer – writers have always worn masks. Be they the mask of Aesopian language or merely metaphor, citation, stylization or parody. A poet hides behind his image, behind his own myth, whereas prose writers—they conceal themselves behind their characters. That said, a mask should not become affixed to one's face—one should retain the ability to breathe.

Although I am not in Odessa now, I can easily imagine being there. I have been there many times – first in my childhood, or rather, at that transitional moment between childhood and adolescence. It was in Odessa that my grandfather spent his youth and got married; my mother was also born not far away– in Bolhrad. I vividly remember its poplars and plane-trees, its grapevines and golden ash-trees, the splendor of the Potemkin Steps and the life of the little limestone backyards, the Privoz Market and the pebbles in Luzanivka. It was in Odessa that I was first introduced to the Mediterranean world. Even in the tightly sealed off Soviet Union, Odessa was a lesson in openness – in what has been called “universal responsiveness.” I would

therefore like to say a few words about the city – a wonderful place for the encounters between writers.

European history, as well as that of the entire world, begins with the Homeric *oinopa pontos* – the wine-dark sea—upon which the Odyssean ships hoisted their sails. This sea thus left its indelible mark on the first images of culture. The Black Sea became the most Northern part of the Mediterranean, bordering on the world of the Steppes. At first the Greeks named these waters *Pòntos àxeinos*—the “inhospitable sea” — whose shores, in their myths, were inhabited by sinister giants. By the way, I once chose these same words – *Pòntos àxeinos* – as the title for my very first poetry collection, which at the time could only appear in *samizdat*. The title alluded not only to impressions from my youthful travels, but also to the dangerous totalitarian world which we inhabited back then. In due course the Greeks renamed the sea “hospitable” – *Eùxeinos pòntos*, because they founded settlements on its shores, and developed relations with the locals – the Scythians, the Sarmatians, the Dacians. These shores thus entered the lore of the ancient world. It is near these parts, not far from the modern-day Odessa, that Ovid died.

Later, the tribes of the Steppes fell under the influence of Byzantium. Some of them converted to Christianity. In the Middle Ages, the Black Sea was reached by the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – whose successor is my home country, modern Lithuania. Today, it does not even share a common border with Ukraine, but only a few centuries ago it shared its fate. One Ukrainian writer and a public figure recently drank a toast to the Lithuanians – “the invaders whom Ukraine no longer remembers.” In fact, the Lithuanian invasion, as opposed to subsequent ones, can hardly be called an occupation – the Lithuanians did not impose anything upon the peoples that entered the Grand Duchy. On the contrary, they learned a great deal from the locals themselves. In fact, the origins of Odessa – then called by the Tartar name *Khadjibey* because Crimean Tartars nomadized in the area – goes back to the Grand Duchy.

These are only some of the tangled, interwoven strands that underpin the history of Odessa. The most important thread is perhaps that of the *Zaporozhian Sich* – one of the bases of Ukrainian nationhood and sovereignty. Yet, in Odessa one can also find an Italian thread (Odessa could be said to resemble Genoa), a French one (Odessa reminds one of Marseille), a Polish

one—as well as Moldavian, Armenian, and, of course, Jewish threads. There is also a Russian strand, but the real Odessan Russians are a special breed. Unlike a Russian from Moscow or St. Petersburg, they are more open, get along better with their neighbors, and are more Mediterranean, I would say. Perhaps, in terms of its culture, one could call Odessa an offshoot of the Levant. All this has contributed to an excellent Odessan literary tradition, which begins with Alexander Pushkin, Adam Mickiewicz and Lesya Ukrainka, and includes, to varying degrees, Anna Akhmatova, Boris Zhitkov, and Yury Olesha, Hayim Nahman Bialik and Isaac Babel—and is continued by contemporary authors of the free Ukraine.

Odessa – like my native city of Vilnius – is a borderland between countries and cultures. Frontiers can be exceptionally fruitful things for writers, as can be seen in the examples of Dublin, associated with Yeats and Joyce; Prague, linked to Kafka, Hašek, and Čapek; the city of Trieste, and many other places. But borderlands – including Dublin, Prague, Trieste, Vilnius, and Odessa – unfortunately, become all too often zones of conflict and strife. And this is where we return to the more serious crisis, which, as I mentioned earlier, is overshadowed in our eyes by the pandemic. For however serious the current health crisis may be, it is milder and more transient.

Thirty years ago, we witnessed the breakup of an isolated, hopelessly backward empire – a collapse that some today are trying to describe as the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century.” Of course, it was not a catastrophe, but the beginning of a more prosperous era. From it emerged—or were reborn—several free or relatively free countries that are startlingly diverse: they pursue their own direction and develop their heritages—ones which are not imposed by an inhumane dictatorship. Some have lagged behind, but in the end have joined the general stream. The most recent to join is Ukraine’s northern neighbor, Belarus, where under our watch there has emerged a people aware of its sense of dignity; a people who are demanding, with an enviable calm and nobility, that human rights be respected, and freedom of thought and conscience protected. However, obstacles have been thrown up in their way – from police crackdowns to secret, attempted assassinations, from falsified election results to forced expulsion and coercion to leave one’s country, from lying propaganda to direct military intervention, occupation, and annexation. And this can easily turn into a real geopolitical catastrophe. It seems

that we are returning to the situation of the 1930s. Dubious theoreticians and pundits are describing it as a return to “traditional values” and to “a multipolar world.” In reality, this is a return to conflict and unfreedom.

Eastern Europe is once again becoming a danger zone. The sovereignty of international borders are being shamelessly violated. To add insult to injury, this is being passed off as the will of the people. Borders that should be open only to goods and ideas, are being crossed in order to smuggle both murderous weapons and the murderers themselves. Last but not least, there appear temporary demarcation lines instead of borders, over which the gunfire continues. The dismantling of the Iron Curtain was a great victory. Of late, it has, in all practical terms re-emerged, with only some geographical shifts.

Writers – and more broadly, intellectuals – elicit hostility and scorn from dictatorial regimes. But this is not the worst thing, as hostility and scorn mask fear – at times a hysterical fear of losing control. What is more regrettable is that writers and intellectuals very often talk about their own inadequacy and irrelevance. One of the frequent contemporary, and not only contemporary, clichés is – “words can’t change anything.” I am not entirely in agreement with this assessment.

Sometimes literature, and not even necessarily first-class literature, directly contributes to social change: thus, Harriet Beecher Stowe helped abolish slavery, Zola and Dickens helped draw attention to the plight of the insulted and downtrodden in the industrialized world, while Solzhenitsyn helped destroy Stalin’s Gulag. But even more importantly: literature gradually changes our language and with this, our perceptions of life. In other words, it elevates humanity to a new level of development. After reading Proust, we see Paris in a new light, as a repository of memory, after Joyce, Dublin takes on a protean aspect, after Kafka and Tsvetaeva – Prague becomes a walled-in labyrinth. Not everyone has the ability to renew our perceptions in this way (although one should strive for it). Further, not everyone is capable of resisting evil. But one can at least challenge the status quo, attempt to initiate dialogue, promote a higher standard of intellectual life. One can, and should, be a sceptic in the world of the collective, resist imposed, “incontrovertible truths.” Finally, one can – and should – speak out against unjust wars, masked

or unmasked assassinations, police batons, prison cells, and torture. I believe that it is important to stick to two rules. The first overlaps with the medical maxim *primum non nocere*: *first, do no harm*, i.e. do not write or say a single word, which might promote slaughter. The second: always begin *not* with your adversary, but with yourself.

Perhaps the second rule needs a bit more explanation: many would say that one should call out the main culprit – the *revanchism*, the malevolent ambitions of a system that has failed to become democratic, and has remained imperialist. I agree that the primary fault lies with those more powerful – they bear greater responsibility. But there also remains a reverse causality. Therefore, one should not let one’s fellow-countrymen off the hook either. A country’s sense of dignity need not rest on excessive pride.

Our nationalisms, quite widespread in Eastern Europe, place the love of one’s motherland and nation higher than all other possible virtues – higher than reason, justice, and empathy. Indeed, the country where one is born and grows up – its landscape, language, history, the memory of generations past and the anticipation of ones to come– is important. But if destiny, upbringing, or even free choice find you there, rather than in any other country, then one should, above all, aspire that your country’s voice be heard as a part of a universal symphony. It should not be the voice of artillery, rockets, or bombers, but the voice of culture. One should also try, as much as possible, to correct one’s country’s mistakes – and these can often be serious ones. Unwavering criticism of your own kind is better than whitewashing or – even worse – the glorification of vices. To love your country means to oppose any attempts at self-isolation, for isolation is a removal from history. To love your country means to resist hatred, and remain clear-headed in the face of any crisis. Clear-headedness is the first sign of a serious writer. Our encounters can and should sharpen our minds.

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