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Odesa's Many Frontiers

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Résumé de l'article

Ivan Kozlenko's novel *Tanzher* (Tangier) became one of Ukraine's biggest cultural events of 2017, vigorously debated in the country's media and shortlisted for multiple prizes. This ambitious Ukrainian-language novel by a native of a predominantly Russophone city is simultaneously a love letter to Odesa and a daring subversion of the superficial version of the city's popular myth, widely disseminated both by mass media and by scholarly discourse. A novel whose plot centres on two pansexual love triangles, one taking place in the 1920s, the other in the early 2000s, *Tangier* employs strategies of intertextual engagement and multidirectional memory to construct an alternative affirming narrative. It focuses on the episodes in Odesa's history during Ukraine's wars of independence in 1918–20 and the time it served as Ukraine's capital of filmmaking in the 1920s and seeks to reinsert this queer-positive narrative into the national literary canon. This article analyzes the project of utopian transgression the novel seeks to enact and situates it both in the domestic socio-cultural field and in the broader contexts of global countercultural practices. It also examines the challenges faced by post-communist societies struggling with the new conservative turn in national cultural politics.



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Abstract: Ivan Kozlenko's novel *Tanzher* (*Tangier*) became one of Ukraine's biggest cultural events of 2017, vigorously debated in the country's media and shortlisted for multiple prizes. This ambitious Ukrainian-language novel by a native of a predominantly Russophone city is simultaneously a love letter to Odesa and a daring subversion of the superficial version of the city's popular myth, widely disseminated both by mass media and by scholarly discourse. A novel whose plot centres on two pansexual love triangles, one taking place in the 1920s, the other in the early 2000s, *Tangier* employs strategies of intertextual engagement and multidirectional memory to construct an alternative affirming narrative. It focuses on the episodes in Odesa's history during Ukraine's wars of independence in 1918–20 and the time it served as Ukraine's capital of filmmaking in the 1920s and seeks to reinsert this queer-positive narrative into the national literary canon. This article analyzes the project of utopian transgression the novel seeks to enact and situates it both in the domestic socio-cultural field and in the broader contexts of global countercultural practices. It also examines the challenges faced by post-communist societies struggling with the new conservative turn in national cultural politics.

Keywords: Ukrainian literature, Odesa, urban myth, multidirectional memory, postmodernist intertextuality, alternative canons, queer writing.

In recent years, discussions of Ukrainian culture often sought to combine two seemingly opposite trends: an emphasis on unity, in the face of attempts at fracturing the nation along political, regional, generational, linguistic, and other lines, and the thesis that its diversity can be seen as a source of its strength. This can definitely be observed in the discussion of its cultural, and especially literary, canon: spurred by George Grabowicz's challenge to rethink the history of Ukrainian literature and Marko Pavlyshyn's influential essay on the politics of Ukrainian literary canon ("Aspects of the Literary Process in the USSR"), a number of scholars and practitioners of Ukrainian culture sought to revise and reconceptualize the canon and the criteria on which it is based. Among the most notable examples of this kind have been efforts of Solomiia Pavlychko and Tamara Hundorova. Thanks to the work of

these and other scholars, we have begun to think of the Ukrainian cultural canon not as a static “iconostasis” but as a dynamic system.

In exploring this dynamic system, both the spatial and the temporal axis have been investigated. Thus, Iaryna Tsymbal’s series of anthologies *Nashi dvadtsiati* (*Our Twenties*) brought a rethinking of Ukrainian 1920s writing to a broader audience, as did the campaigns to mark the anniversaries of the Futurist poets Mykhail’ Semenko and Geo Shkurupii, both of them victims of Stalinist terror. At the same time, regional dimensions of the canon have been explored as well, such as in Irena Makaryk and Virlana Tkacz’s *Modernism in Kyiv*, John Czaplicka’s volume on Lviv, or the 2015 conference *Kharkiv: City of Ukrainian Culture* at Columbia University and the special issue of *EWJUS*, also on Kharkiv (*Kharkiv: The City of Diversity*). In the context of literary activity of recent decades, it has become commonplace to speak of distinct literary schools associated with specific Ukrainian cities, such as Ivano-Frankivsk or Zhytomyr. There has also been a distinct fascination with geography in post-Soviet Ukrainian writing, as discussed by Pavlyshyn (“The Rhetoric of Geography”; “Literary Travel”) and in my earlier work (“The Trope of Displacement”; “Identity Quests”).

Within this overall trend, the city of Odesa has been curiously marginalized. While the city has a rich cultural history and its literature and arts are internationally renowned, Odesa has long had an ambiguous position within Ukrainian cultural history and national imaginary. Although for several decades of the late nineteenth-early twentieth century it was the largest city in Ukraine, its coastal location and role as a major international commercial port led to a tentative, liminal status often ascribed to it. Ethnic Ukrainians constituted a minority in it until the 1930s,¹ but in that the city differed little from other major urban centres in Ukraine before the mass migration to the cities in the 1920s and 1930s, thematized, among others, by Valer’ian Pidmohyl’nyi in the case of Kyiv. However, while Odesa had an active and large Hromada since the mid-1870s (Boldyriev), was home to one of the strongest local branches of the Prosvita movement (Iareshchenko), and served as a major publishing centre, including for Ukrainian-language books and periodicals (Zlenko), it rarely functioned as a setting in major Ukrainian-language literary works. Among the rare exceptions are Ivan Nechui-Levyts’kyi’s *Nad Chornym morem* (*On the Black Sea Coast*, 1890) and Iurii Ianovs’kyi’s *Maister korablia* (*The Shipbuilder*, 1928). Yet while both of these are fascinating, thought-provoking texts, and as we shall see below, the

¹ According to the 1939 census, the city’s population was divided almost evenly between three main ethnic groups: Jews (33.3%), Russians (30.9%), and Ukrainians (29.6%). http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/ussr_nac_39_ra.php?reg=336. Accessed 2 Dec. 2021.

importance of Ianovs'kyi's novel has grown significantly in the city's context, they are still not firmly associated with Odesa's literary myth.

The literary image of Odesa as a unique heterogeneous place, a multilingual and multicultural outpost of Mediterranean culture within the borders of the Russian Empire, began coalescing already by the 1820s, and its first canonical text is the description of the city in Pushkin's "Puteshestvie Onegina" ("Onegin's Travels"), a supplemental chapter added to his novel in verse. By the end of the nineteenth century, the myth morphs to focus on the city as a bustling centre of secular Jewish culture, some of it in Yiddish and Hebrew (including such major authors as Sholem Aleichem and Mendeleyev Mocher Sforim), but especially in Russian. Here it is important to point out the merging of the Odesa discursive myth as "body of lore—the legends, the folksongs, the anecdotes—that has been collected, embellished, and passed down for two centuries" (Tanny, "The Many Ends of Old Odessa" 22) and the city text as associated with the "Southwestern" school of Russophone literature that emerged in this city in the 1910s–20s as a distinct strain within Modernist writing (Stanton, intro., ch. 1). While many authors associated with this group were not Jewish, Odesa became a unique city in the context of the Russian Empire and later, the Soviet Union, where acculturating into secular Jewish culture was considered desirable and prestigious for non-Jews, and the writer who gained international fame as the quintessential representative of this school, Isaac Babel, came to be viewed as the Modernist Russophone writer who explored Jewish culture and his own Jewish identity in particularly profound and memorable ways.

Unfortunately, it is a shallow stereotypical representation of the vision of Odesa as depicted in Babel's stories and the lore referred by Tanny that came to dominate the city's self-image and the version of its cultural identity marketed by the tourist industry. It is this version of the city that is recreated, often in caricature, minstrel-style ways, in many works of Russian-language Soviet and post-Soviet mass culture, such as the popular Russian television series *Likvidatsiia* (*Liquidation*, 2007), set in Odesa immediately after the end of World War II. Within this mass-marketed stereotype, the city is associated with Jews (often portrayed through clichés that border on overt anti-Semitism), crime, and a vernacular that combines elements of Russian and Yiddish—again, understood in a reductive way, as the historical Odesan vernacular, now almost gone due to the influence of mass media, was a patois that mixed features of many other languages besides Russian and Yiddish, most notably Ukrainian, French, and Turkish (Stepanov). Odesa's place and role within Ukraine, its connections to Ukraine's history and culture, past and present, are nowhere to be found in this mass-market product, even though by census results ethnic Ukrainians constituted a plurality within the city by the 1950s, and a majority by the 1980s. This glaring absence is also unfortunately true of much Western

academic scholarship about Odesa, which considers the city's Jewish community in a vacuum and renders non-Jews, and especially Ukrainians, nearly invisible and likewise reduced to flat stereotypes, including in Roshanna Sylvester's unfortunately named *Tales of Old Odessa: Crime and Civility in the City of Thieves* and, to a lesser extent, in Tanny's *City of Rogues and Schnorrers: Russia's Jews and the Myth of Old Odessa* (2011).

The tense situation in the city following the Revolution of Dignity and the collapse of the Ianukovych government, especially the 2 May 2014 tragedy, when several pro-Maidan activists were shot in skirmishes in the city centre, and then over forty persons (many of them opponents of the Maidan-led changes) lost their lives in the fire of the Odesa Oblast Trade Union Building, was aggressively exploited by Russian and pro-Russian propaganda outlets, both in mass media and online. Odesa, like other major cities in Ukraine's eastern and southern regions, came to be viewed as an arena of harsh ideological clashes and of intense memory wars. At the same time, this constituted a major problem for the city's economy, which is strongly dependent on tourism, both domestic and international, and therefore, economic considerations appeared to take the upper hand and ease the tensions eventually. As the city, together with the rest of Ukraine, transformed in recent years, the question of rethinking and deconstructing its dominant myths and stereotypes, re-evaluating and productively complicating its rich and diverse legacy, came to the fore and became a prominent focus of a number of local intellectuals, among them academics like Oksana Dovhopolova (Dovgopolova) and Kyrylo Lipatov, writers like Borys Khersons'kyi (Boris Khersonskii) and Andrii Khaiets'kyi, visual artists like Oleksandr Roitburd and Ihor Husiev, and many others. Nuanced and rich scholarly explorations of the city's past and of the present-day engagements with it have been offered by several Western scholars, most notably Patricia Herlihy (*Odessa: A History; Odessa Recollected*) and Tanya Richardson (*Kaleidoscopic Odessa*).

The recent exhibition titled "Metafizyka. Ostriv" ("Metaphysics: An Island"), co-curated by Dovhopolova, Natalka Revko, and Kateryna Semeniuk for the *Mynule. Maibutnie. Mystetstvo* project and presented at Odesa's NT-Art gallery in October-November 2021, can serve as a good introduction to the diverse spectrum of efforts at re-evaluating, deconstructing, and transforming Odesa's urban myth(s).² In both the curatorial text and in media interviews, the curators highlighted the challenges presented by the Odesa myth. They note that their approach is anti-nostalgic, and that they sought to cut through the superficial cheerfulness of the commercialized version of the Odesa myth and explore

² See <https://www.pastfutureart.org/metaphysics-island>. Accessed 2 Dec. 2021.

other, different senses that radiate through it. Seizing on the blinding hot summer noonday sun as a trope, they highlight the strange timeless feeling it generates, the simplified lines and shapes, and the rich, if also faded, colours. The other word in the exhibition title, "island," was meant to attract our attention to the city's symbolic place between two seemingly endless expanses—of the sea and the steppe that are simultaneously linkages essential for its identity and markers of its symbolic self-sufficiency and even self-centredness.³ The works in the exhibition were drawn from the legacy of Odesa's nonconformist painters of the 1960s–70s, notably Valerii Basanets', Iurii Bozhko, and Liudmyla Iastreba. A painting by Iurii Iehorov, arguably the best-known Odesa painter of those decades and a mentor of the nonconformists, titled "Poluden'" ("Noon"), is an excellent example of this trend, with its urban seaside landscape reduced to a minimum of details and overpowered by intense sunlight.

Figure 1. Iurii Iehorov, "Poluden'" ("Noon," 1986), reproduced with permission from the "Metafizyka. Ostriv" exhibition organizers, the Mynule. Maibutnie. Mystetstvo project (pastfutureart.org).



³ A key part of Odesa's cultural narrative is the status of a free trade zone (*porto franco*), enjoyed by first the port, and then by the entire central part of the city, for several decades in the nineteenth century, which thus made it feel quite separate from the lands adjacent to it. Its prominence in the city's imaginary is confirmed by the title of the first censorship-free anthology of Odesan contemporary poetry published in the final months of Soviet rule: *Vol'nyi gorod* (*Free City*).

The curators emphasize that this aesthetics, this alternative mythology co-exists with the dominant commercial one, and that grasping the city's senses is only possible at the boundary between, in the meeting of, those sets of images and values. Even the dominant literary myth of Odesa, in their opinion, is divided between the gravitational poles represented by Babel's stories and the Odesa-focused writings of Vladimir Zhabotinskii (Ze'ev Jabotinsky). Both zero in on secular Jewish culture as one of the city's defining cultural features, but the former explores the romanticized grotesque associated with the criminal gangs of the Moldavanka neighbourhood, while the latter focuses on the city-centre-based intelligentsia. However, because of his émigré status, Zhabotinskii's writings were banned in the Soviet Union, and thus his key Odesan text, the 1936 Russian-language novel *Piatero* (*The Five*) is only beginning to get its due recognition in the city. Therefore, the Odesa myth is inextricably bound with a history of selective suppression and erasure, and with later attempts at almost an archeological-style reconstruction.

The curators of *Metaphysics: An Island* link their vision with the key quote from Roitburd's manifesto for his influential 2018 exhibition *Metafizika mifa* (*Metaphysics of a Myth*)⁴: the artist Heorhii Senchenko, during a 1989 visit to Odesa, after Roitburd took him on a walking tour of the city centre, exclaimed: "You live here in a De Chirico landscape!" While Roitburd's own paintings were not part of this recent exhibition, this insight he shared illuminated the earlier artists' work with a new understanding, and it also spurred Roitburd himself to new experiments. In a nutshell, Iehorov and the 1960s–70s nonconformists created an original late Modernist image of the city, while Roitburd proceeded to perform a postmodernist deconstruction of it, playfully echoing both their work and the original efforts of Italian metaphysical painters like De Chirico. One of his paintings explicitly quotes Iehorov's signature imagery but also places the Odesa opera house on an island in the middle of a Iehorovian sea.

⁴ See Roitburd; for more about the exhibition, see <https://arthive.com/exhibitions/828>. Accessed 2 Dec. 2021.

Figure 2. Oleksandr Roitburd, “Prybuttia na ostriv Kiferu” (“The Arrival to the Island of Cythera”) from the cycle *Metaphysics of the Myth* (2018), in the private collection of the artist’s daughter Betty Roytburd, reproduced with permission.



This, however, is a multi-layered, playfully intertextual work that references not only De Chirico and Iehorov, but also Vitalii Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, the founders of *sots-art* as a quintessential form of postmodernist art practice in Soviet and post-Soviet contexts: Roitburd's opera house takes the place of Komar and Melamid's Moscow kremlin in a painting from their “Nostalgic Socialist Realism” series, where it likewise is an island floating in an imaginary landscape.

Roitburd's investigative project entails both the distancing from the city's dominant myth and an attempt to grasp its origin and contexts. He simultaneously highlights Odesa's origins as “a simulacrum city” built by Italian and French expatriates, who in the Ukrainian steppe constructed an idealized vision of a Mediterranean city, and the dominant “jocular” myth as the city's strategy of surviving Soviet rule. Yet his emphatic call is to tear off the shroud of the dominant myth so that we could perceive what he calls a “metaphysical Odesa,” a dreamlike condition where urban noise and even our own personalities dissolve into the sea and the air.

In a telling gesture, Roitburd's manifesto was reprinted as an afterword to the 2018 book *Odessaika intelligentsiia* (*The Odesa Intelligentsia*) by Khersonskii, and paintings from the project were used for the book's cover

and illustrations, thereby linking the projects aimed at challenging, deconstructing, and potentially transforming the Odesa myth pursued by the two, respectfully in the visual and the verbal arts. Khersonskii's projects are now gaining increasing recognition, and indeed an international fan following, although at this point the amount of academic writing on his work is still relatively limited. Although he was active as a poet long before, he finally received critical acclaim in the 2000s, while in his mid-fifties. A good introduction to Khersonskii's themes and projects, particularly in the context of Odesa, can be found in Iaroslav Polishchuk's recent monograph *Frontyrna identychnist': Odesa XX stolittia* (*Frontier Identity: Twentieth-Century Odesa*), which devotes to Khersonskii its closing chapter. For Polishchuk, Khersonskii both systematizes the understanding of the dominant myth and analyzes its functioning, highlighting the ways in which it shackles the city culture and stifles innovative cultural impulses (especially in his essay "Odes'kyi syndrom" ["The Odesa Syndrome"]).

Khersonskii's *The Odesa Intelligentsia* was published immediately before Polishchuk's study and thus is not discussed in it. The book is a veritably tour-de-force of a diversity of voices and masks. Its first two thirds are comprised by the playful series of absurdist sketches featuring a series of stock characters, among them the personified Odesa intelligentsia; the dramatis personae and their signature attributes are even described in a list early in the text (Khersonskii 13–16).⁵ The author serialized them on social media (indeed, his Facebook feed is a consciously constructed literary project⁶), and they have gained a considerable following. The final third of the book is comprised by the poetry cycle "Plokhoi raion" ("A Bad Neighbourhood"), which creates a mosaic-like panorama of Odesa's daily life, observed from many different perspectives, but invariably with a knowing melancholic—yet resolutely not nostalgic—tone. Khersonskii is a keen observer, captivated by Odesa and simultaneously frustrated by the city in danger of squandering its remarkable potential. The same message, with arguably even stronger melancholic notes, is developed in the cycle "Odesa z onym 's'" from the poet's Ukrainian-language book *Stalina ne bulo* (*There Was No Stalin*), also published in 2018.

While these projects interrogating and deconstructing the Odesa myth have many important differences between them, they are united in their desire to reveal the far greater, far more nuanced space of encounter and mutual influence of diverse identities and cultural forces that shaped Odesa's

⁵ A few of them are available in English translations from the short-lived but influential journal *The Odessa Review*: <https://odessareview.com/odessa-tales-by-boris-khersonsky/>; <https://odessareview.com/odessa-tales-boris-khersonsky/>. Accessed 2 Dec. 2021.

⁶ For an insightful analysis of it, see Uffelmann.

history. With the help of a greater awareness of this richness, they visualize a more constructive, more inclusive memory politics, and a similarly more inclusive and diverse future. To me, their efforts constitute a remarkable instance of exploring the possibilities of reimagining the city and its cultural text through the prism of multidirectional memory.

The concept of multidirectional memory, which has gained considerable currency in recent years, was proposed by the memory studies scholar Michael Rothberg, and developed in his influential 2009 book as an intervention in hope of finding ways out of tensions between powerful memory narratives. In a recent interview, Rothberg noted that “[th]e concept of multidirectional memory was [his] response to the tension . . . between recognizing the specificity of different traumatic histories and the need to avoid turning that specificity into a sacralized uniqueness” (“Understanding Mnemonic Complexity”). He further observed that in contemporary global cultural politics, this tension played out in what some called a “competition of victims” and in what Rothberg dubbed “competitive memory.” Thinking such competitions and conflicts over the past, and realizing that they were very real and often “seemed to take place especially among different minority groups,” the scholar became convinced that “the dominant public and scholarly way of thinking about that phenomenon was mistaken.” Rothberg rejected the “zero-sum logic” of memory politics, that is, the idea that memories crowd each other out of the public sphere: “Too much Holocaust memory, the story goes, blocks remembrance of other traumas, such as slavery or colonialism. Inversely, too much attention to slavery would threaten the public memory of the Holocaust” (“Understanding Mnemonic Complexity”). For Rothberg, this is a fundamentally erroneous approach. Instead,

[b]y looking at a particular (though significant) case—the relation of Holocaust memory to memories of colonialism and slavery and to ongoing processes of decolonization—I came to a different conclusion: that collective memories build on each other through a dialogic process of borrowing, echoing, and appropriation. I called this dynamic, non-zero-sum logic “multidirectional memory.” (Rothberg, “Understanding Mnemonic Complexity”)

The vision that Rothberg proposes in his 2009 volume and the later monograph *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* cannot be further from simplistic relativism. It is profoundly ethically grounded and emphasizes a crucial notion from Alain Badiou's *Ethics*: its need to be grounded in what he calls fidelity to an event.⁷ In his work, Rothberg

⁷ For more on this, see Rothberg's review of Badiou's book.

confronts some of the most difficult memory conflicts in today's world, such as the one between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and some of the most powerful enduring traumas, like the Holocaust and the enslavement of Africans by European colonizers. However, his approach is to optimistically seek out opportunities to find ways out of being caught up in tense memory conflicts. Rothberg rejects "two assumptions: that a straight line leads from memory to identity and that the only kinds of memories and identities that are therefore possible are ones that exclude elements of alterity and forms of commonality with others" (*Multidirectional Memory* 4–5). "When the productive, multicultural dynamic of multidirectional memory is explicitly claimed," he argues, "it has the potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice" (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 4). The brave intellectual project by Odesans like Dovhopolova and Khersonskii, similarly to projects by those who delved deep into the entangled, often painful past of other Ukrainian cities, like Ola Hnatiuk's exploration of Lviv in her *Courage and Fear*, can thus be seen as following Rothberg's dictum: "understanding political conflict entails understanding the interlacing memories in the force field of public space. The only way forward is through their entanglement" (Hnatiuk 313).

Still, as Dovhopolova has commented recently,⁸ many of these Odesan projects aimed at deconstructing the dominant city myth with the tools of multidirectional memory are focused internally, and reverberate only to a limited extent outside the city's intellectual circles. Khersonskii's controversial position within the city's literary community (to this day, he appears to enjoy much greater appreciation outside Odesa, and for many local literati, he is the figure they love to hate) point to the dangers entailed in stirring the anthill of self-satisfied consumption and reproduction of the dominant city myth. However, we now also have a striking and ambitious new attempt at challenging and transforming the Odesa myth in the context of contemporary Ukrainian literature, in a Ukrainian-language novel by a native of Odesa, Ivan Kozlenko, provocatively and paradoxically titled *Tanzher* (*Tangier*—more on this title below). The book directly engages the city's multicultural past and its ambiguous position as a seaport, literally located on the country's edge, and highlights its role as a Ukrainian cultural hub. Arguably the most remarkable manifestation of this role came in the mid- to late 1920s, when Odesa served as the capital of the booming Ukrainian film industry, and many notable Ukrainian writers, artists, theatre actors and directors became engaged in this ambitious project. In his novel, Kozlenko stages an intervention seeking to rethink the city's place in

⁸ In her remarks as a moderator at the first international conference of the working group on Post-Socialist and Comparative Memory Studies of the Memory Studies Association (PoSoCoMeS), Sept. 2020, held online. <https://www.posocomes.org/>.

Ukraine's cultural history and create an alternative multidirectional cultural narrative that recognizes and affirms its past contributions to Ukrainian culture and therefore also gives possibility to future ones. The text interrogates this openly: "the Odesa myth: is Ukrainian culture capable of digesting it, of building in into its own body," asks one character (Kozlenko 29).⁹ While he and his interlocutors agree that it is not possible with the currently existing version of the myth, a revision is possible, but what directions it should take, what iconic figures it should build upon, is open to question.

The book generated lots of public discussion and was among the titles shortlisted for the BBC Ukrainian book of the year prize ("BBC Ukraina oholosyla"). The launch of a film adaptation of the novel was announced in October 2017; it is currently in development, with plans unfortunately delayed by COVID-related economic challenges.¹⁰ *Tangier's* road to recognition, however, was by no means smooth.

Kozlenko has achieved acclaim as an enthusiastic reformer and transformational leader of the Oleksandr Dovzhenko Centre in Kyiv, where he served for three years as deputy director, and from 2014 to 2021, as director. In leading this institution, Ukraine's premier film archive, he demonstrated that ossified state cultural institutions in Ukraine can in fact be rethought, reinvigorated, and made socially and creatively relevant. He is also at the moment Ukraine's most prominent cultural figure who is comfortably out as gay. The novel was written in 2006, when he made a decision to leave Odesa for Kyiv. Prior to that, Kozlenko was an active participant in the city's artistic circles as a young writer and cultural activist. A version of the novel was published in the journal *Kyivs'ka Rus'* (*Kyivan Rus'*) in 2007, in a special issue focused on Odesa, but generated relatively little response at the time.¹¹ The author later indicated he was unhappy with the editorial "cleaning up" of the text that sapped it of local colour, and revised the manuscript several times before the 2017 book publication. The latter is also accompanied with explanatory footnotes, an author's afterword, and several primary and secondary texts dealing with Ukrainian Odesa in the 1920s.

The novel, of course, is not just about Odesa. It is also a book about coming of age and the shedding of illusions—a paradigmatic narrative through much of world literature. It is named after Tangier, a city that from

⁹ "одеський міф: чи здатна українська культура його перетравити, вбудувати у своє тіло?" All translations in this article are my own.

¹⁰ In the latest news, the project received funding from the Göteborg Film Fund in Sweden, so the development is restarting ("Shveds'kyi fond").

¹¹ See http://shron2.chtyvo.org.ua/Kyivska_Rus/2007_N02_XI_Khyvli.pdf. Accessed 2 Dec. 2021.

1923 to 1956 was a so-called international zone, under joint administration of multiple European powers, before being reincorporated into Morocco. During this period and subsequent years, Tangier had a reputation for diversity and tolerance, both religious and sexual. It was famous as a home for expatriate writers and artists, most notably Paul Bowles and William Burroughs, who wrote his *Naked Lunch* there. Kozlenko's novel opens with an epigraph from Burroughs. While critical of Odesa's present, it reaches into the past for a reimagining of the city as a "territory of freedom."

The book's structure is complex. It is organized around two triangular relationships, one set in the mid-1920s, the other at the beginning of the 2000s. There are distinct and conscious parallels between them. Structurally, the novel borrows this device from Michael Cunningham award-winning novel *The Hours* (1998), which is organized as a complex intertextual dialogue with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the case of Kozlenko's novel, the dialogue is with Ianovs'kyi's *The Shipbuilder*. Ianovs'kyi's novel is iconic in the context of modern Ukrainian literature and is set in Odesa, named just the City (*Misto*) in the novel itself. It is the primary intertext for *Tangier*, but Kozlenko's novel also engages with other intertexts (fiction, memoirs, historical documents) that describe Odesa during the years 1917–27 (including both Ukrainian-language authors, like Volodymyr Sosiura, and Russian-language ones, like Teffi, Ivan Bunin, and Aleksei N. Tolstoi). There is an important precedent of the use of this device in innovative Ukrainian literature, when Pidmohyl'nyi borrowed the basic plot structure of Guy de Maupassant's *Bel Ami* and transferred it to the 1920s Kyiv in his novel *Misto* (*The City*, 1928). Crucially for Kozlenko, *The Shipbuilder* is a book by a young author: Ianovs'kyi was only twenty-five when he wrote it, and this youthfulness is what for Kozlenko unites the two plot lines.

In *The Hours*, we have three interconnected plots: one is about Virginia Woolf herself; the other about a person reading *Mrs. Dalloway* in the 1950s; the third about a 1990s person who seems to be reliving the plot of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Crucially, the present-day part is set among members of the LGBT community: Clarissa Vaughan is a lesbian in a long-term relationship; her best friend, Richard, is a gay poet dying of AIDS-related complications; however, in their young days they were part of a happy triangular relationship with another man. Cunningham's success in presenting their experiences as universal and relatable not only for queer readers but for a much broader general public is one of the reasons the book enjoyed such broad acclaim, winning its author the Pulitzer and the PEN/Faulkner award and leading to a star-studded film adaptation. In Kozlenko's novel, we have a retelling of the central plot premise of Ianovs'kyi's *The Shipbuilder* (the relationship between ToMaKi [based on Ianovs'kyi himself], Sev [based on the film director Oleksandr Dovzhenko], and Taiakh [based on the ballerina

Ita Penzo]) with the names of the 1920s participants restored and some details reimaged. The novel also features the contemporary triangle of Orest, a young writer (who shares some features both with Ianovs'kyi and with Kozlenko himself), Seva the experimental film director (whose name is a clear allusion to Ianovs'kyi's Sev), and Marta, Seva's companion. An additional smaller narrative line is set against the historical background of Odesa during the 1917–20 revolutionary events (struggle between the Ukrainian People's Republic, the Bolsheviks, the Denikin army, the Austro-German troops in 1918, the Franco-Greek troops in the winter of 1918–19, and the independent warlords like Nykyfor Hryhor"iev). The mid-1920s triangular plotline, set shortly after the revolutionary years, focuses on the time when Odesa attracted many young ambitious writers, some locally born, others transplants (both Russophone, like Babel', Eduard Bagritskii, Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov, Valentin Kataev, Semen Kirsanov, Iurii Olesha, and Konstantin Paustovskii, and Ukrainophone, like Mykola Kulish, Mykhail' Semenko, and Ianovs'kyi), visual artists, like Anatol' Petryts'kyi and Vasyl' Krychevs'kyi, and actors, like Amvrosii Buchma and Natalia Uzhvii, not to mention Ukraine's leading avant-garde theatre director, Les' Kurbas, and Dovzhenko himself, who transformed in Odesa from an ambitious yet little-known painter into a major film director. Kozlenko relishes the ambiguity and ambivalence, indeed the profound multidirectionality of that history in both the documented (to the extent we have documentary evidence) and the mythologized versions. The warlord Hryhor"iev emerges as a symbolic embodiment of this ambiguity: "What should one do with Hryhor"iev, for example? Is he a hero or a scoundrel? A saviour or a traitor? There are far too many questions" (Kozlenko 29).¹²

Odesa in the novel is a hybrid, transitional space both in the 1920s and the early 2000s, and its beauty can be found in unexpected places some would term ugly (like the notorious and sprawling "7th Kilometer" market, the site of a major plot development in the present-day section of the text). The narrative pointedly attacks the narcissistic belief of many Odesans in their city's superiority and their condescending attitude towards Ukrainian culture—a feeling shared by many in the local intellectual elite both during the 1920s and during the post-Soviet era. In both periods, the text seeks to uncover ephemeral spaces that served as points of attraction for bohemian artistic circles and their sexually liberated ways. The 1920s section seems to have a distinctly Weimar touch, as if portions of it stepped off the pages of Christopher Isherwood, although he is never directly acknowledged in the novel as an inspiration.

¹² "Як бути з тим же Григор'євим? Герой чи паскуда? Рятівник чи зрадник? Надто багато питань."

Rethinking and highlighting the role of gender and sexuality concerns in Ukrainian literature has been a prominent phenomenon during the post-Soviet era. However, in a number of instances, including Pavlychko's writing on Lesia Ukrainka and Ol'ha Kobylans'ka and Grabowicz's writing on Taras Shevchenko, it has often caused controversy among the more conservative members of Ukrainian cultural establishment, both in Ukraine itself and in the diaspora. Later, the 2009 publication by Krytyka of a scholarly anthology of queer writing that bore a title challenging old-fashioned norms, *120 storinok Sodomu*, resulted in violent attacks on the contributors and other panelists by right-wing extremists at several public events associated with the book's launch, and eventually the torching of Ya Gallery in Kyiv, the site of one of them, by arsonists (Chernetsky, "Ukrainian Queer Culture" 216–17).

In retrospect, Kozlenko's novel shares more with Pavlychko's efforts in the 1990s than with the militant queer activist practices of the more recent years. Half a year before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Pavlychko published her groundbreaking essay "Chy potribna ukrains'komu literaturoznavstvu feministychna shkola?" ("Does the Ukrainian Literary Scholarship Need a Feminist School?"), which launched a powerful school of feminist literary criticism in Ukraine. Trained as a scholar of Anglo-American literature, Pavlychko builds, among others, on a classic essay by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship," that outlines the dilemmas of authorship for writing women. Gilbert and Gubar emphasize the alterity of the writing woman within the literary tradition through challenging Harold Bloom's theory of literary history that postulates the artist's "anxiety of influence," the "warfare of fathers and sons," as the key to its dynamics. They argue that in reaction to the hegemonic masculine authority of the tradition, the female poet/artist experiences an "'anxiety of authorship'—a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate and destroy her"; the female artist, they continue, "must first struggle against the effects of socialization which makes conflict with the will of her (male) precursors seem inexpressibly absurd, futile, or even . . . self-annihilating" (Gilbert and Gubar 49). She has to react to the tradition with a revision that is far more radical than that performed by her male counterpart—frequently by actively searching for a female tradition which, "far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible" (Gilbert and Gubar 49). Hence for women writers and artists, and—I would argue—for artists representing other non-hegemonic identities (in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability status, etc.), a crucial step is to seek out allies and precursors that can be seen as hallmarks of an alternative, resistant canon. Kozlenko's lengthy list of literary influences in the

biographic note to the novel's journal publication makes a perfect representation of this paradigm.

Within that list, the appearance of V. Domontovych next to Ianovs'kyi, the main intertext of Kozlenko's novel, is telling. In Pavlychko's monograph on Ukrainian modernism, she highlights in particular the theme of sexuality in the work of several writers who sought to create new modern urbanist Ukrainian prose, in particular Pidmohyl'nyi (1901–37) and Domontovych (pen name of Viktor Petrov, 1894–1969). In the case of the former, it was an interest in nineteenth-century French literature (especially Honoré de Balzac and Maupassant), as well as a fascination with Freudianism, that brought him to discuss homosexuality (curiously, not so much in his own fiction writing, but in critical essays about other authors, especially Nechui-Levyts'kyi). However, an even more radical and fascinating case is presented by Domontovych. As Pavlychko notes, in his novel *Doktor Serafikus* (*Dr. Serafikus*, written in 1928–29, published in emigration in 1947) we see the first “posing of the question of love between two men in the Ukrainian context” in a work of literature (*Dyskurs modernizmu* 227). While this is but one of the many plot lines in the novel, its presence in a work that draws a memorable portrait of Kyiv intelligentsia in the 1910s–20s is hugely consequential.

In this context, the brief but vividly portrayed scene of lovemaking between Ianovs'kyi and Dovzhenko was probably the most potentially controversial element of Kozlenko's novel. Later, several scenes with the two of them and Ita Penzo continue indicating that this is a happy pansexual relationship of three equals united as one. In the present-day plot line, Marta, in one of her remarks, encourages Orest to treat his body not as something that imprisons him, but as something that has its own language and freedom; this exploration likewise leads him to open to pansexuality. All the more remarkable, given the enduring presence of homophobic attitudes in contemporary Ukraine, is that the publication of the novel did not provoke homophobic abuse or physical attacks at any of the multiple public events associated with its launch over the course of the spring and summer of 2017.

The question of sexuality and the radical reimagining of the role of Odesa in modern Ukrainian culture thus stand as the two equal pillars of Kozlenko's ambitious text. What is also notable is that the novel was written during the time when the author made a conscious decision to switch from the Russian he spoke in his childhood and youth (similarly to many fellow Odesans) to Ukrainian. The novel thus also served as a documentation of the author's refashioning of his own identity. In this, he can be seen as anticipating the Ukrainian-language writing of other erstwhile exclusively Russophone authors, such as Khersonskii and Volodymyr Rafieienko (Vladimir Rafeenko), as discussed, among others, by Marco Puleri in the conclusion to his insightful monograph on Russophone writing in Ukraine (235–44).

Paradoxically (and he is very much aware of this paradox), given Kozlenko's fascination with the Beat generation writers and their theory of spontaneous writing, his own literary practice was far from spontaneous, and indeed the novel took many months to write and later underwent multiple revisions. I would argue that we have here a productive conflict between the aesthetics of spontaneity and a "difficult," intertextual form, documenting the desire to master a means of expression. Rafieienko's reflections on the process of writing in his first Ukrainian-language novel, *Mondegrin*, provide an informative foil for Kozlenko's project. For Rafieienko, the impulse to write in Ukrainian was linked to his forced displacement from Donetsk to Kyiv in the context of Russian aggression, and he indicated that he sought simultaneously to disprove the propaganda narrative that Russian-language speakers were somehow oppressed in Ukraine, as well as to challenge the negative stereotype in the eyes of many Ukrainian intellectuals about his native region ("Ostannia liubov"). Kozlenko's gesture, predating Rafieienko by a decade, can be seen as simultaneously forestalling such negative impulses and affirming a more inclusive vision of Ukraine's cultural identity. Its yearning for utopian transgression, one could argue, resonates profoundly with the Ukrainian culture of public protest and the creation of short-lived utopian spaces at the Maidan square in Kyiv, both in 2004 and in 2013. Perhaps this is the answer to the question why the novel's reception has been overwhelmingly positive, the potentially controversial plot elements notwithstanding.

For the moment, Kozlenko's *Tangier* largely remains a vision of an Odesa that could have been, utilizing its rich intertextual engagement and deploying the mechanisms of multidirectional memory in an effort to modify Odesa's (self-)image. But its mix of nostalgia and utopian hope is in synch with Rothberg's. Rothberg emphasizes that memory controversies and clashes "always turn on the deployment of narratives, and not on facts that can be objectively adjudicated" (*Multidirectional Memory* 10). He further draws attention to

complex acts of solidarity in which historical memory serves as a medium for the creation of new communal and political identities. It is often difficult to tell whether a given act of memory is more likely to produce competition or mutual understanding—sometimes both seem to happen simultaneously. A model of multidirectional memory allows for the perception of the power differentials that tend to cluster around memory competition, but it also locates that competition within a larger spiral of memory discourse in which even hostile invocations of memory can provide vehicles for further, countervailing commemorative acts. The model of multidirectional memory posits collective memory as partially disengaged from exclusive versions of cultural identity and acknowledges

how remembrance both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and cultural sites. (Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory* 11)

Kozlenko's novel is meant to serve precisely as such a catalyst, cutting across and binding together, for a rethinking of the city's rich multidirectional mnemonic past and equally rich potential within Ukrainian culture. As he commented in an interview with BBC Ukrainian Service, for him the feeling that the cultural transformations of Odesa of his youth (that is, the first post-Soviet decade) had not been meaningfully captured yet either in literature or in film was a key stimulus (Dorosh). Simultaneously, he felt that the city was "oppressed by obstinate and obtrusive myths,"¹³ and he sought to demonstrate an alternative to those dominant myths (Dorosh).

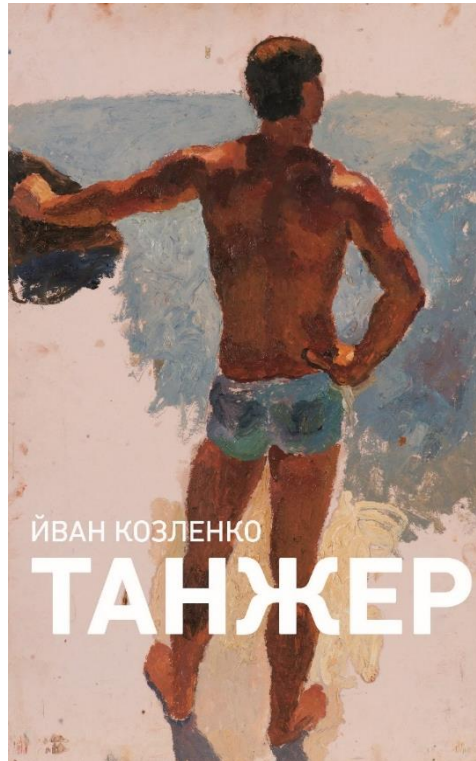
These goals have been picked up by critics, such as Zaven Babloian, a prominent blogger and literary translator, who in his comments on *Tangier* noted that "creating a new Odesa Ukrainian culture is the goal not only of the novel but also of its characters," hence a certain self-reflexive and performative quality of the text. "What we are reading is the realization of the recipe [the characters] found for the 'de-mummification' of [the myth] through the discovery, rethinking, and, finally, reliving a particular part of it that had been repressed" (Babloian).

Kozlenko's choice of a Iurii Iehorov painting for the book cover (Figure 3) is a profoundly significant gesture in this context, resonating with other quests for an alternative vision of Odesa, such as those of the *Metafizyka. Ostriv* exhibition curators.

Recent developments in Odesa demonstrate that many transformed cultural spaces are in fact appearing in the city where the novel is set. The Odesa Fine Arts Museum was transformed under the directorship of Roitburd into a vibrant globally and locally relevant cultural hub, sadly marked by his untimely death but continued with redoubled dedication by his colleagues such as Kyrilo Lipatov. Zelenyi Teatr at the Shevchenko Park, a Stalin-era outdoor performance stage, was relaunched as a site for cross-platform artistic exploration. It has successfully linked visual and performance art, music, literature, and cinema with a goal of engaging a broad cross-section of public with art as a catalyst for intellectual reflection that would hopefully spur meaningful change. Finally, Dovhopolova's projects, with many collaborators and at several platforms, on memory politics in the city add to a list of representative examples of promising changes.

¹³ "Одеса потерпала від тривких, нав'язливих міфів."

Figure 3. Cover of the 2017 book edition of Ivan Kozlenko's *Tanzher* (*Tangier*), featuring a painting by Iurii Iehorov, "Cholovicha postat'" ("Male Figure," 1975), reproduced by permission from Komora Books.



These processes demonstrate that the impulse for experimentation and subversion portrayed by Kozlenko in his novel with a tinge of loving nostalgia for the economically poor but culturally fluid 1990s is far from extinguished. Zones of freedom that channel multidirectional openness, mnemonic and otherwise, can appear in the most unexpected circumstances—one just needs to be able to see them. Odesan literature provides some fascinating new examples of this kind, such as Vadym Iakovlev's postmodernist punk novel *Tam, de pochynaïet'sia terytoriia* (*Where Territory Begins*, 2020), where near-future Odesa features as one of the backgrounds for what is simultaneously an action-packed adventure and a post-Deleuzian philosophical treatise. Hopefully future generations will see Kozlenko's *Tangier* as a breakthrough that unleashed a rich and diverse array of innovative cultural practices in a renewed and invigorated Odesa.

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