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## PEN

We – PEN – each of our centres and the international movement as a whole – are a great global coalition of literature and literatures. We are the marriage of language, literature and free expression.

In the bureaucratic language of today, we are an NGO or a non-profit, or even a charity. All of that is nothing more than mediocre legalese. The whole idea of PEN predates these technocratic approaches. You could say that we more or less invented the NGO, but more to the point, we are the only worldwide literary organization. And on this, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Writers in Prison Committee, we are the leading and indeed the cutting edge organization working, struggling for freedom of expression.

The central point is this: we are ourselves. We are not a cause seeking supporters. In our lives and in our words we are the expression of our cause. And because language, once expressed, belongs to everyone, our cause can and should be the public cause.

When we work to bring literacy to schools or to support endangered languages or literatures or to get writers out of prison or to look after them in exile or to increase translations of smaller languages, we are not engaging in acts of self-interest or charity. We are expressing the place that literature and free expression occupy at the core of any civilization, even when the authorities stand in the way or use violence. The creators of

literature in what ever form – from novelist to bloggers- are among the first endangered or arrested in troubled times, precisely because language and literature are the intersection of civilization – the expression of civilization – whether that is focused on personal lives or well being or the environment.

This is why PEN is not about wealth or conventional power, and does not have an overarching centralized bureaucracy, let alone battalions of soldiers or waves of tax collectors, nevertheless, it carries the weight that it does around the world.

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## JAPAN

Japan PEN has three times taken on the task of an international Congress. In these early hours of the 76<sup>st</sup> Congress, I want to thank Takashi Atoda and everyone at Japan PEN who has worked so hard to put together this enormous and remarkable literary festival; I want to thank you on behalf of all of us for thinking so carefully through the relationship between the PEN cause and the Congress theme of the environment, we want to thank you for welcoming the PEN family from around the world, and most important, thank you for giving up so much of your writing time for months on end! These are words which will not be written unless you now find an eighth day in every week.

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## THE SITUATION WE FACE

We are here today in an international atmosphere very different from that of 1957 or 1984.

For a start, we are now at the end of almost four decades of economic determinism, what some would call economic authoritarianism, as the world's reigning ideology. This experience has gradually hollowed out many of our democratic structures and left citizens feeling alienated from even the most open of governments.

In fact, there is a growing self confidence among authoritarian regimes. We can see this in the treatment of our members. In Eritrea the government simply leaves a large group of writers, including Dawit Isaak rotting and dying in a death camp, these sorts of dictators now seem indifferent to outside complaints.

At the other extreme of sophistication, there is a growing conviction among all types of governments and corporations that the new and ever expanding communications systems should be treated as mere commercial or bureaucratic tools devoid of the guarantees of free expression and privacy. We have PEN members in prison because of this. Hossein Derakhshan, the father of internet blogging in Iran, has been in jail for two years. Now he is threatened with a death sentence. In China, Liu Xiaobo was imprisoned in part because of a betrayal of internet information.

What is more, in almost every cultural domain, this era, which had promised more open competition, has left us with oligopolies and monopolies, particularly in the cultural fields, particularly in the world of communications. And this is partly why hundreds of languages and cultures are in danger of disappearing.

There is a troubling return to respectability for pure violence. Look at the journalists being shot down in Mexico – Mexico, the single most dangerous place in the world to be a writer. Over the last few days, the possibility of something positive has appeared. For 2 years now, PEN International has been insisting that attacks on journalists should be sanctioned with the weight of a federal crime. Anything less, is mere political posturing. President Calderón of Mexico has just agreed to this. Now we must all make sure he carries through on his promise.

There is also a troubling return to respectability in all parts of the world, in all types of societies and belief systems of negative nationalism, of racism and of religious extremism. And so, in the same week PEN has had to stand up both against regimes who want to make the criticism of religion a matter of defamation and against religious leaders who want to burn the holy books of other faiths.

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## THE POWER OF LANGUAGE

One of the most important Confucian ideas is that the clarity of the names – of the words – is the ultimate power in any civilization. Those who hold power just can't help themselves when they change this idea of clarity into one of ownership. If only they can own the language, the meaning and the use of it, then they have power. And that is why, even in democracies, they are frightened of writers. Not because of political differences, but because of the power of language itself and more precisely, the ability of writers to throw language over the barriers created by every form of authoritarianism so that it lands in the hands of the people.

In 2009 in Linz, Jiří Gruša – giving his last speech as PEN president - talked of the return of populism. We know what he was talking about. This is the sort of populism that is built upon fear mongering and the grotesque deformation of free expression into a tool of hate provocation. This is one of the most effective and destructive ways to control the power of language. In Vasunari Kawabata's words, "it's the good things that attract the villains".

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## REGIONAL STRENGTH

And so the effort made by Japan PEN to put a new emphasis on the international side of our work comes at the right time. We are a grassroots organization operating everywhere in the world with more than 140 centres in more than 100 countries. One answer to this size and complexity is that we are learning to function regionally. The program of this Congress is filled with the regional realities of PEN.

Yesterday I sat in the Asian regional network meeting, the African network and Ural-Altay network. Those rooms were filled with young writers at their first PEN Congress- from Afghanistan, Guinée, Cambodia, from everywhere in the world. You could feel in those gatherings a palpable energy, an astonishing desire to work together. Big PEN centres with small centres. Big languages and cultures with smaller cultures. Writers who live in high levels of freedom with writers for whom every written word may be a danger to themselves and to their families. Writers who have survived great battles for free expression, others who fear that those battles lie just ahead. Writers who have been to prison. Writers who may well go to prison.

This is the world of PEN. The world of creation and literature. This is the real universe of the word struggled for in the name of literatures that belong equally to readers and to writers.



## ENVIRONMENT

And all of this is related to the theme of the Tokyo Congress.

Today's environmental crisis is a constant reminder of the social complexity I have been describing. We live the crisis as individuals, neighbourhoods, nations, regions and internationally. We see what is happening – or rather we see what is not happening – at almost every level. Yet our societies and our government seem unable to act in any convincing way.

You could argue that this is a problem caused by corporate greed and influence or political corruption or self indulgent citizens. All true in part. But, I would argue that this environmental crisis is first about the power of language and the ownership of language.

When it comes to the environment, language has been largely reduced to the details of science and management and the market place – a heavy blanket of obscurantism which in the name of precision makes action impossible. And we, as writers, have so far failed to throw to the people the necessary words and phrases – the language - that people could use to make change seem possible, even inevitable.

I have flown low over most of the arctic glaciers and held in my hands photos of those glaciers taken fifty years ago. It is really very simple. You look out the window; you see how much these glaciers have melted. It is not complicated. It is a matter of observation and then of language.

Let me put this another way. We are faced by a straightforward problem. We can't do what we can't say. Those who currently own the language are obsessively engaged in a pseudo scientific debate, weighing technical arguments. By the time anything clear comes out of these arguments, the time for making choices will have passed.

In that sense, the crisis today is far more one of language – even of literature - than of science.

For a long time now we have been looking for the language that will change the shape of environmental power. I think of Sōseki Natsume early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when he wrote:

“to what extent did human effort contribute to the creation of heaven and earth; and the answer is that it contributed nothing. What right then do human beings hold to decide that things not of their own creations nevertheless belong to them?”

And more optimistically, there is a Tanka by Satarō Satō:

even as  
the typhoon rages  
the hen  
cries out that  
her egg is laid

The chicken may not be noble. Eggs are everyday food. What does that matter? We are here in Tokyo. And we will cry out this week because there is a desperate need for language that will help us to understand that we are an integral part of the place we are so happily decimating. Perhaps this will help us to learn to act not as passersby but as the permanent residents we are.

This is the role of language. This is the role of PEN. This is why we are here.