

Dear friends!

All modern peoples, all peoples that have determined that they in fact are nations... are book nations. The Estonian nation is, and the Swedish nation is. We all have our core texts, our fundamental texts, our own secular scriptures, which we read over and over, and which each generation, re-reading them, reinterprets, adding its own comments, its own understanding, and through which, time and again, old answers are sought to new questions. Or new answers to old questions. It is the same with nations, with peoples. But, for a long time now, the basic texts that form national literatures have belonged not only to individual nations. With the help of translators, they have surmounted the language barrier.

And thus, readers in other nations have made the texts of other nations their own texts. Long before the European Union, there existed something that could be called European literature. It is older, far older, and remains to this day, much larger than the European political community. At a time when rulers and generals were still planning and waging wars to conquer their neighbors, the readers of books in other nations were speaking their language. The voice of books has been quieter than the sound of cannons, but their whisper has been more persistent, and nothing, not even cannons, prohibitions, book-burnings or bans, or even death threats have been able to force them to be silent.

In Europe, books have helped us to know each other long before we learned to trust each other in life or in politics. In this way, books have made policy, and people have tried to use books to conduct politics. The latter has not been very successful, especially when the goals have been twisted, and violent. Books, those outwardly even-tempered and obedient little things, have time and again turned out to be more willful and insubordinate than some despot could have anticipated.

There have been rulers in history, however, who have understood the sovereign power of books and tried to harness it, not just for subordinating people, but also in the service of enlightenment. Opening these festivities dedicated to the Estonian book here in Gothenburg, in the Kingdom of Sweden, is historically so symbolic that one cannot let this go by unnoticed. In their way, it was the Protestant rulers of Sweden, a "Great Power" of the day, who turned the

“country people” of its Livonian province into book people. This too started from translation, namely translation of the Bible, the most important basic text of Protestant culture, into the local language, which the Baltic lords of the country in their arrogance, called undeutsch, the non-German language, and which many of whom believed made no sense to cultivate or write down. Fortunately, the Swedish rulers of Livonia, viewing things from a distance, saw further, and thus the first truly Estonian-language books were born. These were translated from languages that had been dead for centuries — Hebrew and Greek.

No language, however, is dead as long as it can be translated into living ones. Moreover, no human language is so different from the others that a text created in one cannot be interpreted into another. Since the dawn of humankind’s written culture, it is translators who, with their diligent and often inconspicuous work, have kept reminding people of the great richness and integrity of its cultures. The Babel of languages may lead us astray, but guides can always be found who will keep us from getting lost, who refuse to allow anger and alienation to smother humane attempts at understanding.

Europe is still a Babel of different national languages, but it is a Babel that works, and is being constructed thanks to mutual understanding. Thanks to the diligent work of thousands, perhaps even hundreds of thousands of translators and interpreters. This work, backed by the same primal human attempt at understanding what goes on around us, can accomplish miracles. One of these miracles is before us today. These scores of books, translated from a language spoken by barely a million people, an insignificant part of humankind, have found their way into another language spoken by slightly more millions. Perhaps there are fewer than we would wish, and there continues to be much for translators and publishers to do, but there are immeasurably more books than we could have dared to hope a hundred years ago, when the first masterpieces of Estonian literature were born. Not to mention three or four centuries ago, when the rulers of Sweden turned their gaze to the education of the people across the Baltic Sea. Now our nations have been united for a long time by completely different ties, creative and mutual ties, and the reciprocal translation and reading of books is a fundamental and natural component of these ties that bind us together.

There are very many books in the halls of this fair. One can easily get the feeling that there are too many. Time and again people have dreamt of one great and wise book, a book that would collect all the wisdom of humankind contained in all the books of the world. Some believe that the Internet can become this book of books.

For it is true that new means of communication are increasingly accelerating the movement, propagation, meeting, and distribution of ideas. But, at least to date, nothing has appeared that could truly replace books, as we know them. Of course, one can find out “everything” faster through the Internet. More precisely, one can find something about everything. But books continue to embody that which is indispensable to spiritual and intellectual life—time. Time that

is spent reading, concentrating, learning, and understanding. As well as learning to know each other, to understand who the people are whose language we do not understand, but with whom we are building this great shrunken world and this small Europe, enlarged yet closer than ever before.