

Esteemed Presiding Officer lord Elis-Thomas.

Esteemed National Assembly of Wales.

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends.

I am pleased and honoured to greet your honourable assembly in the name of the Estonian people and their republic. Wales and Estonia are both small nations, but we are small only in numbers. Our two peoples both have a long history, but above all we share a common contribution to a common European culture.

I am personally happy that by visiting the concerts, art expositions and literary events presented in the framework of the Walestonia Festival, thousands of Welshmen and women will be able to get a feel for a part of Estonian culture.

Today, I would like to speak of language, the tool and medium for preserving our literary and oral cultures, one of the foundations of our national identities. The Czech writer Milan Kundera, writing in French, has an essay with a German title, „Die Weltliteratur“, („Global literature“ in English) in which he writes:

„Small peoples differ from large nations not only on quantitative criteria, but also in something deeper. For small peoples existence is not self-evident, an indisputable fact, but a permanent question, a wager, a risk; they are always in a defensive position face to face with History, a force greater than they, which does not take them into account, which does not even notice them.“

Kundera goes on to ask what would be the case if the Icelandic Sagas had been written not in Icelandic, a nation of 300 thousand, but in English.

Quote: „The names of the heroes in the Sagas would be as familiar to us as Tristan or don Quijote. Their aesthetic particulars, their chronology and their imaginative intermediaries would have provoked all kinds of theories, people would have argued whether or not to consider them the first European novels.“

Most importantly, argues Kundera, they would have influenced living literature through the ages. But they did not, because there are too few Icelanders.

But does this mean that they are worth less? That in the pantheon of great creations of the human imagination they are of any lesser stature than the creations of large nations.

To the contrary, even the smallest peoples can create the greatest literature.

This is why the ecology of cultures and peoples is an issue for all of mankind. This is why the European Union cares. This is why Europeans care, be they Welsh, Estonian or a Czech writing in French.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Speakers of Cymraeg and Estonian are among the peoples of mankind like golfers among all the athletes. Golf, a sport that only now is becoming affordable for the middle class, has been an aristocratic and exclusive game. And expensive. The global cultural middle class has not yet had much access to small cultures. In other words, to be Estonian or Welsh has been an expensive pastime and way of being.

Expensive, yes, but we don't have much choice, either, do we? I am not speaking here of money, of Pounds or Crowns when I say expensive and exclusive, but of a far more costly resource: time. The time a small people must spend to learn in addition to its mother tongue, the language of its larger neighbours.

Nor do I need to mention that those large neighbours generally do not spend much of their time and effort learning the tongues of their smaller neighbours.

Be that as it may, but today we live in a global village, where we all would like to be understood. In practical terms this means spending a considerable amount of our intellectual resources to translation.

We know from the structures of the European Union how much it costs to translate even a short text into all the official languages of the member states. As we know as well that a considerable number of languages spoken in Europe are even today unrepresented.

No doubt anyone entrusted to decide how to distribute limited resources will be tempted to draw a line between „important“ and „less important“, „generally used“ and „backwater“ languages. With the justification that after all, we can't do everything.

From here I would adduce one of the primary preconditions for the survival of cultures with a small number of language-users: our language and our understanding of it may remain costly for us, but it must be inexpensive for others to access. And other languages must be made inexpensive for us.

It is said that those who have old manuscripts to show, need not have to prove anything.

They have simply come before the others; they have put their existence to paper and preserving that, demonstrated their cultural right of self-determination, even for those times when knowledge of the language no longer has a national lineage.

This is what happened to the Romans and their Latin, to the Hellenes and what we today call classical Greek. But all those who come later, afterwards, also have the possibility to prove themselves as a part of the culture by understanding what came before.

There will always be those who in their search for the truth will learn classical Greek or Latin. And right after them come Irish and Cymraeg languages with their ancient literary texts.

I know that most of my compatriots know the tales of King Arthur, although, without associating them with Cymru. Yet we know too that these legends originally were put to paper in Cymraeg

and that they belong to the oldest original literary texts. When they reach Estonia, in English or in Estonian, they have already been transformed into a part of our common European intellectual heritage. This road has been ineluctable.

Yes, in Estonia Cymraeg is translated directly into the Estonian language, not through any other middlemen. But if in two years just one Cymraeg language text – the Arthurian romance Peredur, son of Efracw and only a few sagas in the past decade (as well) have been translated, we must also face the fact that this represents only one out of 20 thousand Estonian language books.

I doubt whether the situation is much better in the other direction.

But we stand before the threshold of a solution. In number of speakers, Estonian ranks among the top two hundred languages, in terms of written language among the top one hundred. Cymraeg should rank in the same range. The global search engine Google allows people to have a dialogue in their own language in 118 languages, among them Cymraeg and Estonian. In searches, it recognizes 43 languages.

In order to achieve that we have spent money. But a machine recognizing a language is only a half step. The real breakthrough will come when computers can provide quality and rapid translations from and into our languages. Nor is it Utopian to think that this will be possible in the near future. And certainly we are closer to this than to the secrets of how the boulders from Southern Wales got to the Stonehenge.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is our task to ask ourselves and to decide: do we make golf a middle class sport, available to the broader public? My answer is yes. We have only to gain from this. And what shall we do with the time we will have when we no longer have to translate? Well, let us create new myths, new legends and poems, which will keep and sustain us as literary peoples in the future.

Let us have the strength and resolve to achieve this. The futures of our small cultures depend on it.