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Translation is the language of Europe

Literary Translation and Culture Conference

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Speaking points

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to Brussels and to our Conference on Literary Translation and Culture.

I am happy to see that the Commission has been able to attract so many of you here today.

We are better known for our financial and economic policies, but this is a bit unfair because the Commission is very active in the domain of culture and multilingualism. And here let me thank Commissioner Orban, whose commitment has ensured multilingualism is firmly on the European agenda.

As you know, our programmes support a wide range of projects ranging from universities to the arts, from movies to the book industry—and just as well.

Let us not forget that Europe is much more than an internal market—important as this is. Our united Europe is first of all a beautiful idea; a century-old dream whose time has come.

Our process of integration is nurtured by ideas and by our very own brand of creativity that springs from a unique cultural mix. Europe's diversity is perhaps our most valuable asset.

The dialogue between our cultures has always been the yeast that has made our bread rise. Europe would not be what it is today had it not been for the constant exchange between our languages and cultures.

And translation has always been at the centre of this historical process.

It is not easy to describe what Europeans have in common, but we all know we share a great deal the moment we step out of our borders.

Two Europeans at a cocktail party in Brasilia or Bangkok are likely to spot each other across a crowded room.

But although it's hard to say what Europe's common culture is like, one thing we know for sure: it is the result of a history of interactions that goes back many centuries.

Our history has seen countless examples of these exchanges; insights and thoughts that were born in one part of Europe and then spread to the rest of the continent.

Together, we have been weaving a carpet; each of us adding the weft and warp that have resulted in the multifarious patterns of our common culture.

And what is translation under this light? It is the loom that has made the whole design coherent—and we are still weaving our history together.

This constant process of communication has shaped Europe's languages as well—and it couldn't have been otherwise, because languages and cultures always go hand in hand.

It is thanks to translation that our languages have been enriched by foreign words and concepts. Even a cursory look at the history of European literatures shows that the borders of our languages are porous.

The border, often regarded as a limiting place, is in fact a place where differences are negotiated and new ideas are born in the process. And the border is the place where translation lives.

Taking advantage of translated works, philosophers, writers and political thinkers have been engaged in a debate that has turned Europe into a permanent cultural laboratory.

We Europeans are children of multiple cultures and this is our pride. Anthropologist Robert Hanvey wrote: “Those who are locked in the cage of one culture, their own, are always in a state of latent war and do not know it”.

A culture is no longer the same when it translates a book. Translating opens up a language to thoughts and views originally conceived in another cultural environment.

And because new concepts and new words challenge established assumptions, translation is a force for innovation which enriches languages and change the communities that speak them.

In our globalised world, translation is more than ever a powerful tool for mutual understanding. This applies to international relations and to the growing multi-cultural landscape of our cities and towns.

Thanks to translation, we can share our cultural production with the rest of the world—a fact that has important economic implications as well.

In addition, translation can help us manage diversity within the EU. We will be better able to integrate the migrant communities that chose Europe as their destination if we can read their literatures and get acquainted with their cultures.

Conversely, these new Europeans will better understand our society and their relations with our way of life if they have access to our literary heritage.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Many people of my generation will certainly remember the toil of writing our Latin translations at school.

It was arduous work and we were very serious when we were cursing Cicero, Lucretius and all those classical authors; together with all those medieval monks who inconveniently saved their texts from oblivion.

Some of us thought that the world would have been a better place—and our Latin courses much easier—if just a handful of inscriptions had survived here and there on top of some Roman arch.

What we didn't know then was that translating was teaching us the difficult art of listening to other people, to bring their ideas into our culture, and to understand the permeability of languages.

Most important of all, translation was teaching us to accept that our beliefs and convictions are intrinsically changeable.

What would we be without this piece of wisdom? Our talent for innovation, adaptation and invention springs from our ability to mediate. Innovation presupposes the ability to look beyond our horizon and judge on the basis of comparison, not only on principle.

The translations from Latin and Greek we did in school point to another, more down-to-earth aspect of translation. Translating, in its many forms, is a profession.

The vast majority of translations in history have gone unrecorded, because they were mostly oral and—even when written—they were used for purely practical purposes; for instance in trade and diplomacy.

The Septuagint is the oldest important translation we know of in the West, carried out between the 3rd and 1st centuries BC. For many centuries, translating literary, scholarly and religious texts was the preserve of a cultivated elite.

Intellectuals and writers with some language knowledge regarded translation as a completion of the cultural background of an artist, not as a skill in its own right.

Things changed with the expansion of literacy at the turn of the 19th century, when translation became a widely-used means to bring out new titles.

Today translation has evolved into a fully fledged profession and discipline, with its masters and theoreticians, its university courses and professional associations.

The European Master's in Translation (EMT) Project, led by our Directorate General for Translation, has counted 285 programmes leading to a bachelor's and/or master's degree across Europe.

As to the industry, its exact size is difficult to measure with any degree of precision. But we know one thing for sure. Translation is a flourishing business in most countries and is important for the book industry.

Today, literary translators are important actors in the cultural industries. They introduce their readers to texts from other languages and cultures, and they breathe new life into those texts by placing them in different cultural settings.

Translation is more than ever an active process, transforming what it transfers, creating something new, reinventing literature and keeping it alive.

Translation is also important for our process of integration, as it allows Europeans to get to know each other across linguistic barriers and to get acquainted with each other's traditions and cultures.

Translation gives us a sense of a common identity and contributes to the preservation of our cultural diversity. This is especially clear when we think of lesser-used languages, which are projected onto broader horizons thanks to translation.

Literary translation and translation in general have also a considerable impact on language learning and in the diffusion of multilingualism.

The access the translated works offers to foreign writers stimulates the curiosity to know more about their culture and language.

Finally, let us not forget the vast and growing movement involving nonprint creative texts such as drama, opera, cinema, radio, TV, and the ever expanding horizon of the new media. Here, creative translation is the only strategy to give a creative text a new home.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

these are some of the reasons why I believe that creative translation—and translation in general—is an important province in Europe's cultural landscape.

I believe that the time has come for the practice of translation to develop its potential and for us to become better aware of how much we owe to translators.

I also have great expectations from the growing number of academic programmes in Europe that carry out research in translation and from the centres where future translators are trained. The development of the discipline and the professionalization of the practice depend on them.

Today's conference is taking a step in that direction. You represent the sectors involved in creative translation. In the tradition of the European Commission, today we open a space for you to meet, exchange views, and debate.

Experience teaches us that some debates will reinforce old alliances, others will heat up beyond boiling point to become disputes. And that will be just fine.

We will welcome all approaches and views because we know that everyone in this hall shares one and the same goal: promoting the discipline and the practice of creative translation and helping translation become more visible and more appreciated in Europe.

Thank you.