

John Ralston Saul
Nomination Speech for the Presidency of International PEN
19 October 2009, Linz, Austria

Cecilia – muchas gracias

Jiří

Eugene

Écrivains – Éditeurs – Amis

Margaret Busby

Je voudrais commencer en remerciant les centres Catalan, Colombien et Japonais pour leur nomination. C'est un grand honneur d'être mis en avant pour la présidence de PEN International par une telle coalition.

Le premier congrès de PEN International auquel j'aie assisté a été celui de Maastricht dans la fin des années 1980s, un congrès important puisque c'est un peu là que le mouvement pour réformer le PEN a commencé. Certains d'entre vous étaient là. Ce qui nous rappelle que le PEN n'est pas simplement un organisme qui à 88 ans mais qu'il a aussi des membres qui restent loyaux pendant de très longues périodes. Et en même temps, il y a des nouveaux membres qui arrivent tout frais, comme je l'étais au congrès de Maastricht. Chaque fois que je viens à un Congrès, j'ai l'impression de retrouver une famille – une famille internationale et compliquée – une famille d'écrivains qui est ma famille.

José Saramago has said that “inside of us there is something that has no name, *that* something is what we are.” Literature is the expression of that something and it is that which holds us together. There are those who will talk about a division inside PEN between the importance of literature as opposed to the importance of freedom of expression. In fact they are one and the same. I remember clearly that at the heart of the calls for reform at Maastricht there was an attempt to marry the old and the new PEN by bringing together the relationship between literature and freedom of expression. An enormous amount has been accomplished since then and I've been in and out of direct contact with the movement over that period of time; but I saw those changes slowly building in gatherings such as that of Tromsø, Mexico and Bogota. And I see many of the results of this work in a document such as *Our Story* and in talking over time with people such as Eugene Schoulgin, who has given so much to this organization and movement. At each congress I've come to I've learned something. And over the last few days here in Linz I've tried to listen and have learned a great deal from you. It could be said that PEN has reformed itself and it has been a remarkable reform, and yet these changes have

brought us to a turning point where we are deciding what our organization is going to look like over the next few years.

Qu'est-ce que ça veut-dire pour nous d'être à un tel point tournant? Je crois que ça commence avec la nécessité de renforcer l'importance de nos trois langues officielles. Je crois que je peux aider dans au moins deux des trois langues, mais l'espagnol n'est pas moins important et il faut faire un énorme effort pour que la réalité multilingue officielle de PEN ne soit pas seulement officielle mais réelle aussi. Nous sommes les *Nations-unies* de la liberté d'expression et de la littérature. Il faut donc renforcer la réalité de cette multiplicité de langues qui commence avec nos trois langues officielles mais qui nous demande un effort pour réinventer comment on fait face à notre multiplicité, à nos dizaines et dizaines de langues. Il faut trouver comment renforcer leur rôle, en partie par la régionalisation. Mais, il est tout-à-fait possible que la technologie qui fait peur à certains, en fait nous offre des possibilités assez simples et pas chères pour ouvrir nos portes à des utilisations plus intégrées de nos remarquables mélanges de langues. Deuxièmement, cette multiplicité de langues est liée à un grand problème actuel et qui, j'ai bien peur, se maintient. Il semble que la moitié de nos centres ne peut pas venir au congrès. C'est partiellement un problème de financement, mais il faut trouver une manière de bouger cette barrière, de repenser cet obstacle pour relancer la participation de nos centres. We need to bring our family together.

And part of that involves the president finding ways to get to the centres in order to hear what they have to say, in order to help them find ways to increase their membership by drawing in a broader and often younger variety of writers, and in that way help many centres revive from situations which mean not simply that they will not be able to come to annual congresses, but they are not able to function as full and vibrant PEN centres.

Third, and again linked to the first two, is the reality that the public space of freedom of expression, which was once occupied almost only by ourselves, we now share with other very fine organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Reporters Without Borders. It's good that they are there as partners in our work. But we bring something very particular to this role, and that is that our strength, freedom of expression is tied to our existence, at the very core of literature and creativity and imagination. And when we talk of the imagination, we mean not simply the imagination of writers, but also the imagination of civilizations. The public expression of that imagination is entirely dependent on there being full freedom of expression.

The existence of these other organizations means that we have to change how we present ourselves and how we are seen. This is central to our ability to make ourselves felt in the world and make our central view of freedom of expression felt. Eric and Caroline and many others have worked very hard raising money for International PEN. They have been so successful that we have been able to triple our budget. And yet everyone knows that this remains a sensitive and strategic issue for PEN. The President has to help with this work, and in particular help in thinking how we present ourselves and how this relates to our ability to fund our programs and the central causes.

Quatrièmement, je suis convaincu qu'un élément essentiel dans tout cela est le renforcement des régions de PEN. Cet effort a déjà commencé, mais il faut aller plus loin. Ainsi on peut arriver à entendre les idées qui existent partout dans le PEN. Il y a un grand travail qui se fait à la Centrale de l'organisation. Mais nous savons que dans toutes les structures démocratiques, les vraies sources d'idées se trouvent chez les citoyens. Les citoyens du PEN sont des écrivains, des membres, et propriétaires de l'imagination de notre organisation. Quand je parle de renforcer des régions et de la régionalisation, je ne suis pas en train de décrire une tension entre, par exemple, l'ouest et les autres régions, mais entre toutes les régions. Si on réussit à créer un véritable débat entre les régions à l'intérieur du PEN, ça va avoir un impact extrêmement positif sur nos idées puisque la source de nos idées se trouve dans les régions. Et si on peut faire marcher ce renforcement des régions, on va pouvoir faire marcher l'idée que PEN est une organisation horizontale.

Fifth, it follows from all of what I have been saying that the time is now to expand our membership. Of course, this means first a greater effort to strengthen our centres and to draw more writers into each of our centres. But I believe we must also look at doing what other organizations which resemble ours have done; we must examine the possibility of subsidiary PEN centres spread throughout schools and universities. Some of our centres have started doing this, but they are only beginning. A large movement in this direction would change the nature of our work in a very positive way because it would develop the relationship between established writers and new generations. I think we can say that this would have a very positive effect on the way in which our ideas are spread around the world and through our societies. It could also have a very positive effect on our funding.

Sixth, I think it is increasingly important for us to concentrate on our writers-in-exile network. We all know the effect of exile for most writers. They lose their public, often they lose a world which speaks their language, they lose their reason for existence. Exile may save their physical life, but it can just as easily create a new prison – a prison of silence. I've seen the positive effects that our Writers In Exile network can have, which I helped to set up early in the century with other PEN members. And I see this again through the European centered Writer-In-Exile system – ICORN – on whose advisory board I sit. This work constantly reminds me of the humanist and literary face of freedom of expression.

Finally, perhaps the worst, the most complete silence, is that of the disappearance of a language and perhaps of its culture. This is happening all over the world and at a growing pace, particularly with aboriginal languages. This is the most extreme form of loss of freedom of expression and therefore of literature and culture. We at PEN cannot turn our backs on this.

The President of International PEN can only do a certain amount. It begins by listening and by leading in a way which pulls us together and helps to shape – with the International Secretary and the Board – what we will do and say.

Let me pick up Jiří's words from this morning. What we do, we must do together in an era of rising populism of the worst old-style sort. Somehow this populism is frighteningly married to the new technologies of communication.

But I am energized by two things.

This new technology of communications is not necessarily our enemy. It belongs more naturally to us than to the enemies of literature and freedom of expression.

Second, most of the authoritarian leaders now in place will be forgotten within a year or two of losing power.

Mais la poésie, elle, rend éternel.

Poetry makes possible the eternal.