Dear Colleagues and Friends,

It is my great pleasure to inaugurate the XI International ISSEI conference here in Finland, at the University of Helsinki.

ISSEI, International Society for the Study of European Ideas, is a multidisciplinary scientific organization which brings together colleagues working in different fields, particularly those in the humanities and social sciences. The importance of the Society lies here: it enables discussion not only on an international level between nations and cultures, but also between different disciplines. Both these modes of communication are vital for scientific creativity.

In the 25 years since the founding of ISSEI in Bellagio, Italy, this is the third time the conference is taking place in northern Europe: the third conference in 1992 was in Aalborg, Denmark, and the seventh in Bergen, Norway, in the year 2000. Two years ago, the tenth ISSEI conference was held in Malta, by Professor Henry Frendo.

Today’s conference is thus coming to Finland from the opposite side of Europe. The theme of the last ISSEI conference was ‘The European Mind: Narrative and Identity’. It seems to me to have been a logical geographical choice to concentrate on Europe’s identity in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea, in the cradle of European culture.
Here in Helsinki, the topic of the conference is ‘Language and the Scientific Imagination’. In our closing ceremony on Saturday, Ezra Talmor will talk more about this particular subject; for now, I will explain why I think that the choice of our topic makes geographical sense.

First of all, Finland is among the youngest - and when it comes to our approximately 5 million inhabitants, also among the smallest - nations in Europe. There is no way we can compare our short cultural history to that of other European nations, say, Germany or Italy.

In addition to this, I think we Finns have quite a peculiar relationship with the past, one that brings to mind the theories elaborated by an Italian poet, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944) at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1909 Marinetti founded an artistic and literary avant-garde movement called Futurism. The basic principle of this movement was the glorification of modernism, modernity, the future and technology - which he coined with his own term, ‘macchinolatria’, (the idolatry of machines). He completed this enthusiastic approach towards everything that was new with, among other things, the explicit refutation of any kind of tradition and even the entire past, which he justified with his idea of time.

In Marinetti’s ideology - as in literary modernism in general at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries - the conception of time plays a vital role. Marinetti’s time was linear in the Judaeo Christian sense, a time that was running constantly ahead. This notion is followed by the idea that ‘time is running out’, which is one of the central features - not only of European fin de siècle literature – but also of the
whole of Western thought. In an extreme sense, and in Marinetti’s case in particular, this notion means that time becomes one-dimensional: there is no past, no present, but what remains is only the future, a future towards which human beings are running but which they never reach. For, as soon as one attains the future moment, it becomes a present moment, and then a past moment, and must consequently be rejected. That is at least how Marinetti comprehended the idea of time.

According to Marinetti, this theory of time was to be applied to and had influence upon every human activity - including the arts. As Marinetti expressed in one of his early poetical works, called L’Aeroplano del papa (originally published in French in 1912, and which in English would be ‘The Pope’s Aeroplane’), every work of art had to be destroyed as soon as it was completed, for the simple reason that everything, in the very moment that it comes into existence, immediately becomes part of the hideous past and hideous history. For this reason, instead of conserving, we are faced with an eternal state of creation.

I sometimes think that we Finns have adopted this futuristic conception of time and its constant drive for eternal creation. For instance, whereas in other countries signs of the past, of national history, such as more or less important buildings, are jealously conserved and restored, here in Finland it seems as if from the 1960s onwards we have done our best to destroy as many old buildings as we can, and with them - willingly or not - the memories of our past. Not only in Helsinki have we demolished much late 19th century architecture, but also much of many small towns in the Finnish countryside has been destroyed and replaced by generic shopping centres that all look pretty much the same. And far from having learnt anything from this
modernisation project of ours, now, at the present time, the victims of this ‘mania for renewal’ are the examples of architecture from the 1960s and 1970s.

Similarly, the Finnish attitude towards the future could be interpreted in a futuristic way. In the Finnish language we don’t have a future tense. We have only the past and present tenses. If we are to believe what the theorists of critical linguistics or critical discourse analysis say - that language reflects the user’s ideology or worldview - a consequence of this is that we Finns do not have a future. This can be understood in negative terms, in the sense that we are a lost nation - which I do not agree with or in a positive and a more dynamic way that, for us, the future is never unreachable. With this second interpretation we come to a positive conclusion, too.

For Marinetti, Italy’s artistically rich and glorious past was a burden that impeded the modernisation of his country, and its development into an industrialised ‘superpower’. Full of historical monuments, Italy was a country where everything worth inventing and making concrete had already been done. For this reason, there was no space among Italy’s bygone inventive geniuses for the new generations; their duty was to venerate the memory of the past.

Here in Finland the situation is quite different. The history of our country is very short. In addition to this, instead of respecting the past, we seem rather to have a disdain for everything that is ‘old’. Maybe the positive thing here is the quite unprejudiced attitude we have towards everything that is new, and towards the future. Maybe this can explain the ‘scientific’ - or should we say ‘technological’ - imagination for which this country is nowadays famous.
Also, from the point of view of the notion of ‘language’, I see interesting analogies between the conference theme and its location in Finland. First of all, Helsinki is - as it has always been - a meeting point for different cultures and, as a consequence, for different languages. The city (at least in theory) is bilingual, Finnish and Swedish being the official national languages of Finland. But we must not forget our two other neighbouring countries, the vicinity of which we are constantly reminded of by their languages which one can hear in the streets of Helsinki. Here I am referring to Estonian and Russian.

The presence of these four languages (and taking into consideration our linguistic and cultural minorities, the presence of many other languages here in Helsinki as well), is a good indicator of Finland’s position as a meeting point of different cultures, and its role as a mediator between them. This has naturally enriched our culture to the extent that, in addition to the fact that this is definitely a country of the North, defining the Finnish identity, whatever that may be, and whatever form it may take, becomes more complicated.

Due to its geographical position, Finland is a country between East and West, both of which contribute to the formation of the Finnish identity. This is a small nation with a modest role in international politics and in European cultural history, and is thus unable to impose anything on anyone. Rather, our role has always been that of mediator: between the larger nations and especially between the East and the West.

As well, the basic function of language - whether we talk about a human language or of any kind of sign system, such as art for instance - is to serve as a mediator: through
language we communicate our feelings and thoughts to others. This is precisely the reason why we are gathered here in Helsinki: to communicate to each other our ideas about ‘language’, ‘scientific imagination’, and through these specific topics, about Europe’s culture, and its past, present and future in a wider sense.

More than 500 delegates are participating in today’s XI ISSEI conference. From the immediate vicinity, all the northern European countries are represented, as are Estonia and Russia. And since there are actually very few European countries that are not represented at this conference, I’ll limit myself to stating that a conspicuous number of participants are here from Germany, the UK and Romania. Also, we are very happy to host over ten delegates from our linguistic neighbour, Hungary. As for participants from outside Europe, most are from the USA (over a hundred), while our remotest colleagues have travelled here from New Zealand.

Without using this occasion to repeat details of the pessimistic visions related to the theory of cyclical history, it seems evident that in world history we have reached a turning point, a point at which Europe and the whole of the Western world will have to reconsider their values and their position in the new global order. Yet there is no doubt this part of the world has contributed in both positive and negative ways to world history, and thus its cultural past and present deserve to be studied. For this reason we are particularly honoured to be hosting delegates from outside the Western hemisphere, from other countries of rich culture, such as China, India and Japan.

This conference is the result of a large collaboration. First, I would like to thank our generous sponsors who have helped us financially. We are very grateful to the Finnish
Academy of Sciences, the Finnish Culture Foundation, the Niilo Helander Foundation and the Italian Institute of Culture in Helsinki.

During the past year, together with the ISSEI secretariat in Haifa, Israel, our local organising committee, consisting of University of Helsinki colleagues Giacomo Bottà, Jyrki Hakapää, Kai Eriksson, Laura Lahdensuu, Mirjami Matilainen and Peter Stadius, as well as the local ISSEI 2008 congress secretariat at Congreszon, Taru-Maija Heilala, Vilja Varjoranta and the rest of the team, have all helped to make today’s conference possible.

The University of Helsinki’s friendly and highly professional porters, under the supervision of head porter, Timo Laitinen, will guarantee adequate seminar rooms and the proper running of any technical equipment needed. Last but not least, the conference assistants, University of Helsinki students, Jarno, Milla, Olli, Paula, Reeta, Taina and Vilma, will offer their assistance to delegates during this week in Helsinki.

Even though we have done our best to make this conference successful, inevitably you will find imperfections. And we will be glad to have your feedback. In any event, on behalf of the whole team, I wish you a fruitful week and a very enjoyable stay in Helsinki. Thank you!

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