Her Excellency, Ms. ChitranganeeWagiswara, The Consul General,

Mr. Karunarathna Paranawithana, Dr. Suwanda Sugunasiri, Distinguished guests, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen:

First, thank you all for being here. Friday evenings are precious, particularly in the summer, and I would like to consider your presence here as a sign that literature as a discipline is making a comeback. Those of us who read and teach literature for a living constitute an endangered species, and we are constantly looking for ways to stay afloat. I say this somewhat facetiously, but I am also serious about my hopes and expectations, and I will return to this point a little later. I am delighted to have a captive audience of professionals and not literary scholars. That itself is a rare privilege. Many thanks to the High Commissioner, the Consul General and their staff for their efficiency, interest, and above all, their conviction in making this happen. A book launch in Canada when the editor of the book lives in Sri Lanka and the publisher is in India is not by any means an easy task. I am also grateful to the organizers for asking me to participate in this launch, and for the opportunity to speak about a book and a topic that is close to my heart.

Those of you who are familiar with Professor Rajiva Wijesinha's work would agree that this is probably his most significant editorial work to date. Over the last twenty-five years, Rajiva Wijesinha has been a prolific writer. I have known Rajiva Wijesinha and his work for over thirty years, starting from the mid-seventies when he arrived in Sri Lanka, newly minted from Oxford, as

an expert in 19th century British literature. I invited him to serve as a visiting lecturer at the University of Jaffna, which he agreed to quite readily, in addition to his work as a permanent lecturer at the University of Peradeniya. Very quickly his interest expanded to include postcolonial studies, Sri Lankan literature, and creative writing of his own. As a novelist, short story writer, critic and editor, Rajiva Wijesinha has shaped and moulded the way we look at Sri Lankan writing. I would like to reiterate that when he wrote his first two novels, *Acts of Faith* and *Days of Despair* nothing like that had been written in Sri Lanka. Salman Rushdie had burst into the Indian scene with his spectacular magic realism, his fantasy and his irreverent wit, but in Sri Lanka we were lagging behind. We were used to a particular kind of writing that grew out of a very specific context and dealt with recognizable themes. Rajiva Wijesinha broke that pattern with his experimental, allegorical work that put Sri Lankan writing on the post colonial map. He went on to publish *An English Education*, *The Lady Hippopotamus* and *Servants*, the latter two being collections of his short stories. Exuberant, funny, sensitive and perceptive, his work was to some extent responsible for proving that the term South Asian literature did not simply mean Indian literature. If one were to think of a handful of writers who have shaped contemporary Sri Lankan literature in English, Rajiva Wijesinha would be one of them. Equally important, his critical writings, particularly a collection called *Breaking Bounds: Essays on Sri Lankan Writing in English*, refashioned the way we think about Sri Lankan literature. His opinions were bold, radical and quite startling at times, but always perceptive and precise.

As an editor, Rajiva Wijesinha began by putting together works written in English. Two collections that he edited brought together the best of poetry and short fiction written in Sri Lanka. That was important, but to concern oneself with only literature in English is, in the final analysis, inadequate and unfair in a country that can legitimately claim impressive literary histories in both Sinhala and Tamil. Hence the present decision to find ways of incorporating Sinhala and Tamil literature. Admittedly, Rajiva Wijesinha's efforts are part of a long and impressive tradition of gathering translations. In the early 1980s Suwanda Sugunasiri pioneered this movement with an issue of the *Toronto South Asian Review* that included literature in English and translations from Sinhala and Tamil. Ranjini Obeysekera did the same with a journal that came out from Michigan. In recent years, D.C.R.A Goonetilleke painstakingly edited a collection that was published by Penguin. From Sri Lanka the Gratiaen Trust brought out in 2002, a little over ten years ago. a publication titled *A Lankan Mosaic*, edited by Ashley Halpe, M.A. Nuhman and Ranjini Obeysekera. Translations from Sinhala to English and from Tamil to English have been undertaken by many, with remarkable success. But moving across languages has been relatively rare, and it is in this context that one must recognize the importance of Rajiva Wijesinha's work and particularly the book that we are launching today. A book published by the National Book Trust in India, with such a huge reach in South Asia, is a tremendous boost for our literature. For those of us who are teachers and critics, this book marks an important milestone in Sri Lanka's multiple literary histories.

At the beginning I referred to the importance of having you here today and said that I would come back to it. I actually meant what I said, but I would

like to come to it in a somewhat roundabout way by referring to a talk given by Martin Heidegger, the famous German philosopher, many years ago. The year was 1955, and Heidegger was invited to his hometown Messkirch to speak on the 175th birth anniversary of the famous German composer Conradin Kreutzer who was born in 1780 and died in 1849. More than a hundred years separated these two major figures, one a major thinker and philosopher and the other a composer, but they were from the same town. In this instance Heidegger was invited to his hometown to speak about another important intellectual from the same town. Germany in the mid-1950s was beginning to recover from the effects of the Second World War, and what Heidegger saw in his hometown was very different from what Kreutzer experienced in the 19th century. The details about the biography of Heidegger, his political stances, or for that matter the history of Germany are probably not immediately relevant. Suffice it to mention that for Heidegger this was a deeply emotional moment and he used this opportunity to speak about the idea of belonging and about the role of art in moments of profound change. In true Heidegger fashion, he said, "a memorial celebration means that we think back, that we *think*". In some ways a book launch is also an occasion to reflect, to think and to meditate. To launch a book is to renew the cultural capital of a people. My own thoughts today have been shaped by this particular talk.

I do not wish to use this moment to deconstruct Heidegger. In fact I am not even sure that I fully understand his work. But this particular address has a deep relevance, although Sri Lanka of the present does not have much in common with the Germany of the 1950s. But there are threads that lead from the past to the present, not only to Sri Lanka but also to the diaspora.

The Sri Lanka of today is a far cry from the Sri Lanka I knew in the 1950s and 1960s. I recognize that my own sense of the past is coloured by nostalgia and fantasy. Yet, I think it is true that the world of Peradeniya where I grew up and spent my formative years retained all the charm of small town, bigger but not very different from a village. Peradeniya was framed not only by awe-inspiring hills and a majestic river, but by a closely-knit community. The Peradeniya I saw a few years ago was very different. And this is not a matter of conflict, ethnicity or violence. I am not unaware of the impact of violence, but that is not my point here. As with many countries, Sri Lanka too has been swept along in this massive wave that we call globalization. Even if we had wanted to we couldn't have resisted the onslaught of the global economy. The fact that we have gathered here today is also in some ways a result of this movement. Even a cursory look at the economic scene would reveal that Sri Lanka is hardly an island, except in purely geographical terms. From technology to tourism, from clothes to cricket, we are part of the so-called global network. The sheer power of this movement is difficult to resist.

Don't get me wrong. Although I have used somewhat forceful metaphors to describe globalization, I do not believe that globalization is all bad. We cannot turn away from something that benefits us on a daily basis. But the point I would like to make is that globalization also involves change in the way we live, in the way we relate to others, to the land and our landscape, and even the way we talk about ourselves and about our gods. Think about the relevance of Heidegger saw around him in the 1950s:

Hourly and daily [the people] are chained to radio and television. Week after week the movies carry them off into uncommon, but often merely common, realms of the imagination, and give the illusion of a world that is no world. Picture magazines are everywhere available. All that with which modern techniques of communication stimulate, assail, and drive [people] – all that is already much closer to [people] today than [their] fields around [their] farmstead, closer than the sky over the earth, closer than the change from night to day, closer than the conventions and customs of [their] village, than the tradition of [their] native world. (48)

These words are as relevant today as they were sixty years ago. Pico Iyer, writing about the cosmopolitan world in his famous work, *The Global Soul*, remarks quite astutely that the freedom of a globalized world is that one is in a perpetual duty-free zone. It is a great metaphor. True, but that is also the problem. Duty-free assumes no sense of duty, no commitment, no sense of belonging. To be duty free might be economically advantageous but it also implies being unmoored and adrift. When Martin Wickremasinghe or Tissa Abeysekerate write about the village, the point they are making is a deeply felt sense of identity and belonging that is very much a part of lived experience. Your neighbours, your community, the house in which your parents have lived, the burial ground in which your ancestors lie, the gods who protect you from their temples, the field that you cultivate to make your living – all these are part of what it means to belong, to be rooted in a place. One is reminded of the words of Jose-Maria de Heredia, quoted by Georges Perec:

Happy he who can sleep without fear and without remorse

in the paternal bed, massive, venerable,
Where all his kinsfolk were born and where they died.

The scholar and theologian Philip Sheldrake discusses this particular dimension of experience in relation to the idea of a parish. The parish is not simply a geographical area or even an administrative unit. It is a world in itself, that brings together your inner, subjective life, your social life of family, friends and community, and your ontological sense of being. It becomes a world in which you belong in a very fundamental sense. I do not wish to idealize these sentiments. Rajiva Wijesinha himself might be sceptical about the superficial representation of this sensibility, which he likens to being "stuck in the village well' in one of his essays. But my fundamental point is that globalization involves a particular kind of loss. It is a loss we do not often recognize because it comes clothed in the robes of opulence and achievement.

There is no easy way to talk about this loss. About the gain, we certainly have a number of discourses that tell us the future is paved with gold. Economists, scientists, sociologists, and even historians can show us, often quite convincingly, that these discourses are the way of the future. Their thought and their approach is what Heidegger calls "calculative thinking." Not in any bad sense. Calculative thinking is linear thinking or what is often called diachronic thinking. It is forward looking, goal-oriented and driven by the expectation of certain kinds of results. Those of us in the diaspora who tell our children to do something useful, enrol in a program that will give them a good job and a decent salary are in some senses involved in

calculative thinking. This is inevitable, and perhaps even necessary. I once had a parent who called me on the phone, having made sure that I was a professor of English, asked me if I would dissuade his son from studying literature at the university. The argument was that as a professor of English literature I should know how absolutely pointless it was to study literature. One part of me fully understood the predicament of the parent. Many of you are professionals, and you know by instinct the significance of calculative thinking. But calculative thinking is not about belonging, about being rooted. Meditative thinking, on the other hand, is about establishing a covenant with the land, with the landscape, with the family and community, with the gods in ways offer a very different sense of fulfilment. In a globalized world, I do not think it is possible to recapture the sense of a self-sufficient community that probably existed in the past. But some form of meditative thinking is still a possible in what the German poet Rilke once appropriately called "our translated world."

And this brings me back to *Mirrored Images*, the book of translations, which, both as literature and as translation, has something to impart. The poems in this book are not about calculative thinking. They are, in Heidegger's words, about meditative thinking. Many years ago, in a famous poem called "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" Robert Frost wrote the memorable line: "I have miles to go before I sleep." Frost does not say "I have miles to go before I succeed." What exactly does this mean? The traveller wants to go home, not loiter in a place that belongs to someone else. Going home is also a journey but it is a journey of a different kind. The traveller implies a kind of rootedness that is a necessary part of going to sleep. The poem is ostensibly about time, when in fact it is about space –

or spaces – that one must inhabit in order to bring about closure to one's inner life.

Literature – at least good literature – is never about what it says; rather, it is about what it means. Literature is not about ideas but about consciousness. We live in an age in which we need to understand things quickly and efficiently. We often adopt a Wikipedia approach to life. One sometimes wonders whether Google and Facebook have replaced God. Literature teaches you to pause, to think, reflect, and meditate. Ostensibly, literature might be about an event, but a good writer's struggle is always with language. And in a Sri Lankan context, the place you belong to, the land and the landscape determines what you say and how you say it. Writers are conscious of what they have and what they have lost, of what it means to belong, and how one responds the loss of identity. Lesser poets are driven by ideology. The great ones are concerned with how lives are shaped. As Rajiva Wijesinha quite rightly points out in his introduction, "good writing shares certain values that transcend differences that are seen as contingences." Reading a book of translations alerts us not only to differences but also connections and intersections among communities, religions, and ethnicities. To read this anthology is also to understand differences. And that again is important. Uniformity can quite boring. Just imagine if all of us in this room were bankers. That would be terribly boring. I say this without any disrespect to bankers – I need them as much as you do.

The last thirty years, as you all know, have been difficult for Sri Lanka and the diaspora. The politics of blame does not interest me very much. In fact

politics itself does not interest me very much. But I am aware that in Sri Lanka and to some extent in the diaspora there has been a failure to speak across languages. How many of us can claim to be fluently trilingual? One of the tragic consequences of this failure is that the worlds embodied in the literature of these languages remains largely unknown outside the language community. It is for me a source of immense regret that although I speak and understand Sinhala I do not have the expertise to understand the nuances of Sinhala literature. I wish I could read Gunadasa Amerasekera or Siri Gunasinghe in the original and understand the subtleties of the original. Liyanage Amarakeerthi's very perceptive introduction to the Sinhala section of the book tells you that Sinhala literary history is very different from other histories. It gives you a very different narrative about what it means to be human. The same thing could be said of Tamil literary history as well. And this is also where Rajiva Wijesinha's book marks a significant step ahead.

In an ideal context, the book should have had poems in Sinhala, Tamil and English without translations. We are still far from that. In fact translations from Sinhala to Tamil and from Tamil to Sinhala are also few. Unfortunately these literatures have to be mediated through English. That said, the task of bringing together poetry from all three languages in one volume, with introductions, might well begin the process of engaging in conversations across languages and ethnicities. The objective of the book is to bring together a broad spectrum of poetry from all three languages. As far as I know, the editor did not begin with a thematic agenda, did not go looking

for poems that focused on one dimension of experience. Interestingly, the poems do have connections. There are similarities and there are differences. Both are in fact important. Context shapes the way one lives. A poem set in the South would be very different from one set in the North. The subject matter too could be different. But the meditative dimension, the concern with belonging, and with identity and rootedness are similar. They are, to repeat the title of the book, "mirrored images". Poems written by 89 poets are brought together in an impressive collection that is as important in South Asia as it is in the diaspora.

I would also like to reiterate that translations offer very little money. Unless one is commissioned to translate, the task of translation is really a labour of love. There are very few institutional structures that support translations with grants and facilities. Finding a good editor or a good publisher are Herculean tasks. Major companies may sponsor other activities, such as sports, but rarely fund translations. I believe this needs to change, not because we wish to be charitable, but because translations invite us into other worlds in which we recognize not only the humanity of others but ourselves as well.

And there is a crucial dimension to this book that needs to be emphasized. Rajiva Wijesinha as editor has been fair, balanced, objective, thorough and comprehensive. As a writer and as a critic, he is aware of the need to let literature speak for itself and construct worlds that readers must decode for themselves. For me this was an opportunity to read both familiar and new authors, to recognize the richness and diversity of Sri Lanka's literature. Unlike the parent who phoned me to persuade his child not to study

literature, I hope you adopt the opposite approach and not only read this book but also persuade your children to do the same. It is equally important that you make non-Sri Lankan, Western readers aware of the value and richness of our multiple literatures.

I would like to end by reading two short poems that are different and yet similar, that remind us about conversations across languages that only translation provides. The first is a poem called "Intersection" written by Ariyawansa Ranaweera and translated by Liyanage Amarakeerthi:

The Intersection

I love that intersection
where one path leads
to a certain little house.

A few dwarf stores
their old plank doors half closed
break the deserted loneliness
and stray dogs
with mouths down on the ground
sleep here and there.

It's just an intersection
with nothing special about it.

Yet
I love
that intersection
with one path leading
to a certain
little house.

The other is by Thirmavalavan, titled "Living" translated by S. Pathmanathan.

Living

a small tank
four glass walls
filtered and disinfected water heated to an ideal temperature
floating artificial plants in a dim electric light
at regular intervals processed food

within the posh prison

the little fish sings its sorrow.

Neither poem tells us much, but both poems open up so many thoughts about choosing, constructing and inhabiting worlds that are meaningful.

Many thanks again to the High Commissioner and the Consul General for this opportunity and to all of you for listening. Thank you.