

EWA ŁUKASZYK

**TEACHING EASTERN STUDENTS WESTERN HUMANITIES?  
NOTES ON INTELLECTUAL MEDIATION  
IN THE SEMINAR “SEARCHING FOR IDENTITY”  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW**

1.

The idea of this essay appears in strong connection with a biographical circumstance: that of my dawning consciousness of penetrating into a different, larger sphere of academic activity. It is hard to explain what has actually happened, but still I've a clear consciousness that something determining actually has happened over a definite span of time inscribed in just one year: 2014. Perhaps this crucial change is rather the result of a growing weight of many tiny events than of any sudden and great breakthrough. Writing in English became progressively more frequent than writing in Polish. People that matter for my work have somehow become more and more disseminated over the globe. Traveling over large distances has become more frequent; on the other hand, places like Berlin and Amsterdam have become close at hand, joined the sphere of quotidian penetration. At a certain level of intellectual encounters, an increasing sensation of representing rather Europe than Poland has made the novelty. The appearance and the growing weight of a certain exteriority is a topic in itself. Yet the nature of this change, its causes and its symptoms are still hard for me to grasp, and they could give matter for another essay. The main point here is to say that somehow, through a complex network of causes, coincidences, events and experiences, I've become a global scholar. Like a fish washed away by mysterious currents, I've found myself drifting through abysmal depths of a global ocean.

Metaphors left apart, the reality of my daily work has suffered a reorientation. On the one hand, the circumstance of closing a biographical chapter inspires to make a balance; on the other, the new reality in front of me requires comprehension. This double cognitive effort leads to reenact, from a new perspective, the opposition between local and global humanities that has been explored at two occasions in the context of the Faculty “Artes Liberales”: in the collective volume *Humanistyka krajowa w kontekście*

*światowym. Doświadczenie Polski i Rosji*<sup>1</sup> and in a debate that took place on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2012, published in the eighth volume of *Debaty Artes Liberales* that has just appeared<sup>2</sup>.

The reflection that follows reenacts thus once more the concepts of “center” and “periphery” on the mental map of scholarly identities. This time nonetheless I can see the old problem in a new light: that of my newly acquired consciousness of being a part of the transcultural community of scholarship and intellectual life. Once I used to exploit the concepts of center and periphery in my own conceptualization of the world. This is how I actually used to see my own place in the academic hierarchies and networks of dependency. Yet this conceptualization needs urgent reshaping. What remains of my identity as a peripheral scholar, what remains of my subaltern condition at the moment I enter the central space of debate, speaking with my own voice?

I've put my reflection in a strictly personal, autobiographical perspective. Nonetheless the problem of intellectual identity concerns all of us. What place do we occupy in the global landscape of humanities? Does our work count outside the local context? At both occasions I've just mentioned, the absence of Polish and Russian scholars in the international debate had been observed and commented; prof. Savelieva even gathered precise data, showing how rarely the Russian scholars are read and quoted according to the service “Web of Science”. Alleged self-sufficiency of the Western humanities has been mentioned as a makeshift explanation; yet very few positive hints concerning the possibility of breaking through the invisible frontiers has been given. This is why I see the necessity of returning to the topic of our relationship with the global context. What kind of event is our seminar in the global horizon? What new perspectives for our own intellectual identity can we develop, taking this experience for a starting point?

The utmost stake of our presence in the global reality doesn't appear close at hand. Sometimes we ask questions concerning our position in relation to the world when we are very young. But most people don't seriously ask: “what is my position in the international scholarship?” in their 20-ties or 30-ties, when they are busy to establish their position just in the

---

<sup>1</sup>The book has been published in two versions: *Nacyonalnaya gumanitarnaya nauka v mirovom kontiektstie. Opyt Rosii i Polshy*, Moskwa 2010 and *Humanistyka krajowa w kontekście światowym. Doświadczenie Polski i Rosji*, Warszawa: IBI AL – Wydawnictwo DiG, 2011.

<sup>2</sup>*Debaty Artes Liberales. Inteligent, humanista, intelektualista*, v. 8, 2014;  
[http://www.al.uw.edu.pl/pliki/publikacje/elektroniczne/debaty\\_t\\_%20VIII.pdf](http://www.al.uw.edu.pl/pliki/publikacje/elektroniczne/debaty_t_%20VIII.pdf).

local context of an institution, to gain a stable contract, a degree or a title. Such questions appear rather at the moment of making a long-term balance of our intellectual life. When it is often too late to undo previous moves or change the strategies put into practice along the years.

As I suppose, the interrogations concerning national and individual presence in the international context may have been awkward or even painful for many people participating in those two debates I've mentioned, specially if they happen to find themselves at the end of their academic career. I look up to prof. Kieniewicz, to whom this essay is particularly dedicated, as one of those who had the courage of posing that awkward question, also in an autobiographical perspective; I do it neither with censure nor criticism, but rather in search of a paradigm of intellectual fight till the end. I do it as a strategical anticipation of my own old age, inviting all our doctoral students to imagine themselves in their 70-ties. What do we see as our last achievements? What is the position of those achievements in a local and non-local perspective? How can we see the world as a whole and our own intellectual itinerary as a whole inside this whole?

The ancient philosophical tradition, from Socrates to Boethius, didn't hesitate to see the intellectual activity as an essential apprenticeship that should teach us how to die. Today I would say the humanities teach us most importantly how to grow old in such a way as to avoid some kind of utmost intellectual collapse, which is by no means related to Alzheimer disease. By the contrary, the danger is connected to the increased lucidity coming with the old age. At the end of his own life, Edward Said wrote the book *On Late Style*, dedicated to the analysis of the last achievements of writers and composers. The "late style", as he concludes, is devoid of sweetness and harmony, "unreconciled, uncoopted by a higher synthesis"; it is all about "lost totality".<sup>3</sup>

I confess that doing a careful mid-life balance I hope to avoid, at least to a certain degree, the bitterness of an unreconciled old age, the painful consciousness of doors that remained unopened. Such bitter fruits of an old age belong even to the best, and in fact the metaphor of unopened doors is taken from *Errata* by George Steiner, where the great comparativist confess: "What is now aching in me is the sense of doors unopened: my lack of Russian, for one, my lack of access to Islam, for another".<sup>4</sup> I'd read this remark for the first time in Lisbon, when I was studying comparative

---

<sup>3</sup>Edward Said, *On Late Style. Music and Literature Against the Grain*, Bloomsbury: London – Belin – New York – Sydney, 2006, p. 12-13.

<sup>4</sup>George Steiner, *Errata. An Examined Life*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, p. 41.

literature. Evidently I knew Russian, we all knew it to a certain degree at that time, since it was still compulsory in Polish schools; yet *Errata* contributed for my own decision of initiating myself in the Arabic studies. But I quote this passage in the first place to draw our attention to the fact that even those educated at Cambridge may miss the world so painfully, may feel stuck in front of some doors that are open for us and that we unjustly take for granted.

Steiner's remark shows that there is more frontiers than just the invisible line dividing local humanities in which we may feel either at home or imprisoned. Confrontation with the global dimension present in such concepts as world literature, international academia or the richness and variety of human cultures may signify more than just the discomfort of realizing we haven't reach the level of international recognition. Taking consciousness of our own intellectual insufficiency is a burden and a privilege at the same time.

Since his very beginning, Steiner spoke five main European languages with the natural grace of a Viennese Jew<sup>5</sup>. At my Portuguese times, I could also speak five, but uncomfortably, in a stumbling manner of those who have learned against many odds. It shows the disparity of origins, paradoxically so close to each other in geographical space. But even to state that, between Vienna and Lublin, we might have shared the same cultural area of *Mitteleuropa* required from me a long maturation indeed. Perhaps I didn't actually see it until I looked back to it from an Arabian perspective...

## 2.

As Said stated, the “mastery of language” is the source of intellectual's power, yet each one of them remains organically rooted in his or her own language.<sup>6</sup> The invisible frontier of the local academia becomes barbed-wire entanglement to those unable to write but in their national tongue. To cross the line dividing the local and the global humanities, not only must I accept the stumbling and the discomfort of an acquired language, but also leave behind everything I've ever written in Polish. Tens or even hundreds of scholarly contributions are swept beyond the horizon, no matter how big or how small their intrinsic value was. As a consequence, the peripheral scholar often crosses this border in a specific condition of unwritten nakedness. No wonder that, for many persons, the burden of the

---

<sup>5</sup>Even if the accidents of the familiar history made that George Steiner has been born in Paris, he still presents this as his defining origin.

<sup>6</sup>Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, The 1993 Rooth Lectures, London, Vintage, 1994, p. 20.

pages that have actually been written becomes too heavy to be left behind. Those who cross the line must face an absolute beginning, the shock of blankness, as they suddenly, often at the peak of a brilliant national career, become an academic non-entity, a name that is no longer recognized by anybody.

There is a powerful temptation of stepping back into the well-known national field. Specially if the peripheral context repays with increased recognition those who return in the glory of great centers, the glory inundating those who have been at Stanford, Cambridge or any other prestigious university. I'm always very skeptical towards some colleagues: one of them seems omnipresent in Poland since she presumably became professor at Stanford; another one included on the cover of his book a photo showing him in front of the façade of the University of Cambridge. Yet such bits of ridicule offer an insight in the interplay between the big world humanities, or their shadows, and the tiny local humanities. My intention is by no means to criticize persons; I'm interested in observing the general mechanism.

My colleague went to Stanford not just to stay and work there, but to gain highest recognition and visibility in Poland. Paradoxical or ridiculous as it may seem, it is indeed a winning strategy. The logic of the peripheral system prizing most highly those legitimized by their contacts or contracts abroad seems to be transparent: it's based on its essential inability of recognizing excellence. If any new idea appears in a peripheral academic system, it causes at first great perplexity, for nobody knows what is its exact value. Since it's new, it's strange, inadequate, out of joint. This is why the peripheral system looks up to a center for a verdict. If the new idea proves to deserve the central attention (or simply is accepted for publication), if the person is admitted to any prestigious (or less prestigious) scholarly assembly, the fact automatically brings the recognition home.

Yet very similar mechanisms favor the displacement of the “strong minds” towards the center. Official policies, such as those of the European Research Council, that fosters and speeds up the dislocation of the promissory scholars towards the leading centers, only reinforce this natural trend instead of counteracting it. At the moment when excellence is recognized by the central instances, the idea itself and the personal potential of the scholar who created it are often as good as lost for the peripheral academic system.

The “strong scholars” (just to recycle the “strong poets” of Harold Bloom) never come back; they disappear beyond the horizon, as if they had fallen into a black hole. Those who do come back, irradiating the aura of

central recognition, are those rejected by the restrictive excellence zones, those to whom access to the very top had been finally denied. In the meanwhile, their highly visible activity, back at home, causes further distortion in the peripheral hierarchies of value. This is why, from the peripheral perspective, the term “academic excellence” may often resemble a spell, a magic word appearing in the EU documentation that nobody manages to define precisely. And if we can't even fairly guess what “excellence” actually stands for, how on earth could we ever achieve it?!

Obviously it would be inadequate to speak about external symbolic violence in this case; we are beyond the range of postcolonial theory. The whole system composed by the centers and the peripheries is impersonal, has no agent, no program behind it; this is why I prefer to use abstract, mathematical or astronomical metaphors to describe it. What defines the center is its symbolic gravity rather than symbolic violence. Its propensity for absorbing matter from the peripheries is due to unfathomable curve in the very tissue of space, caused by no recognizable human agency.

The centers drain the peripheries, causing a movement of the best minds and the best ideas. Yet in this complex, communicating system the centers pay back to the peripheries, perform useful, even essential services. They serve as sanctuaries for peripheral intellectuals; a great majority of them remain, often for life, in the condition of a glorious, academically excellent exile. Putting the values on trial, as I mentioned before, might also be considered as a requested service. But at what a price!... The centers sort people and ideas for the peripheries, but they are free to keep the best ones for themselves as the reward for the sorting expertise...

Great universities remain naturally unconcerned with our struggles, and the profit and loss of the peripheries that prove unable to fend for themselves. Just like the great metropolis in Czesław Miłosz's poem, *Rue Descartes*: “zgodnie ze swoją naturą zachowywało się miasto, / Gardłowym śmiechem odzywając się w ciemności, / Wypiekając długie chleby i w gliniane dzbanki nalewając wino”...<sup>7</sup> The periphery is by no means the victim of their programmatic ostracism or spite. I would rather say that, ravaged by the effects of symbolic gravity, it also suffers a self-inflicted symbolic violence that still remains largely unexplored.

Creating the concept of “Sytuacja”, Kieniewicz stepped into this yet undone exploration of the darkness on the margin. The Situation written in capital letter stands for the impalpable, surrounding passivity that paralyzed any action in the context of communist Poland. Yet in academic terms,

<sup>7</sup>Czesław Miłosz, „Rue Descartes”, in: *Wiersze*, v. II, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1987, p. 363.

“Sytuacja” encountered new modalities after the end of the communism. Agata Bielik-Robson speaks about “this most stupid time” (“ten czas najgłupszy”) coinciding with the transformation, when the political resistance has been translated into a paradoxical, perhaps specifically Polish phenomenon of “resistance against theory”. The eternal anxiousness of being colonized, subdued, de-nationalized (“wynarodowienie”) becomes a strange, non-Bloomian anxiety of intellectual influence.<sup>8</sup>

Such figures as Piotr Nowak, applying to himself the label of “conservative cultural criticism”, try to oppose resistance against the Western figure of the intellectual and, as a consequence, against the humanities as a specifically Western product. In his recently published volume of essays, *Hodowanie troglodytów*<sup>9</sup>, Piotr Nowak – reaching the level of absolute abjection in my eyes – formulates a glorification of Mark Lilla's *The Reckless Mind*. He puts this highly questionably book in the place traditionally occupied by the classical manual in history of philosophy by Władysław Tatarkiewicz. These two texts apparently have very little in common: Tatarkiewicz's book is an extensive, three-volumes thick panorama of Western philosophical tradition, while Lilla's essay is an attempt to deconstruct, over less than 200 pages, some chosen figures of intellectuals that the authors considers as morally blamable. The intention of substituting the one by the other seems hard to justify. Yet there is a purpose in this. If Lilla's vision is to become a new *summa philosophiae*, the aim is to dismiss the Western figure of the intellectual, the traditions of humanities and the line of cultural theory and criticism as something that we, Poles, don't need.

Perhaps I've just missed the golden opportunity of ignoring Nowak's new book, which would be the appropriate strategy of dealing with the problem. For there is a problem. Reverting the hierarchy of values, so that such figures as Nowak himself might occupy the place of the leading cultural critics, is a dangerous idea. He explores the discontent of those who cannot stand the discomfort of a system based on excellence, unavoidably marginalizing them. Such a stance is doomed to become very popular.

By the way, the general idea is not new. In 2000, Adam Chmielewski wrote about the “submissiveness of Polish philosophy” and “an illness of mind which is incapable of originality”, protesting, at the same time, against

---

<sup>8</sup>This is an allusion to the famous book by Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry* (1973), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

<sup>9</sup>Piotr Nowak, *Hodowanie troglodytów. Uwagi o szkolnictwie wyższym i kulturze umysłowej człowieka współczesnego*, Warszawa: Fundacja Augusta hrabiego Cieszkowskiego, 2014.

the American imperialism in the philosophical domain.<sup>10</sup> Martin Jay, included by Chmielewski on the list of the imperial agents, found it necessary to formulate a response.<sup>11</sup> He turns his defense into a large essay concerning the “philosophical nationalities” going from German and French to “African” (evoking the position illustrated by Paulin Hountondji in 1980).

I believe that Jay's argumentation, pointing out that philosophy has no nationality (so there is no objective possibility to undermine “the Polish philosophy” by any imperialistic attempt), reveals a complete misunderstanding concerning the nature of his opponent's anxiousness. Yet at the end of his essay, I can see Jay's point as he concludes that “perennial philosophical questions and possible answers circulate in a never ending shuffling of the deck, with cards that both reflect local origins and inevitably transcend them”.<sup>12</sup> There is a “sea of translations” in which we are all equally submersed. The maritime metaphor brings about the idea of trade that may help me to explain what really matters here. Philosophy is a marketplace where ideas circulate, passing from hand to hand indiscriminately. But the peripheral people find it difficult to adopt to this market economy; they feel as if they had no local currency. They feel uncomfortable as if they came to the marketplace with empty pockets.

What makes us so inefficient is precisely our longing for “national humanities”; we believe it would give us this missing currency to enjoy equality on the marketplace; it would grant us a right to buy we otherwise believe not to have. But what the currency on the market of ideas actually is? Who enjoys the right of pre-emption? Most probably Jay is right: there is no such thing as “national humanities” at all, or if there is, it's not a thing truly worth having. Do the Americans have any “national humanities” they impose on the rest of the world? Is Martin Jay indeed one of their “national philosophers” for whom Chmielewski took him? Honestly, I doubt. If they appear to rule, it is only by selling reader's digests of everything. Sometimes we have the simplicity of mind of a savage in a supermarket, believing that things are there stored in such an abundance, because they have been magically created there. We believe in *numina* of the intellectual shopping center, and we fall on our knees, worshiping fervently and scared of such a powerful magic that might turn against us.

---

<sup>10</sup>Adam J. Chmielewski, „Looking Westward: The Submissiveness of Polish Philosophy”, *Times Literary Supplement*, June 23<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

<sup>11</sup>Martin Jay, “Can There Be National Philosophies in a Transnational World?”, in: *Essays from the Edge. Parerga & Paralipomena*, University of Virginia Press, 2011, p. 162-176.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

The Poles got an inkling of exacerbated resistance. Perhaps they still oppose themselves to a colonization, and who knows, colonized they might be more than anyone else. They resist the American empire of ideas, and Americanized they are by the sheer force of their resistance. This is a basic lesson of René Girard: you get defined by any agonistic contest you engage in. And we, Poles are entangled in many agonistic contests, over and over again.

Nonetheless, I presume that the temptation of “resistance against theory” that I’ve illustrated above with some Polish examples may be more than just a local problem. Is a similar resistance widespread in the non-Western world? I wouldn’t be surprised to discover it. The great question that emerges here is how to channel this discontent towards the creation of various non-Western forms and versions of humanities and cultural criticism rather than admitting anti-intellectual stagnation of vast regions of the planet. The great task is indeed to resist the “illness of mind” that cripples us according to Chmielewski, the deficiency that makes us incapable of originality.

### 3.

Here I come back to the topic announced in the title of this essay: my intellectual mediation in the particular circumstances of the seminar “Searching for Identity” that takes place at the University of Warsaw, but gathers participants from as far as Kamchatka. What kind of event is it?

The position of the Polish scholar in this context is thus that of a non-neutral, perhaps unwilling mediator that introduces to the Eastern students the concepts elaborated predominantly in the context of the post-structuralist, post-modern and post-colonial thought. This intellectual context is both geographically and – in a certain sense – axiologically oriented. If we admit the logic of ranking, derived from thinking in terms of centers and peripheries, the aim is presumably to teach the paradigms of cultural theory and criticism as they have been elaborated at the leading universities to those coming from geographical and cultural territories lacking their place in the ranking. Synthetically speaking, those outside the ranking come to a place situated somewhere near the middle of the ranking in order to learn about the advanced theories created at the top of the ranking, that nonetheless, for intellectual and logistic reasons, cannot be accessed directly. This perspective soothes our pains, puts us back on the marketplace of ideas. As empty as our pockets might be, we discover someone poorer than ourselves...

This vision is deliberately provocative. In other words, Warsaw is an intermediary place through which the theory flows down, reaching the

remotest parts of the world. This intellectual flow behaves according to pyroclastic rules. The volcanoes on the top spit lava that descends through the slopes; its progress, originally torrential, becomes very slow as it cools down. Considerable lapse of time separates the state of the art as it appears in the leading institutions from the state of the consciousness in the peripheral humanities.

This might be a way of stating what our situation at this seminar is. At the light of my previous remarks, we might even presume that the students coming to Warsaw in hope of improving their intellectual stance enter a space marked by multiple deficiencies, where the solution of their problems simply cannot be found. Is their presence at Warsaw the result of a misunderstanding? Or is there any possibility that this Warsaw experience may transport them somehow from the peripheral state of mind into a permanent participation in the global intellectual community? How?

As I confessed at the beginning, I'm reflecting on this question at a special biographical moment, establishing a kind of closing balance in my own "Polish period", intersecting the "Polish periods" of other people. Is there any final remark I could add to all I've done over these years? Anything going beyond a mere private recollection? And more importantly, is there anything universally valuable I could draw from my experience, anything able to transcend the local scale, anything I could render as globally valid?

Some years ago, this experience of Siberia that might have seem so odd, even so absurd adventure in my academic curriculum. Mere accident put me there, and in many moments I've been deeply frustrated by the role that was ascribed to me, as if I had no competence, no field on my own, as if I were a joker to substitute whoever was missing. Yet the joker is the highest-ranking card in many games, and perhaps the experience could bring me an insight.

I've been teaching Western humanities to Eastern students. For reasons that remain unexamined, I've believed they should know about post-modernism and post-colonial studies, and subaltern studies, and the rest I tried to resume for them in a single, coherent narration, a story to be told. On the other hand, I've built on this experience. It could be integrated into my own narration of transcultural humanities. This is also how I became something more than a joker, someone more than a substitutable teacher retelling them the story to be told. Can I speak about my intellectual mediation between East and West? In what moments and with what efficiency?

I tried to adopt my scholarship to the public, evoking Buddhist concepts and searching for parallels that might elucidate somehow their situation and their perspectives. For sure I was clumsy doing it. Yet some form of *amor fati* is required. For a reason or other, they landed in Warsaw and there was hardly anyone I could cede my responsibility to.

Successful or failed, some form of intellectual mediation has existed, and it should be rendered and reinforced in reflection. This is why I'm writing an essay on it, saving something from my Varsovian years, and perhaps announcing something of importance. I write it to see the diagram of connections more clearly. For sure the marketplace is here in Warsaw, not in America as Chmielewski regretted. But where are the goods coming from, if I resell them now to the new users? What kind of usage do I propose to them? What kind of usage can they actually make of those goods? How can Western humanities serve them?

On the other hand, Western humanities are more than a body of knowledge, even more than a set of tools. It is a space of communication and inclusion. Perhaps the whole situation of this Varsovian seminar should be taken as a phenomenon in the global space, causing effects that refer to the global landscape. Is my mediation and my influence as far-flung as I believe? Could it be in both directions? I presume it is quite real I provoke an impact upon my students' intellectual destinies and, indirectly, on their communities. But am I by any means empowered to provoke an impact on Western humanities through my experience with them? Could such a local fact in the peripheries actually change the landscape of the global centers?

This is not an interrogation concerning my importance. It is all about knowing to what degree the global networks are actually able to transmit the vibrations. It is generally believed, and I've assumed it for this essay, that the centers configure the peripheries. But do the peripheries configure the centers? Honestly, I believe it too. First of all, it is nothing else than their presence that transformed "the humanities" into "Western humanities". The central marketplaces are spaces where transactions are done, but not where the goods are initially produced. There is a raw material that comes from somewhere else. Only a child believes the apples are made in the supermarket, even if it is where you can usually see them. Yet there are unseen apple trees somewhere else.

Am I an unseen apple tree? The carrier that brings the apples to the market? The shopkeeper selling them in a backstreet? Or perhaps the worm that spoils and adulterates the pulp?

Last year, as we started our work, I saw my task naively, as something very simple: teaching the Western humanities to those who don't

know, who have no idea whatsoever about postcolonial studies and no idea whatsoever about Foucault. This situation puts me in a double position of power: as the one who knows and as the one who decide that they should and shall know. Progressively I started to see my task in terms of intellectual mediation. The main target is no longer to transmit a body of knowledge, but to create conditions of intellectual autonomy. And yet it would be just another position of power, even quite a familiar colonial practice, if I pretended that I'm able to bestow intellectual autonomy on anybody! By the contrary, it's about myself I'm thinking in the first place. I've built up my intellectual autonomy in this seminar, and this is the only warrant that others may achieve it as well.

4.

A peripheral scholar looks up toward the center, neglecting everything else. This is the very basis of his or her symbolic dependence. He or she neither knows nor cares about nothing but the ideas that appear in the center. The rest of the world barely exists mediated and filtered by this center. A non-peripheral scholar has a direct access to the world, unmediated and unfiltered by any center exterior to himself or herself. This is precisely the situation that enables him or her to formulate innovative, original conclusions rather than recapitulate chapters from an American book or use conceptual grids formulated in German academia. This unmediated access is what the central scholars strive for. This is why Steiner lamented so bitterly his inability to read Dostoyevsky and Ibn Arabi otherwise than in a translation.

I would like to stress this is evidently not all about languages. I know excellent Arabists that rely on Henri Corbin to understand Ibn Arabi even more heavily than Steiner himself does in *The Grammars of Creation*.<sup>13</sup> By the way, the culminating interplay of the “yes” and the “no” of the mystic is beyond any philological complexity. This is all about actualizing experience, stepping into the domain of experience – the authenticity, the seriousness of intellectual experience is what enables you to do something else than just copying the ideas, the expressions, even the whole sentences from books already written by other people.

To describe the condition of being-in-the-world, beyond the opposition of center and periphery, I re-employ the concept of worldliness, proposed by Said in *The World, the Text and the Critic*.<sup>14</sup> Originally, this

<sup>13</sup>George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, London: Faber, 2002, chap. II.

<sup>14</sup>Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983.

term has neither geographical or cultural connotation. To define it, Said considers the case of a pianist interpreting his partition in front of a public. Worldliness characterizes an act of communication, taking into account the Other. Analogically, the condition of participating in the global humanities is defined by the public to whom the discourse is addressed. If you manage to address successfully the global public, you participate in the global humanities, no matter how big or small your contribution is, and no matter what your geographical location is.

To gather my ideas in guise of a conclusion, I would like to stress these two aspects of the condition of worldliness: the unmediated experience of the world and the successful mediation to a world. To put it even more synthetically, we need two things: something to talk about and an efficient way of talking about it. Between the two things, I stress the first one. We often believe our peripheral problem originates from the lack of “mastery of language”, including discursive and rhetorical skills that the center requires of us. Yet the importance of this factor is secondary and instrumental. The main thing the peripheral scholar miss is the unmediated access to his or her matter; his or her competence, as large as it may be, is derived; the belatedness (using theoretical keys that are out-dated from the central perspective) results from this time-consuming process of derivation. The peripheral scholar sees the world in the mirror of the center. As a consequence, everything he or she says is reflection of a reflection, a jugglery with borrowed terms, concepts, expressions, constructs, ready-made items of discourse.

Am I not speaking with Said's words right now? I do, as we always speak inherited languages. But notice that it is about my own experience I talk, I go straight through to the essence – whatever the essence is for the moment for my own perspective. Finding the braveness of doing so, I establish myself as a center, not as a periphery. I create my own configuration of the world.

All the centers are superposed; none of the peripheries is superposed to any other – this is my conclusion in topological terms; perhaps a bit hermetical for a moment. Enough to say that such a stance as I've described puts me extremely close to the other intellectuals. Said and Steiner are my kin, as I interrogate our common beginnings, as we originate from the same stem. Together with Ibn Arabi. Noticeably, as I mention a dead and gone Palestinian critic, I have neither the feeling of belatedness, nor the urge of searching for something more fashionable. With Said, Ibn Arabi and all the remaining dead, I'm still very much alive, inhabiting my present and

comfortably up-to-date, because my way of interrogating them is dictated by the present tense of my experience.

*Kraków, December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2014.*