

EPIGONISM AND SHODDY RESEARCH

“Isolation would be most unfortunate. We would be doing science in our own company, completely indifferent to what is happening outside our own universe. This would be totally self-destructive and I hope it will never happen,” says **Professor Michał Głowiński** in an interview with Grzegorz Wołowicz, titled “A Time Unexpected,” a fragment of which is presented below.

How did the political transformation that took place in 1989 affect academic life in Poland? How was this watershed significant, what changed as compared to the period of communist rule?

I can share with you my own personal experience rather than objective historical facts. I would say there were two opposing trends. Everything changed in some respects and very little changed in others. I'm talking only about the year 1989. The real breakthrough from my viewpoint, as for all scholars in the humanities, writers or critics, was the abolishment of censorship. No censorship meant freedom, which was of enormous importance to me, since I was interested in the language of propaganda, newspeak and public discourses. I found myself in a completely new situation: I could legally publish a few books that I already had written.

I just could take these texts out of my drawer, edit them and have them published. My next works were mostly inspired by the phenomena of writers' servility and socialist realism. I could release articles on these topics in journals and then publish them as a collection titled *Rytuał i demagogia* [Ritual and Demagogy], which was one of the first publications dealing with those issues. I had developed my interest in them under the influence of a then PhD student of mine, Wojciech Tomasik, who is now a professor. In his PhD dissertation he demonstrated that this topic was most fascinating and worthwhile. Interestingly, he encountered obstacles when he wanted to publish the book towards the end of the 1980s – the eclipse of the totalitarian system – and some compromise had to be reached to make its publication possible. In this way, even though the book dealt directly with the socialist realism novel, its title referred to the poetics of a biased novel.

From the perspective of the methodology of literary research and my personal interest in literature, on the other hand, the year 1989 did not bring any change at all. The type of humanities that I and my colleagues worked in was completely non-ideological, detached from any political situation and did not provide any opportunities for a career in public life. One could find space for working within this domain of



PROF. MICHAŁ GŁOWIŃSKI

humanities since the beginning of the 1960s, following what is known as the Polish thaw of 1956. The communist authorities were constantly troubled by really serious problems, so they didn't consider literary studies worthy of their attention. Due to this, the field was in a more comfortable position than philosophy, sociology or contemporary history. I believe that the situation of a Polish literary historian could be compared to that of a historian investigating the life of Władysław III Spindleshanks – a somewhat obscure twelfth-century duke – but both of them had been in a much more advantageous position as compared to a historian studying the inter-war period, not to mention the present times. So in this respect, very little changed for me in 1989. At the end of the 1990s, the Kraków publishing house Universitas, and more specifically its manager Andrzej Nowakowski, expressed interest in publishing my selected works in five volumes. Looking at these volumes now, it might be difficult to guess when particular parts were written. For instance, in theoretical and methodological terms my book about the Modernist novel first published in 1969 does not differ from the book on Modernist literary criticism published almost thirty years later, i.e. long after the demise of censorship. From the standpoint of methodology and theoretical foundations, the year 1989 does not mark any definitive divide in the study of literature in Poland. Simply, there was no reason for a breakthrough, as the field had not been ideologized, it had enjoyed moderate freedom and Marxism was long dead.

I guess then that you disagree with the opinion that it was 1989 that opened a window to modernity for Polish humanities, including the study of literature?

Let me put it differently. If someone wanted to teach or do research in an ideologically-biased way, they did. But those who were familiar with the various schools and current trends in the humanities managed to be a part of these world-wide trends. If you wanted to read Derrida and Foucault, you read Derrida and Foucault. If you wanted to read German theorists of literary reception, you read those theorists. There was no pressure and no limitations. It started to be emphasized after 1989, and it still is, often by the people managing academia, that it is important to be connected with the broader world of humanities. In my view, officials who voice such opinions are vaguely aware that this connection has always existed. They seem to be oblivious of the fact that this agenda is far from new, and the postulate to stay abreast of the world is not a breakthrough, but a continuation of what was a normal academic practice in the communist era Poland, even if it wasn't part of the official policy. I can't imagine that one could do something in the humanities, at the same time disregarding the activities of one's neighbors or scholars on the other side of the ocean. Choosing to be provincial is but a way of practicing masochism.

I think that Polish studies of literature were not provincial. Although Polish scholars were not as successful as our Czech colleagues, who founded the Prague school of structuralism in the 1920s, we were not quite in the woods either. The present-day ideology of worldliness is built on the premise that this is where we in fact were. But it is not true. When ties with the broader world of humanities are discussed nowadays, I remember what Nikita Khrushchev, called "Nikita the Corncob" by the English writer Julian Barnes, used to say, namely that the Soviet Union has to catch up with and finally outperform the West. This, as we know, didn't happen. Catching up with the West is not about us reading books that came out in the States, England, Germany or perhaps in Italy or Spain, and learning from them. What is important for us is that while we have our own views, we also know what is going on in the world so that we can draw on it in accordance with our needs, rather than be epigones of world trends. In my opinion, all state institutions doing humanities research should subscribe to this kind of agenda. Isolation would be most unfortunate: We would be doing science in our own company, completely indifferent to what is happening outside our own universe. This would be totally self-destructive and I hope it will never happen. But a program based on imitation or catching up with others would also be completely inappropriate. It is crucially important not to become uprooted from one's own tradition and resources, or otherwise we would forever be copycats, not worthy anyone's attention, except perhaps some local scholars dealing with the history of literary studies in Poland.

Let me point out that the phenomenon that I once dubbed “avant-garde epigonism” exists not only in the sphere of art but also in academia. We should keep in mind that the term “avant-garde” is not unanimously positive. I am critical about the general direction taken by academia in recent decades, mostly of the fact that the adoption of a given paradigm is valued higher than individual achievements. Avant-garde epigonism is also linked to being trendy. One could announce a catalogue of currently fashionable motifs and ideas – something akin to the nineteenth-century *La Revue des Modes de Paris* – which are the topics of countless research publications. It is a question of academic policy whether such works – what I call avant-garde epigonism – get promoted. Modern and worldly on the face of it, but derivative and worthless deep inside. I am truly worried that funds get spent mostly on promoting researchers who can write something fast.

Preferably in English.

All researchers of the young generation speak English. But a book or article written in English constrains the range of its potential readers in Poland. I’m old and it’s perhaps my age that makes me somewhat lazy, but I wouldn’t be quite encouraged to read a book in English, if I knew the author could well write it in Polish. As regards Polish literature and language, writing research in a foreign language doesn’t make sense because if a researcher from a university outside Poland is interested in a Polish topic, they can usually read Polish, too.

Language affects the character of a text. When we write in English we are addressing different recipients, which in turn affects the choice of the focus and way of presentation.

This requires perfect proficiency in a language. An outstanding chemist told me once that all you need to write a research paper in his discipline is basic grammar and six hundred words. If a humanist of comparable competence tried to write anything, they would become a target of laughter. Research papers in the humanities are not mere reports of laboratory work but, as I keep saying, they are a domain of creative writing, and a humanist scholar is therefore a creative writer of sorts.

Besides, papers written in foreign languages can be of questionable quality. Back in the 1970s, I once talked to a renowned American Slavic scholar, who also spoke Polish. He was reviewing a manuscript with a lot of corrections, which turned out to be a research work written by a Polish scholar and translated into English by a non-native speaker. The translator had a reputation as being highly competent, but the American scholar maintained that every single sentence had an error in it.

Here we touch the subject of language competence. To what extent is it possible to accomplish a humanist’s task in a foreign language?

Good question, since research in humanities is part of culture. Imagine if Maria Janion – a researcher who has been highly influential not only in the sphere of academia but also in Polish culture in the last decades – had written her works in English or German. They could potentially, though not necessarily, have garnered some attention abroad but they would have passed unnoticed in Poland. On the other hand, I believe that publishing translations of Polish authors, as monographs or as whole anthologies, is a great idea. For instance, the anthology of works on socialist realism that you co-edited was very successful. I am very happy about this enterprise, partly for personal reasons, since two of my books came out in this series. One of them is *Totalitarian Speech* and the other *Myths in Disguise*, which has been translated into German too.

I agree that writing in foreign languages or having certain works published in translation is often desirable, but it cannot be a default or preferred method for a humanist researcher as it deprives his/her native culture of some value, thereby marginalizing and weakening it, ironically enough.

This is related to the general policy in academia. I find it difficult to talk about it since I’ve been retired for several years, but some news still reaches me and raises my concern. As far as research grants are concerned, I think I understand the general policy implemented

PROF. MICHAŁ GŁOWIŃSKI

in Poland for the last 25 years, but the application procedure raises my objections. First of all, I take a principled stand against blind reviewing. Being anonymous as a referee may encourage a superficial, if not biased and irresponsible assessment. If I have to sign a review with my name, I can be held accountable for it; if I write it as professor X, I cannot. I have witnessed many instances of irresponsible reviewing. Besides, I presume that anonymous referees may have no idea what they are reviewing. I learned that one of my PhD students was refused a grant, and one of the reasons was that his PhD supervisor, that is me, was not involved in international scholarship. I was slightly astonished because, in my humble opinion, what I have attained professionally does have something to do with scholarship. I've been retired for several years, so it would be practically difficult for me to be actively involved internationally. I guess that my name and my achievements were totally unknown to this reviewer. A number of my books, both academic and literary, have been translated, which also counts as international contacts.

Research grant applications are evaluated on the basis of strict criteria of various kinds, e.g. whether the applicant has published a paper in a journal included on some international list. Such criteria are decisive in assessing our research achievements. Arguably, they are appropriate for hard science but not necessarily so for the humanities.

This is what leads to the malpractice and stupid bureaucracy that now rules Polish academic life on an unprecedented scale. When you compare the present conditions to those from the communist times, the latter look like a fairly liberal state, characterized by confidence in people doing research, educating students and publishing their works. Judging on the basis of what I hear from my colleagues, it has turned into something horrendous. Those incessant reports and inspections, who needs or reads them?

Indeed, who is it that reads, calculates, sums them up? We are becoming subject to the rule of bureaucrats, of increasing number and power.

Truly a bureaucrat's dream and paradise. No trust in scholars. To remedy this situation, it is necessary to boost the significance of self-representation in universities and in the institutes of the Polish Academy of Sciences. Nowadays bureaucracy is like a spider web in which Polish academia is entangled. This gives rise to pathology; despite overtly promoting transparency, efficiency and quality, this system brings more harm than benefits. Following purely practical principles in one's research career – which means publishing a lot, preferably in English and having one's academic achievements evaluated purely in terms of quantity – encourages the pursuit of fake rather than real research, the publishing of low-quality stuff, not to mention the growing plague of plagiarism.

On top of that, another threat may now be pending, namely pressure to make research ideology-oriented. This ominous threat is real, judging by what is going on.

Those who currently hold power in the realm of academia issue statements in which they postulate the pursuit of ideological criteria in research. This finds reflection in the awarding of funding, which for instance has effectively eliminated studies of left-wing movements, unless such studies are designed to be ideologically critical.

Poland boasts a long-standing tradition of research in the humanities, any ideological limitations imposed on it may have grievous consequences for the reliability and objective value of such work.

This is the first time such a situation has occurred since 1989. The only criteria for funding research projects had been based on quality. Now for the first time it was proclaimed that ideological criteria are of fundamental importance. This is just unbelievable, the ethos of academia is being undermined.

The current ideological limitations, which still may only herald the direction of future changes, remind me of the communist Poland of the early 1950s. Then, the dominant agenda was to investigate progressive trends. Now it is the opposite, to investigate everything that is conservative! ■



"A time Unexpected"
– a book-length interview
with Prof. Michał Głowiński
by Grzegorz Wołowicz,
Wielka Litera 2018