

162 Acceptance Speech at the World Congress of Middle East Studies (Barcelona 2012)

Events which call themselves a World Congress make me nervous. I come from a little provincial town, and I have always been a lonely worker. Let me say it in a verse from Lope de Vega which I learnt when I was a student:

A mis soledades voy, de mis soledades vengo,
 porque para andar conmigo me bastan mis pensamientos.¹

Basically, academia is, as was said in the title of a once famous American campus novel, a “small world”. We might even venture to allege that during the 19th and early 20th century Middle Eastern Studies were more global than they are nowadays, for not only did people like Nöldeke, Goldziher or Snouck Hurgronje know each other, they also conversed with each other without regarding their national differences. Almost everybody used his own language, and he could be sure to be understood, at least as long as he expressed himself in writing, be it in French, English, Spanish, German, Italian, or even Dutch. I should, of course, not idealize the situation. Most experts of the Middle East, whether modern or medieval, belonged to the colonial powers (England, France, Italy, Russia, Holland) or to those nations who wanted to be included among them (Germany for instance). The victims of their research, Orientals as they used to be called, were almost absent from the scholarly meetings. To a certain degree this situation has changed. But it did not do so entirely; Edward Said, first recipient of this award, used to point to symptoms of hidden colonialism in our own approach. As far as language is concerned we have become, in my generation, rather uniform; the philologist of the early days who used to be polyglot but had perhaps never seen the Middle East has been replaced by multitudes of vagrant experts all of whom speak English. I shall do so, too, on this occasion although I feel at ease only in my own native tongue; when I got offers from non-German universities I refused them mainly because I did not want to change my idiom permanently. At this moment, however, this is not the issue. My problem is not *how* I should say what I want to say, but rather *what* I am going to say at all.

1 The beginning of a long *romance* (Lope de Vega, *La Dorotea* 14).

In a small town like Tübingen it is of no great use to talk a lot; you don't have much of an audience anyway. You rather write, and you have time. Now I have an audience but only twenty minutes.

Recently, our local newspaper showed, on its frontpage, the picture of a girl who had got a grammy. I was impressed, for when you get an award in Middle Eastern Studies you can be sure not to make it onto the frontpage of our newspaper. The girl was attractive, but she had apparently not said anything; she had simply smiled – God bless her for that! Two days later, we had another picture in the same newspaper, this time a middle-aged man, less attractive but holding an Oscar which he had just got. The film he had appeared in was called “Inglourious Basterds”. He had performed the part of an ss officer; this is the sort of inglorious bastard who still attracts the attention everywhere. Again, as an orientalist (and a philologist on top of that) you don't have a similar chance. Both epithets, “orientalist” as well as “philologist”, are far from being a compliment; you won't make it to the walk of fame with them. Now, what did this filmstar say when he got the news of his new status? “This is super Bingo”, he had said. Bravo, but I can't use that either; I do not even know exactly what “Bingo” means. Moreover I never had the opportunity of acting as an officer in the army. Before 1945 I was not only too young, I was also Dutch, and when the Germans were asked by their American patrons to resume their militarist past in order to fight for Western values I had already lost the appropriate shape for that honour, for I belonged to the “white” generation (“die weissen Jahrgänge” as the German bureaucracy had decided to call us), i.e. to those youngsters who had reached the age of military service when the Germans still believed that they would never take up arms again. This is why I never learnt how to use a gun. It is a pity, because – who knows? – when possessing a gun and having the appearance of a real man I would perhaps have | ended up in the Near East as a four star general in Afghanistan, “defending Western civilization at the Hindukush” (as one of our glorious German ministers once said, referring perhaps to the British who, ages ago, did the same thing at the Khyber Pass). As a general I would certainly have made it onto the frontpage of our newspaper. I am not sure whether, as a simple old-fashioned orientalist, I have been of any use to Western civilization up to now. But at least I feel better like that.

163

I apologize: My speech seems to have got onto the wrong track. A WOCMES award cannot be compared to a grammy or an Oscar, and orientalists have always been serious people. On the other hand we cannot deny that they are also boring creatures, certainly less exciting than a popstar. Nobody listens to what they say, and nobody reads what they write, not even the orientalists themselves. But perhaps I am right when suggesting that I might be the last orientalist who became famous by not being read. To reach this stage is not

easy, I can tell you, and I would not be surprised if such a thing had only been possible in my generation. For I still remember the world of the happy few who had the time to read the publications of their colleagues. The first international congress I attended was the one in Delhi in January 1964. I was 29 then, and I had just finished my second book, the book which I had to produce in order to pass the “Habilitation”, the qualifying exam which made me eligible for a university chair. The paper I read was one among many; it had to be brief, and I had to do it in English. Expressing oneself in English was what everybody expected, but the reason was not yet that English was the only language which was left over from the gamut of scholarly idioms but rather that we were in India where English was the prevailing language. Many participants of the congress were still polyglot, and one of them, Alessandro Bausani from Italy, had made it his habit to always read his paper in the language of the country he visited. At school, I had still learnt five languages: English, French, Spanish, Dutch, and some Latin – Dutch because my parents lived in a border town close to the Netherlands: Aachen in German, Aix-la-Chapelle in French, Aquisgrán in Spanish, Aken in Dutch, the town of Charlemagne when Europe (as far as it existed) was still united. The only people who did not submit to the language restriction in Delhi were the Russians; they had come as a delegation, and its leader, Babajan Gafurov, a man from Central Asia and a member of Moscow Academy, read his paper in impeccable but unintelligible Russian. He spoke too long, and then his interpreter repeated everything in equally unintelligible English. The chairman was American, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a professor of comparative religion who had lived in India for a long time as a missionary. He banged the table and rang the bell, but he did not manage to stop the speaker. Language had ceased to be a means of communication and had become a symbol of power – not only with regard to Russian, by the way, but also with regard to English; we witnessed a performance of the cold war.

I found the confrontation amusing, and I did not mind the loss of time; most of the papers were not exciting anyway. What I appreciated were the conversations I had on the corridors or during the excursions. I spoke German with the German emigrants, and I remember a long and very fatherly congratulation which I got from Goitein who had left Germany already in 1923. I talked with the Iranians who had come: Saʿīd Nafīsī, Muġtabā Mīnovī, Badīʿuzzamān Fīrūzānfar, all of them great scholars; today they would, I assume, not even get a visa. And there is something else which I remember: the excellent speech given by the prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru who attended the opening session; this was the only time I saw a renowned politician honour an International Congress of Orientalists by his presence. Internationality as it is understood in Europe nowadays has become somewhat haphazard, and colleagues who

publish in Turkish, Persian, or Arabic are more marginalized than they used to be; the secondary literature published in these languages remains largely unknown.

There are, of course, many reasons for this situation. Who could have foreseen then that such masses of people would enter the academic career? In the German congresses of orientalist during the fifties or sixties nobody was allowed to read a paper who had not yet passed his | “habilitation”. The concept of creativity was different; nobody was expected to produce striking new ideas before having acquired a broad knowledge of the field. This broad knowledge still exists, but it has been redefined under the umbrella of specialization. When you are supposed to become a specialist you can have an original idea even in your MA thesis; the question is rather whether you will be able to stick to it. Early hypotheses have a certain tendency to follow the principle of “épater le bourgeois”, and then you are forced to swallow the consequences for the rest of your life. In my youth this sort of innocent originality was considered to be an American privilege; the European approach was disciplined by tradition. This is no value-judgement on my part; both approaches can produce good results. The problem is only that in our days the success one is hoping for may turn out to be an effect of mere group-dynamics. What makes the difference is that there were several scholarly traditions in Europe, each one of them displaying specific habits of expression and methodological idiosyncrasies; switching from one code to the other was an interesting and rewarding experience. It is only one generation ago that here in Spain most historians were still involved in the clash between Américo Castro and Sánchez-Albornoz. The contribution of Islam to the national identity was at stake, and the controversy still survives as an issue of local politics.

164

But can we safely pretend that what we are doing in Middle Eastern Studies nowadays is still useful? In my youth nobody would have asked this question, at least not in Germany. Somebody who occupied himself with things non-European and non-Western was welcome in the academic world. He was a rare bird, certainly, but he also contributed to the somewhat vague concept one had of “Bildung”, *adab*, higher education. When, however, the erudite generalist was replaced by the “expert” the intellectual climate changed, and the universities started abolishing positions which they did not find relevant. The concept of usefulness or “relevance” had come up among our students in the late sixties, and meanwhile it has crept, as part of their heritage, into the entire cosmos of academic administration. There is no doubt that with regard to Islam and Near Eastern politics non-academic approaches have a better chance of reaching a big audience than our somewhat helpless Orientalist endeavour, approaches as we find them in journalism for instance or, politically even more successful, in

the realm of “intelligence agencies”. “Intelligence” has a peculiar meaning there, and its speciality is quickness rather than precision. Germany was privileged to have, for a sufficiently extended period (until 1989), even two institutions of this sort. As symbols of the cold war they managed to precede what started to be called, on the academic level, “gegenwartsbezogene Orientforschung”, and their sombre competition outshone the achievements of this kind of academic endeavour. As a special “service”, a secret one as a matter of fact, they kept offering “Erkenntnisse” as we have it in German, “insights” of the sort which is supposed to be convincing without further discussion. As insights they pretend to be based upon “Nachforschungen”, investigations, rather than “Forschung” and upon “Recherchen” rather than research, *research* being the English word for “Forschung” whereas “Recherchen” in German is taken over from French where the *recherches* (pl.) always meant activities of the police. However, what is the use of insights which cannot be checked? And who invented this confusing vocabulary?

I don't want to sound apocalyptic. In my personal field of research the influence of the opinion-makers has always been minimal. They were only superficially interested. I work on a distant past where nobody interferes, i.e. “classical” Islam as the term is for the moment. I am left in peace; this is perhaps what explains my productivity. The experts of modern Islam have a more difficult job, and sometimes it seems to me that what is left to them is simply picking up the shambles of previous disasters. But this is perhaps what historians do anyway, and possibly it is painful only as long as you still have the feeling of not being able to change anything. When I was young the distinction between “modern” and “classical” Islam did not yet exist, at least not
 165 in German orientalism, and I still think that both fields cannot be | completely separated. I have to admit, though, that we lived then in a naïve world. We thought that Europe which had exhausted itself in two global wars and horrible crimes would manage to export the peace it had gained to the rest of the world, but in the end we only retained peace for ourselves. Terrorism existed already in the Near East: the King David hotel had been blown up, Count Bernadotte had been shot. But we did not take these events seriously; we thought that they were merely a sign of the ultimate defeat of colonialism. When the tide turned and airplanes were kidnapped some of us called this “guerilla” (a Spanish term which dates from the time of the Napoleonic wars), and we thought that in a way such actions were justified with regard to occupation, as was the case when Germany had occupied Europe during the Second World War. Nowadays “guerilla” is out, and we only talk about terrorism which we discover everywhere in the world. What a change of outlook in the few years of my own life! Did we become more “intelligent” or have greater “insight” in the meantime?

Personally, I remained a mere observer. I did not shift “from Plato to NATO”; I rather chose the opposite direction.

But when I ended up with Islamic theology as my “speciality” (again a new term!) I was not spared my linguistic problems either. I had to explain what I meant by “theology” and whether this theology was the same as in Christianity. My personal answer is that no religion is so obsessed with theology as is Christianity, neither Judaism nor Islam. But it would be mistaken to simply doubt that Islam has any theology at all, as many Western observers tend to do for the moment. Such kind of skepticism did not exist when I was a student; it came up when Islam was discovered to be fundamentalist. The story is well-known to all of you; I don’t want to go into it now. But what concerns me is that again we have reached a dead-lock which blocks our perspective. The problem in Europe is not fundamentalism; the problem is that we live together with millions of Muslims who have a past of their own. Whether they came as workers or as refugees does not make any difference; they are Europeans now and citizens of our countries. It is true that, as far as Islamic theology is concerned, they kept it in their baggage only subconsciously. But they should be offered it as part of their intellectual heritage, their “patrimoine”, as the French would say. We should not see this as a question of true or false; this is a choice they have to make themselves. Europe has always harboured a plurality of historical self-portrayals in one and the same geographical area, and it is, I think, not so difficult to welcome still another one. Spain is again a good example, with its experience of *convivencia*. The French who have always been good in coining terms have started to talk about “transversalité”. But I am not concerned with words; we are rather confronted with a new reality. Why can’t we define the German Turks as the Andalusians of our time and offer them their heritage as far as they want to have it? And why don’t we become “global” in this respect?

These are very private ideas, and I am sure that not everybody is going to agree. But I am happy to express them in this country, and especially here in Barcelona where, at the border of Muslim cultural influence and military expansion, the main avenue is called La Rambla, from Arabic *ramal* “the sand” – the Arabian sands outside the Roman walls of the town –, and where we still find an old academy, the Real Academia de Buenas Letras which is, as far as I know, the oldest one in Spain and was, incidentally, the first European academy to honour me, 35 years ago. I got the news in the United States when I was teaching at Princeton, where I had just met the American translator of Américo Castro who (I mean Castro), at that time, still lived in exile. In Germany, the *cursus honorum* was an affair of the academies. One could not apply for membership as one could not apply for a professorship; one had to

wait until one was elected. This is also the case with your award. Prizes are nowadays given in Germany to people from whom there is still something to expect; they get money in order to start a project, and then they are given some time to turn it into a success. Your award is different; it makes me look back. Thank you very much for it. *A mis soledades voy ... Muchas gracias.*