correspondents abroad

Writing and Teaching from Limbo

JOHN NEUBAUER

ON 11 SEPTEMBER 2001 I WAS ATTENDING A EUROPEAN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE IN EXETER, ENGLAND. WHEN THE NEWS reached us, just before the final banquet, we were all deeply shocked, but I could not help detecting in the reactions of some colleagues (as, indeed, in the newspaper editorials the next morning) an ill-suppressed and indelicate undertone: "America has become vulnerable." The official and media rhetoric that has reached Europe since then has, I believe, further widened the differences between the United States and European perspectives. A spectrum of opinions exists, of course, in each continent (we all too easily forget, for instance, that the United States is not identical with North America), but inasmuch as one can judge from official statements and media reports, the general tone of reactions in the United States differs from that in Europe. The kind of patriotic sentiment that now seems to wash over much of the United States is distasteful to many western Europeans—though they display xenophobia in other ways and in other areas of their lives.

The question beyond the immediate grief and outrage is how to respond to acts of fanaticism without becoming a fanatic oneself. Europe has a long history of religious and ethnic fanaticism, which lives on today in the former Yugoslavia, the Basque country, Northern Ireland, and elsewhere. This history explains why so many European intellectuals and artists categorically reject acts of violence, even when responding to atrocities. America had its experience with fanaticism during the Civil War, under McCarthyism, with the Ku Klux Klan, and with today's right-wing and sectarian fanatics. Yet are Americans not, perhaps, less experienced dealing with it than are Europeans, who have been much more exposed to it? I would not presume to answer such a general question, but from the perspective of the Netherlands, a country that is relatively tolerant and free of violence, reactions from the United States to 11 September are disquieting. Since I share this concern, I cannot help asking myself whether I would react differently if I had stayed in the United States instead of coming to Amsterdam some nineteen years ago. Although, once more, I cannot answer unequivocally, I want to signal an affirmative

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response by showing how and why I have become editor of a large research project that cannot avoid facing fanaticism, an innovative history of the literary cultures in east-central Europe.

Our profession, with its traditional preoccupation with literary history, has been deeply implicated in a major source of modern fanaticism: nationalism. The first literary scholars and historians, the Schlegel brothers and Coleridge, had no footing in academia. They held their lectures on European literature in hired halls of big cities. But when Friedrich Schlegel declared in his last lectures, given in Vienna in 1812, that the practical and social function of literature was to remember the national past, politicians and educators seized on literature as a force to shape national identity. Though much of literature is, of course, not nationalistic, the Schlegelian view initiated the teaching of the vernacular literature in the schools, the establishment of university chairs for it, and the founding of national academies, theaters, and other institutions for its cultivation. These developments too led to the canonization of national poets and the writing of national literary histories that claimed to represent the spiritual history of the nation. Such a national view of literature was not unique to the national awakenings that swept eastern Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; it was dominant also in Germany, Italy, Greece, and other countries that struggled for their national identity and independence. And the national myths, like those of Kosovo, the national treasure houses of historical fiction, and the patriotically reinterpreted folklore of epic and lyric poetry, continue to fuel all kinds of fanaticism in all parts of the world.

Of course, much of contemporary literature and literary scholarship is devoted to the deconstruction of these national literary myths and of their philological elaborations. But can one simply discard literary histories, as David Perkins seems to think? The proposition of our project is that we must reconceptualize rather than discard literary history to help bring about a gestalt switch in people's sense of identity. We ought to show that the borders of the national units are tenuous and porous, that the homogeneity of nations conceals heterogeneous groups and cultures, and that the "unique national fortunes" have been subject to the same forces, structures, and mechanisms as the fortunes of the neighbors. Traditional comparative literature, however useful in other regards, has accomplished this task incompletely, because it tended to use for its comparisons national units or schematic East-West contrasts and because it habitually neglected the minor, minority, peripheral, and noncanonical literatures. Nothing reveals these shortcomings more disturbingly than the literatures of east-central Europe, a vast and colorful region we define as stretching from the Baltic Sea to Macedonia, which had (and often still has) to assert itself against the German, Russian, and Turkish hegemonic powers. With few exceptions, European literary histories have neglected this immensely rich cultural region, and the national literary histories could not, or would not, look beyond their borders. The dominant comparatist practice lumped these literatures together as some exotic eastern other of the West and engaged in interregional instead of intraregional comparisons. Comparative studies among Polish, Czech, Hungarian, Romanian, Croatian, Serbian, and other east-central European literatures have been rare, and only a handful of scholars speak several of the relevant languages.

The point is not to replace putative unified national cultures with the imagined community of a similarly homogeneous east-central Europe but to indicate the tenuousness and contingency of all such groupings. For this reason, the projected publication will be structured not as a single, overarching chronological narrative but as microhistories that focus not so much on time as on the topography, the institutions, the genres, and the (real and imaginary) figures of literature (see Cornis-Pope and Neubauer for a more detailed outline of the project). We need to weaken the collective identity that tends to fuel fanaticism, whether it is national, religious, or attached to a soccer club. Such a task can seldom

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be carried out from within tight communities. People living in east-central Europe today have no Archimedean point from which to launch a comprehensive literary history of the region, although many of them joined enthusiastically once it was initiated from abroad. Of the 120 contributors to the project, more than a third reside in east-central Europe; the rest are, with few exceptions, people born and raised in that region but living now in the United States, Canada, or western Europe. Wherever we reside, we tend to be literally or figuratively deterritorialized, for we speak from mobile or liminal spaces.

I would not want to claim that European and United States scholars approach such issues in radically different ways, though it may not be accidental that Linda Hutcheon and Mario Valdés, the general editors and initiators of the series in which our project will appear, reside in Canada and received generous support for the project from that country. The United States perceptions of nationalism and fanaticism differ significantly from those in Canada and Europe, not to mention from those in east-central Europe. From my dual perspective it is not certain that peaceful acts of civil courage will appear should the nationalist sentiment in the United States turn into fanaticism. Will United States citizens find Archimedean points from which to speak and act, the kind that citizens of eastern Europe cannot find, even today?

Let me offer, at the risk of sounding sentimentally egotistic, a few autobiographical details to indicate the position—at a distance from the professional academic milieu in the United States—from which I provide a perspective on professional matters. I grew up in Hungary, was persecuted by Hitler, and was discriminated against by Stalin's totalitarian system. I studied and taught in the United States but assumed a professorship in comparative literature at the University of Amsterdam in 1983. I teach here in Dutch and converse with my German-born wife in English. Our daughters, who live in Berlin and New York, have further diversified their cultural identities through their marriages. Much of this history came about by accident, yet it was surely shaped also by some subliminal drive, which was at work even during the first years of my life in the United States, when I wanted to become one hundred percent American. It took several decades for me to open up again and to acknowledge my Hungarian, Jewish, and European heritage.

What my personal experience forces and allows me, and what perhaps helps me as I further the project I described, is a considerable disengagement from all national, ethnic, religious, and institutional commitments, not because I have none but because the distance permits me to examine them from all sides, the inside included, without upholding them with gleaming yet clouded eyes. I have loyalty to Hungary, the United States, and the Netherlands, but only in exceptional circumstances would I fight for any of them (I did in 1956). My ideal is the fierce individualism of perhaps the only hero of my present host country: Erasmus. The country of my citizenship, the United States, has always granted generous space to individualists (rugged or not), though it has also been known for its pressure to conform. Will the present outrage about the tragedy of 11 September be able to do without the kind of flag-waving that disturbs so many Europeans? And will the Europeans be able to resist the tide of nationalism that washes over western Europe, not as intensely as over the former Yugoslavia but with enough force to muddle European integration? The questions are somber. I cannot answer them with an unequivocal yes, but contemplating them, I find it slightly (just slightly) consoling to think that my present project may help refocus literature in a less fanatic context.

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