HENRY H. H. REMAK

ONCE AGAIN: COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
AT THE CROSSROADS

Four and a half decades ago I introduced an anthology of comprehensive studies by one of the great scholars on Franco-German literary/cultural relations, Fritz Neubert, to the American academic establishment in these terms:

The import and exemplariness of this volume for America lie in its character as a wreath of syntheses, based on scrupulous scholarship, yet accessible, indeed vital to any thinking person interested in the intellectual life of France and Germany. Nowhere else are such lessons in bridging the frightful gap separating professional literary scholarship and general intelligence more urgently needed than in this country. We have preferred starting a myriad of projects, duly registered as "our own", most of them relatively safe from competitive intrusion by dint of their recondite diminutiveness, to pulling together the results of the work already accomplished by our colleagues and injecting it into the intellectual bloodstream of the nation. Everybody wants to build walls; nobody wants to put a roof over them. The scholarly landscape is dotted by motley torsos of contrasting heights, widths, colors, solidity and angles: no wonder the highway traffic roars by unconcernedly after a puzzled look at these disconnected enigmas.1

In 1961, eleven faculty members of Indiana University, from various areas but linked by their commitment to Comparative Literature, published a collaborative book, Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective,2 which stayed in press for almost thirty years, an unusually long time for a scholarly volume.3 It seems almost incred-

3 The title of the present essay harks back to a longish article, "Comparative Literature at the Crossroads: Diagnosis, Therapy, and Prognosis" which I contributed to the Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature, IX, 1–28, 1960. The thoughts I am presenting herewith were first devel-

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ible today that only a little more than a generation ago many researchers at one university could get together and agree, for all the diversity of their approaches, on what the precincts of Comparative Literature were. Is that perhaps the reason why we were flourishing at the time and are in jeopardy today? Has the center held?

If there are culprits, I am certainly one of them. All the writings on Comparative Literature I have committed during my lifetime, taken together, have not had the impact of the two first sentences in my opening chapter of the book:

Comparative Literature is the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand and other areas of knowledge and belief, such as the arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, architecture, music), philosophy, history, the social sciences (e.g., politics, economics, sociology), the sciences, religion, etc. on the other. In brief, it is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression. 4

In the last twenty years in particular, I have had many occasions when I have been embarrassed not by the intent but by the consequences of this apodictic statement. I had not foreseen that in the meantime North American scholarship in what used to be known as literature has become an often indistinguishable part of a diffuse melting pot named “culture”. While I did note right away, in 1961, that the circumspect, historicist/positivistic French tradition in literary scholarship militated against my American exuberance, I did not anticipate, especially after Structuralism waned, the impending avalanches of contextual, paratextual, and pretextual (the latter in both the chronological and the ‘ulterior purpose’ interpretations of the term) rather than textual theories, the denial of the integral author and work, the rebellion against the “New Criticism” which had ruled the 1950s and the 1960s. I did not anticipate the multiple impetus of Semiotics, Deconstruction, Neo-Freudianism, gender, sexual orientation, chronotope, Bakhtin’s dialogism, genre criticism, Feminism, the new Hermeneutics, intertextualism, Neo-Marxism, German phenomenology in French clothing, Anthropology, Reception theory and history, Communication science, the national as an imagined community, regionalism, ethnicity, race, class, post- and neocolonialism, inside and outside minority cultures, socially determined thematology, postmodernism, the Annales School, the new historicism, historiography as fiction and science as a succession of paradigms, etc. I had no idea of the impending, almost