

## FORUM

### COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN CANADA: THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CCLA

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#### INTRODUCTION: THE CCLA AT FORTY

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The Canadian Comparative Literature Association marked its 40th anniversary at the 2009 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences (formerly known as the Learned's), which was held at Carleton University in Ottawa. As part of the program, the CCLA executive organized a special anniversary roundtable panel so that prominent comparatists could offer their memories of and insights into the history of the discipline of Comparative Literature in Canada. There were two motivating forces for this panel, both of which helped to set its tone and give it form, and both with a connection to Carleton. The following account of these forces is intended in the spirit of promoting institutional memory that the session was conducted.

The first of these forces is Eva Kushner. A former president of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), Kushner has long been recognized, as Wladimir Kryszynski points out in introducing her 2001 essay collection *The Living Prism: Itineraries in Comparative Literature*, as "an internationally authoritative scholar, one of the most committed to the study of literature from an international per-

spective” (vii). She was instrumental in the establishment of Comparative Literature in Canada, of the CCLA itself (as she details in her contribution to the Forum), and of our panel. Kushner taught at Carleton from 1961 to 1969, when as a Full Professor (French and Comparative Literature) she moved to McGill, where she had received her university education (a BA in Philosophy and Psychology in 1948, an MA in Philosophy in 1950 and a PhD in French Literature in 1956) and became Director of the Department of French Language and Literature. Her final academic move came in 1987, when she became the President of Victoria University at the University of Toronto, which is why, since 2001, Victoria University’s E.J. Pratt Library has housed the Eva Kushner fonds, a veritable treasure trove of material on, among other things, the history of Comparative Literature in Canada.<sup>1</sup>

Had Kushner not approached a representative of the CCLA’s Executive (namely, me in my capacity as Secretary-Treasurer) to inquire as to our plans for celebrating the association’s 40th anniversary, the event would have passed unnoted. As it was, we were able to begin brainstorming ideas for the anniversary at our meeting in 2008 at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, plans which took on a further dimension with the second of our motivational forces: the publication of a feature article in the August 5, 2008, issue of *University Affairs* entitled “Academe’s Stepchild” by David Hayes, which opened with the teaser “Comparative literature is a small field that’s often misunderstood, even by neighbouring disciplines in the faculty of arts. That’s partly why it’s in crisis.” Hayes chose Comparative Literature as an example of the “epic struggles” currently going on in the Canadian, and global, academies:

The epic struggles in academe are most visible as cultural ones (for example, science and engineering squaring off against the social sciences and humanities), where repercussions shudder through a university and often make waves on campuses across a country. But it also happens on a micro level, and one example is the state of comparative literature. Like a poor cousin from the backwoods, it’s under-funded, undervalued and misunderstood, lying as it does on the margins of large, firmly established English and foreign language departments. A quintessential interdisciplinary field, it suffers at a time when there is an increasing emphasis on interdisciplinarity in all fields.

Needless to say, the CCLA Executive was shocked to be singled out in this way without our knowledge or input, and then-President Jan Plug at Western immediately drafted a response. Most disturbing to us was Hayes’s juxtaposing of the discipline’s supposed suffering and lack of success with a focus on the success of two graduates of Comparative Literature programs, who had been the recipients of prestigious awards in 2008 but were not CCLA members: Ian MacRae won the Distinguished Dissertation Award from the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies for the best doctoral thesis in the humanities and social sciences, while Sarah Phillips Casteel was one of five academics to win a \$20,000 John Charles Polanyi Research Award from the Ontario government. Now an associate professor of English at Carleton University, Casteel did her doctorate in the department of English and Comparative

Literature at Columbia University, while MacRae has an MA and PhD in Comp Lit from the University of Toronto and a tenure-track position at Wilfred Laurier in Contemporary Studies and Journalism. Both Casteel and MacRae are identified by Hayes as studying “literatures of the United States, Latin America, Canada and the Caribbean,” and both provided Hayes with provocative sound bites. His headline comes from MacRae’s acceptance speech, which was “an opportunity, he’d decided, to let university administrators know in a public way that he thought his chosen field, comparative literature, had become an undervalued stepchild in the Canadian academic family,” while Casteel is quoted as saying that “I don’t usually describe what I do as Comp Lit...When I came to Carleton from an American graduate program, where the term was understood and accepted, I found people weren’t familiar with that paradigm.” Given that Carleton had closed its Comparative Literature school in 2000 “for financial reasons,” a fact Hayes mentions, adding that “In the same period, the English department grew and acquired a PhD program...[and] Carleton now has an Institute of Comparative Studies in Literature, Art and Culture offering a PhD in cultural mediations,” we thought it was important to have Casteel’s and MacRae’s perspectives represented at the Carleton roundtable and are grateful to both for their participation. We are also grateful to the editor of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, Jonathan Hart, for being part of the roundtable and updating us on the state of the journal, which since Milan Dimić’s having founded it in 1974 has gone on to be an internationally recognized and ranked publication.<sup>2</sup>

Kushner’s contact and Hayes’s article were wake-up calls to the CCLA that we need to do more to, as the old gangster ditty goes, accentuate the positive, latch on to the affirmative, and make clear that Mister In-Between isn’t to be messed with. The recollections and reflections collected here chart some of the key developments in Comparative Literature in Canada over the past forty years, and even if the contributors did not have that particular tune in mind while writing, their commitment to the discipline shines through as though they had. After Eva Kushner’s setting the scene of “The Early Years,” which she ends with Canada’s successful hosting of the VIIth congress of the ICLA—jointly by McGill and Carleton in 1973, George Lang reminds us that “Edmonton is fun, after all” with his trip down memory lane to the beginning of his PhD studies at the University of Alberta in 1969. Next Mario Valdes, who, like Kushner, was unfortunately unable to attend the roundtable, details the history of the “Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Toronto,” which also marked its 40th anniversary this year, while Nasrin Rahimieh offers insight into other institutional shenanigans and conundrums in “Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta: The Dissolution of a Department.” Finally Evelyn Copley, Sarah Casteel and Ian MacRae reflect on major shifts in approaches to literary study over the past 40 years. Copley addresses the relation and troubles the boundaries of Comparative Literature and Theory, something Kushner points out in *The Living Prism* was symbolically acknowledged in 1974 when the ICLA “integrated literary theory among its areas of study...[which] meant that in a number of countries, Canada included,

comparative literary theory had become the metadiscourse of the discipline" (57). Casteel situates "the hemispheric turn" in the wake of postcolonial and transnational studies, while MacRae urges us to respect the call of the wild.

On remarquera l'absence de contributions francophones, lacune que je déplore et qui me met dans un certain embarras. Manifestement, c'est là le signe d'un clivage à surmonter (il en est d'autres, certes) et donc d'efforts à déployer en vue d'un rapprochement. Le thème du prochain congrès, qui se tiendra à Concordia (Montréal) est très prometteur à cet égard puisqu'il sera question du "savoir branché".

The Canadian academy is clearly a much different beast than it was forty years ago, and while many developments are cause for concern for Humanities disciplines, there are nonetheless still productive graduate and undergraduate programs teaching Comparative Literature across the country,<sup>3</sup> and graduate student participation at Congress has been steadily on the rise. The future seems to be in good hands. Looking back over the past 40 years to the CCLA's beginnings is helpful in reminding us that a changing times and crises have always been the discipline's sine qua non.

## WORKS CITED

Gillespie, Gerald. "In memoriam Milan V. Dimić (1933-2007)." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11.1 (March 2009) Document 12, accessed September 5, 2009 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol11/iss1/12>>

Hayes, David. "Academe's Stepchild." *University Affairs/Affaires universitaires*. August 5, 2008, accessed September 5, 2009 <<http://www.universityaffairs.ca/academes-stepchild.aspx>>

Kushner, Eva. *The Living Prism: Itineraries in Comparative Literature*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2001.

## ENDNOTES

1. A list of their contents is available at: <http://library.vicu.utoronto.ca/special/F44kushnerfonds.htm>.
2. In the 2008 rankings of the European Science Foundation, it was placed in the top "A" category (<http://www.esf.org/research-areas/humanities/research-infrastructures-including-erih/erih-initial-lists.html>). For more details on Dimić's seminal contribution to Comparative Literature in and beyond Canada, see Gillespie.
3. They are at the University of Toronto, the University of Alberta, the University of Western Ontario, l'Université de Montréal, l'Université de Sherbrooke (and its program in Littérature canadienne comparée), Carleton (in Cultural Mediations) and Brock (with a new MA in Studies in Comparative Literatures and Arts). An up-to-date listing of Canadian graduate programs is available at <http://www.gradschoolfinder.com>.