

# COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN CANADA: A CASE STUDY

E.D. Blodgett

*University of Alberta*

**308** When Paul Morris, the Treasurer of the CCLA/ACLC, graciously invited me to talk to you about Comparative Literature in Canada as I knew it, I hesitated, of course. Did I really wish to venture again into that curious history, and how should I go about it? Would it mean asking once again what comparative literature might be, a question you have no doubt seen frequently raised. English and other languages are, by contrast, profoundly comforting: they know what they are, despite all the internal debates about the curriculum. After all Proust belongs to French, Dickens to English, and nothing (or everything) belongs to comparative literature. It is a fate that certain scholars have thrived on.

Having once agreed, I proposed a title which was mutually satisfactory. To give the matter some shape, I have chosen a 50-year period between 1960 and 2010. I chose this period for 2 reasons: first, because it follows roughly the years of my career, and because it follows the trajectory of the former Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta, the department with which I have been associated. It has a prehistory in 2 phases, both of which were European. The first student who earned a PhD at the University was a German immigrant named Kuonrat Haderlein (1971), who went on to have a resounding career at the University of Saskatchewan. The other European aspect of our prehistory is, of course, more enduring, inasmuch as it belonged to the tradition in which our discipline took its rise.

As we know, Goethe's notion of *Weltliteratur* was developed in the early years of the 19th century, and the idea of comparative literature came into being in the same decades in the lectures of Claude Fauriel (the Sorbonne) and Jean-Jacques Ampère (Collège de France). Why this period and not earlier, one might ask? Because the idea of the monolingual nation possessed a powerful prestige that it acquired during the post-Revolutionary and Romantic periods. Latin as a dominant language standing

above national languages did not begin to fade until the 17th century. Moreover, the political and other tensions of the emerging nationalisms of the period foreshadow the latent tensions of the century that culminated in the international catastrophes of the two world wars. International solutions were proposed in the United Nations and, on the regional level, by the European Coal and Steel Community (1951), which became the basis for the EU. This was a period that was even more troubled than the post-Revolutionary period, and it was hardly surprising that one of the literary responses manifested itself in the first of the Acts of the Congresses of the ICCLA/AILC, *Venezio nelle letture moderne* (papers given at the congress of 1955, ed. Carlo Pellegrini).

I mention all this because it is our contemporary point of departure. In the 1950s Europe was the dominant project, politically, financially, and culturally, especially its unity, and it continued to be so in the 1960s when I began its study. As a young graduate student, my larger passions were Greek grammar, Old Provençal poetry, and German mysticism, certainly legitimate, if blithely innocent, areas of exploration for someone at that level. Of course, my horizons quickly expanded, and when I went to enquire about the comprehensive exams, I was told there would be a two-hour oral, all organized around the literatures of Europe and Classical Antiquity. I was handed a book divided into two columns. On the left page were primary works arranged under six headings: Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, Neo-Classicism, Romanticism, Modernity. On the right-hand page each period contained a list of the major studies devoted to the primary material. Dismayed, I asked whether there were written exams to fall back on if one did not fare well. The answer was firmly in the negative, but you were given two chances to pass it. A year later, when I was ushered into the exam room, I saw facing me six specialists from other departments. Although my heart sank, I passed. Not long after, I received an offer from the University of Alberta.

You will have noticed that I have spent a fair amount of time discussing historical contexts. As a student, and in my early years at Alberta, a far away city of which few knew anything, such contexts had not impinged greatly on my imagination. The programme gradually expanded until in 1970, when it became the first department in Canada offering both graduate and undergraduate courses, we had a faculty distribution in the formative years as follows: our chair from Serbia, a member from Belgium, another from Spain, another from Poland, another from Israel, and two from the United States. It should be added that our strongest support in the Arts Faculty came from two professors with doctorates from the Sorbonne, one of whom, E.J.H. Greene, had published *T.S. Eliot et la France*, which tacitly placed the approval of French comparatism over the department. Europe was the focus, and perhaps too much so, for in the Fall of 1970 during the October crisis, an inspector in the RCMP arrived in the office of our Serbian chair, demanding information on all the aliens in the department. He was coolly sent to see the vice-president. The world, however, had arrived, and I suppose we had already acquired the reputation for political radical-

ism, a quality particularly noticeable in students of comparative literature, that Leo Strauss and others mention in passing.

Two years later I began my career as an administrator, by becoming acting chair during the absence of our Serbian chair. As I drove him to the airport, I raised a topic I had already raised several times. Not being sure how much I could rely on German mysticism, I needed advice. The one response I got was: "Don't put anything on paper you would not put in the party newspaper." Sound as this counsel was, it did not help when the advisory committee to the department, consisting of the five department chairs of English and the other languages, put a motion at a Faculty meeting that the department be placed in quarantine until the credentials of all staff members had been thoroughly examined for their validity. The motion was withdrawn when the dean advised them that such a motion could be used against them. This, combined with the arrival of the RCMP, made it evident how precarious our presence in the University was, and so it continued for another 30 years, more or less, until we lost

**310** department status.

I suppose we might have been more firmly anchored, if our founder had been Northrop Frye,<sup>1</sup> which was the good fortune of the University of Toronto. Our fate was, I think, more interesting. It was dispensed by the Serbian member of the department, M.V. Dimić, who was a fine example of the Clerk of Oxenford of whom Chaucer says: "gladly wolde he lerne and gladly teche." Although he did not possess either Frye's rootedness in Canada nor his public éclat, nor the international reputation acquired through his book on Blake, his literary theory, and his studies of the Bible, Prof. Dimić was more firmly rooted in comparative literature, which resulted, inter alia, in our hosting one of the Congresses of the ICLA/AILC. It was a necessary orientation, but it was perhaps too broad, at least in the early years, for the University. When we were organized into a department in 1969, something as emphatically interdisciplinary as our field was in a certain measure a scandal. Most departments in the humanities were concerned with specialization. There were strict rules about the honours programmes, and as such they meshed very well with the Faculty of Education, which had difficulty knowing where we fit. That was our first obstacle. Compared to subsequent ones, however, it was manageable, despite a second attempt to have the department closed down not long after the first. The other obstacles to our survival were for the most part more subtle and, hence, more difficult to find a way to address.

One of the most powerful events to move through American universities in the late 1960's and the next decade was French poststructuralism and, concomitantly, feminist theory. Literary theory can almost always be counted on to receive a positive reception. After all, as Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* does, it appears to give a kind of patina of objectivity to fields that seem to foster nothing more than the reading of novels, while the rest of the academy is striving to add to the useful sum of knowledge, such as cures, graphs of voting trends, and convenient bombs. Theory appeared a fine way to appeal to legislatures and granting agencies by justifying the

happy pouring over of Jane Austen. Sadly, the new theory, especially poststructuralism, openly scoffed at objectivity. In fact, in its contestation of power, essentialism, and patriarchal values, it found very fertile soil in the student protests in Paris in 1968, not to speak of the years of protests against the war in Vietnam, particularly in the U.S. Its effect was felt less intensely in Canada. This is perhaps because the political and cultural worlds here were concerned, at least as one is given to believe from the news, primarily with the economy and separatism. Hence in the 1970s, as theory made its way to Canada, mostly through the filtre of American universities, two events dominated Canadian politics: the War Measures Act and the National Energy Plan. The major impact of the former on the study of literature was to weaken the study of French-Canadian literature in English Canada. Canadian Comparative Literature was the major loser.

The sober reception of literary theory in Canada had a number of facets. The first is that members of my generation for the most part remained satisfied with either the Anglo-American New Criticism or *explication de texte*, and so its fuller effects did not come into view for another decade. Theory, it should be remembered, has two bearings. First, it can be sufficient in itself, making use of literary texts to illustrate its benefits, or, as is more common, the literary text remains central, and theory illuminates it in previously undiscovered ways. One of the early proselytizers of Jacques Derrida in English departments, for example, who followed the latter tendency was Paul de Man, who readily demonstrated that literary texts meant nothing, and therefore hardly lent themselves to the kind of psychological analysis they are so often subjected to. The pleasure of the text is to take the reader to the point where sense, particularly a unifying meaning, is undecidable.

The arrival of French theory opened an invisible breach between our department and English over the very issue of theory in translation, and a number of my colleagues pointed out that the French language as used by Derrida, Barthes, and Foucault, for example, was not quite as clear as the translations suggested. This was not a small point, and it became the beginning of the endless territorial disputes we began to endure. The dispute over language and translation developed to the advantage of the Department of English, and, hence, theory belonged to everyone not so much because it was theory, but because it was available in English. The same is true for reception theory, which originated in German. By raising the issue of translation, it prompted a debate that would initiate serious reconsiderations in the following decade of what the academic role of comparative literature might become.

As to the challenge of Cultural Studies, I think it could be asserted that we did not rise to it with sufficient vigour. This may have been a consequence of the Marxist phobia of Prof. Dimić. In any event, its value was quickly perceived by members of the Department of French, who began sponsoring seminars on aspects of Cultural Studies as developed by Stuart Hall at the University of Birmingham. We failed to realize, I think, that this was a field of research that resisted departmental specialization, and that its interdisciplinary character could lend it very well to our field, as

well as to theirs. Perhaps our caution, without being so extreme as that expressed by Harold Bloom, who surmised some years ago that it might be fundamentally destructive of the study of literature as literature because of the increasing emphasis on questions such as those of hegemony, power, and the role of the reader as agent. Such questions, however, are not only inevitable but also they have sometimes remarkably interesting ways of opening a text to unseen meanings.

Far from Bloom's other argument that Cultural Studies are just about political correctness, on the one hand, and academic opportunism, on the other, our view depended on our generally shared view that either Cultural Studies would be a universal perspective on the study of literature or a kind of instrument to be used like literary theory when considered to be most effective in elucidating a text. To choose the latter is, of course, to violate many of the operating principles of Cultural Studies, inasmuch as elucidation is not always, perhaps rarely, the problematizing of texts themselves, which questions what a text is, who controls it, particularly in a classroom, and how it forms kinds of knowledge. To choose the latter, furthermore, was to give the impression that one's field, no matter how avant-garde it may have appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, might be losing its edge.

Nevertheless, Cultural Studies raise yet another problem. For those raised in the European paradigm, it challenges us with crucial questions of power, tradition, and reader practices. What makes, for example, one text more worthy of study than another? What, in fact, is the role of the literary text in cultural formation or, to put it more simply, education? Given the significance of both popular culture and the canon, for want of a better term, how much teaching time should be devoted to either or both? These are questions that gathered together amount to asking: What is the teaching of literature for? Given the brief amount of time we have at our disposal in the teaching of a course, how is that time best used? *Ceteris paribus*, these are questions which reach the same level of anguish as Hölderlin's desperate cry: "Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?" It may be construed that such a sentence that begins in Latin and ends in German, making use of a quotation that assumes you are familiar with it, is a sufficient sign of antipathy with Cultural Studies. Such an assumption is not necessarily valid, inasmuch as Cultural Studies ought to be inclusive. But it also implies something else. Does the classical tradition still have a role to play in contemporary education? If I am to teach world literature, is it to be taught vertically or horizontally? If the latter, what happens to Sophocles? If the former, how do we engage Sophocles with popular literature, or do we rather problematise the text of Sophocles and raise immediately its hegemony in European culture since the Renaissance? It's all very well to argue that it was the political power of Maecenas that gave Virgil the leisure to dictate the *Aeneid*, but in the absence of much popular literature of the time, with the exception of the Greek romances, how are we to address its role in Latin literature?

Although these are rhetorical questions, very moving answers to them are proposed in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Teheran*, a book that has been unfairly treated

as orientalist by some of her fellow Iranians, and that could probably be shown to be a weak response to my questions by a student of Cultural Studies. After all, Nafisi's family was part of Iran's elite, she was given a superior education in Switzerland, England and the U.S., and when she left Iran, she acquired a prestigious position at Johns Hopkins University. She also had, nevertheless, a connection with Marxism, and, one might argue, deep feminist sympathies, at the very least. The framework of her book is the teaching of modern English and American in Iranian universities. What her memoir reminds us is that while a text may belong to a dominant canon, it does not carry any other prestige until it has been suffered. Living with a text and being prepared to suffer torture and death for it confers upon it its canonic value. We might have wanted her to have chosen some texts of popular culture for her students, but she did not. We might wish to believe that her choice was a mark of professorial hegemony that determined the responses of her students, but we would be wrong. In fact, her students took their novels into their complicated lives and made them their own. It was a process that gave them as readers unusual hegemony, especially for women in a thoroughly misogynistic society.

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Anyone who has read Nafisi's book will no doubt recall "the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran versus *The Great Gatsby*" by F. Scott Fitzgerald, the charges laid against it, the brilliant defence, and triumphant verdict in favour of the novel. The case itself would strike most Western readers as bizarre, but Iran is a special situation, and all of Nafisi's canonized texts become sites initially of ideological firefights over which in the end the imagination triumphs, thus demonstrating that reading only realizes itself as a mental activity when the reader becomes an intensely active agent. As a result, writing and reading become interdependent activities. The defence of *The Great Gatsby* is a radiant response, I believe, to the proposition of Cultural Studies that political oppression and agency are implicitly more readily seen in texts of mass culture. Although the text itself is probably not important, those texts that avail themselves to nuanced analysis of psychological motivation and ethical limitations can often be the most effective. Hence, Nafisi's book can be read as a significant and moving contribution to Cultural Studies.

That such teaching—within the context of Cultural Studies—and without the constraints that Nafisi and her students suffered from, was already being practised in French and English began to pose certain problems for us, problems which have beset us ever since. These were problems, furthermore, that took us to one of the major issues of teaching comparative literature at the undergraduate level. We could not subsist, as all of you know, without the use of translations. I am not going to try to amuse you with the Italian pun, *traddutore traditore*. In many ways it's nonsense: a translator can be wrong, and, of course, no single translation can do sufficient justice to a text, but more than one by serious and skillful translators with different objectives do it sufficient justice, and this is true even for most poetry. Of course, the original music of a poem cannot be transferred, but it can be suggested. Some rhythms can never really be imitated, such as the rhythms of classical poetry, *pace*

Gerard Manley Hopkins. Most prose, however, responds well to translations, and it never hurts to consult more than one version where possible.

The use of translations, particularly in the Department of English, began to pose problems for us, and it was often difficult to explain to our colleagues that they should, as much as possible, be used in the classroom by those who know the language so as to enrich the text, even to read it aloud in the original if it is poetry. Our colleagues in English would always make reference to standard versions that had become part of the English canon, particularly of novels and plays. But the use of translation could be abused in surprising ways. One of our colleagues was invited to be part of an MA examining committee on African literature which involved a translation of a novel in French. She dutifully read all the passages cited, but in French, where she found a sufficient number of errors in the English such that the argument of the thesis could be said to be compromised. When our colleague raised this at the exam, the student replied that she had treated the text as if it were in English, and her adviser, an expert in post-colonial literatures, defended her. Such a way of approaching a text is damaging in at least two ways. First, not only is it wrong, but also it leaves the impression that once in English the text is English, thus quietly erasing its past. Even more damaging, however, is the thoughtless ease in which the English canon is expanded. In those years when translators' names were omitted from the book publication data, the impression that the book was English was only reenforced.

For us in Comparative Literature this was the beginning of an intolerable situation, inasmuch as few, if any, of our colleagues in English understood the basis of our criticism. How readily modern drama could now range from Chekhov and Ibsen to anyone else. Nor did it help when Susan Bassnett observed in 1993 in her book, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, that comparative literature had reached the point in its development that it must be considered secondary to translations studies. Fortunately, she saw the error of her ways and recanted in an essay published in 2006, but the damage had been done. Translation Studies, as practised by Belgian and Israeli scholars in the 1980s, is a highly technical mode of intertextual analysis that few of my colleagues in English seemed interested in. Her book, unwittingly or not, opened the door to a general use of translations where desired that could easily prompt a dean to begin to wonder why one might need a Department of Comparative Literature.

The dominant phenomenon of the 1980s and 1990s was the emergence of globalization, a term already invented in the 1960s. Although discussed frequently in the humanities, its primary bearing is on economics, particularly the liberalization of world trade. Despite the eagerness with which departments of English and Comparative Literature embraced it for their own ends, no one should forget its effects on third-world countries, the term McDonaldization rather neatly covering the general business model. Aligned with the business model are the serious effects of homogenization and Westernization on small countries and regions drawn to what appear to be the financial advantages of globalization. Nevertheless, if it is not

perceived for what it is, that is, neo-colonialism as practised for the most part by the U.S., its full negative impact cannot be understood. Departments of English and comparative literature should unhesitatingly take oppositional stances to the damage it is capable of carrying out. That does not mean, however, that it should be ignored, and as Lois Parkinson Zamora remarks:

the cultural specificity of literary fictions may serve as antidote to current processes of cultural homogenization, and to the perception of homogenization as propagated from critical centers in the U.S. and Europe. For it is surprising how little literary theorists of globalization refer to particular works of literature to ground their generalizations about the leveling of cultures. As intelligent as the discussions often are, they sometimes seem to me to reiterate familiar colonizing trajectories from U.S. and European academic centers to the peripheries: Latin America, Africa, Asia. This, I confess, worries me, for however we choose to structure (or re-structure) our approach to the new spaces of global culture, we will need to continue to direct our attention, and our students' attention, to the specificities of literary texts and their cultural contexts. We will, then, be prepared to measure the dialectics of difference in a world increasingly "globalized." This has always been the aim of the discipline of comparative literature and it continues to be so. (7)

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As we know from the most recent report of the ICLA/AILC, *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), globalization is now on the agenda, as a kind of sequel to the Bernheimer report on multiculturalism (1994). The Introduction prepared by Haun Saussy makes a number of significant remarks that adjust our understanding of the discipline, and, in fact, lead me neatly toward some of my concluding comments that address the scope of our field, and wonder out loud about the possibility of preparing experts in such a large field that supposes a fair knowledge of the literatures of the world, not to speak of competence in more than the usually accepted three. In other words, globalization poses the question of how we are to continue, an issue that has hovered over Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta for most of its existence. When I was just setting forth, the bibliography on which I was examined would now be woefully inadequate, and even the level of language competence, which then effectively amounted to four languages, which were all European, would be clearly insufficient.

Much of Saussy's introductory remarks are devoted to the history of comparative literature, arguing that it is a field constantly in search of itself. While this may be true to a certain extent of English and other literatures, it is evident that they have canons—no matter how subject to change they may be—and that they imply a certain cultural cohesion through their various languages. English can teach the English novel; comparative literature must teach the novels of several literatures, having none—and this is the central point—of its own. Consequently, comparative literature appears to be in a constant identity crisis, fully aware that there may be “no there there.” Fortunate indeed is the department or programme of comparative literature that does not undergo such crises, but if it did not, it would have little to contribute to the study of literature. Its role seems to be one of regularly creating and managing



crisis, as if crisis were the dominant narrative.

By crisis I don't mean something like the subduction of tectonic plates before an earthquake, but rather the sense of a world that is never finished and futures that cannot be predicted. Globalization is simply a contemporary moment of the world, fostering greed in the economic world and something more complex in the world encompassed by literary studies, a pluralistic world, one hopes, of many centres in which the usual hegemonies have a diminished effect. Such a world can no longer follow the model that I was given in which the European literatures are sufficient. For one thing these are literatures which, if they continue to retain their European cachet, can only foster neo-colonialism. In themselves, however, they are insufficient, and new configurations must be made. It is difficult to imagine how such configurations will unfold, and what kind of critical language will have to be developed or invented that will place disparate cultures on a plane of equality and allow for difference to overcome the desire to establish a *tertium comparationis*. It is equally

**316** difficult to imagine how such a transformation will occur without an increase of team research.

To return to the University of Alberta, it was perhaps a blessing that early in the 21st century the departmental configuration of Comparative Literature was removed, and the surviving unit became part of the division of Interdisciplinary Studies. I fear, however, that such a move was purely administrative, and the challenges of being interdisciplinary were not met with the kind of subtlety and intelligence such studies demand. But to think of comparative literature as collaborative, rather than as a group of experts who can offer courses in Romanticism, mediaeval literature, Modernism, etc., is what is now required. The final move that is now about to happen, namely, to transfer the programme of comparative literature administratively into the Department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies, will not rise intellectually to the occasion. Its professors will be subject to the needs of the department for their teaching assignments, and it is unclear how many will wish to take up Cultural Studies along the lines of the Marxism as once practised at the University of Birmingham.

If the driving force of economic globalization is *cupiditas*, it could be said that the driving force of comparative literature is *hubris*. How many challenges should we rise to, how much should we feel capable of holding within our purview? One of the silly wisecracks that our founding chair used to cast about was: "You name it, we compare it." In our optimistic days, it seemed to fit. Although we all know such optimism is now misplaced, that was part of Prof. Dimić's personality, and it had a great deal to do with how the department was shaped. A few remarks are therefore appropriate on who he was and why his name is still associated with one of the University's research institutes. That he was the *rayonnement exterieur* of the department there can be no doubt, and without taking anything from the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto, Dimić almost single-handedly put Canada on the international map of research in comparative literature. He was the found-

ing editor of *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue canadienne de la littérature comparée* (1974- ) and among the founding members of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association / Association canadienne de littérature comparée (1969), which largely through his efforts came into existence despite efforts by some Canadian colleagues to prevent it, who argued that the American Association was sufficient. As an immigrant to Canada, Dimić always felt strongly that, when opportunities arose, one should contribute to one's new country. He also brought the world of comparative literature to Edmonton in 1994, when he hosted a conference of the ICLA / AILC, an association that he served as a member of the Executive Council in a variety of positions. Among the most demanding was his ten-year stint as the Coordinating Secretary of the editorial committee for the *Comparative History of Literature in European Languages*. Finally, as the director of the Research Institute for Comparative Literature, he organized a number of conferences from 1989-97, among which was a project that was leading toward a comparative history of the Canadian literatures along the lines of polysystem theory.

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Of course, his publications were many, and for all these activities he was promoted to the level of Distinguished University Professor and also made a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. His energy was enormous, his achievements various, and he might be credited with making comparative literature a viable and internationally recognized field of study in Canada. It was only after his retirement while teaching in Taiwan that a new dean arrived and peremptorily announced the virtual demise of the department on the Faculty of Arts web-site. Although the dean did not really follow correct procedures in this, it hardly mattered, and he immediately gave the impression of behaving like any American president. If there is no war going on, find a small, Caribbean country and take it over. We were that country. As someone who had worked closely with Dimić since the formation of the department until its end, I would say that he felt more than his usual disgust and anger at the mean-spirited manner with which large institutions are capable of displaying power. Something in him broke, and his post-retirement years in Taiwan, despite what scholarship he kept up with, were deeply despondent years. It's possible to infer, I think, that his immediate, Canadian identity had been removed without the slightest consultation.

But this was not all. The war that destroyed the former Yugoslavia in the early years of the 1990s also took a large psychological toll, as one might expect, in a certain, ironical fashion. For when Dimić came to Canada in the mid-1960s, he was an articulate opponent of nationalism. Not long after the war broke out, however, a fondness for Serbia took hold of him, and he became very active among ethnic Serbs in Canada, eclipsing the international side of him with which I was more familiar. While everyone knew of his love of Serbian epics, which he could retell with verve and humour, his literary formation in general in Serbia was more significant. It gave him, to an unusual degree, a knowledge of, and openness toward, the literatures of the world, which clearly left its mark on the formation of Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta. As no one needs reminding, Serbia was geographically

situated between the Habsburgs and the Ottomans, between Europe and the gateway to the East. It never had, for example, the assurance of a country like France that could readily produce the first theorists of comparative literature. As far as literary studies were concerned, it was unpretentious, a country that made abundant use of translations and taught literature from an international perspective. It was this global *Weltanschauung* that Dimić brought to our department, which made it, if I may say so, unique among such programmes in Canada. For most people such an openness requires a lifetime to acquire. For Dimić it was an innate disposition, as if he were a globalist from the time he went to school.

Thus his late turn toward nationalism is both easy and difficult to understand, and his disaffection with the University must have had much to do with it. If we put the nationalism to one side, we may discover certain principles that were of value to us and to the field of comparative literature in general. First of all, he was a great believer in diplomacy as opposed to confrontation, the results of which are never predictable.

**318** This is because Dimić was also a great believer in coherence and order. Despite all the efforts of scholars of post-modernity to re-order the world from economics to literary studies, he believed that a possible result might simply be a culture of anarchy. This did not mean he was, therefore, a modernist. He clung to no particular metanarrative, inasmuch as he was more than familiar with the complexity of the human condition. What he understood was the variety of stories we tell ourselves, how they are coloured by the multiplicity of languages and cultures that produce them, and how they form the webs of history we all share in and create. Despite the fact that most of his research and teaching dealt with a variety of romanticisms, it should be said that he seemed to represent the best of the European Enlightenment, deep skeptic as he may have been. In fact it was just this grain of skepticism that motivated him to continue to extend his horizons. He was, without knowing it, a great believer in the counsel of Hugh of St-Victor's dictum, namely, "Omnia disce, videbus postea nihil esse superfluum." While this may have been possible in the 12th century, given the state of knowledge in Europe at the time, for us it appears somewhat extravagant. While such a desire may reflect the hubris I have already mentioned, for Dimić it was no more than a desire. He knew his limitations.

Although it may seem I have dwelt on Dimić's character and achievement to an inordinate degree, I have only discussed him because he, the department, and the international presence of comparative literature at the University are so thoroughly intertwined. It may be that the demise of the department and the immanent dispersion of its faculty into Modern Languages and Cultural Studies without the least notion that it was a part of Interdisciplinary Studies is symbolic, as if the fragmented world that post-modernity predicts has already taken place. Of course, comparative literature thrives elsewhere in the world, offering differing models of order. Inasmuch as it also thrives on constant self-analysis in its effort to define itself or to prevent definitions of itself, it will continue to mount as many theories as possible and, like Stephen Leacock's famous horseman, ride "madly off in all directions." I am

no longer persuaded that such a plan shows much purpose. Because for ineluctable reasons we have collectively chosen, however, to try to learn everything, we have to know how to give up much of our individual ambition. It is now hard to imagine any major undertaking without some sort of teamwork. For example, Dimić proposed to the Planning Committee of the ICLA at Venice in 2005 the preparation of a dictionary of terms and concepts of poetics, and certainly such a proposal and clear desideratum could not be accomplished otherwise than through teamwork. In fact, most of our activities to date point now in the direction of larger kinds of research that would be beyond the scope of an individual scholar. One such project, developed by the department through the Research Institute for Comparative Literature, was the ambition to write a history of the Canadian literatures through the optics of polysystem theory. The project began in the mid-1980s, continuing with preparatory conferences for a number of years thereafter. Admittedly, the whole project foundered toward the end of these conferences, but Dimić and I were overwhelmed by other matters at the time, and we gradually let it go. Speaking only for myself, I wonder, however, if the actual history would have been written. A near equivalent was already underway for the literature of Québec, namely, *La Vie littéraire au Québec* (5 vols, 1991-2005), and it is difficult to say how much time this team could have devoted to our project beyond giving sage advice. Another doubt arose when I was writing my *Five-Part Invention: A History of Literary History in Canada*, as I continually discovered how little English Canadian literary historians were in fact interested in history. But to return to my larger point, it also became very clear to me that my book could serve as a prefatory volume to a number of other volumes that could only be written by a small team working effectively together. The project remains a worthy desideratum in comparative literature, and its time may come. It will not come from the University of Alberta where no one has carried it on.

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It may seem disheartening to conclude on such an unfinished note, a note that is hardly a conclusion, but unfinished is often better than finished. It reminds one of Kenneth Untener's little prayer on Óscar Romero:

Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying  
that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

These words remind us that everything we do has at once an immediate value and, more powerfully, a future resonance. This is why I have concluded with desiderata, inasmuch as one tends to delight more in what might happen, rather in than what has already occurred. Without doubt, the accomplishments in comparative literature across the world have been solid and often ground-breaking. They have brought us to thresholds, however, where more is expected and where whatever we manage to do will best be brought about by working together, enlarging our knowledge of the field from several, diverse perspectives.

## NOTE

1. Jonathan Hart has compared the two in “CL History: Northrop Frye, Milan Dimic and Comparative Literature.”

## WORKS CITED

- Hart, Jonathan. “CL History: Northrop Frye, Milan Dimić and Comparative Literature.” <http://inquire.streetmag.org/articles/61>
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