

THE EARLY YEARS

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While the undersigned may or may not be recognized as the founder of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association, the following circumstance certainly sparked off the foundation process. During the 1966-67 academic year preparations were being made for the Vth congress of the International Comparative Literature Association, which was to take place in August 1967 in Belgrade. Canadian scholars who wished to present papers had no direct access to the organizing committee but were directed to apply via the American Comparative Literature Association. I did so, not without irritation. Those of us who followed this procedure began to realize that we were bereft of normal channels of communication with the ICLA. The Belgrade congress itself mainly made history as the theatre of a major confrontation between "East" and "West." A much less spectacular event was the resolve of a small group of Canadians hoping to be identified as such. We telephoned the Canadian embassy for an appointment, demanded a glass of sherry, and though the ambassador was absent, the official who received us graciously took note of our desire to become a Canadian learned society. 175

In the sixties, and until the creation, in 1978, of the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada, it was the responsibility of the Canada Council to oversee the process of recognition of nascent learned societies in the Humanities and Social Sciences; then, as now, the criteria to be observed mainly related to scholarly potential, but also to numbers, geographical distribution, and financial responsibility. Our group next met on US ground (!) in Chicago, at the 1967 convention of the Modern Language Association of America, and continued to develop its project. The next meeting took place in 1968 at the Learned Societies congress in Winnipeg. At the time, it was the Royal Society of Canada (now replaced in that function by the Social Sciences and Humanities Federation) which called the meetings of the learned societies. Having

met all the criteria, the Canadian Comparative Literature Association officially came into being at the 1969 Learned Societies congress, at York University.

It should not be forgotten that before the CCLA existed, there was a Canadian representative on the Executive Council (then called the Bureau) of the ICLA, in the person of Eugene Joliat of the University of Toronto as long time Treasurer.

There were few Canadian institutions of higher learning where Comparative Literature was taught, and even fewer incorporating centres or departments in the discipline. At Carleton University, the program was inaugurated in 1965 with a lecture by Northrop Frye. Pierre Laurette came from Strasbourg, closely followed by Wladimir Kryszinski, who came from Lodz via Strasbourg; and Hans-George Ruprecht came from Germany via Mexico. Together, among other subjects, they emphasized the role of semiotics in literary studies.

176 The VIth ICLA congress, that of Bordeaux (1970), closely followed the creation of the CCLA. Twenty-five Canadian scholars were in attendance. It was there that René Wellek gave the paper entitled "The Fall of Literary History," signalling the perceived rift between historical "continental" approaches and the "American," theoretically better founded, approaches. It was also there that the one-year old CCLA was chosen to be entrusted with the following ICLA congress, as against the candidacy of East Germany; the undersigned was to be the organizer.

The period of preparation of the VIIth congress (1973) was a collaborative one, not devoid of tensions among regions. Early on, the University of Alberta wished to host the congress, but in the end, it was decided that it would take place successively at McGill University and Carleton University. However, the congress proceedings were to be edited jointly by the Alberta group under Milan Dimić, and the McGill-Carleton group. Focusing on the "Dependence, independence, interdependence of the literatures of the Americas," the VIIth congress innovated by hosting a number of Latin American participants. A number of participants came from "behind the Iron Curtain": fifteen Hungarians, fifteen Romanians. While very few of these were officially delegated by their Academies or Universities, the majority were guests of the Congress, which offered an opportunity of dialogue, difficult yet creative. Philip Stratford (English, Université de Montreal) was president of the CCLA during the period of preparation; Paul Chavy (Dalhousie), an historian of translation, was president at the time of the VIIth congress.

From the earliest years, the CCLA was a community of reflection on the meaning and function of Comparative Literature in Canada. Establishing it as a disciplinary/interdisciplinary field was in itself a challenge. In its statutes, if memory serves, the CCLA drew attention to the fact that Comparative Literature graduates could in addition teach their component literatures and languages at the secondary and post-secondary level! Comparative Literature in Canada was also in the process of becoming a locus of reciprocal studies of French and English literary texts, notably at the Université de Sherbrooke, and also of translation studies. It soon also became a microcosm of the global transformation of "national" literatures diversi-

fied by the inclusion of literatures in exile, immigrant and migrant literatures, native literatures.

Last but not least, in its theoretical outreach, the CCLA has worked towards maintaining the human sciences at the forefront of our national and international consciousness.