

CENTRE FOR COMPARATIVE LITERATURE, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Mario J. Valdés

University of Toronto

182

In the spring of 2009 the Centre for Comparative Literature marked the 40th anniversary of Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto. The Centre began in 1978 but it was the successor to the Programme in Comparative Literature founded by Northrop Frye in 1969.

As with many other Canadian beginnings, Comparative Literature began as a compromise between idealism and necessity. Early in 1969 Frye, influenced by Martin Mueller, a young Assistant Professor in the Department of English, became convinced that literary studies were changing so rapidly under the twin forces of literary theory and structuralist criticism that Toronto, with its historically constrained departments of language and literatures, not only was not receptive to the changes sweeping Western Europe and the United States, but was institutionally unable to make changes in spite of a number of young colleagues who were part of the spirit of open inquiry. A good example of the limitations on criticism that kept peace between the language departments was the special faculty meeting called to decide whether the English or the French departments had the authority to teach the works of Samuel Beckett. Although *Murphy* was first written in English and published in London in 1938, Beckett rewrote it in French and published it in Paris in 1947. The tug-of-war between two very large and important departments seems ridiculous today but in the 1960s it was a matter of defending one's domain.

Northrop Frye's influence was so strong that he was perhaps the only professor at Toronto who could stand up to the opposition entrenched in the Department of English. The advocacy of Frye did not go unheeded, but the major financial cut-backs on post-secondary education in Ontario was a reality that became the basis of the argument against unjustified spending in a time of severe limitation on the operating

MARIO J. VALDÉS | CENTRE FOR COMPARATIVE LITERATURE, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

budget. It was resolved that at that time it would be imprudent to authorize a new permanent budget line. The compromise that came out of the presidential meeting was that Professor Frye and his younger colleagues would have five years to demonstrate the value of Comparative Literature and, at the end of this period, a select committee would assess the value of the undertaking and recommend permanent status or dissolution of the Programme. The concession to opposition was that the Programme would operate out of the School of Graduate Studies without a budget. Each of the members of the teaching staff would teach a full graduate course each year on a volunteer basis, in addition to their regular teaching load in their home department. In addition to teaching and advising students in the Programme, they would make themselves available as extra-departmental examiners in as many PhD examinations as they thought had relevance to Comparative Literature. The Programme began in the Fall of 1969 with Professor Frye as Director, Martin Mueller as Graduate Student Coordinator, and Cyrus Hamlin from English and German and Mario J. Valdés from Spanish, Italian and Portuguese as the other members of the staff. The Programme was given a student apartment in Massey College to serve as an office, and a part-time secretary two days a week and, of course, letterhead stationary and a typewriter. Such was the austerity of the compromise.

183

Professor Frye served three years as Director of the Programme. In 1972 Cyrus Hamlin was appointed the new director and served until 1975. Having recently come from the United States he was unaccustomed to the Canadian tradition of conflict resolution. Professor Hamlin was an idealist who believed deeply in the importance of Comparative Literature; he had been trained at Yale University by Rene Wellek and was passionate about the discipline with little patience for the narrow view of literary studies that existed at Toronto at the time. In the five years between the Autumn of 1969 to the Spring of 1975, the Programme staff had taught twenty graduate seminars to forty-eight MA and PhD students. In 1975 the Programme granted its first PhD in Comparative Literature to Linda Hutcheon, who successfully defended her thesis, "Narcissistic Narrative: The Paradoxical Status of Self-conscious Fiction." She dealt with English, French and Italian literatures. The revised version of the thesis was published as *Narcissistic Narrative* in 1980. The Programme's teaching faculty had participated in 38 doctoral examinations in the course of the five-year trial period. Late in the spring of 1975 the School of Graduate Studies set up an appraisal committee to review the work of the Programme.

The Dean of Graduate Studies, Edward Safarian, called Cyrus Hamlin, Martin Mueller, and Mario J. Valdés to his office and informed them that the appraisal report recognized the exemplary work that had been done and that there was no doubt of the high academic merit of the Programme. However, he added, the financial situation of the university had become direr over these five years and there was no possibility of funding the Programme. He recommended that the staff continue teaching, advising, and directing students on a volunteer basis. The three members of the Programme were well aware of the financial cuts in provincial funding and

the budgetary crisis that resulted, but they also knew that a university as large as Toronto had many discretionary lines in its budget. It was their considered opinion that the funding was not forthcoming because of the opposition of the Department of English. All three colleagues resigned from the university in protest of the breach of the understanding reached with the dean in 1969. Cyrus Hamlin went to Oxford, Martin Mueller to Northwestern University, and Mario J. Valdés to the University of Illinois, Chicago.

184

The Dean was astonished with the response and rapidly put together a complement of substitute professors, who ironically were to be paid a full stipend for the additional course they were being asked to teach. The crippled programme resumed operation and within two months the students vigorously protested against what they considered a violation of the commitment they had taken enrolling in the Graduate Programme in Comparative Literature. In October, the new dean of Graduate Studies, John Leyerle, and the new president of the university, James Ham, called an emergency meeting to find a solution.

Mario J. Valdés, who was now Head of the Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese at the University of Illinois, Chicago, received a conference call from the president and the dean. He was asked what it would take for him to return to Toronto as Director of Comparative Literature. The conditions for his return were, first and foremost, the establishment of a Centre for Comparative Literature with a permanent budget line for all the cross-appointed faculty, a full-time secretary, a budget for visiting lecturers and colloquia and a visiting professor each year, as well as appropriate office space and, finally, a deferment until 1978. Professor Valdés had made commitments that had to be met and he would not be free until that time. All conditions were met, and in 1978 the Programme became a centre.

The challenge for the new Centre after a two-year hiatus was no longer a local struggle with academic skepticism in the university, but rather the establishment of the credentials of the Centre at Toronto, as an important part of the international community of scholarship in Comparative Literature, literary theory, and interdisciplinary research. The drive to attract the best students interested in a graduate education in Comparative Literature from the national and international arena had three parts: first, holding the most advanced colloquia in the discipline with the leading scholars in the field; second, inviting a series of challenging speakers to come to Toronto each year; and, third, inviting a visiting professor each year to lecture on work in progress with the aim of publication. From 1978 to 1983 four international colloquia were presented at the Centre. The first was "Hermeneutics and Literary Criticism" in 1979 with such major participants as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, E.D. Hirsch, Max Black, Hans Jonas, Northrop Frye, and Bernard Lonergan. The second colloquium was "Literary History and the Canon," in 1980, with Ralph Cohen as keynote speaker. A selection of the lectures from this colloquium was published in *New Literary History* in the Winter issue of 1981. Besides Professor Cohen, the main speakers included Northrop Frye, Jerome McGarm, Donald Heduck, Paul

Hernadi, Fredric Jameson, Christie McDonald, David Shaw, Michael Riffaterre, S.P. Rosenbaum, and Mario J. Valdés.

The third colloquium (1982) was the most ambitious; it sought to challenge the established concept of the literary text. The lectures were published by the University of Toronto Press with the title *Identity of the Literary Text* (1985). The speakers included Jonathan Culler, Lubomír Doležal, Wolfgang Iser, Hans Robert Jauss, Felix Martinez Bonati, J. Hillis Miller, Paul Ricoeur, Michael Riffaterre, Robert Weimann, and Mario J. Valdés. The fourth colloquium was "Literature, History, and Moral Philosophy" in 1983. Among the principal speakers were Stanley Cavell, Geoffrey Hartman, Paul Ricoeur, George Steiner, Tzveton Todorov, and Hayden White.

The five visiting professors during this period were Fredric Jameson, Michel Foucault, Wolfgang Iser, Paul Ricoeur, and Robert Weiman. Parts of Jameson's seminar were published in *The Political Unconscious*, and parts of Michel Foucault's seminar as "Life: Experience and Science," Iser's contribution was part of *The Act of Reading*, Ricoeur's seminar was published as Volume I of *Time and Narrative*.

185

At the time the Centre began in 1978, Mario J. Valdés and Owen Miller published *Interpretation of Narrative* with the University of Toronto Press. Lectures at the Centre during these years included Ricoeur, Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Mikel Dufrenne, Jose Ferrater Mora, Nelson Goodman, Hayden White, Jonathan Culler, Michael Riffaterre, J. Hillis Miller, Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, Robert Weimann, Paul Hernadi, Uri Margolin, Eugene Vance, Timothy Reiss, Mieke Bal, Umberto Eco, A.J. Greimas, Gerald Prince, Edward Said, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Among the distinguished authors the Centre brought to Toronto there was Octavio Paz, Derek Walcott, and Julia Kristeva.

In 1995 the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council awarded the Centre the largest and most ambitious grant in the Humanities put forth to that time: the Comparative Literary History Project. This was an international collaborative undertaking. Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés published *Rethinking Literary History: A Dialogue on Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2002), which encapsulated the theoretical discussion about the new thinking concerning literary history. The project was successfully completed in 2004 and produced two multi-volume comparative literary histories. *Literary Cultures of Latin America* was published by Oxford University Press in 2004 in three volumes. *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* was published in three volumes (2004, 2006, 2007) by John Benjamins Publishing Company (Amsterdam). Two hundred and eighty-eight specialists in the humanities and social sciences took part in the two histories. All the coordinators met in Toronto at the Centre three times from 1996 to 1999. The General Editors were Mario J. Valdés and Linda Hutcheon. The editors of the Latin American project were Mario J. Valdés, Linda Hutcheon, and María Elena de Valdés. For the East Central Europe project the editors were Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer.

The students who came to the Centre during these years were outstanding, and they have gone on in their careers to become part of an international group of Toronto

alumni. They came from Belgium, England, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States of America, as well as Canada.

186

After 1983 the Centre continued to prosper under a steady stream of excellent students. The most notable visiting professors over the next ten years were Edward Said and Julia Kristeva. The most significant achievement during this period was the appointment of two new members of faculty, Linda Hutcheon and Edward Chamberlin; both were eventually awarded the highest academic rank at Toronto as University Professors. By the 1990s the faculty of the Centre consisted of ten professors with a scope both of theory and literatures that was unprecedented. In 1989 the students of the Centre once again took matters into their own hands. For the six years that had elapsed since the last colloquium, the Centre had worldwide recognition, but it was no longer a place where the best comparatists met on a regular basis. The students managed to gain the necessary funding to organize the first student-run colloquium in Comparative Literature. It was organized as a tribute to Lubomír Doležal, who was retiring from the university. The student colloquium has been held every year since its inception. In 2009 it celebrated its twentieth year. This time it was to honour Linda Hutcheon and Edward Chamberlin who retired from the university. The colloquia have been a brilliant demonstration of the quality of mind and the expansion of comparative literature to become a comparative inquiry into the human experience of the imagination. The topic in 2009 was "The Poetics and Politics of Reading." The keynote speakers were Sander Gilman and Mario J. Valdés. Thirty papers by graduate students from a number of universities were presented. Every year a new committee of students organizes the colloquium, acquires the funding, invites the keynote speakers, reviews and selects the submissions and runs the three-day colloquium.

Since 2002 the students have also edited and produced a scholarly journal, *Traverse: A Comparative Studies Journal*. The articles, photographs and artwork are as good as any journal in the field. The colloquia, the journal, and the work of students have the same openness of mind and innovative inquiry into interdisciplinary research that have characterized the Centre from the beginning.

Over the last forty years there have been many high points for the Centre: the publication of major books in comparative literature and comparative literary history, collaboration with leading journals, participation in the international development of the discipline. Eva Kushner, the third director of the Centre (1993-95) was president of the International Comparative Literature Association (1972-1975), Mario J. Valdés was president of the Coordinating Committee for Comparative Literary History (1993-2002). The three Canadians who have been elected to the presidency of the Modern Language Association have come not only from the same university but from the Centre for Comparative Literature of the University of Toronto: Northrop Frye, Mario J. Valdés, and Linda Hutcheon. But perhaps the most significant accomplishment of the Centre, and the Programme that preceded it, has been the sixty-three

phD degrees in Comparative Literature awarded to its students. These graduates have gone on to serve in major universities in Canada and abroad.

In 1999 Roland LeHuenen was named the fourth Director of the Centre. He was able to guide the Centre in the difficult transition from the School of Graduate Studies to the Faculty of Arts and Science. He also negotiated the move from the Robarts Library to the Isabel Bader Theatre in Victoria College and the finest physical space that Comparative Literature has had in its forty years in Toronto. The Centre now has an Administrative Officer, Ms. Aphrodite Gardner, in addition to a secretary. All the students in the Centre are now fully funded. It has come a long way from the austerity of a student apartment in 1969, but the quality of open inquiry has been its hallmark over its entire history. A new period begins this year (2009) with its fifth Director, Neil Ten Kortenaar, and new appointments to its faculty. There is no doubt the students will keep the Centre at its best in the years to come.

187