

FORUM

AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE

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There are few scholars better placed to address the past vicissitudes and future prospects of Comparative Literature as a discipline than E.D. (Ted) Blodgett. The decision to approach him to address the topic at the 2013 annual conference of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association was easily made. The reasons for this confidence are apparent in the text of his address printed below, though they are not necessarily the ones explicitly laid out by Blodgett himself. It is true, of course, that Blodgett's career coincides with the approximately 50-year period of the discipline's emergence and transformations (to avoid the Spenglerian vocabulary of "decline") within the Canadian university system. And it is no less true that for reasons of both his intellectual formation and the historical moment of his arrival at the University of Alberta, Blodgett was well positioned both to observe and to shape the emergence of one of Canada's most influential programmes in Comparative Literature. But ultimately the perspicacity and resonance of Blodgett's observations rest not on the accident of personal witness, but on something as difficult to quantify as it is essential to the comparatist approach to the study of literature and culture—temperament.

Once sprouted, temperament may be cultivated, though it is a seed difficult to plant. It germinates, finds its roots and flourishes out of its own eccentric combination of environmental factors. Blodgett's—as witnessed in this address—is a deeply historical temperament, a turn of mind acutely sensitive to the historical dialectic of

change and continuity *sur la longue durée*. Appropriately, then, Blodgett's comments on in "Comparative Literature in Canada: A Case Study" are placed within interlocking frames of reference—intellectual, institutional, personal—each of which is itself shown to be subject to the changing forces of historical trajectory. As Blodgett notes, the programme in Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta emerged out of a discipline which, ultimately, derived from early nineteenth-century trends in understandings of literature and the nation as well as the societal exigencies created by the two world wars of the twentieth century; Blodgett's own participation in the Canadian project in Comparative Literature resulted from the historically determined character of literary study during his student years and his own intellectual interests, both of which were shaped by the needs and perceptions of the period; the development of the programme in Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta was influenced by both societal developments and institutional forces from within the university in the 1960s and early 1970s; once established, Comparative Literature grew and contracted in parallel to, and competition with, a variety of evolving intellectual trends shaping the study of literature and culture throughout the 50-year span of time; and finally, Milan Dimić, the driving force behind the programme at the University of Alberta is presented as a man formed by the changing fortunes of his nation of birth, Serbia, and the shifting institutional priorities of the university.

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Within this complex web of temporal flux and flow, Blodgett is ever able to perceive—and intimate to us—the abiding pull of Comparative Literature. He offers no template for future configurations: to an imagination so keenly perceptive of the constancy and complexity of historical change, such predictions would be foolhardy. And Blodgett is acutely aware of the "challenges" (to use the techno-managerial vocabulary of administration) facing the discipline at the present time. Nonetheless, the very breadth of his perspective suggests that the conditions which have consistently evoked a comparatist response to literature and culture in the past will remain, whatever the institutional form of the discipline. As Blodgett might wish to put it, the comparatist temperament will always respond to "the sense of a world that is never finished and futures that cannot be predicted." Change is constant, but so is diversity and the need to know.