

“IL MIGLIOR FABBRO”: MY MEMORIES OF TED BLODGETT

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538 On September 1, 1970, I arrived in Edmonton to begin my course work towards an MA in Comparative Literature. Days later, the first professor I met in the Department of Comparative Literature was Ted Blodgett. He was acting chair at the time because Milan Dimić, the official chair, was away. We discussed my course selections for the coming year. Within days, I felt at home in the department because many of the professors were immigrants from Europe and spoke English with different accents. They were much like my extended Italian family back in Toronto.

In the summer of 1971, I worked on my MA thesis. My thesis supervisor was unavailable and Ted Blodgett stepped in and acted as my supervisor all summer, reading different chapters that I had written. This was not the last time that Ted Blodgett was to take over thesis supervision of other students after the first supervisor became unavailable. Ted was very helpful to me, so that I completed my MA thesis on Dante and Baudelaire and defended it that October.

When my wife Emma and I were married in 1973, Ted Blodgett and his first wife Elke came and danced at our wedding. And we were invited to visit them at their cabin in the woods. We found our way to a remote cabin near Entwistle, north of the Yellowhead Highway, about 103 km west of Edmonton.

In 1975, Ted Blodgett published his first book of poetry, *Take Away the Names*. The following year, the first review of this volume appeared in the academic journal *Canadian Literature*. The review was written by me. It was a fitting gesture of thanks to a very supportive professor and writer.

I asked Ted to supervise my PhD thesis on Italian, French, and English hermetic poetry. Working with Ted made me a better scholar. He helped me complete my dissertation by September 1977. My defence was that December. I had begun to work at Athabasca University that fall.

In comparative literature, we often study the influence of one writer on another. What follows is a short narrative of such a chain of influences.

Ted Blodgett's first book of studies, *Configuration: Essays on the Canadian Literatures*, was published in 1982. It is a very good example of comparative Canadian literature in the tradition of the Sherbrooke School. But Ted moved beyond the English-French binary model: one essay in the collection deals with ethnic minority writers and characters in prairie fiction. This is the example that I followed with my first book, *Contrasts: Comparative Essays on Italian-Canadian Writing* (1985). I began the introductory essay by quoting from Ted's *Configuration*. Ted appreciated this acknowledgement of his own work.

In 1986, Milan Dimić, the editor of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, invited me to contribute an article on Italian-Canadian authors. Because these writers work in English, French, and Italian, it was necessary to take a comparative approach to their texts. My article, "Constantly Translating: The Challenge for Italian-Canadian Writers," began by referring to Ted's book *Configuration*.

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In 1987-88, I held the Mariano Elia Chair in Italian-Canadian Studies at York University. While there I was asked to organize the fourth conference of the Research Institute for Comparative Literature on the topic of ethnic minority writing in Canada, held at the University of Alberta in April 1988. Speakers included Milan Dimić, Edward Mozejko, Nasrin Rahimieh, and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek. When the proceedings were published in 1990, as *Literatures of Lesser Diffusion*, I was the editor. This was part of a larger project, "Towards a History of the Literary Institution in Canada," for which Ted Blodgett had co-edited the first and third volumes in the series. I was honoured to be part of this project.

All of my career was spent as a professor at Athabasca University. Over that time, we hired seven graduates from the Comparative Literature program at the University of Alberta, some of whom were students of Ted Blodgett.

In my second book, *Echo: Essays on Other Literatures* (1994), I again refer to the literary examples of Ted Blodgett's work in Canadian literature (70, 124, 255, 277). When I edited my book on Sheila Watson in 2015, I asked him to contribute his comparative essay on Sheila Watson and Quebec author Laure Conan.

In 2004, Ted published his major work, *Five-Part Invention: A History of the Literary History of Canada*, in which he returns to examine the place of ethnic minority writing in the larger context of English and French cultural and political relations.

In 2016, when I began work on our book, *Comparative Literature for the New Century*, I invited Ted to contribute his essay, "Comparative Literature in Canada: A Case Study." Our book was published by McGill-Queen's UP in September 2018. With the passing of Ted Blodgett, this essay has become his last academic publication. Two of the contributors to this volume are Prof. Jolene Armstrong and Prof. Monique Tschofen, graduates of the Comparative Literature program at the U of A and Ted's former students.

In his last email to me in September 4, Ted congratulated us on this volume. "Well

done,” he wrote. September 4 was the day I first met him in 1970. Ted Blodgett was a creative writer and academic who inspired many of us over the years. As a poet and literary scholar, he was our own “il miglior fabbro.”