

Working Rhythms of the ICLA/AILC: An Addendum to Steven Tötösy's Report on the XIVth Triennial Congress at Edmonton

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As incumbent ICLA / AILC President (1994-97), I would like to supplement the quite brief section of Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek's report as a Co-Organizer of the Edmonton Congress (*CRCL/RCLC* 21: 469-90) in which he comments on the triennial renewal of the Association's Executive Council and its working groups (473-74). By way of introduction, Tötösy contextualizes his remarks in several frameworks: current debates in North America on the nature of the field, his personal views and predilections as a researcher, and his personal experiences in the crisis for Comparative Literature during a period of contracting institutional support. My purpose is not to revisit his personal account or his arguments as a fellow North American. Rather I hope to amplify the information about the rhythm of activities pertinent to ICLA / AILC as an *international* enterprise. First, some minor emendations: two members of the Executive Council elected at Edmonton are missing from Tötösy's listing: Wladimir Kryszinski (Montréal) and Eduardo Coutinho (Rio de Janeiro). Among appointive offices, the ICLA Archivist, Manfred Gsteiger (Lausanne), should be added. The name of the global project on poetry headed by Earl Miner (Princeton) should read "Traditions and Ruptures."

If space permitted, one might list beyond the chairs named by Tötösy the full roster of members in administrative and research committees who are serving along with the chairs in the same three-year cycles. A hundred more names would then appear giving a fuller picture of the dynamics of participation. In a further exercise (which I hope someone interested in the sociology of literature might yet undertake), we could look at the geocultural distribution of ICLA / AILC officers and committee heads, and of persons involved in the Association's research projects and publications, over the past forty years. The number of national associations of Comparative Literature has doubled since the New York Congress (1992) to three dozen; overall membership of ICLA / AILC, as well, to about 6,000. About one sixth of the members either prefer not to adhere through a local association or are domiciled in one of some three dozen further countries where there is no local association for our field. Most self-styled comparatists in the "old" homelands acknowledge that today Comparative Literature is a

conglomerate of disciplines. And it would not be very surprising if a survey disclosed that many of the "independent" joiners are seeking connection with one particular segment of the comparatist complex not available in their immediate environment, while others want to cruise around the entire complex as their way of liberation from local norms. The historical data deposited and being deposited in the archives by the onflowing series of Secretaries General show that the composition of the Executive Council and of ICLA's working groups has steadily been following the growth of the field around the world in respect both to real participants and to their real interests. I shall leave it to informed historians of future moments to assess the failures and the accomplishments in this accrued and accruing record.

The reason change occurs steadily in the international organization is that renewal has a statutory basis that reflects the continuing desire for change on the part of ICLA / AILC members. Statutes provide a clear mechanism for implementing change. From 1955 to the present, the ICLA / AILC constitution has not permitted anyone to serve more than a grand total of twelve years on the Executive Council. No one ever has served more than twelve years. The by-laws of standing research committees include similar provisions that limit the total years of service. In addition, two thirds of the currently authorized research committees are operating under charters with a sunset clause, setting a terminal date for completion of their project(s). Administrative committees are formed or reconstituted at the start of each triennium (and on occasion, abolished). They draw on scholars from around the world. In the actual practice of ICLA / AILC over recent cycles, as its programs have become more complicated, the administrative task forces have served as vehicles to recruit new activist scholars. What then are the natural conditions that promote anecdotal conclusions at variance with the actual situation?

Part of the answer can be deduced from the geocultural makeup of the ICLA / AILC Executive Council and committee leadership just installed at Edmonton. Many colleagues in North America are used to the honorable, but superseded, tradition of American and Canadian "dominance" in the field. Senior scholars of yesteryear have passed the expectation of that special, historically hardwon status on to the youngest cohorts of the present moment. "We" (I include myself in this generic raising of consciousness) have been accustomed to sharing the limelight with comparatists based in Europe. Reciprocally, European scholars have been accustomed to a dominant position and to sharing it mainly with North Americans. The compound Transatlantic "we" (the combined North American and European contingents) have not yet wholly digested the fact we celebrated at the Tokyo Congress in 1991: that our field actually is thriving in the world at large and is being changed by virtue of its own successes. The American, Canadian, and European contingents occupy proportionately less room today, because so many colleagues from other countries want to discourse *with us*; they

have joined "our" enterprise; and so their young, middle-aged, and senior people are necessarily in the process of displacing some of "ours" in specific instances. The possessive adjective has widened to embrace all the continents in current ICLA / AILC usage.

Of the twenty-five individuals elected as officers or assessors in the Executive Council for 1994-97, *three* (the lion's share) are American and *one* is Canadian. Together the North Americans occupy 16% of the Council posts. In the remaining 84% of Council seats, in terms of areas of the world, *thirteen* individuals or 52% come from Europe, *four* or 16% from Asia and the Pacific, and *one* each from South America, the Near East, and Africa. The strong European set includes a significantly enhanced presence of scholars from the Mediterranean. Among heads of committees and editors, the Canadians (with four persons) and Americans (with two) still play a large and important role which is the product of real history — real work contributed to the cause of Comparative Literature in recent decades. But the North Americans are still outweighed nowadays by the combination of colleagues from Europe (four), Asia (two), South America (one), and the Near East (one) who are heading ICLA / AILC committees. If I were to enumerate the larger membership of the various committees, the balance would tilt away from North America even more dramatically because of the gratifying readiness of colleagues from other continents and regions to collaborate. And then there is the complicating factor which I personally believe exhibits our field's vital mobility: scholars who one day are entered in the ledger under this or that particular parochial label may another day be counted as lights in a different parish, for they have changed their main site of activity (and perhaps also their critical tenets to boot!).

Under the dispensation of the 1990s, it is a simplification to interpret the variety of institutional frameworks for ICLA / AILC comparatists in some seventy nations narrowly in the terms of Euroamerican colleges and universities or Euroamerican popular slogans about hierarchy and status quo. It is also a simplification to read locally grounded anecdotes as a meaningful index of the attitudes and efforts of ICLA / AILC as an organization that is negotiating among the cultural perceptions that flow nowadays from the variety of *all* the continents (thus from the global variety of actual cultures, theoretical assumptions, critical practices, and scholars' lives). In fact, one of the breakthroughs that we can now aspire to because of the growth of our field internationally is a more solidly grounded awareness of how the practices in the "old" homelands of Comparative Literature relate to one another, and to research and teaching in the "new" homelands.

If persons regarding themselves as "new," in any part of the world, get interested in the international life of Comparative Literature, there indeed are very powerful forces that may condition how they perceive the possibilities of sharing their ideas through the multiple channels of ICLA / AILC. I would put at

the top of the list the inexorable movement of time (in a range of sectors of activity), each person's geocultural location relative to available means for scholarly travel, and the individual measure of will to belong to the concourse of voices outside of the home circuit and its favorite discourses. If a scholar entering academic life just after an ICLA / AILC world congress misses out on the next world congress during his or her third year, the gap will lengthen to six years — in anybody's book a not inconsiderable span in our experience as researchers and teachers. In that interval, two turnovers of the ICLA / AILC Executive Council will have occurred, but the newcomer will probably have only a faint or no awareness of the changes. The locus for the following congress may swing again away from North America or Europe to another continent, or away from such potential "newer" venues back to the familiar "older" haunts. (Currently, the Executive Council is studying proposals by prospective hosts in Africa, Asia, and Europe.) The perception that a congress venue is "remote" can present a serious psycho-logical obstacle for a young scholar; the objective fact of relative distance can pose a serious financial burden. The beginner can stay in touch by doing what a devoted core will do (by being a faithful long-term member of a regional association and/or carefully reading the news in the *ICLA / AILC Bulletin*, plus other sources). But the obvious best way to get and remain connected with the world scene of Comparative Literature is to attend the "movable feast" in propria persona. It stands to reason that a person who misses one or two ICLA / AILC congresses and does not attend other related, complex international meetings is more likely to feel alienated from those very colleagues around the globe who, already more active outside their home circuits, eagerly desire to make the acquaintance of, to recruit, and to share with "new" fellow coworkers.

I hope that the following analysis of the *actual* rate of change in the ICLA / AILC Executive Council will encourage more persons from every country to see the Association as a viable organ for their own work and service. Were all the reeligible members of the Executive Council to stand for another term in some capacity (which has never happened in the past), the entire lot who have entered office at Edmonton would still have cleared out at the latest by the end of nine years. Over those nine years, in fact, new entrants would steadily change the focus and balance in Council deliberations. No President may ever repeat. It is a new ball game every three years.

Of the twenty-five persons elected at Edmonton for the term 1994-97, one person had nine years prior service on the Executive Council, two had clocked six years, fourteen had first come on board at Tokyo in 1991, and eight were newcomers. Once we subtract the three "old-timers" who averaged seven years of service, the remaining *twenty-two* members averaged 1.9 years. Tötösy correctly reports that the average service of twenty-four members — virtually the whole Council — is 2.1 years. The average rises to 2.5 years if the longest serving

person is included in an augmented aggregate of twenty-five members.

Let us take 2.5 years as the operative number. The point is that we are talking about rather low average years of service spread around amongst colleagues who happen to be from *twenty-three different countries*. In the course of performing their duties, they will move the site for their working meetings to several different parts of the world during the current triennium. A reasonable inference we can draw from the actual historical pattern evident in today's Executive Council is that ICLA / AILC has been willing to take risks with the continuity of institutional memory about very complicated relationships in order to keep the election process open, experimental, and creative on a *worldwide basis*.

The success of the enterprise depends on participation. Yours is warmly invited. Please send to Professor Milan V. Dimić (Research Institute for Comparative Literature, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta T6G 2E6, Canada), as current chair of the Nominating Committee, or to me (Bldg. 242G, Stanford University, Stanford, California 94305-2030, USA), any suggestions you may have of good candidates for the election that will be held at the Leiden Congress in August 1997. Please also feel free to write to any of the heads of administrative or research committees if you have a suggestion regarding some aspect of ICLA / AILC activities, or if you would like to get involved in the kind of international collaborative projects being nurtured by a particular group, or if you would like to start a new project through ICLA / AILC auspices.

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