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in memoriam Milan V. Dimić (1933-2007)

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***In memoriam* Milan V. Dimić (1933-2007)**

Milan Velimir Dimić was born in Belgrade in the former Yugoslavia on 9 March 1933. He died there unexpectedly on 11 March 2007, while visiting relatives. At the time of his death he had been living for a while in Paris with his son Nicolas Dimić, a Canadian diplomat, and his son's family. The news of his decease evoked a great sense of loss and sadness across a wide spectrum of colleagues, friends, and acquaintances not just in Canada, but in the ranks of the International Comparative Literature Association / Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée (ICLA/AILC) worldwide. He was a respected veteran in the field of comparative studies, and a number of colleagues who had seen him in action in Venice in 2005, at the conference commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of ICLA/AILC's inaugural congress in that city, were looking forward to a new phase of creative activity on his part. As Koji Kawamoto, a former ICLA/AILC president, wrote in instant response when his colleague Jonathan Hart (University of Alberta) distributed the announcement of his parting to the ICLA/AILC Executive Council: "The last time I talked to him was when Gerald [Gillespie] called a meeting of the Planning Committee late at night at an outdoor café during the Venice [conference] in 2005. He passionately put forward a number of farsighted plans for the future of ICLA. His unflinching efforts, with the help of Steven Tötösy, to go ahead with the Alberta Congress [of 1994] despite extreme hardships … impressed us all. The soirée chez the Dimićs, when everyone sang along till late, will always remain a cherished memory with me" (e-mail communication, 11 March 2007).

Who was the Milan V. Dimić to whom an appreciative Kawamoto so accurately attached four salient characteristics -- his dedication to literary studies, his constructive tenacity, his collegiality, and his legendary hospitality? I attempt here to combine a few of my own memories of Milan with information conveyed by others about him. I am grateful to his son Nicolas for generously providing more recent information. Milan's career began in his home city Belgrade where at the age of twenty-three he obtained a position as an instructor in German and English and was attached to the Institute for Experimental Phonetics of the Serbian Academy of Science (1956-57). He next served as assistant professor of General Literature with Theory of Literature (1957-62) and as research associate in the University of Belgrade Institute for Theory of Literature and Aesthetics (1960-62) while completing graduate work and developing his dissertation. But the doctoral thesis in Serbo-Croatian on the topic *The Double before Romanticism*, although extant in a manuscript of 2000 typescript pages, was never officially registered because of an important turn in Milan's life. By means of bursaries, he had enjoyed a summer program in 1956 for teachers of German at the University of Vienna, and non-degree studies in Freiburg im Breisgau and Strasbourg over the course of 1958-60. In 1963 he received an Alexander von Humboldt grant which was extended, giving him three precious years of academic experience as a research fellow in Romance Languages and Comparative Literature at the University of Tübingen. After the stimulus of this period, he felt it was imperative to build further upon his personal "triangulation" of three cultural zones (Slavic, Germanic, Gallic) by moving next wholeheartedly into the Anglo-Saxon zone. Thereby he risked the displeasure of his original home institution, knowing it was uncertain whether he could return to process his dissertation at the University of Belgrade if he remained abroad longer. As an enthusiastic student of antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times, Milan had by 1964 published three successful books, *Predanja klasične starine* (Legends of Classical Antiquity), *Predanja starih Germana* (Old Germanic Legends), and *Predanja azijskih naroda* (Legends of Asian Nations), all reprinted a number of times. In 1965 followed his edition of *Franc Kafka. Pripovetke* (Franz Kafka: Selected Narrative Prose), thrice reprinted.

In 1959 Milan married Dr. Colette Anne-Marie Bidanchon in Freiburg im Breisgau and consideration of the academic career of his spouse now also figured in the equation. They co-authored a *Manual of the Old High German and Old Norse Languages and Literature* which was accepted by the University of Belgrade, but its publication was abandoned after they left the country. Likewise, he had to abandon his completed and already advertised book *Tomas Mann. Prolegdi na književnost* (Thomas

Mann's Views of Literature). This kind of political liability was one of the lesser ills which plagued scholars from countries of East and Southeast Europe at that time under communist regimes. Now in his early thirties, Milan wagered on restarting his career in the New World and accepted the necessity that he would have to try afterwards, as at best an outside possibility, to reinstate his finished dissertation. He moved to Canada, accepting a position as assistant professor of German and Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta in Edmonton in 1966, rising to associate professor, becoming full professor in 1972, and university professor (the honorific highest rank, "beyond departmental and formal disciplinary boundaries") in 1988. He helped to found and he chaired the Department of Comparative Literature in Edmonton from 1969 to 1975 and stepped in again on occasion as chair to tide the operation over. In parallel, he was a founding member of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association / Association Canadienne de Littérature Comparée and served on its executive board for an impressive thirty years (1968-98). In 1983 he was named a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, the first scholar to be elected under the heading of Comparative Literature.

Milan's career exhibits a familiar pattern seen in an important segment of globally active comparatists who not only enrich the culture of their eventual elective homeland, but simultaneously strengthen the international fabric of our discipline. He counts among the accomplished cosmopolitan "transmigrants" who subsequently wherever they go carry a command of several languages, the lessons of their experience of direct immersion in different cultures, an acquired capacity to appreciate cultural distinctions in general, and a curiosity and passion for doing so. At the University of Alberta, Milan soon became a moving force in comparative studies for Canada as a whole. In 1974 he founded the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* (*CRCL/RCLC*) and served as its editor until his retirement in 1998. This peer-reviewed quarterly was conceived as the official journal of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association / Association Canadienne de Littérature Comparée but rapidly established itself as one of the leading organs internationally. Graduate candidates in Comparative Literature and other literature departments at the University of Alberta received valuable training by working as checkers of quotations and publication data in numerous languages under Milan's supervision. *CRCL/RCLC* soon earned a reputation for the thorough refereeing and meticulous copy-editing of contributions. In 1985 Milan succeeded in establishing an independent Research Institute for Comparative Literature (RICL) and served as its founding Director. RICL was designed to promote an open program of sponsored research projects, to invite notable figures in comparative studies to campus, and to assist in organizing conferences with pan-Canadian and/or international reach. RICL was to prove vital in the hosting of the Fourteenth Congress of ICLA/AILC at the University of Alberta in 1994, a subject that will be mentioned below. A detailed account of these institutional activities and research projects can be found in reports by Milan's close collaborator and associate director of RICL, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, "History of RICL: Research Institute for Comparative Literature, University of Alberta 1985-1999" in *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and* Culture (*Library*) (2003): <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/riclhistory>. In 1999 the University of Alberta honored Milan by renaming RICL the "Milan V. Dimić Research Institute for Comparative Literary and Cultural Studies."

My first personal encounter with Milan followed soon after the energetic period of his founding of the journal *CRCL/RCLC*. ICLA/AILC had succeeded in holding its Fifth Congress in Belgrade in 1967 and its Eighth Congress in Budapest in 1976, an accomplishment not to be underestimated for its importance during the Cold War in enabling direct exchanges with (and also among!) scholars who were struggling to practice under totalitarian and authoritarian systems. Combining Montréal and Ottawa as joint venues, Canada hosted this huge week-long triennial meeting of literary comparatists in 1973. Because some contemporary writers had reflected on the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 and invasion of the former Czechoslovakia in 1968 to crush the democratically tending Dubček reform, references to these and related moments of history occurred in

a few papers given at the Sixth Congress of ICLA/AILC in Bordeaux (1970) and at the Seventh Congress of ICLA/AILC in Montréal and Ottawa (1973). Colleagues from countries in the Soviet block found themselves caught in an awkward, and in certain cases dangerous, position vis-à-vis their cultural authorities. Mainly for obvious political considerations but in a few instances partly out of ideological zeal, some made clumsy efforts to force editorial changes on scholars who worked in the so-called West. This incited controversy which spilled over into the Eighth Congress of ICLA/AILC in Budapest (1976), threatening to undermine the painstaking work of the wiser leaders of the international organization to foster a protected zone of free expression wherever its triennial congresses and the usually annual conferences of its various research groups might venture. The publication of the official *Proceedings* of the Canadian and French congresses were delayed several years but eventually the materials were duly produced intact. Milan was heavily involved in the onerous labor of editing both of these complex sets of papers. I appeared as a "junior scholar" with René Wellek on a panel at a conference of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) where the question of how to respond to a blatant threat of censorship was discussed. A large contingent advocated the withdrawal of ACLA from the international organization if ICLA/AILC did not exhibit backbone, and by my estimation a clear majority of ACLA members favored an immediate stern protest and accelerated acceptance of blockaded materials. Wellek and I agreed on the impossibility of tolerating censorship but cautioned against acting in such a manner as to drive fellow scholars into worse isolation under harsh regimes.

With impeccable timing, at this juncture a Canadian scholar (to me as yet unknown) identified himself -- it was Milan -- and spoke from the floor. He defended the probity of the Canadians in their handling of the difficult situation, gave assurances of their readiness and ability to solve it with the help of others of good will, and deftly indicated his sympathy for the plight of the East Europeans who depended, at that time, on the kind of pressure and support which the luckier scholars in modern democracies could apply by cultivating cooperation through international bodies like ICLA/AILC. It was a masterful job of diplomatic reasoning -- just one of many on his part I was privileged to witness in the coming years. Afterwards we got together privately for a chat, and I was struck by Milan's sincere desire to know whether I believed he was "fair" in his manner of pushing back against the negative US-American sentiment and advocating a tough-minded engagement and collaboration as the better path. These were the hallmarks of Milan's involvement with his colleagues everywhere, in all seasons. I also quickly discovered that *gourmandise* belonged to the mix. Over the ensuing years I was among the happy acquaintances to whom Milan never offered or recommended anything but excellent food and drink, of diverse provenance, and from whom he always welcomed a good culinary suggestion with real enthusiasm. Here I permit myself a brief excursion illustrating the man who believed that at its finest the humanist symposium literally should include a feast. One evening during a lull in the Twelfth Congress of ICLA/AILC in München (1988), Milan agreed with my idea of going to the colorful Bavarian restaurant Am Glöckl next to the Marienkirche, but it was jammed with locals. Only a special table in the very center next to a pillar, always reserved for his honor the mayor, stood empty. Having noted the good things dished up to satisfied diners, Milan was not to be deterred. He ingeniously told a senior waitress that we were foreign friends of the respected mayor of München and hoping to see him. We duly seated ourselves and ordered some tasty fare, to approving glances. About half an hour later, while we contemplated dessert, an elegantly attired Münchner arrived and sat at the table without further ado. Luckily he was a medical doctor, a bosom friend of the mayor, and quite curious about us. While we were explaining that we were a Canadian and a US-American attending an international literary congress hosted by München's famous university and were terribly sorry our hope to see the mayor on a chance was proving unsuccessful, the doctor suddenly asked: "But why, if you are Canadian and American, do you speak not just to me, but to each other in German, rather than English?" Milan's modest answer was priceless, as he rose to precipitate our leave-taking: "Because we need the practice."

As the dating of this anecdote indicates, my connection to Milan was to take on many forms over the years beyond the frank exchange over the publication crisis of the early 1970s. Milan filled many useful offices for ICLA/AILC in the ensuing years, serving as assessor on the Executive Council (1970-73), acting as treasurer (1973-79) and next as vice president (1991-94). When, following the Tokyo Congress of 1991, I learned that the newly installed Nominating Committee wanted to propose me for president in the next term (1994-97), the first thing I did was to approach Milan and ask him to serve in the all-important job of chairing the future Nominating Committee. His membership in ICLA/AILC dated back to 1955, the year of the inaugural congress in Venice. Since his salad days he had developed into one of the most knowledgeable, widely respected, and astute activists in our field. Happily he agreed. But let me return to what I consider the original core of our collaboration, collaboration linked to another line of exemplary service on Milan's part. One of the *spiritūs moventēs* of the mammoth ICLA/AILC project of a Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages (CHLEL), the late György M. Vajda, was nominated to become president of ICLA/AILC in 1992. This compelled him to relinquish his post as secretary of the supreme editorial body called the Coordinating Committee that recruited and supervised the growing plethora of separate research teams and oversaw the final production of volumes in the CHLEL super-series. At the behest of the Coordinating Committee, Milan stepped in to relieve Vajda of this demanding burden and for an entire decade performed the duties with distinction. The various teams could count on clear, timely minutes that chronicled the status of their work under the ICLA/AILC aegis. I expected nothing less from Milan, because I had meanwhile become attached as a worker to the project on Romanticism which he had fostered.

This project was destined to develop into one of the largest of the sub-series in the CHLEL super-series. Eventually, bringing together some 100 experts from some two dozen nations, the ICLA/AILC produced five collaborative volumes: *Romantic Irony* (1988), *Romantic Drama* (1994), *Romantic Poetry* (2002), *Nonfictional Romantic Prose* (2004), and *Romantic Prose Fiction* (2008). I have told the longer-range story in "The Horizons of Romanticism, Two Centuries Later" in *Neohelicon* 35.2 (2008): 163-80. Of the dozens of symposia and conferences on a diverse range of topics in which Milan was involved over the years as a planner and/or host organizer, I like to think that those on Romantic literature held at the University of Alberta in 1978, 1981, and 1984 were especially close to his heart. His sidelined Belgrade dissertation already attested his powerful interest in European Romanticism. Once established at the University of Alberta (the second largest university in Canada after the University of Toronto), he designed and took personal responsibility as director of the research division on Romanticism within RICL, and his planning under the aegis of the RICL thrice enabled an international group of experts to convene and to interact with Canadian discussants at the University of Alberta. There was a somewhat different mix on each occasion according to the shifting conference focus. But on each occasion the original nucleus of an editorial team reassembled to push the concept of the sub-series and its implementation further. Milan's presence as a nurturer of international comparative research and his own expertise reaching across Europe were indispensable for launching the venture from its original center at the University of Alberta. In due course, editors who were chosen to implement a next new volume would make their own university into a subsidiary center branching out from the mother center. For the original momentum the good chemistry that ruled between Milan and Frederick Garber, the editor of the initial volume, was crucial. They and their founding editorial group agreed that they should encourage a spirit of innovation in order to reenergize serious literary history on the international plane. The choice was to examine one of the master impulses that had informed much of the writing, art, and psychological and intellectual stance of the Romantic period. Hence, as planned and executed, the volume cut across all literary genres and art media, as well as philosophy, and constituted an interdisciplinary cultural study as well as literary history. Milan himself contributed two chapters, "Romantic Irony and the Southern Slavs" and (with

Edward Możejko, his colleague at Alberta) "Romantic Irony in Polish Literature and Criticism," *Romantic Irony.* Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1988. 225-40. and 250-66.

The triennial ICLA/AILC Congress returned to Canada in 1994, this time to the western side of the continent. As organizer Milan had called upon a number of colleagues at the University of Alberta for assistance, but his chief ally and co-organizer was Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, his former Ph.D. student and later colleague, who also co-edited with Milan *CRCL/RCLC* 1989-97, as well as the monograph series published by RICL 1989-98. An unusual dilemma arose that threatened to wreck expectations based on the several years of advance planning and understandings reached earlier with the university. Prior to the opening of the congress, a political upheaval occurred in the Province of Alberta. The incoming new government, with a strong libertarian bias, had promised to intervene in education at all levels and enact "reforms." The intrusive micromanaging included inducing the university authorities to dabble in restructuring departments. Against the wishes of the relevant faculty, the administration had decreed an awkward amalgamation of Comparative Literature with Film Studies and Religion and had radically altered promised support. As many seasoned comparatists well know, Comparative Literature (CL) almost everywhere faces periodically several standard difficulties stemming from: the monopolistic tendencies of established local "national" literature departments; the more legitimate concern of the local "foreign" literature departments over cooptation of their subjects; the attempt by local cliques to "colonize" CL and transform it into an exclusionary club only for Theory or some species of Cultural Studies; sometimes jealousy on the part of departments of philosophy or social sciences; and so forth. More dreaded than all of these, however, is what can arise when ill-informed and/or opportunistic administrators see CL as a flexible oddity, a container into which to park various fragments in need of a shelter. At the opening ceremonies, the redoubtable, then incumbent president of ICLA/AILC, Maria Alzira Seixo (University of Lisbon), unabashedly rebuked the University of Alberta for the damage it had done to a distinguished program and warmly praised the dedication of the organizers and helpers who were rescuing a vibrant congress. The wisdom of Milan's creation of the RICL was borne out. It served as an operational headquarters not trammeled by the problems associated with departmental disarray (see also Tötösy de Zepetnek's "Comparative Literature and *Applied Cultural Studies*, or, a Report About the XIVth Triennial Congress of the ICLA/AILC (University of Alberta, August 1994)." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 21.3 [1994]: 469-90; available also online at <https://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/crcl/article/view/3316/2655>). Also, among other things, working through RICL permitted Milan and Tötösy to organize the complicated pattern of publishing the University of Alberta ICLA/AILC congress papers in thematic volumes (rather than the usual *Proceedings*): María Elena de Valdés, Mario J. Valdés, and Richard Young, eds. *Latin America as Its Literature* Special Issue *Review of National Literatures* 8 (1995): 1-219.; Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, ed. *International Perspectives on Reading* Special Issue *Reader: Essays in Reader-Oriented Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy* 35-36 (1996): 1-120.; Roumiana Deltcheva, Wacław Osadnik, and Eduard Vlasov, eds. *Film and Literature* Special Issue *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 23.3 (1996): 637-886.; Mabel Lee and A.D. Syrokomla-Stefanowska, eds. *Literary Intercrossings: East Asia and the West*. Sydney: Wild Peony, 1998.; and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek, Milan V. Dimić, and Irene Sywenky, eds. *Comparative Literature Now: Theories and Practice / La Littérature comparée à l'heure actuelle. Théories et réalisations*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1999. (the latter volume is of almost one-thousand pages and it is considered a seminal volume of the discipline).

Milan exercised diplomatic resistance to the "reformist" folly in public and was a model of firmness. Behind the scenes he made quite clear his disgust with what he regarded to be cultural vandalism wrapped in high-sounding rhetoric. An exile seeking reasonableness in the free air of the Far West, Milan was also an admirer of the deep old civilization from which such excellent things as modern classical liberalism had sprung. He was bitterly disappointed by the haze of zealotry that at

that juncture blinded so many of his fellow citizens in his adopted land. He had a lively sense of humor, could laugh at most annoyances, and always had a will to find a compromise, but he detested destructive stupidity, hypocrisy, and cant. I found very congenial Milan's capacity to assess the issues at stake touching the health of an actual living culture and his passionate commitment to the defense of a humane vision. Unforgettable to me is my memory of the tumultuous cloture session of the General Assembly at the Eleventh Congress of ICLA in Paris in 1985. Several persons, mainly from "Western" countries, with a few maladroit seconders from "Eastern" countries, attempted to push through a resolution for a selective boycott and exclusion of colleagues from South Africa (where ICLA/AILC eventually would hold its Sixteenth Congress at Pretoria in 2000). This sort of politically motivated proposal struck at the very heart of long-held ICLA/AILC principles. Membership in ICLA/AILC was exclusively individual. The organization had learned never to allow governments or political parties or regional professional groups to interfere in the free commerce among scholars internationally. That meant that the mix at our meetings would include colleagues from jurisdictions which were under authoritarian or totalitarian rule. Milan understood how precious this principle was as a shield for those toiling under unfavorable conditions. At crucial turns in the debate, he leapt to his feet and in a voice as powerful as a ship's horn he explained the tradition, made the necessary motion and amendments, and finally the Assembly once again affirmed the freedom of all scholars.

Several other areas of special interest to Milan stand out in my mind. One was ethnic literature broadly, and more narrowly the works of members of the Chinese diaspora and the Serb diaspora in Canada – later his attention expanded to other geocultural zones, including Arabic literatures. Milan was constitutionally unable to remain quietly at home as an emeritus. His adventurous acceptance of a position as Visiting Professor in the Department of English at Shih Hsin University in Taipei, Taiwan, in 2001 led to a new burst of interest in the Chinese world. This relationship deepened into several years of teaching and research collaboration. Among the many results was the volume *Identity and Space in Chinese Literature of the Twentieth Century, Its Margins and Diaspora*, as a special topical issue of the *Tamkang Review* 35.2 (2004): 1-161, which he co-edited with Peng-hsiang Chen and Jenn-shann Lin. Another area was general systems or polysystem analysis. Milan and Colette divorced in 1987. Eventually, in 1991 in Vancouver, he married a Canadian colleague, Marguerite K. Garstin. Garstin collaborated with him on *The Polysystem Theory: A Brief Introduction, with Bibliography*. Edmonton: Research Institute for Comparative Literature, 1988. A third area, claiming a lot of Milan's energies in the 1990s and into the start of the new century, was the discussion of the future of Comparative Literature as our field grew increasingly global and older notions of relativism seemed very challenged by the need for a more complex, non-Eurocentric vision of cultures.

I remember vividly some of Milan's concerns shared in conversations. He found it disturbing to observe the increasing fragmentation and ideological rigidity of many "Western" self-identified comparatists and of their imitators in other geocultural zones. He felt that newer polysystem analysis afforded at least a temporary repositioning in an honest formalistic and semiotic approach that openly avoided accepting dogmatic theorizing (including such phenomena as deconstructive criticism) in place of substantive engagement with actual cultures worldwide. He was also wary of the often cavalier, and sometimes nihilistic, dismissal of values associated with European civilization, rather than painstaking consideration both of advocacy and of rejection of them as reportorial elements in cultural systems. He felt intellectual evasion and disciplinary confusion in institutional frameworks had grown so widespread that a campaign of reform was needed and that ICLA/AILC should spearhead it on the international level. This was the thrust of his inspiring paper "Proliferation of Literary Theories and Consequences for Comparative Literature," given at the Venice conference of 2005, and published in *À partir de Venise. Heritage, passages, horizons. Cinquante ans de l'AILC / It Started in Venice: Legacies, Passages, Horizons. Fifty Years of ICLA*, edited by Paola Mildonian and Alessandro Scarsella. Venezia: Università Ca' Foscari, 2006. 13-23. Upon the sad news of Milan's death, I decided to organize a special workshop in his memory and taking its theme from his suggestions at Venice. The

statement of purpose, duly printed in the announcements of the ICLA/AILC Congress in Rio de Janeiro (2007) bore the heading "Real-World Practices and Institutions of Comparative Literature, and Envisioning the Future of the Discipline." This statement and selected papers were published in the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 35.3 (2008): 171-270, entitled "Toward Rethinking Our Mission."

During the evening session of the ICLA/AILC Planning Committee in Venice in 2005, referenced by Koji Kawamoto, Milan was indeed in fine form. As mentioned, he made a detailed and eloquent plea for a session at the forthcoming Rio de Janeiro congress that would fearlessly scrutinize deleterious aspects of contemporary work hampering the emergence of a genuinely international discipline. In addition, he advocated the desirability of ICLA/AILC sponsoring a new international research Committee on Poetics and saw two main goals in prospect. One would be studies based on documented traditions of major regions, including the story of poetics in the European super-system, but not tolerating any arbitrary imposition of Western norms. Another would be a world dictionary of terms and concepts of poetics. It is to be hoped that stalwart teams will yet undertake to fulfill these ambitious initiatives. Alas, almost exactly a year after the death of his spouse Marguerite, whose untimely death Milan grieved over intensely, his many friends and admirers were confronted by his parting. As his son Nicolas kindly informed me and others, Milan was pursuing research in the Bibliothèque Natonale in Paris in the period before the family visit to Belgrade and was enthusiastic about it, a sign that he found solace in what he shared with his spouse.

We salute this respected colleague.

Gerald Gillespie
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