

# **An Interview with Professor Milan V. Dimić**

*Yiu-nam Leung*

## **ABSTRACT**

In this interview, conducted on August 2, 1996, Professor Milan V. Dimić (U of Alberta) expresses his impression and personal overview of the evolution and development of the discipline of Comparative Literature during the last thirty years and its present situation. He discusses the critique of Comparative Literature, its marginalization, and its future, the conflictual debates about the humanities and culture in general in North America, the power struggle inside departments, and the rift between American scholarship and its counterparts in other countries.

## **KEY WORDS**

Comparative Literature  
marginalization  
theory  
critique  
future

debate  
crisis  
methodology  
development  
postmodernity



Leung Yiu-nam (*L*) received a grant from the Canadian Trade Office at Taipei to do research at the University of Alberta in the summer of 1996. During his stay at Edmonton, he conducted an interview with Professor Milan V. Dimić (*D*). As a university professor and a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, Dimić is the founding editor of *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* and the director of the Research Institute for Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta. Educated at the University of Belgrade, he established his reputation in the domain of Comparative Literature. His name is often mentioned in the context of new developments in systemic interdisciplinary study of literary, artistic, and cultural institutions. His most recent publications include "From the Margin to the Centre of the Canon: Folk Fairy-Tales and the Foundations of Romantic Fiction" and "Comparative Literature in North America: Impressions of the Last 30 Years."

Before this interview, the author met Dimić on two occasions and was impressed by his rich teaching experience and profound knowledge in the field of Comparative Literature. The interview took place in Room 330, Arts Building, University of Alberta.

\* \* \* \* \*

*L*: As a comparatist for all these years, you must have gone through the changes that took place within the discipline of Comparative Literature. Last October, at the National Tsing Hua University, you gave a lecture on present debates on Comparative Literature in Canada and the United States. When we met in Taipei in June this year, during the Conference on Cross-Cultural Studies: The Chinese Perspective, you mentioned that you are elaborating a broader per-

sonal overview of the discipline's evolution during the last thirty years and its present situation. Why?

**D:** I have personal reasons for it and reasons linked to the present situation of the discipline. Having taught Comparative Literature in North America since 1966, I would like to report on impressions that I have gathered over the years about an evolving discipline and the way it is going now. I had the good fortune to be the editor of one of its learned journal and I also had numerous other opportunities to observe what comparatists are doing and what they would like to do. This experience allows me, perhaps, to attempt such an overview. On the other hand, in a less personal way, I am prompted also by the fact that once more many scholars and administrators claim that Comparative Literature is in a great crisis; some colleagues even think that the discipline is dying. It is therefore important to take stock and to see where we are heading at this time.

**L:** Is it possible to summarize the most important features of this North American development over the past few decades?

**D:** I would try to distinguish two aspects of the question. First, the changing position of Comparative Literature within the university as an institution and, second, the development of its field of study, its theories and methods. In terms of the institutional implementation of Comparative Literature, the late 1960s and all of the '70s have been a period of rapid expansion. The number of departments and programs of Comparative Literature in both the United States and Canada has increased significantly. By the end of the '70s or early '80s, there was almost no university in North America without offerings in Comparative Literature. There were a great number of graduate degree programs on the master's and doctoral levels, but often they involved also undergraduate courses of study. Since the early or at least the mid 80s, there has been not only a slowing down of this expansion but also an actual shrinkage of the institution of Comparative Literature. This shrinkage is sometimes in proportion with the retreat in the teaching of foreign languages and literature in North American universities, but in the recent years it went beyond this overall diminishing place of the Humanities. The second aspect which I have men-

tioned concerns the changes in the theories and methodologies used in Comparative Literature. Like all literary studies in North America and elsewhere, Comparative Literature has been influenced, in an ever more rapid succession, by a variety of theories and methodologies. Most of them are imported from Continental Europe but some like New Criticism had also roots in North America itself. Other, more recent ones like feminism, have been developed here well beyond their European forms. Belonging to literary scholarship in the broadest sense of the term, Comparative Literature has from its very beginning been highly interested in questions of theory and methodology. It was usually strongly self-reflexive and, therefore, particularly open to impulses from the different structuralist, neo-Marxist, neo-psychoanalytic, and later various poststructuralist theories, such as feminism, deconstruction, and postcolonial studies, as well as other new ways of studying literary and cultural phenomena, such as cultural studies and the new systemic and empirical approaches. For quite a while, this methodological rejuvenation and the succession of theories which were often difficult to assimilate or implement in their totality, have been, nevertheless, useful, even essential for the rethinking of the discipline. In different ways, they contributed to a larger coverage of the literary phenomena of the world, a stronger awareness about problems of canonization, and a keener understanding of questions concerning gender, race, ethnicity, and cultural differences. They have also fostered a greater alertness to the relativity of theories and methodologies in the study of literature and culture, indeed in the whole domain of the Humanities and of philosophical epistemology. The competing claims of the different-isms, especially those with proselytizing political and social agendas, have become more mutually exclusive and contentious in the last few years. In addition to intellectual reasons, this increase in competition within the academic market place happened in the context of the simultaneous waning in the size and number of programs in languages and literature and especially in the number of independent departments. There have been also specific debates, usually launched from a basis in English departments, about the general purpose of literary studies and

the particular role, or lack of it, played by Comparative Literature in the larger scheme of things.

*L:* What would be the main points of today's critique of Comparative Literature?

*D:* I would venture to say that traditionally, and still today, there are two main types of reproaches made to Comparative literature, which come from the opposite sides of such debates. One, a more traditional one which was stronger in the past than it is today, is the opinion that Comparative Literature is too theoretical, that it is too bent on innovation, and that it tries to embrace a corpus that is too broad and too multilingual. Furthermore, it is a discipline poaching in the areas of other specialized studies, a discipline without its own corpus and theory, and one that has been trying to do too many things to satisfy too many interests. It is therefore not serious and judicious enough. What is being pointed out from time to time in the past, and increasingly so in the last decade, is that Comparative Literature is also very much indebted to a European perspective on the world. It has inherited the theoretical and methodological positions on literary and cultural studies developed in Europe over the past two and a half centuries. Therefore, the claim is made increasingly from the so-called left and progressive side of academe that it is a retrograde discipline which is not doing justice to the social role which teaching should have nowadays. I would summarize and probably simplify this perception and how it describes the differences between Comparative Literature, even when it is open to changes, and the desiderata of the new directions in literary and cultural studies as follows: Comparative Literature is seen as a discipline which in its mainstream clings to a rational scholarly paradigm which takes scholarship as a heuristic and questioning enterprise, while the new trends in the study of literature and culture are very much linking themselves with the postmodern condition, especially as defined by Lyotard. Somewhat paradoxically, these new trends also tend to be didactic, because they experience themselves primarily as a progressive force within the North American societies. This role they fulfill by criticizing this society and the world order of the times, as well as the traditional values which have

been transmitted by different cultures and societies over the centuries.

**L:** In one of our previous discussions, you seemed to distinguish between Anglophone and Francophone positions in Canadian academe. How and why?

**D:** One of the particularities of the situation in Canada is that the country is a self-proclaimed multilingual society with two official languages: English and French, which are predominantly used within two distinct communities with different histories and divergent social goals. Therefore, social and political purposes cannot be defined in unitary and unified terms. There is a marked difference between the scholarly community in the Anglophone part of the country, which is often orienting itself towards models from and problems of the United States, and the Francophone scholarly community in Quebec, which is not only more open towards European social attitudes and scholarship, but which in general has agendas that are socially and culturally different from those in the rest of the country. The main difference, in my view, is that the majority of Francophone scholars, and for that matter intellectuals, writers, artists, and people working in the media, desire to strengthen a specific community and build a new nation. Hence, they are consciously accepting certain avatars of European nationalistic ideologies. Elements of these include a particular role given by the body politic to the study of language, literature, and culture which differs from the deconstructive role now fashionable in English speaking North America, and which even in the rest of Canada frequently concentrates on social problems typical of the United States.

**L:** Speaking of the “Cultural Wars” in the United States and increasingly also in Canada, you are referring to the function of departments of English. Could you elaborate this topic?

**D:** It is not a secret, I think, that most of the approaches to literary and cultural studies which have been developed as a critique of traditional scholarship and of traditional society have been particularly strong in departments of English. I am thinking, for example, of feminism, of revisionist versions of Marxism and psychoanalysis, of postcolonial and cultural studies, and of the pervasive influence of

deconstruction. In all these areas, departments of English have been usually influenced the first and the strongest. Part of the present cultural wars in the United States and increasingly in Canada is that, in the name of these theories and social ideologies, scholars in English are raising their claim that the whole field of cultural studies, both in a local and international framework, is either the legitimate purview of departments of English or of new programs. These programs should be developed with the paradigm of English studies in mind, not on the basis of the paradigm of Comparative Literature or other traditional disciplines, such as, for example, anthropology.

*L:* What are the reasons for the conflictual debates about the humanities and culture in general in the United States and Canada?

*D:* This is a very complex question, and I cannot presume to clarify it in a few sentences—or even in a book. I suspect, nevertheless, that there are two sets of factors: one is predominantly socio-political and the other is more specifically academic. The socio-political reason is that in the United States and Canada, in contrast to Europe or some other parts of the world, there is no real ideological cleavage between the important political parties or among influential social movements. In both countries there is a certain homogenization of political will and power around social, economic, and fiscal programs which, at least in a European perspective, would be defined as those of the corporatist neoconservative “right.” In this situation, many people within academe feel that the academic institution is the last stronghold of possible effective criticism of the society. Thus, they believe that this possibility must be used for positive political and social purposes. This brings them into conflict, of course, with conservative elements within and outside of academe. Unfortunately it separates them also from those, like myself, who subscribe to a progressive social agenda but fear any outright politicization of academe and the rule of new orthodoxies. As for the more academic, or better, institutional reasons for conflict, they are related to the significant financial difficulties of most public universities. Whenever there is a shrinkage in funding, a phenomenon which is almost universal in Canada and the United States, there is a heightened struggle for the

academic "turf," academic positions and possibilities of career development. When a great number of qualified candidates, as is the case now, are left outside the field in which they would like to work, and when there is increasing difficulty for internal promotion, then the solidarity between generations is put to a particular strain. There is under such circumstances great temptation to adopt instead of evolutionary models and the principle of gradual change the attitude of the revolutionary, and to feel that rapid and drastic changes are necessary, because this is the only way to obtain new academic positions within the dwindling universe of universities.

**L:** From your answer to my previous question, I detect a kind of pessimistic attitude towards the present situation and the development of the field of Comparative Literature.

**D:** I would like to qualify this impression. Comparative Literature, in my view, not only has a legitimate reason to exist, but it has the potential to convince others of its legitimacy if it were to combine more energetically the best of its traditions with necessary and welcome innovations. When I say the best of its traditions, I mean the fact that Comparative Literature has already explored much of what the newcomers wish to do: *study the world, adopt a pluralistic, intercultural, and international point of view, study folklore and popular culture, and reflect upon the methodology which is appropriate for such kinds of study.* It would be a waste of intellectual and scholarly opportunity simply to brush this accumulated experience aside and give up on the knowledge which exists in the discipline of Comparative Literature. But as I mentioned previously, it is also up to the discipline itself to try to use this knowledge creatively for the future and not accept to become marginalized. On the other hand, in general terms, I do worry about the future of Comparative Literature as an institutionalized part of universities in North America because it seems to me that the discipline, much as the Humanities in general, is now assaulted from both ends of the political spectrum. It is very much financially and otherwise marginalized by the neoconservatives, who do not really believe in intellectual freedom and plurality nor in raising citizens who are able to be independent and make critical



comparisons. How can the social powers that be preserve about the virtual reality about the United States projected by the media, Hollywood, and official discourses if it were to be confronted with realities available from elsewhere? At the same time, albeit against their conscious wish and against their better judgment, it is in fact also undermined and sometimes pushed aside by those who are very critical of our society, but who are determined to use the academic world as a direct tool of social change. My personal experiences in Europe with previous attempts at social changes through an ideological monopoly on scholarship have been very sad indeed. I think the historical record shows that the university can serve society best by remaining independent as much as possible from day to day politics and from militant ideologies, not by trying hard to engineer better human beings and a better society. The historical track record of such enterprises, some of which were well meant, has not been encouraging.

**L:** You just mentioned the possible power struggle inside departments between those who are in secure tenured positions and candidates who are qualified to teach in the discipline but are without any job, or at least without a stable employment. What is your solution for this kind of conflict?

**D:** For the moment, I do not see any ideal solution, because the financial means given to universities and the new pragmatic, utilitarian priorities adopted by universities, sometimes willingly, sometimes under duress, preclude the possibility of simply enlarging the extant programs and adding other, new ones. Such an expansion, impossible today, would absorb at least the most talented candidates who are either outside the institution or in floating positions like those of sessional lecturers. Incidentally, such temporary or part-time staff are quite exploited and their intellectual and human potential is not being properly used. Because of the economic situation of academe—it is debatable what the real economic situation of Canada and the United States is—we have to look for other ways of attenuating the present crisis. I would suspect that some innovations are possible, if the university is seriously interested in trying to resolve the generational problem without resolving to replace everybody over 50 or 55 by the

most recent (and cheapest) graduates. As in many other social matters neither immobility nor revolution are the answer, but a staged evolution with an overall plan which takes into account the means which are available at this time. Incidentally, the share of the budget allocated to the humanities, although heavily influenced by political, corporate, and other external interests, is also a matter at least in part negotiated and decided within the university.

**L:** You talked about Comparative Literature being marginalized. Are you referring to the department of English as the centre and Comparative Literature as the margin?

**D:** There are, I think, for the moment two developments. One is that in many places in North America the department of English has assumed the teaching of literary theory, Commonwealth Literature as a world-wide phenomena, and, by extension, also adopted the teaching of neo-Marxism, neo-psychoanalysis, deconstruction, feminism, postcolonial studies, popular culture studies. The other trend is that sometimes, parallel to the strengthening of the realm under the responsibility of English, there is also an attempt and, in a few cases, a successful one to build new programs of cultural studies, translation studies, or other interdisciplinary endeavours. In a zero sum game, in both cases, there seems to have been a *de facto* marginalization of Comparative Literature, as well as, not so infrequently, a true desire to achieve this result. One would have to know concrete situations to analyze them properly and to know to what extent comparatists may have marginalized themselves. If there is any truth in the grape vine, in certain cases they seem to have been pushed to the side by people who do not want to be burdened by the traditions of Comparative Literature or the effort necessary to acquire the multilingual and multicultural background which traditionally Comparative Literature has required of its staff and students for its kind of international studies.

**L:** You mentioned to me that Comparative Literature is often perceived as not being “postmodern.” In what sense and why?

**D:** The usual idea of postmodernity is that of a refusal of tradition, *a privileging of relativity and of fragmentation*. It is also a refusal of traditional rational means of argument for the validation of

observations and conclusions. Now to the extent that Comparative Literature is a scholarly discipline and prefers to remain one, it does insist on certain premises of rationality and of the ability of language to serve purposes of communication, possibly reflecting reality and having a meaning, even if it is not a stable and a definitive one. It also relies on methods of verification which belong to the scholarly paradigms of a Popper or Kuhn. This is in contrast (and some believe—in opposition) to the postmodern attitude about the impossibility of validating the veracity of statements and the idea that we should break totally with the past or use it only as archaeological fragments which can be pieced together into a new, perpetually moving mosaic and new cultural canvas. Comparative Literature, in my opinion at least, has so far insisted on a heuristic role of scholarship, while many advocates of the new trends, as I have mentioned before, insist on the priority of the didactic. This is to me a self-contradictory wish, because I do not see how we can be legitimately didactic if we are consequently deconstructive.

**L:** In your answer to my initial question, you mentioned that there is a certain differentiation, even rift between American scholarship and that in other parts of the world, especially in Europe. What would be the main elements of these differences? In addition, could you touch upon the reasons why debates about scholarship in academe the world over are frequently taking up similar questions but often with different results from those reached in English speaking North America and, indeed, in English speaking countries elsewhere?

**D:** With your permission, I would first mention the similarities. They are the result of the popularity of the concept of postmodernism in the world in general and are probably due to certain experiences of this type in many other parts of the world. They are also the consequence of the importance of American media and popular culture, but also of the prestige of American science, technology, and scholarship. Finally, *an important factor is the predominance of the English language as a language of international communication.* There is little doubt that the American agenda in all matters from politics and trade to academe is quite present everywhere in the world and that students

and teachers alike are informing themselves as a priority of American debates. Some of them are quite influenced by the strength of the arguments which are used in these debates. This would largely account for much of the similarities. When I claimed that the results of such debates are sometimes different, I meant the following. It seems to me, and this is a quite decisive fact, that the social situation in continental Europe and elsewhere is different from the American. This necessitates that the academic institution seeks different questions and answers. Let me speak of continental Europe for a moment. Europe is also dominated by post industrial capitalist societies, while others are aspiring to reach this stage. None the less, the social ideology in non-English speaking countries has remained one of collective, national solidarity and has maintained a vaguely social democratic orientation with a firm role for the state. In that context, universities are still trying to advance traditional and social purposes of such societies and to serve the nation-state which is still an important phenomena. In other parts of the world that I have in mind, for instance, in India, in China, and in Latin-American countries, also increasingly in African countries, there is a perception within the elites that their particular evolution towards modernity, and perhaps postmodernity, is dependent on the preservation or the building of nationhood. This requires myth maintaining and myth building, a constructive and not a deconstructive attitude in universities and the pedagogy. Therefore, I think that traditional attitude, or at least a certain respect for tradition and its historical values is more strongly felt and the advantages of rationality still accepted more readily than in North America where there is a wide-spread feeling in academe and beyond that all such things are not only behind us but that they have not served humanity very well in the past.

*L:* Would you share with me your impressions about Comparative Literature in Taiwan and in the whole area of the eastern Pacific rim?

*D:* Through my readings, limited as they are, I knew, of course, that Comparative Literature has been present in Japan for over half a century. And I also knew that at the latest since the seventies there have been quite spectacular developments in the discipline in Taiwan

and Mainland China, and a little later also in Hong Kong. New periodicals like the *Tamkang Review*, which in the meantime has been joined by others in the area, acquired an international standing. Increasingly publications which come out of that geographic and cultural area which includes South Korea, are part of what the comparatist has to follow or at least have some acquaintance with even when one is working in Europe or in North America. But in the more recent past, the lucky opportunity I had to visit Japan, Beijing, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in particular, has nevertheless surprised me. I was impressed by the vigour of the interest in Comparative literature, the quality of the students working in this area, and the number of colleagues who are not only accomplished teachers and researchers, but who are now displaying an enthusiasm for the discipline which existed in North America in the seventies and the early eighties, but which is sometimes lacking today.

*L:* How do you see the future of Comparative Literature as an intellectual and academic enterprise?

*D:* Well, we all know how dangerous it is to predict the future. For Comparative Literature, I think we should always keep in mind that it has been repeatedly declared dead or dying. For instance, I found in my bibliographic notes American articles of the twenties and thirties which had already proclaimed that Comparative Literature was moribund and which had titles such as "Can Comparative Literature be Revived?" In other words, in its very nature of a self-questioning enterprise and one which is often criticized from all kinds of different perspectives, let us not forget that nationalists, Fascists and Bolsheviks alike hated this discipline, Comparative Literature is probably in a perpetual crisis. It is possible to argue that the present predicament, which coincides at least in North America but probably beyond with a certain crisis in the Humanities in general, may be more significant and perhaps more dangerous than some of the previous crises have been. As I tried to explain in the answer to one of your earlier questions, I am personally still cautiously optimistic. If we can make better known what Comparative Literature has successfully done so far, if we can also more clearly change those aspects of our

activities, for instance the long standing relative European insularism of the discipline, and if we can take care of current theoretical and methodological questions more resolutely, I think that we could still claim to have a good future. The main reason why I do hope that there is such a future for Comparative Literature is the following: In the thirty years of my teaching in North America and the ten years I had academic experience in Europe, the opinion crystallized in me that although there is a full spectrum of ways to look at the world, two polarities dominate the field. One way is that of those observers of the world who relate everything to their language, culture and society. This attitude has always been strong in the departments of national literature, be they French in France, Russian in Russia, and English in English speaking countries. It is still very strong in everything that the department of English is doing in North America, be it Commonwealth studies or colonial and postcolonial literatures, or any other question with an international dimension. The other perspective is the attempt to see the world through the eyes of other people, other traditions, and other cultures. It means the obligation to learn foreign languages, to immerse oneself as much as possible into other cultures, to learn their codes and to learn how to switch between one's own codes and those of other communities. This truly pluralistic world view is much more open in real terms to the question of otherness, a matter of great concern to many new directions in literary and cultural studies. This pluralistic attitude, which does not look only for sameness but increasingly for differences, has been inherent in Comparative Literature and was ever more fostered over the past decade or two. Our discipline and we as a profession can do even better in this area, and especially much better than any perspective on the world which would be centred on perceptions custom tailored to American social agendas or to a vision of the world exclusively filtered through the medium of the English language. If we are able to rise to the intellectual and social challenges of our era, we will be needed.