

# A TRIBUTE TO TED BLODGETT

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Packrat that I am, I still have the notes from the two graduate seminars I took with Ted Blodgett when I began my PhD in Comparative Literature in Edmonton in 1969. I have previously written about my professors at that time and in that place. That I didn't mention Ted in "Edmonton Is Fun, After All" was less an oversight than a reflection of the fact that Ted was still kicking then. There was no need for an *in memoriam*. In fact, given the outsized presence of the man, both in person and in my intellectual life, it would have been hard for me to imagine one. Now, of course, we have had to.

I just wrote "intellectual," but there was a strong personal element to my relationship with Ted too. Those were very different, less puritanical and bean-counting times. Much learning and teaching went on outside the classroom, just as Plato imagined it.

I owe Ted almost everything I know about Latin and medieval literature, in particular Virgil, Catullus, Ovid, Propertius, and even Ausonius, whose poem on the vineyards of the Mosel, *Mosella*, Ted demonstrated *dans le texte* was a worthy successor to Ovid, at least the latter's secondary works, *Tristia*. That was the level of nuanced literary rank, taste, and judgement to which he held in those years. Yet when I think of Ted now, I recall first and foremost the fun—yes, the flat-out fun—we had outside of class as well. He had what he called a dacha about an hour west of Edmonton near the Pembina River. I remember spending weekends out there helping him with roofing, and once roasting a suckling pig for an unruly crowd of invitees. All this was accompanied with and fuelled by beer and wine and heady talk about literature.

I had been in Edmonton just a few weeks when Ted helped organize a weekend conference, *Poet and Critic/Poète et critique*. This was in the autumn of 1969. The attendees, including a number of prominent personae in what was then the emerg-



ing field of CanLit, were invited to after-conference events at his home in St. Albert (where, incidentally, he was known to fly the Québec fleur-de-lys when provoked). At that point in time, Ted still thought of himself as a scholar of classical and medieval literature. But he was already avidly writing poetry and had understood that, at least at that point in time, you practically had to have your union card as a critic of CanLit in order to practice Canadian poetry. Would it be churlish to suggest that Ted's Canadian career as poet and poetry critic was a loss to classical and medieval studies? That is certainly how it appeared to me at times, so strongly had the seminars I took with him a half century ago as a novice grad student imposed themselves in my mind.

Now that I have had this occasion to unearth my class notes, written in a hand I no longer recognize but which is more legible than my present one, I'll be spending time with them. It is impossible to begin recapitulating them within these narrow confines, so let me distill two key points.

- 2 First, Ted insisted that we read all texts in the original Latin (or German or Italian or Provençal), at least to the point of being able to point out by line number in the Loeb or whatever Latin edition of the passage on which we were commenting. This meant either taking a crash course in the grammar and vocabulary of any language on the curriculum, or making better whatever prior knowledge we had of them. My own Latin was woefully inadequate to such a task, at least initially. Yet the fact of the matter is that, unless you try to do what Ted asked of us, you will always know less than if not. This is the essence of comparatism as he understood and taught it.

It follows that, thanks to Ted, I read Virgil's *Eclogues* in Latin, tediously perhaps, but with what eventual delight! Ovid's *Ars amatoria* sprang to life for me as its words were acted out by this great bear of a man with a gift for the dramatic and a flair for wry aside and wit. The transmission of the Ovidian love lyric tradition through the Provençal of, say, Bernart de Ventadorn and then on to Petrarch and Dante was *mise-en-scène* in one brilliant reading after another. Ted did enjoy performing, but then he would turn to us individually and ask us to read aloud, to perform ourselves.

The second point I'd like to make about Ted's pedagogy in those years is how political it was without being "political." There was no such thing as political correctness in our little sphere in those years, though there was lots of politics in the air. But Ted himself always set texts in their social and political contexts. Virgil, for him, was a kind of anti-imperial poet, despite the *Aeneid*; Ovid a victim of tyranny who was dispatched into exile on the Black Sea by Augustus to shut him up. (Like me, Ted was born American and experienced Canada in the late 1960s as refuge sought after; unlike Ovid, we were willing exiles.)

I remember in particular Ted's take on the Provençal love lyric as an allegory of feudal hierarchy and the desired transgression of that hierarchy by the Troubadours. Also, I recall his dwelling on what the coming of Christian cultural hegemony meant to the late Latin world, in particular how frustrating Ausonius found the "defection" of his dear friend Paulinus of Nola, who converted to Christianity in the 380s and



cut himself off from classical Latin culture.

Ted found a similar tension within Augustine of Hippo, whose *Confessions*, of which we had to read extracts, recounts his ambiguous feelings for the passionate image of Dido in Virgil's *Aeneid* once the good Father had renounced the world of sensual desire. So when I came to explain to Ted why I admired Mao Zedong's prescriptions for post-revolutionary literature, I compared Mao to Augustine, both writing from the other side of a cultural gulf in which the old high classical culture was to be sealed off for ethical reasons, but by someone who had mastered it.

He got my point, though he didn't agree. Nor do I now, for the record. But for and through Ted I learned to speak the language of comparative literature, a language which my gut tells me is slowly dying, precisely because it requires attentive understanding of an Other, that Other's language and their desires, not just our own. It is easy to imagine Ted turning over and over in his grave at the parochialism and cultural chauvinism that increasingly surrounds us. He would have appreciated the jussive mood in *Requiescat in pace*.

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## WORK CITED

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