

CHAPTER 15

“A View of the Empress at Sunset: A (Not-So-Cheeky) Tribute to Bénédicte Ledent”

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Pondering the fascinatingly complex theme of genealogies, to which this volume is dedicated, can have interesting yet unexpected side-effects, such as shedding new light on relationships one had never formally stepped back to analyse. Although the academe tends to be permeated – if only symbolically – by questions of (af)filiation, it indeed turns out, as I endeavour to retrace my steps, that I had never theorised my twenty-year-long bond with Bénédicte along those lines. It now occurs to me that she was not, to me, the mother-figure she may have embodied for several scholars of my generation (and the next). I had already graduated when she started her career as a tenured professor at the University of Liège, so that it was only as a postgraduate that I had the chance to be briefly taught by her – for various reasons, I do recall a short module on Canadian literature including a few lively classes she had chosen to devote to Dionne Brand’s novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon* (1999). In that context, she did not become my PhD supervisor but I remember being impressed by (and, to be honest, slightly envious of) the unfailing support with which she provided her own doctoral students, who invariably respected her even as they were often in awe of the natural authority she (gently) bestowed upon them: in spite of her well-known and pretty idiosyncratic sense of humour, Bénédicte’s candour, professional rigour and determined seriousness can make quite an impression on sensitive young souls that have not yet got around to discovering her kind and warm personality. Surely, Bénédicte’s commitment to her students was remarkable, and ranged from offering them the fruitful feedback and constructive criticisms that would enable them to thoroughly improve their scholarly work, to associating them to major (and otherwise inaccessible) editing projects or the numerous academic events she organised at ULiège over the years, always encouraging them to fearlessly gain the expertise, self-confidence and sense of legitimacy that would help them become the best versions of themselves – not to mention the myriad touching gestures she lavished on her team members (going so far as to save newspaper cuttings pertaining to their centres of interest, celebrate their birthdays with thoughtful gifts, or feeding them when they were figuratively or literally hungry, as all nurturing mothers do). It now dawns on me that while Bénédicte’s attention, engagement and enthusiasm also benefitted me in various ways, she was, to me, closer to what a benevolent aunt might stand for. Not only was she an esteemed member of my thesis committee, whose

careful reading of my work I was, and still am, thankful for; as I look back on the past two decades, I also realise how often I collaborated with her, in all kinds of circumstances. For quite a few years, Bénédicte was centrally involved – as president or director – in a number of associations and research units, following in the footsteps of a tutelary figure for many postcolonial academics, namely Hena Maes–Jelinek, who had founded them. In particular, she chaired the Association Belgo-Britannique (ABB), of which I was once the treasurer, as well as, until recently, the Centre d’Enseignement et de Recherche en Études Postcoloniales (CEREP), which, more than half a century ago, pioneered the then emerging study of postcolonial literatures and which I currently co-direct with Daria Tunca. I attended many of the lectures she instigated, in the wake of which she would generously introduce us to the creative writers she invited, such as – of course – Caryl Phillips, who has meanwhile become a dear friend. I also took part, under various guises, in many of the conferences that were held at ULiège under her impetus (and the auspices of CEREP), like that memorable symposium focusing on postcolonial biographical fiction (“Illuminating Lives: The Biographical Impulse in Postcolonial Literatures,” March 2017). Moreover, she patiently and meticulously (co-)edited several of my texts, including, in recent years, an article on one of Australian writer Murray Bail’s most enigmatic short stories and another one on Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee’s Dostoevskian novel (a piece that incidentally also addresses the various shapes taken by filiation and affiliative connections), which were respectively published, in 2018 and 2019, in special issues of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* (then reissued in book format by Routledge in 2019 under the title *Minor Genres in Postcolonial Literatures*) and *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, both guest-edited by Bénédicte and other colleagues. Last but not least, she was in the room, a discreet but palpable presence, when, a few years ago, I took the oath as a result of my own appointment as associate professor at ULiège. Throughout these happy, mask-free, Covid-free and comparatively carefree years, we shared countless meals, drinks, conference dinners, and conversations with friends, colleagues, and guests in countless facilities – and, sometimes, around Bénédicte’s own table –, both in Belgium and abroad. In this regard, I am almost surprised at how much we have travelled together, often where academic life would lead us. Our common involvement with (E)ACLALS ((European) Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies) only took us to Sliema (Malta), Venice (Italy), Nicosia (Cyprus), Istanbul (Turkey) and Innsbruck (Austria). I also have fond memories of a verdant and moving stay at Cumberland Lodge, Windsor, where Bénédicte co-organised, in March 2010, the three-day conference held in honour of late Maes–Jelinek, who had passed away less than two years before. In 2017, this very special

conference gave rise to The Cross-Cultural Legacy: Critical and Creative Writings in Memory of Hena Maes-Jelinek, which came out in Brill's Cross/Cultures series (then directed by Bénédicte along with Geoffrey Davis, now deceased, and Gordon Collier) and to which I am proud to have contributed. Next week, as it happens, Bénédicte and I will meet again in Frankfurt, where we will both deliver talks at GAPS (Gesellschaft für Anglophone Postkoloniale Studien – Association for Anglophone Postcolonial Studies)'s 32nd Annual Conference (entitled "Contested Solidarities: Agency and Victimhood in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures" and convened by Kathrin Bartha-Mitchell, Pavan Kumar Malreddy, and Frank Schulze-Engler), as part of a panel initiated by Delphine Munos and aiming to engage with aspects of Affect Theory. I think it is a bit of an understatement to say that we are all looking forward to participating in what will, for many of us, be a first face-to-face scholarly event after a seemingly endless health crisis. Let us hope that we will fare well together, even far beyond this upcoming conference. Bénédicte, you will, no doubt, be sorely missed ... when you truly leave. In the meantime, even if you officially retired, as a professor, from ULiège's Department of Modern Languages, your life as an influential researcher, whose reputation and legacy extend way beyond the boundaries of our home institution, is far from over, and your presence among us will always be most appreciated.