An Idealized State of Mind

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Pouring over Marjorie Garson's valuable first twenty-five-year history of ACUTE/ACCUTE, I am warmly reminded of all the reasons I became so involved in the association in the first place. Like a lot of emerging scholars, I first gleaned an idea that ACCUTE even existed when the Learneds invaded my town, that is, the town of the University of Western Ontario, where I was a graduate student in 1978. Talk about a transformative experience. I was a teaching assistant for both English literature and film classes and had no idea what a learned society was until I tagged along with some professors to well-attended panels being hosted by ACCUTE and the Film Studies Association. Besides the punishing late May sun and the opportunity to drink a lot of beer outdoors in the middle of the day with scholars whose articles I was devouring, I remember being surprised at the magnitude of the entire Learneds congress, the obvious camaraderie my professors shared with visitors to the Western campus, and the glamorous slate of international stars who were listed on the program for both societies.

Two years later I delivered my first formal conference paper for ACCUTE at the congress in Montreal, at the UQAM campus, one of those career-marking moments one tracks in a line of continuity with whatever

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follows. By then I had signed on to ACCUTE and was starting to shape an idea of what being a member of a national professional society meant.

ACCUTE has always had a sizable footprint at the Learneds, as they were called until 1998, and I sensed that belonging to it was not only an important gesture of my seriousness as a professional but an essential opportunity for connecting with other graduate students and, more importantly, potential employers. I was easily drawn in by the charisma and confidence of the apparent leaders of the organization—Judith Herz, Frank Davey, Shirley Neuman, Patricia Clements, Norman Feltes—people with guts and an admirable clarity of purpose and vision about what ACCUTE had been and needed to be. Before you could say "Business Arising" I was routinely attending the annual general meetings, becoming intrigued in particular by the larger pictures these people so eloquently conjured of the Canadian research environment, the challenges and threats to our community, and, indeed, the fact that we were actually a community about which one could speak so assertively. With apologies to Groucho Marx, I really *did* care to belong to the club that would have me as a member.

At those AGMs in the 1980s, I also first witnessed *Robert's Rules* being expertly deployed and gathered an early impression of what a well-run meeting should be. To the jaded and the bored, herding a hundred or so stubborn academics toward a consensus was a tired fact of democracy, but to me that very achievement was an awesome demonstration of skills no one had ever before promoted as worthy or admirable, certainly not necessary for getting a tenure-track position in any city worth driving in. I also learned through all those extended and excited debates over motions on the floor about whether ACCUTE should be more or less interested in Theory, the World, in Writing, the French, SSHRC, and so on, how what we read and taught was intimately connected to something larger than our books and our libraries and the dull little cells in which we graded papers. ACCUTE showed me that our own disciplinary project was intimately engaged with the dream of a civil society, with humanist, liberal values, and with a political landscape in which we had major responsibilities. To a Canadian literature scholar who was reading Dennis Lee's *Civil Elegies* and Frye's *Bush Garden* at the time with gusto, ACCUTE was becoming my natural home.

And so it has been ever since. Because of the leaders I mentioned above, and others such as Marjorie Stone, Gary Kelly, Linda Hutcheon, and Len Findlay, ACCUTE emerged in the 1980s and 1990s and up until the present as a hugely influential player at the Federation. I watched a fearless Frank Davey take charge of issues at the Federation Board table with impressive

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persuasive power. I saw an almost scary Pat Clements wrangle dissenters at the Federation AGMs like a professional big cat handler. I was consistently inspired by the irresistible Judith Herz's command of the issues, always speaking at once with humour and insight. I learned from Marjorie Stone's forceful analyses of where ACCUTE needed to be positioned to take on the forces of government, and how building an alliance with other societies would strengthen our capacity to have influence. These people were my mentors as scholars and leaders, and like so many of my peers I wanted my steps to follow directly in theirs. Not to be underestimated is recent president Steve Bruhm's unflagging commitment to ensure ACCUTE is as hip as a danceable playlist. We are no longer just big ideas and a lot of tweed.

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It is not about numbers or the fact that we are the largest humanities-based association under the Federation umbrella. It is that for over half a century we have developed a strong identity as a community of engaged scholars who can tap into our shared literary and cultural interests and speak to complex social issues at the same time. It is no exaggeration to say that the Federation has evolved its own strong advocacy agenda in response to the leadership of ACCUTE, and not the other way around. And, because this conversation must go with such duties, ACCUTE has been in a challenging dialogue with SSHRC at least since the 1980s, with the first of the shortsighted government hits on the entire infrastructure of our research community, and especially following the forced marriage in the 1990s of the humanities and the social sciences, an arrangement that has generated more familial compatibility than at first imagined. With considerable pride we can boast that, ever since, ACCUTE has led other associations by example and helped the newly formed Federation find its own identity as a player on the national scene.

When our departments let us down, for all the well-documented reasons in social organization textbooks, and when we have become enervated by the repetition of self-absorbed expressions of entitlement on our own campuses, the larger professional association to which we belong, and that claims such an illustrious, often contested history, reliably offers us a much needed sense of solidarity, a community of friends and scholars. It is an idealized state of mind, this group thing we call ACCUTE, and it is ever more powerful and important for being so. Long may she prosper.