

## Editorial Preface to Presentations by the Member Associations of the International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures

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This issue of *Diogenes* includes short papers by prominent officers of 18 of the member-associations of the International Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures (Fédération Internationale des Langues et Littératures Modernes – FILLM) with a view to introducing and explaining the history, purpose, and function of these international learned societies representing different branches of the modern languages field at a time when the role of such bodies is often questioned even by professional academics working within the discipline, and their very existence largely unknown outside it, even to educated persons. The FILLM is one of the earliest member organizations of the International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Studies (CIPSH) which had indeed had a prior existence since its foundation in Oslo in 1928 as the Commission Internationale d'Histoire Littéraire Moderne and was subsequently reorganized in its present structure in 1951 following the formation of UNESCO.

Like the CIPSH and UNESCO itself, the FILLM has throughout its history shared the same problems of identity and function as all the large overarching international bodies which during the 20th century came into existence with the dual aim of representing a particular human need or academic discipline at a global level, and thereby at the same time facilitating international communication and understanding of their subject-area among professionals and laymen alike. For such academic associations this aspiration was during the second half of the 20th century in many respects achieved very rapidly, but a significant price had to be paid: an ever greater specialization among individual researchers in their own university institutions as the cost of their ever increasing numbers from the 1960s on, which has made their individual identification with the aims and ideals of the international umbrella bodies ever more nebulous; an increasing failure on the part of the international bodies to determine a useful function for themselves which goes beyond the merely

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representative; and constant frustration at the lack of resources provided for the international bodies and for the humanities in general on the part of governments, which pay lip-service to the ideals of humanistic scholarship but in practice concentrate their resources on areas of scientific and economic endeavour with the largely material aims of creating wealth or prolonging life, regardless of the spiritual, intellectual, and moral condition of those presumably expected to show their gratitude for these material benefits in the polling booth.

Nowhere is the last-mentioned discrepancy more apparent than in the case of modern languages and literatures. Those subjects which possess the most immediate means of improving communication and understanding among the peoples of the world are in practice currently among the most neglected and devalued of all academic disciplines. In the course of a perennial debate at the Bureau of the FILLM held at the time of the 21st International Congress in Harare in July 1999 which touched, as often in such deliberations, on the role of the FILLM vis-à-vis its member-associations, it was suggested that a future meeting should be accompanied by a short colloquium at which an officer of each association might survey the history, structure, activities, aspirations, function, and problems of associations dealing with humanistic, non-utilitarian disciplines, and that the resulting papers might form the basis of a brief publication.

That publication is presented here. Its intention is to present readers with an overview of the astonishingly wide and diverse range of activities which make up the very heterogeneous forms of academic engagement in the modern languages and literatures at the present time, and the manner in which these independent societies, international by definition through their membership of the FILLM, stimulate original research through their international conferences, maintain the standards of that research through an ongoing process of criticism and review, and publish the findings of research in a large number of internationally acclaimed journals and monograph series. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that all this activity is, with the notable exception of one of the largest member-associations, administered and carried through by volunteer academic staff who perform these tasks unpaid and in addition to their full-time university employment, itself often grossly under-remunerated in relation to the intellectual demands and cultural responsibility of its practitioners. This system, which in most other walks of life would be deemed exploitative, has however the supreme advantage that its quality is assured through its realization by those who truly understand what they are doing. The message for governments, democratically elected or otherwise, is clear: voluntary learned societies have shown in the past half-century that even in undervalued subject-areas such as modern languages and literatures the professional scholars are capable both of expanding the frontiers of research and of maintaining and enhancing the standards of scholarship, and the intervention in research assessment in the humanities by government-directed agencies, which now characterizes higher education in many western countries at least, is an unnecessary and wasteful interference with fundamental academic freedoms which has more to do with the financially driven agendas of governments and with the self-regarding and parasitic interests of the bureaucracy than with any understanding of the humane values underpinning research in the humanities.

No apologies are offered for the considerable diversity in the substance, structure, and length of the different papers. As indicated by the present writer in his contribution on the Modern Humanities Research Association, there are great differences in size, administration, and function among the member-associations of the FILLM, and this diversity is to be welcomed as a true reflection of the present-day diversification of the discipline of modern languages and literatures. The authors were invited to give presentations on what seemed appropriate for their own associations in the light of present conditions, as regards both the current global cohesion of the discipline in question and the representation of the individual scholar at the grass roots. For some associations, continuity with the past is important, when the discipline is seen as established and self-evident: some associations indeed exist purely by virtue of hosting a large international congress in a major language subject-area at fixed intervals, and the intellectual development of the subject needs no stimulus from above apart from the timing of a meeting at which new research can opportunely be presented. For others, innovation, proselytizing, and the breaking down of traditional language subject-areas are major *raison d'être*, and in the past few years the FILLM has itself begun a necessary process of regeneration through the admission of four or five new international associations dedicated to areas as specific as children's literature or particular theoretical and interdisciplinary approaches to the study of 'language and literature'. This shift towards – in the broadest sense of the term – interdisciplinarity is a function of the successful expansion of research in the past generation. It provides some mitigation in an age which has, as part of this process, also seen whole areas once accepted as a coherent part of the discipline, such as many aspects of linguistics, effectively break with the 'language and literature' mould and form new subject-areas with international representation primarily focused in other member organizations of the CIPSH.

It is probably the case that the higher the ranking of an association within the UNESCO pyramid, the more heart-searching currently required about its organization and purpose. This too is a problem which has become exacerbated in recent years by the sheer success of individual scholarly research in the modern languages and literatures as in many other fields. It is not the intention of this collection of short surveys to dwell on the particular problems of the FILLM itself. These were addressed in a paper by the present writer in 1988 in the context of the growing lack of effectiveness of UNESCO, and recently it has been suggested that little has changed in the last decade. The question of the role of the FILLM is mirrored in turn by similar considerations regarding the CIPSH.

The major function of the FILLM in the 1950s and 1960s was the holding of relatively large-scale international umbrella congresses in which all aspects of the discipline were represented and the foreign travel element was undertaken in a spirit of genuine postwar idealism and *esprit de corps*. This has now been replaced by intense professional rivalry and the fragmentation of the discipline alluded to above. But, just as top-down initiatives are not required on the part of governments as long as the grass roots flourish, so with the FILLM: although various useful initiatives by the FILLM Bureau, such as the establishment of research committees and a concern with the hitherto neglected pedagogical underpinning of the discipline, are already bearing fruit, the FILLM, together with its important representative function at the

CIPSH and UNESCO, is essentially what its name implies, a *federation* embodying the enormous efforts of its member-associations collectively, which in turn exist by virtue of their own individual members and the research they undertake, present, and publish. Although, for obvious reasons of space, it has not proved possible to include a detailed roll-call of all the names of those, past and present, active in all the member-associations represented here, whether in an administrative capacity or as contributing scholars, the reader is asked to consider that it is above all the efforts of many individuals across the globe which are ultimately being celebrated in this review of a diverse range of corporate and societal endeavour in precisely the academic discipline which, perhaps more than any other, has the potential for breaking down barriers and increasing international tolerance and understanding.