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Edited by
ELINOR SHAFFER
READER OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
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EDITOR'S NOTE
Comparative literature in Britain

Our intention in this first volume of *Comparative Criticism* is to explore the notion of literary canon as it relates to the present situation within literary studies in Britain. The traditional syllabus of literary studies – confined primarily to one national literature, or to two studied for the most part in isolation from one another and ordered mainly by reference to chronology, is clearly in the process of transformation. If the dominant literary culture of our century is international modernism, it follows that literary studies will move in the same direction. This fact by no means implies a bias towards modern studies, but suggests a concern with the impingement of cultures and languages upon one another throughout literary history, leading to a more synchronically oriented literary history; or the release of texts from their specific environment, leading to a more theoretically oriented literary history. In this situation, the methods of comparative literature, past and present (for it is far from a new subject) may prove helpful.

Although English literature has absorbed many foreign influences in the course of its long history, the emphasis on native tradition in the most extensive and powerful literature in the world has sometimes seemed to impede the recognition of foreign literature. As Matthew Arnold wrote to his sister in May 1848: 'How plain it is now, though an attention to the comparative literatures for the last fifty years might have instructed anyone of it, that England is in a certain sense far behind the continent.' Arnold, with his immersion both in the classics and in contemporary European literature, was, not surprisingly, responsible for the phrase 'comparative literatures', adapted from the French, 'littérature comparée'. As René Wellek has pointed out, this locution originated in the eighteenth century, at a time when 'literature' still meant 'erudition', or 'knowledge of letters', and had not taken on its

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modern sense of 'a body of writing' (whether of special aesthetic merit, or what Lamb called 'things in books' clothing'); the phrase signified simply the comparative study of literature ('The Name and Nature of Comparative Literature', *Discriminations* (Yale University Press, 1970); see also Wellek, 'What is Literature?' in the volume of the same title, edited by Paul Hernadi (University of Indiana Press, 1978).

Before Arnold used the phrase, Henry Hallam had already attempted to put it into practice on a large scale in his *Introduction to the Literature of Europe in the Fifteenth, Sixteenth, and Seventeenth Centuries* (1837–9). Hallam pointed out that 'France has no work of any sort, even an indifferent one, on the universal history of her literature; nor can we (Englishmen) claim for ourselves a single attempt of the most superficial kind.' George Saintsbury later acclaimed him for his *History of Criticism*: 'for Hallam was our first master in English of the true comparative-historical study of literature – the study without which...all criticism is now unsatisfactory and the special variety of criticism which has been cultivated for the last century most dangerously delusive' (III, 294). It must be said that Saintsbury's judgement of Hallam in his *Nineteenth Century Literature* was altogether more moderate (1908, pp. 212–14).

It was Arnold himself, of course, who attended to the 'comparative literatures' most comprehensively and diversely; by this one does not simply mean his own essays on Heine, the Guérins, or Joubert ('A French Coleridge'), nor his *Study of Celtic Literature*, nor his wide acquaintance with Continental education, nor even the whole range of such writings, but his grasp of the sense that had been given to 'culture':

> Let us conceive the whole group of civilised nations, as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation bound to a joint action and working towards a common result. This was the ideal of Goethe, and it is an ideal which will impose itself upon the thoughts of our modern societies more and more.
>
> (Preface to Wordsworth's *Poems*)

Most of Arnold's characteristic critical conceptions are grouped round this centre: the notion of the critic as one so deeply conversant with the 'touchstones' of literature of the past that he is liberated from the class into which accident has thrust him and enabled to discern the living ideas of the present.

Arnold's influence was great, and probably decisive; but towards the end of the century other voices were raised in Britain to define 'comparative literature'. H. M. Posnett published *Comparative Literature* in 1886 in 'The International Scientific Series', a series devoted to

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post-Darwinian developments in all the sciences, and including such distinguished works as Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics*; Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology*; J. W. Draper, *The History of the Conflict between Religion and Science*; H. Morselli, *Suicide: an Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics*; and Alexander Bain, *Education as a Science*, as well as many books in the natural sciences. Posnett had begun his work while an undergraduate at Trinity, Dublin; a barrister and afterwards Professor of Classics and English Literature at University College, Auckland, New Zealand, he was a follower of Herbert Spencer and Sir Henry Maine, what we should now call a sociologist of literature. 'Comparative' for him meant keeping 'the varying relations of social development to literary growth steadily in view' (p. 8), rather than comparing one national literature to another. He accordingly discussed first the nature and relativity of literature, and the comparative method; and then entered upon a consideration of the different forms of social organization with which literature is associated: 'clan literature', and the evolutionary fusion of clans into ever larger social groups, 'the city commonwealth', national literature, and world literature. Although he belongs so clearly to his time, the book is not a mere historical curiosity, and he puts his views vigorously:

> Thus, by neglecting the influences of social life on literature, Greek criticism fostered the deadly theories that literature is essentially an imitation of masterpieces, that its ideals are not progressive but permanent, that they have no dependence on particular conditions of human character, on the nature of that social instrument language, on circumscribed spheres of time and place. (p. 10)

In short, we cannot by the 'science' of comparative literature mean 'a body of universal truths', for 'the very evolution of literature is fatal *per se* to any such literary "science"'. But rather the limited truths of literature must be 'grouped round certain central facts of...permanent influence, such as 'the climate, soil, animal and plant life of different countries', 'and the principle of evolution from communal to individual life' (p. 20). Despite his use of Coleridge as whipping-boy throughout – Coleridge, with his subjectivism, his idealism, his yearning for universals – Posnett sounds remarkably like him in his invocation of 'the principle of literary growth': 'How vast and intricate this two-fold process of individuality deepening in the separate units while expanding in the number of units it includes!' (p. 71). (In a later article, 'The Science of Comparative Literature', *Contemporary Review*, 79 (June 1901), Posnett was prepared to admit that some of the Romantics –

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Mme de Staël, A. von Humboldt, and the Schlegels – had 'touched the borders of Comparative Literature'.)

What Posnett finally valued was not the communal, the clan principle, but those 'adult ideas of personality [which] have long formed for us the centre of all our creative art, of all our criticism' (p. 68). Indeed, 'individual inquiry' is concomitant with 'comparative thinking' (p. 75). It follows, then, that 'the more advanced the country, the more the individual must look beyond her sea-washed shores':

> Does he accompany Chaucer on his pilgrimage and listen to the pilgrims' tales? The scents of the lands of the South fill the atmosphere of the Tabard Inn, and on the road to Canterbury waft him in thought to the Italy of Dante and of Petrarch and Boccaccio. Does he watch the hardy crews of Drake and Frobisher unload in English port the wealth of Spanish prize, and listen to the talk of great sea-captains full of phrases learned from the gallant subjects of Philip II? The Spain of Cervantes and Lope de Vega rises before his eyes, and the new physical and mental wealth of Elizabethan England bears him on the wings of commerce or of fancy to the noisy port of Cadiz and the palaces of Spanish grandees. (p. 79)

And so on, through coffee-houses and theatres and the perfuming of licentious wit with 'French *bouquet*', until the enlightened individual arrives at Weimar and his proper cosmopolitan humanity.

But the accomplished comparatist must turn back from these external influences to 'the comparative study of internal developments', the intimate association of its literature with its corporate life (p. 81). This sense of the domestic focus of literature led him to reverse the expected pattern of his evolutionary account, and to treat 'World Literature' before 'National Literature', a reversal he justifies by the historical (and, we may suspect, Hegelian) consideration that the true world literatures are the Alexandrian and Roman, the later Hebrew and Arab, the Indian and Chinese, in which literature is universalized, severed from defined social groups, and becomes reflective and critical in spirit (p. 236). After all, Posnett felt, the national literatures of Western Europe held the best expressions of individual life. 'Provincialism is no ban in truly national literature', he insisted (p. 345). On account of this sturdy insistence on native roots to which his sociological science returned him, chroniclers of comparative literary studies have tended to be rather dismissive about him. (See, for example, the standard history, Ulrich Weisstein, *Einführung in die vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft* (Stuttgart, 1968); translated as *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory* (Indiana University Press, 1973). For a brief account of the reception of Posnett's book, see the useful article by Frederick C. Roe, 'Comparative Literature

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in the United Kingdom', *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* (1954), pp. 1–12.) Only the following description of the 'Herculean labour' of the comparative historian is held to salvage his claim:

> To watch the internal and external development by which local and national differences give way in turn to national and cosmopolitan ideals – this is one line of study open to students of national literatures; another is the deepening and widening of personal character which accompany such social expansion; a third is the changing aspect of physical nature which this social and individual evolution likewise involves. But to chronicle the rise of new forms, new spirits, of verse and prose in each European nation, and the gradual separation of science from literature; to trace such growth to its roots in social and physical causes; finally, to compare and contrast these causes as producing the diverse literatures of England and France and Germany, of Italy and Spain and Russia; this, truly, were the task of a literary Hercules. (p. 346)

The main line of development of comparative studies in Britain passed not through Posnett (Roe held), but directly from Arnold to 'an impressive harvest of studies in European literature undertaken by men born around the mid-century and consequently fully open to the influence of Arnold in their formative years': J. Addington Symonds' *History of the Renaissance in Italy*; Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the French Renaissance*; J. Paget Toynbee's *Dante in English Literature* (1909). The story is surely more complicated than that, and indeed, needs to be unfolded 'comparatively'; for on Posnett as on the others, the influence of German historical thinking was strong, and by the later nineteenth century was directly as well as indirectly available to them. Whatever the full story, however, a formidable number of the new professors of English followed suit: Saintsbury with his *History of Criticism and Literary Taste in Europe from the Earliest Texts to the Present Day*; Edward Dowden, *The French Revolution and English Literature*; C. H. Herford, *Studies in the Literary Relations of England and Germany in the Sixteenth Century*; W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance*; J. Churton Collins, *Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu in England*; Sir Sidney Lee, *Shakespeare and the Italian Renaissance*. (This is the merest sampling; see Roe, pp. 3–5, for a somewhat fuller list, which could certainly be much extended.)

The interest in Scandinavian literature had been strong throughout the century. The Romantic taste for ballads, sagas, and folklore had dictated the first wave; the new Scandinavian modernism of the 1880s was imported almost immediately, in the form of the enthusiasm for Ibsen. Sir Edmund Gosse published his *Studies in the Literature of Northern Europe* in 1879, and claimed he had been the first to mention Ibsen's name in English, in an essay in the *Spectator* in 1872. The role

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played by G. B. Shaw, A. B. Walkley, and Henry James is much better known. (For an account of the reception of Ibsen and Strindberg in England, see Malcolm Bradbury and J. W. McFarlane, *Modernism: European Literature 1890–1930* (Harmondsworth, 1979).

The development of comparative literary studies as an academic subject on the Continent began to make its influence felt, as the first chairs were founded, for Francesco de Sanctis in Italy (1871) and Joseph Texte in France (1897). G. Gregory Smith discussed the French developments in two articles, one reporting on the Paris Congress of Comparative History held in July 1900, in *Blackwood's Magazine* (January 1901), and the other, 'Some Notes on the Comparative Study of Literature', generalizing his critical position, in the first issue of the *Modern Language Review* (1906), edited by J. G. Robertson, who himself contributed an article on 'The Knowledge of Shakespeare on the Continent at the Beginning of the Eighteenth Century'. Gregory Smith is as interesting a case as Posnett, for while he was a whole-hearted supporter of comparative studies, he was distinctly critical of French orthodoxy, especially as represented by Ferdinand Brunetière (the author of another post-Darwinian essay, *L'Evolution des genres*). He is critical of its scientific pretensions – 'the "evolution" of poetic form as well as of marsupials' – and of its equal but opposite tendency (as represented by Texte's *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et les origines du cosmopolitisme littéraire*, translated into English by J. W. Matthews in 1899) to expect 'the rise of an ideal literature which shall be a beneficent blend of all the national aspirations in the common culture of the "United States of Europe"' (p. 39). Despite his asperities, however, he concludes by calling on the universities to take up the new study and produce critics worthy of the name, rather than the journalists who 'expound the Ptolemaic system of criticism as it has always appeared to the good folks of Little Pedlington' (p. 48). As Texte had written, 'Le XIXe siècle aura vu se developper et se constituer l'histoire nationale des littératures; ce sera sans doute la tâche du XXe siècle d'en écrire l'histoire comparative.' This task the International Comparative Literature Association is currently attempting to carry out in the *Comparative History of European Literature*, comprising a number of collaborative volumes. But Gregory Smith was sceptical; he felt that this approach was ruled by antiquarianism and genealogy. He wanted a 'critical branch' of comparative literature, concerned with 'the fundamental doctrines of criticism', as he put it in his later article.

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> It is perhaps worth noting that academic criticism was, in its earlier stages, strictly comparative. The evidence of Greece and Rome is clear on this point; and sixteenth-century Italy, the birthplace of the new criticism, worked by this method and passed on the lesson to the rest of Europe. Example and Comparison were of course essential to Classicism, with its doctrine of the Model, the Ancients, etc., but there the main purpose was the collection of material and precedents for the establishment of a literary Canon. The application of the Method to individual experience and effort has been left to the Moderns. (p. 4)

Gregory Smith's essay is sketchy; but it is clear that, like Posnett, he was adumbrating a 'national' stance, in which the authority of universalism, whether of traditional precept or 'scientific' fact-mongering, was not acceptable. (Posnett had taken Mathew Arnold to task for advocating an Academy on French lines.) If for Posnett 'comparative literature' pointed towards the social relations of literature, and for Gregory Smith towards the intricate relations of critical problems, both prized the individual, highly 'evolved' expression of collective literary knowledge and experience. Only comparative studies could fit the critic for this.

In the twentieth century, Arnold's legacy continued to bear fruit; and the increasing professionalization of comparative studies abroad exerted an influence, as post-graduate students went to France to work for their degrees under Fernand Baldensperger, Paul Hazard, or Jean-Marie Carré. It has been claimed, rather artificially perhaps, that comparative literature was 'officially' recognized when Baldensperger was invited to give a series of lectures on eighteenth century comparative themes at Aberystwyth in 1921. Scandinavian modernism was succeeded by the more powerful presence of Pound and Eliot, whose fresh canons served to graft American literature onto the English and European, while transforming all of them. Henry Gifford's lively book *Comparative Literature* (1969) starts from the studied internationalism of Pound and Eliot.

All of the English advocates of comparative literary studies had called for some form of institutional arrangements. These were late in coming; in Italy, Hungary, and Germany, the first comparative journals were founded in the nineteenth century; in France, the *Revue de littérature comparée* first appeared in 1921. The first English journal was *Comparative Literature Studies*, edited by Marcel Chicoteau and Kenneth Urwin as a war-time effort to keep the subject alive despite the suspension of the publication of the *Revue*; published from 1940 to 1945 in Cardiff, and in 1946 in Liverpool, it had formidable patrons both in and out of the universities ('The Late Sir Hugh Walpole, C.B.E. and

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Mr Walter de la Mare, Mr Hilaire Belloc, and Sir William Rothenstein'). But the crisis over, it quietly disappeared from the scene.

The establishment of posts in the subject waited until the post-war period: in 1953 a Lectureship in Comparative Literary Studies was established at the University of Manchester. Roe, estimating in 1954 that about ten per cent of post-graduate work being done in French departments was comparative in nature, was nevertheless not sanguine about the prospects for further posts. The advent of the new universities, however, created a certain enthusiasm for novelty and interdisciplinary ventures, and it was in this climate that Essex University formed in 1963–4 a School of Literature, appointing Donald Davie as professor of Literature. Sussex and the University of East Anglia formed Schools of European Studies: at East Anglia in 1963 J. W. McFarlane was appointed professor of European Literature; at Sussex in 1967 A. K. Thorlby became the first professor of Comparative Literature. There are at present three chairs of comparative literature in the U.K., one at Sussex, and two at the University of East Anglia, established in 1969 and 1975 respectively. The only undergraduate course leading to a B.A. in Comparative Literature is offered at East Anglia; the Universities of Essex, Sussex, Warwick, and York have undergraduate programmes with strong comparative elements. In view of the long-standing conviction that comparative studies were best conducted at a post-graduate level, a number of new degree courses were established: Manchester University's Department of Comparative Literary Studies offers an M.A., as do East Anglia, Essex, Sussex, and Warwick. East Anglia and Warwick stress literary theory and translation studies, but offer a considerable range of options; Essex offers two, more specialized M.A. courses, one in literary translation, one in the sociology of literature. The Oxford B.Phil. in general and comparative literature is a more advanced degree; and all of these universities offer the degree of M.Phil., Ph.D., or D.Phil. There are other post-graduate degree courses with a comparative bias, though without the title. More important perhaps than the appearance of specifically comparative degrees, departments, and schools of studies, is the increase in comparative interests within English departments, partly through the greater weight being attached to nineteenth- and twentieth-century studies, partly through the impact of recent Continental and American critical theory. The proportion of post-graduate research devoted to comparative study in both English and modern language departments merits investigation.

1975 a conference on comparative studies was held at the

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University of East Anglia; on that occasion the British Comparative Literature Association was founded, and a steering committee elected. Since then, at the Warwick conference held in 1977, the Association has elected its first president and become an affiliate of the International Comparative Literature Association.

In our present enterprise, the first volume of *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, published for the British Comparative Literature Association by Cambridge University Press, it is a particular pleasure to have an article by René Wellek on Francesco de Sanctis, the first holder of a chair in comparative literature in Europe, and a critic whose work on realism (as well as his history of Italian literature) is still too little known in this country.

In the present period, recent English literature is increasingly being considered 'minor'; yet literature in the English language is more than ever the major literature in the world. If this implies an interest in Irish, Scottish, and Welsh, as well as in Commonwealth and American, it also offers fresh opportunities to reconsider English literature of the past in relation to its foreign counterparts. The novel has come to be the major modern European genre, and Friedrich Schlegel's original perceptions as to its nature and derivation are borne out by Martin Swales' vigorous revaluation of the significance of the German *Bildungsroman* for the English and European novel tradition, and by Christopher Heywood's demonstration of the interweaving of French, American, and English theory and practice of the novel in the nineteenth century.

Another traditional comparative topic is of course the history of the reception of Shakespeare in Europe and elsewhere. David Williams shows how Voltaire, even in the act of defending the French neo-classical theatre of Corneille and Racine against the inroads of Shakespeare, found himself unable any longer to accept it fully. We are especially glad to be able to publish this essay as a contribution to the celebration of the Voltaire bicentenary.

Medievalists have long been indisputable comparatists, and on the basis of just that cosmopolitan Latin culture for which Herder and Goethe, preparing the ground for the formal study of comparative literature, sought a modern equivalent in *Weltliteratur*. Professor Manzalaoui's article, in showing the use of the authority of pseudo-canonical sayings of the Prophet in the founding of the service of love, has broad implications for the relation of literary to religious canon and for the theory of tragedy. The Arabic material is here translated for the first time. Peter Hurst's paper too shows how the authority of learned

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tradition was used to justify the genre of romance, and has general implications for interdisciplinary studies. Richard Gordon goes to the root of the question in his discussion of the work of French anthropological critics on the relation between ritual religion and Greek tragedy.

For this first volume we are very pleased to have a number of W. H. Auden's unpublished translations and several articles touching in various ways on the relation of his translations to the canon of his poetry. This is of particular importance because the editions we have and those in prospect do not include his translations. Yet it is clear not only that some of the unpublished and uncollected translations are distinguished poems, such as the resplendent 'Sun Song' which we offer here, but that they often throw fresh light on his work as poet and critic. The Scandinavian element in his own poetry, his concern with a 'Northern' mythology and geography of which England also was a part, was deeply rooted in his heritage and experience, as Peter Salus makes clear in his account of his and Paul Taylor's collaboration with Auden on the translations from the *Edda*. The translations of Erik Lindegren are placed precisely in the context of modern poetics by Göran Printz-Påhlson. Harald Ohlendorf suggests a neglected aspect of Auden's German interests.

Some of Auden's finest translations were those of Gunnar Ekelöf's shorter lyrics, and we are delighted to be able to publish the first translation of Ekelöf's *A Mölna Elegy*, a major modern poem of the order of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, by a poet considered one of the finest lyric poets of Sweden, yet still scarcely known in Britain, despite Auden's translations. The translators of this poem, the well-known American poet Muriel Rukeyser, and Leif Sjöberg, Auden's collaborator in his translations from the Swedish, have received an award from the Anglo-Swedish Literary Foundation, based on George Bernard Shaw's donation of his Nobel Prize for literature.

And as the last shall be first, we are pleased indeed to publish Professor J. P. Stern's Opening Address to the 1977 Conference of the British Comparative Literature Association, in which he continues his complex reassessment of the impact of Nietzsche's thought on the whole of our own period. We shall continue to publish major papers from our conferences.

Thanks are owing to many others who have helped with this volume: let me name only Göran Printz-Påhlson and Michael Hamburger for a great deal of generous advice; Dr Paula Clifford, who undertook the onerous task of collecting the bibliographical material which will form

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the basis of our knowledge of comparative literary work in Britain, and Professor Ulrich Weisstein for his invaluable counsel in bibliographical matters; Michael Robinson, who has taken time from his post-graduate studies to contribute his extremely efficient editorial assistance; and a considerable number of kindly people at the Cambridge University Press, in particular Peter Burbidge, Judith Butcher, Elizabeth O'Beirne-Ranelagh, and, finally, Michael Black, whose unfailing sympathy and clear-sighted judgement have been indispensable.

The next four volumes of *Comparative Criticism* will address themselves to the following themes: 'Text and Reader'; 'Rhetoric and History'; 'The Languages of the Arts'; 'Biblical and Literary Interpretation'. Translations of poetry and other literary works as well as of scholarly and critical works, past and present, are welcome at all times. We shall continue to publish a selection of the best papers given at the conference of the British Comparative Literature Association. The annual deadline for submission of manuscripts is 1 February; the annual press deadline is 30 June, and the volume should appear in the following spring. Submissions for all the above volumes are now being received. All correspondence should be addressed to the Editor, *Comparative Criticism*, Cambridge University Press, P.O. Box 110, Cambridge CB2 3RL.

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