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Edited by Elinor Shaffer

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2

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Frontmatter

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Frontmatter
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CONTENTS

<i>List of contributors</i>	page vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Editor's note: The 'scientific' pretensions of comparative literature</i>	xi

Part I Text and reader

GABRIEL JOSIPOVICI Text and voice	3
WOLFGANG ISER The indeterminacy of the text: a critical reply. Translated by Rodney Foster	27
TERENCE CAVE Recognition and the reader	49
J. M. FOLEY Epic and charm in Old English and Serbo-Croatian oral tradition	71
NICOLE WARD The prisonhouse of language: <i>The Heart of Midlothian</i> and <i>La Chartreuse de Parme</i>	93
JOHN PRESTON The community of the novel: <i>Silas Marner</i>	109
GILLIAN BEER Plot and the analogy with science in later nineteenth-century novelists	131
LOTHAR HÖNNIGHAUSEN 'Point of view' and its background in intellectual history	151
LESLIE HILL Proust and the art of reading	167
DAVID H. WALKER Subversion of narrative in the work of André Gide and John Fowles	187
MIKHAIL BAKHTIN The word in the novel Translated by Ann Shukman	213
ANN SHUKMAN Between Marxism and Formalism: the stylistics of Mikhail Bakhtin	221
ANN JEFFERSON Intertextuality and the poetics of fiction	235

Part II Translations

MARÍN SORESCU Poems	
Translated by Michael Hamburger	253
GÜNTER KUNERT Poems	
Translated by Derek Bowman	259
MARCEL SCHWOB The king in the golden mask	265
Herostratos, incendiary	276
Cecco Angiolieri, malevolent poet	279
Paolo Uccello, painter	282
The art of biography	285
Translated by Iain White	

Part III Essay reviews

FRANK KERMODE Figures in the carpet: on recent theories of narrative discourse	291
JEFF OPLAND Written and unwritten: on Ruth Finnegan, <i>Oral Poetry</i>	303
GERALD GILLESPIE <i>German Poetry 1910–1975</i> : On Michael Hamburger's anthology	313
PETER HULME and GORDON BROTHERSTON A partial history of traduction: Borges in English	319
<i>Books received</i>	331
<i>Bibliography of comparative literature in Britain, 1977</i>	335

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978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

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Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The 'scientific' pretensions of comparative literature

Comparative literary studies in Great Britain have most characteristically worked through a natural interest in the literatures that have impinged on English historically: Celtic and Saxon, Latin and Norman, as well as European literature since the Renaissance, and in Britain's own literary impingement on large areas of the world during periods of exploration, Empire, and Commonwealth. Universal histories and comparative studies of various kinds were undertaken in the eighteenth century. But the inception of comparative literature as a discipline occurred in the later nineteenth century, as part of a movement towards a more 'scientific' approach to historical, social, and literary subjects. If Matthew Arnold had already offered a stirring invocation of 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' and a personal example of the breadth of literary knowledge and concern required for 'the criticism of life', and had spoken of 'comparative literatures', the first book with the title *Comparative Literature* in English was by H. M. Posnett, published in 'The International Scientific Series', devoted to post-Darwinian developments in all the sciences, which included such distinguished and familiar titles as Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics* and Herbert Spencer, *The Study of Sociology*. Although Posnett has tended to be dismissed in the standard histories of comparative literary studies (see Ulrich Weisstein, *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1973)) not so much on account of his scientific pretensions as on account of his insistence on the importance of national literary history and social milieu rather than on 'world literature', his work marks a very important phase not only in the development of comparative literature, but of modern literary criticism in general: for the scientific pretensions of criticism are a notable feature of our own century. To assess the grounds of Posnett's claims is not only

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978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xii

EDITOR'S NOTE

to touch on an important chapter of post-Darwinian effects, and to display the tangled story of the importation of both German historical thinking and French positivist philosophy in the Victorian period, but to cast light on a set of claims which are much to the fore in current criticism, whether Continental sociology of literature, linguistic studies, anthropologically based studies of folklore and narrative patterns of oral poetry and literature, or psychological studies applied to the aesthetics of reader response. It is now a familiar fact that Dilthey's concern for the hermeneutic method of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, a searching inquiry into the relation of the methods of the social sciences to those of the natural sciences, has been of profound importance for subsequent theory, and has been carried on by a long line of theorists of the rank of Heidegger and Sartre and, more recently, Gadamer and Habermas. What is far less well known is that literary theory, and specifically comparative literary theory, arose in a similar attempt to come to terms with the methods of the emerging social sciences, as defined in English terms by J. S. Mill and Henry Thomas Buckle, in part following Comte. It has constituted a considerable loss to literary studies that these early discussions have been so little noted.

Posnett was in no way isolated in his claims, nor would they have seemed strange to any informed contemporary. His first book, *The Historical Method* (1882), which outlined the approach he afterwards applied to literary studies in *Comparative Literature*, drew on works which had already been acclaimed and had wide currency at the time, Sir Henry Maine's *Ancient Law* and associated works, and J. S. Mill's *Logic*, in particular Book Six, on 'The Historical Method, or Inverse Deductive'. As Maine described his own work: 'The course which I have followed . . . has been to trace the real as opposed to the imaginary, the assumed history of the institutions of civilized mankind' (*Early Law and Custom*, p. 192). Maine's chief disciple, Vinogradoff, gave this account in his Oxford inaugural lecture:

Maine first approached the study of law mainly under the guidance of the German school of historical jurisprudence which had formed itself around Savigny and Eichhorn . . . But the school . . . was anything but a group of technical specialists . . . Romantic in its appeals to archaic custom and national traditions, conservative in its legal creed, the first school of historical jurisprudence entered the lists in support of a conception of law determined by historical antecedents, by a growth of national psychology hardly less instinctive than the evolution of language itself.

(Paul Vinogradoff, 'The Teaching of Sir Henry Maine', Oxford, 1904)

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978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

EDITOR'S NOTE

xiii

Maine himself did not consider his method the property of one school: 'The best contemporary historians, both of England and of Germany, are evidently striving to increase their resources through the agency of Comparative Method' (*Village-Communities in the East and West* (1876), pp. 7–8). He explained that his use of the word 'comparative' was the same as that in such expressions as 'Comparative Philology' and 'Comparative Mythology', although he doubted whether the application of the Comparative Method to jurisprudence would yield equally satisfactory results: 'To give only one reason, the phenomena of human society, laws and legal ideas, opinions and usages, are vastly more affected by external circumstances than language' (p. 8).

Posnett, in embracing Maine's method, gave an enthusiastic account of it:

Whatever name we prefer, 'comparative' or 'historical', the nature of our method is the same. It consists in retracing the steps man has taken individually and collectively in reaching the highest social life, the widest and deepest personal consciousness as yet within his ken. It is not a new method, save in the clearness and fulness of its conscious use and in the systematic appeals it now makes to facts of human experience.

('The Science of Comparative Literature',
Contemporary Review, 79 (June 1901), pp. 864–5)

'In a word', Posnett concluded, 'the method of Comparative Literature is itself the outgrowth, the highest outgrowth, of the very evolution it undertakes to study' (p. 865).

For all his enthusiasm, however, Posnett was not uncritical. His phrase 'whatever name we prefer' conceals a controversy. Posnett took issue with his master's use of the terms 'comparative' and 'historical' method, holding that Maine was not clear about their relation. For Posnett, the Comparative Method is the same when it is employed upon 'living institutions and modes of thought for purposes practical or speculative', as when 'applied to the Social and Mental Phenomena of the past, for the purpose of putting those phenomena into their true order of succession' (*The Historical Method*, p. 63). The notion that a distinction could be made between comparison of contemporary phenomena and comparison of past phenomena (what we should now modishly call 'synchronic' and 'diachronic') 'originated in the conception (as old at least as the Roman lawyers) that the Comparative Method may arrive at Universal Principles, or generalizations universally applicable'. This, Posnett held, had been disproved, but 'the idea still lives on, that the scientific use of the Method in the present... may attain the universal

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978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xiv

EDITOR'S NOTE

dignity from which such conceptions as the Law of Nature have been historically deposed. . . The imaginary double aspect of the Comparative Method is destined to vanish' (*ibid.*):

The true theory of a living society, therefore, writes the history beforehand and outstrips experience; the true theory of a dead society writes its history behindhand and recovers experience; and the Comparative Method can both outstrip and recover the development of experience. (pp. 66–7)

Posnett's aim here is to challenge the confidence of the new social sciences that it would prove possible to reconstruct new 'Laws of Nature'. In fact, they would differ only in name from those which had been reduced to historical phenomena by Maine and others. Laws of nature, referring to the synchronic operations of society, have no privileged position, as far as Posnett is concerned. Posnett's scepticism is of considerable importance in understanding the attitudes of the new literary criticism towards the disciplines on which it was drawing with such apparent enthusiasm.

The point may be clearer if we refer to Mill's carefully pondered exposition of 'the historical method'. Mill emphasized the scope of the ambition of the new science: 'for the first time it is acknowledged, that no social doctrine is of any value unless it can explain the whole and every part of history, so far as the data exist' (*Logic*, p. 930), Mill, moreover, accepted what he took to be the foundation on which the method of philosophizing in the social science has been erected, namely, 'the progressiveness of the human race'. He agreed that there had been an advance from the predominance of physical and material factors to the predominance of intellectual or mental qualities, and that this applied to the fine arts as well as to other phenomena. He held too that with the advance of civilization comes greater uniformity among nations. But he expressed his scepticism sharply as to the level of generality of the results achieved by 'the most advanced thinkers on the Continent':

But while I gladly acknowledge the great services which have been rendered to historical knowledge by this school, I cannot but deem them to be mostly chargeable with a fundamental misconception of the true method of social philosophy. The misconception consists in supposing that the order of succession which we may be able to trace among the different states of society and civilization which history presents to us, even if that order were more rigidly uniform than it has yet proved to be, could ever amount to a law of nature. It can only be an empirical law. . . Until that law could be connected with the psychological and ethological laws on which it must depend, and by the consilience of deduction a priori with historical evidence, could be converted from an empirical law into a scientific one, it could not be relied on for the prediction of future events.

(pp. 914–15)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

EDITOR'S NOTE

xv

Mill excepted only Comte from his strictures, who 'alone, among the new historical school, has seen the necessity of thus connecting all our generalizations from history with the laws of human nature' (p. 915).

In a brilliant review of Maine's *Village-Communities*, Mill praised his method unreservedly, but characteristically turned his achievement to other ends than those of the romantic conservatives. Indeed, he concluded that Maine's method 'loosens the hold of contemporary practice on the minds of those accustomed to think of it as rooted in nature', and thus opens the way for reform (*Fortnightly Review*, new series, 53 (1 May 1871), p. 550). Laws of human nature could not be drawn from historical generalization, past or present.

Posnett's scepticism, like Mill's, then, did not attach a doubt to the merits of the enterprise, nor was it based on any purported difference between literary and other phenomena belonging to the 'science of man', but was concerned to moderate any claims to universal validity. Scientific method, moreover, properly understood, was not a threat to but an assurance of moral concern.

Posnett, in his article of 1901, 'The Science of Comparative Literature' (reprinted in *Comparative Literature: the Early Years*, edited by Hans-Joachim Schulz and Phillip H. Rhein (University of North Carolina Studies in Comparative Literature (Chapel Hill, 1973), pp. 183–206) characterized the two major groups of critical foes that had emerged since the publication of *The Historical Method* and *Comparative Literature*. Those who opposed the new method were the unhistorical critics, 'refined, subtle, plausible, the very Jesuits of criticism' (p. 868).

On the mere man of letters little reliance can be placed either for the discovery of new truths or for the fearless diffusion of truths already known. Habituated to a knowledge of words rather than of things, too much the servant of fancies and too little the master of facts, he rarely shows any desire to know the truth for the pure pleasure of knowing it, and still more rarely does he strive to convert into conduct of everyday life the best knowledge with his reach. (p. 866)

As he pertinently remarks, 'A glamour of falsehood has always charmed the literary world.' In this case, however, he concedes that the claim they are being asked to abandon is not a light one: 'For them the scientific study of literature, which they should have welcomed as the most certain means of discovering what imagination really is, wears the look of a heartless destroyer of their universal truth' (p. 867).

The 'amateur critics', the other group of opponents, 'who are content to echo the sentiments of the old school without inquiry', are of less moment (p. 856). But there was a particular variety of them who drew

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Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xvi

EDITOR'S NOTE

Posnett's wrath, the aesthetes, or 'fops', who 'degrade literature into a stylist's toy and talk with amazing effrontery of what they are pleased to call the moral indifference of art' (p. 869). For Posnett, then, just as scientific method was the very opposite of dogmatism – was empirical and particular, over a wider range than before – so was it the guardian of the seriousness, the moral weight of literature. An empirical and a relative method, far from jeopardizing moral discriminations, secured them:

And perhaps, as in science and literature alike we become more and more habituated to the limited and relative values of truths and to the profound duty of holding the higher in higher esteem, the hope of some philosophers of today may be realised and we may be able to measure the relative values of our limited truths with a precision that will for ever prevent any relapse into the days of ignorant and unhistorical confusion.

(p. 869)

Thus for Posnett, attempting in his small way to bring together those two main currents of Victorian thinking, the 'Benthamite' and the 'Germano-Coleridgean', a scrupulous historical empiricism must form the groundwork of moral discriminations.

Postnett's range and scope, his concern for method and morality, and, finally, his sense that comparative studies must bring the critic back to his own literature and its relations to the corporate life, are to be found in other English champions of the new historical method. As Henry Thomas Buckle roundly described the advance of knowledge that made the comparative method possible:

Not only have the actions and characteristics of the great nations been recorded, but a prodigious number of different tribes in all the parts of the known world have been visited and described by travellers, thus enabling us to compare the conditions of mankind in every stage of civilization, and under every variety of circumstance.

(Henry Thomas Buckle, *History of Civilization in England* (London, 1857), vol. 1, p. 3)

On the basis of these data, it is now possible to write not simply a recital of political and military history, but the history of civilization, 'the progress of science, of literature, of the fine arts, of useful inventions, and, latterly, of the manners and comforts of the people' (p. 2). Instead of the incoherent compilations of past historians, 'I hope to accomplish for the history of man something equivalent, or at all events analogous, to what has been effected by other inquirers for the different branches of natural science' (p. 6).

Yet despite his impressive review of the available data, Buckle determined finally to write not the history of civilization, but the history

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978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

EDITOR'S NOTE

xvii

of civilization in England. After all, the data are not yet sufficient. Moreover, he argues, physical or external causes have in many countries been of overwhelming importance, whereas 'if we would understand the history of a country like France or England, we must make man our principal study' (p. 139). England is the most apt for such a history because, he claims, it has developed in isolation (and here there is a vague analogy with scientific experiment):

The importance of a country depends, not upon the splendour of its exploits, but upon the degree to which its actions are due to causes springing out of itself. If, therefore, we could find some civilized people who had worked out their civilization entirely by themselves; . . . the history of such a people would be of paramount importance; because it would present a condition of normal and inherent development; it would show the laws of progress acting in a state of isolation; it would be, in fact, an experiment ready-made, and would possess all the value of that artificial contrivance to which natural science is so much indebted. (p. 212)

There is no such nation; but England, at least in the last three centuries, is the closest: 'in our progress as a people, we have been less affected than any other by the two main sources of interference, namely, the authority of government, and the influence of foreigners'. This Victorian vaunting may seem today an inadequate basis for historical method, yet it is precisely because of his explicit rejection of all racist theory that Buckle is able to present English civilization as a 'laboratory' in which we can clearly discern 'the normal march of society, and the undisturbed operation of those great laws by which the fortunes of mankind are ultimately regulated' (p. 216). One more characteristic, then, of the English development of comparative method emerges: the tendency, from a mingling of motives, both insular and imperial, and dignified by an appeal to science, to return to home ground.

In this second volume of *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, published for the British Comparative Literature Association by Cambridge University Press, some traces of this history may still be discerned. The conscious concern with method is a hallmark of comparative literature; the notion that only the accomplished comparatist has, or may one day have, the requisite data to formulate theoretical conceptions of literature, and to relate them to other aspects of 'civilization', still animates the comparatist. The sense of the comparative enterprise as the forward point of consciousness remains, even with the waning of the evolutionary jargon and the lapse of 'progress'. The alliance of method with scepticism has assumed new and interesting forms, nor is the connection of both with the moral function of literature absent. The

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii

EDITOR'S NOTE

tendency to return after forays into other disciplines, critical systems and literatures with insights gained for specific works of English literature is still flourishing.

J. M. Foley, whose work has won recognition in the 'Younger Scholars' competition of the Medieval Academy of America, describes his recent field work on Serbo-Croatian charms, and the light they throw on Old English charms. He describes the background of his work in Milman Parry's studies on contemporary Yugoslav oral epic, and the way it has been used to interpret the Homeric poetry. This daring and influential mode of inquiry has its roots in the nineteenth century ambition to gather and collate the data from all over the world and to establish wide-ranging generalizations on the basis of it, and on the ambition to use the methods of the new anthropology. The range of current research on the fundamental question of the relations between oral and written literature is displayed by Jeff Opland in his review of Ruth Finnegan's new book; the excellent work of both these writers on African oral literature may already be known to our readers. The theme of our volume, 'Text and Reader', is explored in its broader implications, which paradoxically derive from the erosion of the autonomy of the individual text, and its absorption into the 'discourse' belonging to a community over a long period of time, from which the single work of art emerges, and to which it returns. The continuing life of the community comes to a focus in the responses of readers to their texts. We are particularly pleased to represent the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, whose work has assumed increasing importance in recent years. Bakhtin belonged to that immensely productive generation in Russia that responded in the aesthetic sphere to the events of the Revolution, and shows their characteristically vivid sense both of the formal qualities of the literary work and the moulding forces of the society. Owing to political pressure, Bakhtin was forced to publish much of his work under pseudonyms, and the full sum of his achievement has only begun to come into view, especially in English, which has been slower to absorb him than French, as Ann Shukman shows in her fascinating introduction to his lapidary brief essay, 'The Word in the Novel'.

The theme 'Text and Reader' has come to the fore in the last decade, in the particular form given it by the theorists of 'the aesthetics of reception' associated with Constance. These studies of 'reception' in the fresh sense of the participation of the reader assumed and provoked by the text in the process of reading were given specific form in studies of the eighteenth-century English novel by John Preston in his book *The*

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978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

EDITOR'S NOTE

xix

Created Self (who here continues his work into the nineteenth century in a study of the 'community of the novel' in George Eliot, a chapter of a new book), and in more theoretical form by Wolfgang Iser in *Der Implizite Leser* (*The Implied Reader*), and in his most recent work, *Der Akt des Lesens*, reviewed in this volume by Frank Kermode. We are extremely happy to be able to present a translation of an article by Wolfgang Iser, which he has revised and brought up to date for this English version. His article is at once a concentrated look at one of the central and most controversial aspects of his theory, the 'indeterminacy' of the text, and a review of critical response to it.

Interestingly enough, it is Iser's work that most clearly makes the connection between the continued effort to produce a 'science' of literature and the maintenance of scepticism for moral and political ends. In the article we publish he held that if literary criticism is on the way to becoming a science, it must necessarily construct models for the understanding of historical knowledge; 'for errors can be corrected, confusion usually not' (p. 34 below). This is a methodological moral; but in his new book Iser shows the implications of his position more fully. 'The literary text', he writes, although it 'generally takes the prevalent thought system or social system as its context', it 'does not reproduce the frame of reference which stabilizes those systems'. In opposition to some leading sociologists of literature, Iser holds that 'Instead of reproducing the system of which it refers, it almost invariably tends to take as its dominant "meaning" those possibilities that have been neutralized or negated by that system' (*The Act of Reading*, pp. 71–2). This is a powerful restatement of the moral function of literature, to which in this brief note I can only refer the reader.

The notion of voice, of utterance as a still discernible reminiscence of the oral community – or, as in the case of a modern like George Eliot, a reconstructed reminiscence – runs through these essays. Terence Cave shows how brilliantly suggestive Aristotle's notion of 'recognition' can be in a new critical context. Nicole Ward points to an oral culture behind *The Heart of Midlothian*. Yet despite these references to community, the notion of 'realism' recedes, as 'the reader collaborates with the novel in embodying a certain kind of voice'. Barthes has said that the novel purports to denote the real, but only connotes a denotation of the real, and Leslie Hill gives a demonstration in his fine piece on Proust. As Nicole Ward notes, both Scott and Stendhal may be read most effectively in this way. Even in Gillian Beer's exploration of the ways in which late-nineteenth-century novelists responded to the need to incorporate

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978-0-521-22756-8 - Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook, 2

Edited by Elinor Shaffer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xx

EDITOR'S NOTE

science into their fiction one can see systems of metaphor being developed that are consciously literary, however much 'science' may have been thought to be a form of description of reality. Lothar Hönnighausen traces the origins of the notion of 'point of view' that has been so decisive in the criticism of fiction to those aesthetic quarters which Posnett found so suspect. In Ann Jefferson's exploration of intertextuality these notions of the relativization of the narrative voice through 'dialogue' in Bakhtin's sense are carried further, until the text itself is dissolved into the polyphony of the voices of the community maintaining its 'text'. David Walker shows how much an immersion in the French novel and current French criticism can illuminate the work of one of our best novelists, John Fowles. Finally, Gabriel Josipovici in his sensitive opening essay shows what it is like for a novelist within this critical framework seeking to create a 'voice' in contemporary fiction.

Frank Kermode at the end of his essay wonders whether there is indeed in the world 'an interpretative community to guarantee the intersubjective norms' which reception theory requires. This suggestion of despair parallels a more familiar one: was it true, as Adorno proclaimed, that 'after Auschwitz there could be no literature'? Hardly; but he was right in his perception that the aspiration that this should be the case, and the terror that it might prove to be so, must inform the new literature emerging in post-war Europe. We here print translations of the poetry of Marin Sorescu and Günter Kunert, who are important voices of that literature, which the translations of Michael Hamburger have already done so much to put before us.

In the very notion of text as a process of readerly response there is a suggestion of a community, an international critical community, having something of the old Arnoldian breadth and detachment from private and class interests which permit it to make a long-range judgement based on history, not on universals. Doubtless this is a chimaera; but it displays the will of the literary critical community to continue its dialogue with the formidable claims – equally chimerical – of the social theorists.

Let me thank all those who have helped in diverse ways with this volume: Michael Hamburger, for his wealth of fine discriminations; Dr Paula Clifford, who continued the collection of bibliographical material on comparative literary studies in Britain; Michael Robinson and Martin Aske for their editorial assistance, particularly the former, who carried on with great energy and aplomb during my term's absence on a visiting appointment. Let me also thank the many people at the Cambridge University Press who have had a hand in the volume, especially

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

EDITOR'S NOTE

xxi

Elizabeth O'Beirne-Ranelagh for her more than sub-editorial expertise, Paul Clifford, Terence Moore, and as always, Michael Black, for his generous and perceptive interest and support.

Volumes 3 to 5 of *Comparative Criticism* will be devoted to the following themes: '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 major papers from the conferences of the British Comparative Literature Association; the next conferences will be held in December 1980 in Kent on the theme of 'Literature and the other arts' and in 1983 on 'European and world literature'. The annual deadline for submission of manuscripts is 1 February; the annual press deadline is 30 June. The volumes will be published in the autumn of the following year. Submissions for Volumes 4 and 5 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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