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Comparative criticism

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Myth and mythologies

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EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Mythic beasts: slouching towards the millennium

We are in a strange mythic twilight as we draw towards the close of the second millennium, unsure whether to scoff or to brush up old apocalyptic tales. Will old myths still serve; if not, do we have new ones? Are both now unavailable, in this century deserted by divinity and shocked witness to the killing fields of the grand narratives of rationality. The process of myth-making itself may have turned cancerous.

The year 2000 has very little claim to be 'special', as Stephen Jay Gould's pungent book *Questioning the Millennium* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997) makes clear. It depends on Archbishop Ussher's spurious schema of a suggested age for the world that would place the birth of Jesus in the middle of the world's span; and this is based on the notion (already suggested by Lactantius in the fourth century) that as the Bible tells us 'one day is with the Lord as a thousand years' (2 Peter 3.8), His six days of creation must have lasted 6000 years; so the world's history must also last 6000 years. Thus Jesus' birth, to be in the middle of that span, must have taken place after 3000 years had passed; and there were 2000 to go before the Apocalypse (described in the Book of Revelation) would usher in the Second Coming and the thousand-year reich (sorry: kingdom). Since Jesus' birth could not take place in the year 1 (or 0), because Herod died in 4 BC (this is one of the few documented dates in the whole story), even Ussher placed Jesus' birth in the year 4 BC, making the Apocalypse due in 1996. So a schema whose only advantage, indeed, only raison d'être, was numerical symmetry and nice round numbers in fact produced a bizarre anomaly. Like so many previous ends-of-the-world, the Apocalypse of 1996 passed over unnoticed.

Postmodernism itself, much touted as a new movement (though 'postmodernity' is labelled as the movement in the book *International Postmodernism*, ed. Hans Bertens and D. W. Fokkema, reviewed here by Thomas Docherty), may turn out to have been 'merely symptomatic of a set of chiliastic fears'; illuminatingly, we are seen to have been in a 'fin-de-millennium' slough for the last thirty years. Its roots lie in

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earlier twentieth-century discussions (Docherty suggests) of the end of ideology; or, more broadly, the death of reason and the 'grand narratives' of Enlightenment. If the death of ideology, then the old millennial hopes of the first thousand years of Christian history, and the utopian political hopes into which they were translated by the nineteenth century, are both irrelevant; if the death of reason, then why not succumb to, even revel in the lure of the old tales of the end, or the new beginning, or any other that lies to hand? But their ghosts still haunt us, both as ghosts of those hopes whose passing we mourn, and as ghosts of modes of perception we think we have put off and whose lingering presence we deplore.

If postmodernism may come to be seen as a tailspin to the millennium, like the decadent fashion of the *fin-de-siècle*, the themes it is really arguing about, Docherty thinks, may (surprisingly) be summed up as 'tradition' – the conditions of continuity and change. In this light, the present forms and viability of myths of traditional culture becomes again a vital question. As Douwe Fokkema's comparative history shows, 'tradition' itself is problematized by being treated on a global scale. Who owns, who answers to the available 'tradition'? Or is tradition itself being given an abstract meaning only, the schema of continuity-and-change, without content.

Two millennia are nothing much to write home about in the greater temporal schemes of human history, and hardly figure in the lengthening history of the earth, or of cosmic time. In the history of literature, however, it takes us back approximately two-thirds of the way to one of the major sources of Western culture, in Homeric Greece. Piero Boitani has written of many myths, but Ulysses – the primary myth of the exile in Western literature – returns and returns again. In this elegant account of Ulysses' long shadow cast across the twentieth century and into the twenty-first (an extension of his book *The Shadow of Ulysses: Figures of a Myth* (Oxford, 1994)), it is Joyce's Leopold Bloom who opens the long train of modern, syncretic versions from around the world, followed by a variety of stranger-figures from Star Trek, the Jews who wander the desert as Ulysses did the sea, Celan's 'Nobody' God, Desai's India as Ithaca, the exile Wole Soyinka's depiction of Nelson Mandela as a Ulysses of Africa whom the sirens of the West try in vain to lure, Derek Walcott's Caribbean singer descended from slaves. Perhaps the Ulysses who 'wandered through the world like a dog / saying that Nobody was his name', as Borges put it in a sonnet entitled 'Odyssey, Book XXIII', is at the end of the twentieth century the true

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figure of the king of Ithaca, who continues to seek his home far beyond the bounds of the European inland seas.

The other great traditional source of Western myth, the Bible, is taken up by Gabriel Josipovici, who has become well known for his sensitive and subtle rereadings of Biblical, especially Old Testament stories. He returns to the starting point in Genesis, the relationship between a father and his two sons, and the modes of inheritance that govern the handing on of rights, duties, and paternal blessings. Of what value is the patriarch's blessing if it is obtained by trickery? This is one of a series of explorations 'On Trust' which began as his Weidenfeld Lectures in Comparative Literature, given in Oxford in 1996. For Josipovici, an academic but also a writer (several of his essays, fictions and plays have appeared in *Comparative Criticism*), these Biblical figures spring into unholy life, and the relation between unholy life and holy significance is a permanent crux of mythic interpretation.

If the Bible and Homer are still recognizably at the pinnacle of Western culture, they too harbour folk myth. Marina Warner, whose Circe has powers so great that metamorphosed men prefer to remain pigs than return to human state, and still more her pairing 'Circe and Sycorax', draws in the folk traditions and superstitions of witchery and witchcraft as they flourished beneath and within the interstices of 'high' European culture. Her essay on Circe (delivered as a plenary lecture at the 1998 British Comparative Literature Conference on 'Legenda. Reading and Writing Myth') could not be published here; but it may be found in her book *No Go the Bogeyman* (Random House, 1998), exploring the deep and inexpugnable fears that lie behind the 'bogeymen'. In volume 15 on 'The Communities of Europe' Anne Barton gave us a memorable glimpse of the 'The Wild Man in the Forest', the 'little green man' who lurks at the wild edges of the tiny cultivated garden of high culture. These creatures of our fears (or we of theirs) cannot be fenced out.

E. S. Shaffer in a millennial meditation on the bicentenary of the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* shows how the 'high' and the 'low' are still present in the Romantic ballads, even as they turn from the millennial or religious mode to the political and utopian modes of the nineteenth century through the watershed and ordeal of the French Revolution. The anxious questioning of the nature of community is a central focus of the shift of terms from religious myth to secular myth. The authors of the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth and Coleridge, stood just at this crossing-over point, publishing in 1798 and a revised version

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in 1800, another apocalyptic moment; and if they became known later (and wished to be known) as the representatives and arbiters of 'High Romanticism', at this time they interleaved folk, popular, sensational and gothic elements to give voice to the dispossessed.

If the Odyssey and the Old Testament still yield such rich mythic material for us, and the 'low' forms of popular tradition are still flourishing, secular forms of myth are often in our century cast into the form of critical controversy. One of the themes opened by post-modernism is the glimpse of the political – often of an alien community or distant world – behind the homely familiarity of the European novel. Jane Austen, that apparently most domestic and local of novelists, has for that reason proved a favourite locus for the discovery of postmodern and postcolonial themes. A text much favoured in recent years by 'postcolonial' critics is Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, which was revived by Lionel Trilling who pointed out the implicit range of its moral concerns, taken up by Marilyn Butler in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, where it became a belated 'anti-Jacobin' novel, and then by Edward Said in his much noticed *Culture and Imperialism*, and a number of other critics, most freshly Katie Trumpener, in *Bardic Nationalism* (a book that won both the Rosemary Crawshay Prize of the British Academy and the MLA Prize for the Best First Book in 1998), where the extensive popular anti-slave-trade novels are seen to supply the literary-historical context of Austen's novel. The argument that the evils of the slave trade infected not only those directly involved in it, but those who indirectly profited from it was a staple of this literature as of the campaign against the slave trade. Trevor Lloyd, the historian of the British Empire, subjects these 'new historicist' moves to rigorous scrutiny, based on the economic history of the relation between landed families and the overseas slave trade. The bad conscience of the West has found some solace in locating these concerns in the traditional novel, even in novelists once held like Jane Austen to be above, or to one side of the fray. The attention enjoyed by Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a twentieth-century reworking of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, is symptomatic. The novel relates the story from the point of view of the first Mrs Rochester, the Jamaican heiress, the 'madwoman in the attic', displaying the contrast between the dominant Victorian culture of Mr Rochester and the passionate native culture, conveyed in images of night fire and outlawed voodoo practices. The images of 'high' and 'low' are clearly translated into those of politicial, racial and gender sterotyping, of dominant versus oppressed. Current criticism has sought a similar

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reworking of *Mansfield Park*. Lloyd, on the contrary, seeks to reconsider what, in the terms of the time, were Sir Thomas Bertram's options, assuming his wish to maximize the security and well-being of his own immediate family and dependants. He is handled as both a 'patriarchal' figure and an 'economic man' making rational decisions: can those much derided cultural myths of a former age be simply dismissed?

The translation of myth into modernist poetry, criticism, sculpture, and psychoanalysis takes intricate forms and still requires tracing. Richard Read looks at the encounter of the young aesthete and critic Adrian Stokes with the poet Ezra Pound, at the time deeply engaged on his *Cantos*, one of the twentieth century's most important epics or long poems creating a set of personal, sometimes deeply idiosyncratic myths out of the European past. With unrivalled knowledge of the Stokes papers, and a long-standing commitment to Stokes's work, Read uses hitherto unpublished letters from the Stokes family archive to throw light on this complex encounter, and corrects the misapprehensions of major critics of both Pound's and Stokes's work who were unaware of the letters. At the centre lies their interpretation – increasingly divergent – of the Renaissance Tempio Malatestiano at Rimini, which plays a powerful role in the *Cantos*, and in Stokes's first considerable work, his three Essays on the Tempio, the first of which, thought to be lost, we published in *Comparative Criticism* volume 17, which had as its theme Walter Pater (another of Stokes's masters) and the *fin-de-siècle*.

In another study of the transformation of the myths of one period into those of another, and from one medium to another, in this case from the literary to the musical, Hanne Castein looks at the contemporary composer Judith Weir's use of German Romantic novellas of Tieck and of Hoffmann as sources for the libretti of her opera *Blond Eckbert* (based on Ludwig Tieck's 'Der blonde Eckbert') and the opera-ballet *Heaven Ablaze in His Breast* (based on E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'Der Sandmann'). Weir has constructed her own libretti, based on her personal readings of the novellas. Both have had major productions, *Blond Eckbert* by the English National Opera, *Heaven Ablaze* by the Umbrella Theatre Company directed by one of the country's leading choreographers, Ian Spink. Photographs of the ENO production capture the atmosphere of menace, and the brilliant television reworking of the collaboration between Weir and Spink has yielded striking 'stills' of the mechanical doll Olimpia and her doomed suitor. These are again *Märchen* (fairytale) materials, the popular materials greatly refined and given complex individual artistic shape by the masters of one of Romanticism's

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favourites genres. In modern times Freud's interpretation of 'The Sandman' has created a great deal of controversy. In modern musical form the themes of incest, inward quest, and fleshly and spiritual lust for a mechanical object are given powerful voice, and in her rehandling of Romantic materials Weir continues a major vein in modern opera, giving them a characteristically lighter touch, but drawing on her own deep roots in Scottish folk traditions. In twentieth-century ballet too Romantic materials have had a continuing presence. In literature these recovered folk materials, treated by the Romantics with all the artful self-consciousness of sophisticated late-comers, have demonstrated their protean nature, as Angela Carter's 'Red Riding-Hood' and other tales may serve to remind us.

In all of these tales there is a threat to children – Warner traces it back to the Greek myth of Chronos, who unwittingly eats his children for dinner – but it is as powerfully present in Romantic fairytales, whether the macabre folk tale of the Grimm brothers, *The Juniper Tree* (in which a stepmother is responsible for child-eating, and the child is reborn from his bones as a beautiful bird who reveals the truth of the murder) or in a refined form in Tieck's *Eckbert*, where a brother and sister (unknown to each other) seek shelter from the wild wood (refined into the bittersweet song of 'Waldeinsamkeit', the loneliness of the wood). The bird in Weir's opera was projected as a huge symbolic stage set that narrates and presides over the death of the incestuous children; we have adopted this as our frontispiece.

The Sandman is an authentic bogeyman – a threat to children who comes in the night. Hoffmann develops the nursery menace to the eyes of unsleeping children and links it to the mechanical doll who is also a threat to those of flesh and blood. The disproportionate love between animate and inanimate, natural and supernatural is a theme much enlarged upon in Romanticism. Love between those who are too closely allied – like Eckbert and his sister –, as between those who are too far apart – like the automaton and the human in the *Sandman* – will come to grief. Behind the 'art ballads' of Wordsworth and Coleridge are the bogeymen, who threaten children and adults – there is a ghostly presence of dead children throughout the *Ballads* – in the political and social forms suffered in the 1790s, which come together, paradoxically, not in the ameliorative social measures the poets had advocated but in the public fear of 'Boney', Napoleon. That fear had to be exorcized literally in a long war. But another method of 'warding off' is to make art.

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In the postmodern slide, as novelist Jackie Kay (winner of the 1998 *Guardian* fiction prize for *Trumpet*) put it pungently, 'We no longer have fables and fairy tales, but instant kiss and tell – hunting stories down like an animal and dismembering them, then going on to the next chase' (*Guardian*, 5 Dec. 1998). What is striking about this statement is the continuation of the beast / beastly imagery of the traditional fable into the very denial that we have fables any longer. (The paparazzi as wolf, Princess Di as Red Riding-Hood, were never far from the surface, and far more traditional than Angela Carter's version.) Danny Price, the Second Prize-winner in the BCLA/BCLT Translation Competition, has found in French novelist Christian Bobin's narrative of a little circus girl in love with a wolf, another offbeat version of a familiar tale.

The theme of 'Myth and Mythologies' takes its most challenging form in the important correspondence of Hermann Broch and H. G. Adler, two German writers in exile in the period 1948–1950, which we are pleased to publish here for the first time, together with the Bibliography of Adler's works. Hermann Broch, already established as a major European writer, had found refuge in 1938 in the US, and the younger Hans-Günther Adler had survived the concentration camps and found his way to Britain. The letters vividly reveal the conditions under which they had to try to reconstruct a lost writerly community, and take up a broken dialogue again even across the sea that separated their places of exile. Broch, the older man, was already well-known, with established masterpieces behind him, but he was struggling against ill health (the illness proved terminal) to put together his 'Complete Works', and finding it exceedingly difficult to return to works conceived and written under totally different conditions; Adler, the younger, had still his career to make, yet through his bitter experiences of the concentration camp found perforce his themes in that past, which he had as a writer to go on reliving in other, apparently more favourable circumstances, in which he found little response. At the time he wrote to Broch, Adler was trying to find a hearing for his book on the Theresienstadt camp. John White, who knew Adler well, and has written perceptively of myth in the twentieth-century novel, introduces their correspondence; Ronald Speirs translates, capturing the tones of the intense intellectual and emotional exchange between the two writers.

In a century that experienced the 'disintegration of values' (Broch's phrase from a famous section of his novel *Die Schlafwandler*, *The Sleepwalkers*) there could be no rediscovery of a true mythic age, but only a pseudomythological construct, which had at all costs to be

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avoided. It is man himself who is the mythic beast slouching towards the millennium. But what style, then, was available to the modern writer in which to express that experience? How (if at all) could social, philosophical, even theological analysis be combined with fiction? There is a running commentary on Kafka's solutions by the two authors, who are close to him, yet often define themselves, or each other, in contradistinction to him. The letters finally testify to their determination despite everything to maintain a memory of the values that have fallen.

Wolfgang Iser's address to the Centre for British Studies in Berlin on its founding in 1995, which we publish in translation here, is evidence of the continuing efforts at dialogue between Britain and Germany.

We also publish a Bibliography of Adler's work, published and in manuscript, compiled by Franz Hocheneder from Adler's archive, now deposited in the National Library at Marbach. Peter Staengle's introductory note brings up to date one of the subjects of the letters: the long and difficult process of bringing the exiled writer's work to the attention of the public both in his native country and in his land of exile.

We are delighted to have the first English translation of one of the great Viennese sound poet Ernst Jandl's witty and profound lectures on poetry. Michael Hamburger, who has translated a good many of Jandl's poems (though confessing himself sometimes baffled as a translator by the poems most wholly dedicated to German sound), translated Jandl's play *Out of Estrangement* in volume 9 of this journal. Charlie Louth translates the lecture.

The winners of the BCLA/BCLT Translation Competition this year are Georgina Paul, whose rendering of the challenging contemporary poetry of Barbara Köhler's collection *German Roulette*, won First Prize, and Danny Price, who has a gift for uncovering contemporary French writers well established at home but still too little known here, won Second Prize with his translation of a chapter of Christian Bobin's novel *La Folle Allure*. The Third Prize was divided equally between Catherine Jonet, for her translations from Federico García Lorca's beautiful *Diván del Tamarit*, with its Arabic models, and Robert A. Hückstedt, for his translation of a moving and humorous Hindi story 'The Perplexity of Hariya Hercules'. Both of the latter translations will appear in our next volume, *East and West: Comparative perspectives*.

We welcome several new members on the Editorial Board: Dr Laura Marcus (School of English and American Studies, Sussex), Dr Partha

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Mitter (Art History, Sussex) and Professor M. Wynn Thomas (University of Wales, Swansea); and on the International Board, Professor Elisabeth Bronfen (English Seminar, Zurich), Professor Manfred Pfister (Institute of English Philology, Berlin) and Dr Edoardo Zuccato (Institute of Languages and Literature, Milan). Göran Printz-Påhlson, who has left Cambridge for his native Sweden, moves onto the International Board. All of them are known for their contributions, in a variety of contexts, to comparative literary studies.

My greatest thanks go to Dr Simon James, my Editorial Assistant for the last three years, who saw the journal through the varied travails of volumes 19, 20 and 21. His enthusiasm, diligence, and zeal, which were unfailing even when he was in the final days of writing up his thesis, were a mainstay and continuous stimulus to the enterprise. Our best wishes go with him as he leaves Cambridge to take up a teaching post.

At the same time, we welcome the new Assistant, James Thraves, a classicist, comparatist and writer, who received his BA from King's College London and his MA from Cambridge.

Dr Duncan Large, Bibliography Editor, will continue to supervise the move of the Bibliography of Comparative Literature in Britain and Ireland onto the Internet. We should like to urge all colleagues in the UK and Ireland who have written comparative books, articles, or reviews, not only those who are members of the British Comparative Literature Association, to send details of their publications to Dr Large, by normal post, to the German Department of the University of Wales at Swansea, or better still by email or email attachment to him at the BCLA home page. The maintenance and updating of the Bibliography is essential to establish the record of Comparative Literary Studies in Great Britain, which still receives less notice in the international annals of Comparative Literature than it deserves. It is also of use to individuals to make their work known through the electronic media, now most likely to be consulted by colleagues world-wide.

To send data, or for information about the BCLA and its activities, including past volumes of *Comparative Criticism*, please see the home page: http://www.bcla.org.

The BCLA/BCLT Translation Competition is an annual Open Competition for all languages. Inquiries and requests for entry forms for the next (1999–2000) BCLA/BCLT Translation Competition should be directed to Christine Wilson, at the BCLT address given below. Entries and completed forms should be sent by the deadline 31 January

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2000 to Christine Wilson or Dr J. Boase Beier, School of Modern Languages and European Studies, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ. The judges of the Competition, drawing on the recommendations of specialist readers in each case, are: Daniel Weissbort, poet, translator and editor of *Poetry in Translation*; Arthur Terry, translator from the Catalan, and formerly director of the MA in Literary Translation at the University of Essex; Stuart Gillespie, editor of *Translation and Literature*; Peter Bush, Director of the British Centre for Literary Translation; and Elinor Shaffer, *ex officio* as editor of *Comparative Criticism*.

Prize-winners will normally be invited to receive their prizes and to give a short reading, either at the annual St Jerome Lecture on Translation, or at the Triennial Conference of the BCLA, if it takes place in that year.

Prize-winners and other entrants may qualify for bursaries at the British Centre for Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia to support short residencies for specific translation projects. Direct application for bursaries may be made to Peter Bush, Director, BCLT, at the address given above.

We are delighted that the publication of comparative theses and monographs which we had long envisaged has been launched under the imprint of LEGENDA: the European Humanities Research Centre, Oxford University. The BCLA/EHRC Studies in Comparative Literature Series was honoured to publish as its first volume S. S. Prawer's book *Breeches and Metaphysics: Thackeray's German Discourse* (1997). Siegbert Prawer, Taylor Professor of German Emeritus in the University of Oxford, has long been one of the most eminent comparatists in this country. The second volume in the series (1998) was Charlie Louth's acute study *Hölderlin and the Dynamics of Translation* (1998), which began life as a Cambridge PhD thesis; Dr Louth is now Lecturer in German at Bristol. The third is Fiona Cox, *Virgil takes the Metro: Virgil in twentieth-century literature* (1999), originating in a Bristol PhD. Several more excellent books are in the pipeline. It is planned to publish three books a year. Proposals for shorter critical studies, editions, or translations, as well as for theses and monographs, will be entertained. Inquiries should be sent in the first instance to Dr Elinor Shaffer (School of Advanced Study, University of London, Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU) or to Professor Peter France (Dept of French, University of Edinburgh, George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9JX).

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We are also pleased to announce that there will be a launch of volume 21 at a special event at the Institute of Germanic Studies, where the hitherto unpublished correspondence between Hermann Broch and H. G. Adler (a feature of the volume) will be given a reading and discussion by Professor John J. White, who has introduced the Letters, and Professor Ronald Speirs, who has translated and, with John White, annotated them. Adler's bibliographer, Dr Franz Hocheneder, whose work is also published in this volume, will also take part. This event will take place in October 1999 at the Institute of Germanic Studies, 29 Russell Square, WC1B 5DP.

If volume 21 is still working in the limited circle of light and shade of Western traditions in their postmodern forms, the next volume, volume 22, to be published in the millennium year itself (that is, 2000 – *pace* Archbishop Ussher and Stephen Jay Gould), will depart from it to treat 'East and West: comparative perspectives'. It may be fitting to turn for a new beginning to literatures in which a year ending in three zeroes has no special resonance of the end. This year will also mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the BCLA, set up in 1975 at its founding conference at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. For this landmark year we are very pleased to have the collaboration of Dr Javed Majeed and his colleagues at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

Future volumes, for which contributions are welcome, include volume 23 'Humanism and the Humanities'. This will be based on a large conference to be held in London 1–3 June 2000, 'Humanism in the Twentieth Century', as a collaboration between the School of Advanced Study, University of London, and the Getty Research Institute. It will appear in the alternative millennial year, 2001.

A volume on the Fantastic, the Gothic, and Jan Potocki's *Manuscript found at Saragossa* will follow. Potocki's major European novel, written 1797–1815, but published in full only in 1989, has begun to receive the attention it deserves in France, but as yet there is virtually nothing available in English apart from the novel itself. It was the subject of a major Polish film, directed by Wojciech Has in 1965, and circulated in a cut and censored version with French subtitles; the full-length original film was shown in Britain for the first time in May 1999, with English voice-over, at an international Colloquium on Potocki held at the University of London.

A further volume on 'The Lives of the Disciplines: comparative biography', will explore the art of biography in different disciplines.

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