



Meltzl and World Literature Studies: A Case of Mirrored Colonialism

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Abstract: This article examines the role of Hugo Meltzl and the journal *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* in shaping the field of comparative literature in the context of World Literature debates. While recent contributions have heralded Meltzl as a pioneering figure advocating for a non-Western-centric foundation of comparatism, the study pleads for a historicized reassessment of *Acta Comparationis* as a product of the Austro-Hungarian Empire's linguistic and identity politics. This exploration reveals the interplay between Meltzl's advocacy for polyglottism and the imperial agendas of his time, suggesting that his contributions were shaped by the political and cultural dynamics of the Habsburg context. Lastly, the article scrutinizes Meltzl's approach to minor literatures, revealing both an archival ambition, in line with the anthropological presuppositions of the nineteenth century, and a tendency to frame these literatures within Eurocentric paradigms. A close examination of the journal uncovers the tensions between Meltzl's universalist ambitions and the realities of cultural or political hierarchies that molded the *Acta Comparationis's* actual material.

Keywords: Hugo Meltzl, comparative literature, postcolonialism, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, Austro-Hungarian empire.

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The relation between Hugo Meltzl and the origin story of comparatism, as devised by David Damrosch or Haun Saussy, some of the most influential comparatists of the past decades, is central to recent debates about World Literature. In order to counterbalance the rightful charge of Western-centrism, they performed a decontextualized and partial reading of Meltzl's work and *Acta Comparationis*. In the aftermath of other post- or de-colonial accounts, *Acta Comparationis* needs to be historicized in relation to recent approaches to the Late Habsburg empire and in terms of the complex linguistic and identity politics embedded in the archive of the journal. In the argument I put forward, *Acta Comparationis* is not a product arisen from an ineffable ideology at odds with an imperial or Eurocentric outlook, but a product embedded in the political project of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The practices of cultural comparison displayed in the pages of the journal are assessed against the above-mentioned environment and in relation to the manifesto(es) on polyglottism/decaglottism.

Comparative literature, on Meltzl's shoulders

It is no coincidence that the rediscovery of Meltzl as a pioneering figure emerged in the aftermath of Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, which denounced the hegemonic relationship between Western Europe or North America and other parts of the globe—a distinction lying at the core of recent work in comparative literature.¹ Her influential lectures echoed a similar diagnosis voiced by Franco Moretti a few years earlier, according to which comparative literature had been "a modest intellectual enterprise, fundamentally limited to Western Europe, and mostly revolving around the river Rhine (German philologists working on French literature)."² Soon after, two texts with high institutional resonance—authored by Saussy and Damrosch—identified in Meltzl's editorial activity an argument for the non-Western-centric foundation of the discipline. According to the former, the program of polyglottism, with a particular focus on Hungarian language and literature, expressed a progressive "step outside the charmed circle of Indo-European cousinage,"³ while the latter's emphatic 2006 title "Rebirth

1. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

2. Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review*, no. 1 (2000): 54.

3. Haun Saussy, "Exquisite Cadavers Stitched from Fresh Nightmares: Of Memes, Hives, and Selfish Genes," in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 8.

of a Discipline: The Global Origins of Comparative Studies” identifies in Meltzl nothing less than an alternative path, “a shift [...] from a largely European-oriented discipline to a truly global perspective.”⁴ Without being replaced altogether, the icon of Goethe—long associated with the inaugural moment of the discipline—was complemented, in the nineteenth century hagiography of comparative literature, by the figure of Meltzl. Several criteria seemed to qualify the Transylvanian scholar for this entitlement: first, he conveniently came from a geographical context outside the narrow perimeter around the River Rhine; second, the identity and linguistic intersections of Meltzl’s biography appeared to perfectly meet the expectations of hybridity embedded in the new concept of comparative literature. Last but not least, Meltzl’s journal consistently expressed interest in the languages or literatures of non-European populations, thus promising to establish the rules of the discipline along more democratic lines. To these general reasons for rediscovering Meltzl as an irradiating personality I might add the institutional dimension of his activity. While Goethe “coined a phrase”⁵ and displayed a set of concerns in *West-Eastern Divan*, the Transylvanian built a journal around an academic program and attempted to set forth a science of the future. Moreover, his bifocal linguistic policies—that encompassed both the promotion of reading and preservation of minor languages and reflection on circulation and translation policies—resonate strongly with the aims of the discipline in the twenty-first century.

This high esteem placed on Meltzl—cast as a titan that could bear on his shoulders the weight of an entire field—stirred rather antagonistic reactions from those less enchanted by this new origin story of comparatism. Readings like those of Alfred López, David Marno, or—more recently, Shu-mei Shih—place both Meltzl and the new comparatism within the same target, thus broadening the angle of refraction between World Literature Studies—a utopian discipline still entrapped in universalist premises—and postcolonial or decolonial framings. Marno disrupts the democratic narrative around the *Acta Comparationis* project by noting judiciously that none of the languages spoken by the repressed populations of the Dual Monarchy is to be found on his select list.⁶ In addition, López astutely observes that Saussy’s discovery overlooks the whole colonial context of the nineteenth century, including literatures written by subaltern populations in the dominant languages of colonizers: “Whatever its claims to an inclusive ‘principle of polyglotism,’ then, comparative literature established its identity effect by routinely excluding texts that hailed from or reference in any way the single most important historical development of the nineteenth century: the rise and hegemony of European imperialism.”⁷ Not least of all, in a recent call for the decolonization of U.S. comparatism, Shih takes the very cases of Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett and Meltzl as illustrative of the early discipline’s colonial entanglements.⁸ Meltzl’s pronouncement that Asian cultures should adopt the Latin alphabet is read by Shih as the climax of the Eurocentric outlook on world literature.

Recent important research outside such programmatic claims—which held Meltzl responsible both for the successes and failures of today’s comparative literature—has been carried out by Angus Nicholls,⁹ whose texts convincingly document the evolutionary scientific model underlying *Acta Comparationis*’s conception of comparatism; by Levente T. Szabó,¹⁰ who highlights the multifaceted nature of the project beyond the singular figure of Meltzl, or by Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă, who expose, under the Transylvanian journal’s equalitarian project of polyglottism, a process of *interglottism*—defined as an asymmetric distribution of inter-imperial languages.¹¹

4. David Damrosch, “Rebirth of a Discipline: The Global Origins of Comparative Studies,” *Comparative Critical Studies* 3, no. 1-2 (2006): 99.

5. David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

6. David Marno, “The Monstrosity of Literature: Hugo Meltzl’s World Literature and its Legacies,” in *World Literature, World Culture*, ed. Karen-Margrethe Simonsen and Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2008), 37–50.

7. Alfred J. López, “Hugo Meltzl and That Dangerous American Supplement; Or, a Tale of Two 1877s,” *Comparative Literature* 61, no. 3 (2009): 223–234.

8. Shu-mei Shih, “Decolonizing US Comparative Literature: The 2022 ACLA Presidential Address,” *Comparative Literature* 75, no. 3 (2023): 237–265.

9. Angus Nicholls, “The ‘Goethean’ Discourses on *Weltliteratur* and the Origins of Comparative Literature: The Cases of Hugo Meltzl and Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett,” *Seminar: A Journal of Germanic Studies* 54, no. 2 (2018): 167–194; Angus Nicholls, “Stadial Change and the Emergence of Comparative Studies in German-Speaking Europe Around 1870–1900: Hugo von Meltzl Reads Wilhelm Scherer,” in *Comparing and Change: Orders, Models, Perceptions*, ed. Antje Flüchter, Kirsten Kramer, Rebecca Mertens and Silke Schwandt (Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press, 2024), 93–120; Angus Nicholls, “Aesthetics and Anthropology in the Early Years of Comparative Literature: *The Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*,” *Comparative Literature* 76, no. 3 (2024): 294–335; Angus Nicholls, “Three Translations from the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*: ‘Preliminary Tasks of Comparative Literature, Part III: Decaglotism;’ ‘Laws of Comparative Literary Research;’ and ‘Goethe’s World Literature;’” *Comparative Literature* 76, no. 3 (2024): 285–293.

10. Levente T. Szabó, “Cultural Brokers, Forms of Hybridity and the Emergence of the First International Comparative Literary Journal,” *Philobiblon: Transylvanian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in the Humanities* 22, no. 2 (2017): 67–80; Levente T. Szabó, “The Glocality of the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*: Local Interpretations of Educational Freedom, Coercive Innovation and Comparative Literature,” *Hungarian Studies Yearbook* 2, no. 1 (2020): 60–64.

11. Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă, “(Dis)Counting Languages: Between Hugó Meltzl and Liviu Rebreanu,” *Journal of World Literature* 5, no. 1 (2020): 47–78.



Asymmetries of Linguistic Use and Representation within the Dual Monarchy and *Acta Comparationis*

A process still insufficiently explored concerns the historicization of the *Acta Comparationis* project within the larger construct of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Rather than being disconnected from or reluctant towards the politics of language employed by the empire, *Acta Comparationis* mirrors both its egalitarian postulates and its hierarchical realities. This means that, instead of seeing the Transylvanian project as a symptom of subversion towards Eurocentric values, I see it as a product bearing the specific institutional blueprint of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The significance of the Habsburg Empire in the nineteenth century forging of national identities or languages is far from having reached scholarly consensus. While the traditional academic field dismissed it as a living anachronism because it lacked the homogenous architecture of national states, recent scholarship praises “the Monarchy’s diversity, used as a test case for theories about multiethnic societies across the world.”¹² The most representative in this respect is Pieter Judson’s 2016 *The Habsburg Empire: A New History?*, a book that argues that the Austrian Empire “could be progressive in its educational policies and provide platforms for its citizens to identify with both their local cultures and the empire itself.”¹³ If the question regarding the *de facto* ethnicities or the social classes that benefitted from the progressive policies still remains open, it is nevertheless true that one of the official legitimizing discourses of the Habsburg empire—often invoked as a strong asset in the symbolic rivalry among empires—emphasized its multilingual state agenda. In an address held in 1853 at the Austrian Academy of Science, the Orientalist Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall claims that the very essence of an Austrian identity is rooted in its people’s multilingualism: “the more languages of the empire one can speak, the more one becomes a true Austrian.”¹⁴ Even though the multilingual practices were not unique to the Habsburg context—and, especially after the installment of the Dual Monarchy they took on specific agendas in Austria and Hungary¹⁵—it is nevertheless true that, as Judson points out:

“what made Austria-Hungary distinctive are the ways in which those practices were assigned particular shared meanings, the ways in which they were codified, regulated and also manipulated symbolically in public political life. And this adds yet a further dimension to the Habsburg case, albeit one that is occasionally present in other cases, and that is the element of the performance. Linguistic usage gained such a high degree of symbolic significance in some public situations that one could see it as an ostentatious form of performance or display.”¹⁶

It is no accident, then, that perhaps the most sophisticated and linguistically abstruse journal of the nineteenth century should emerge in a context where the problem of how language is “codified, regulated or manipulated” represents both a matter of public debate and an issue affecting everyday interaction between individuals and state institutions. Moreover, Meltzl and *Acta Comparationis*’s commitment to the policy of polyglottism, even if it is often at odds with the nationalist German or Hungarian propaganda, does not undermine the official policy of the empire or the ideology of its ruling class. Meltzl’s multilingual program is actually embedded in the design of the state bureaucracy: the scholar’s command of ten languages, although extraordinary, is not unprecedented in this context. According to scholars who studied the military records of high-ranking imperial officers, “the most successful and the most valued officers were in possession of up to eight languages.”¹⁷ Multilingualism among state employee

12. John E. Fahey, “Review of *Understanding Multiculturalism: The Habsburg Central European Experience*, ed. by Johannes Feichtinger and Gary Cohen,” *Journal of Austrian Studies* 48, no. 3 (2015): 141–143.

13. William Bowman, Gary B. Cohen, Pieter Judson, Michael Yonan, and Tara Zahra, “An Imperial Dynamo? CEH Forum on Pieter Judson’s *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*,” *Central European History* 50, no. 2 (2017): 236.

14. Joseph Baron Hammer-Purgstall, “Vortrag über die Vielsprachigkeit,” in Die feierliche Sitzung des kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften am 29 Mai 1852 (Vienna, 1852), apud Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire. A New History* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 242.

15. Specifically, the linguistic policy is different in the two parts of the empire: while Austria does not try to install monolingualism, in the Hungarian part of the monarchy 1879 marks the beginning of the official policy of Magyarisation, with a law stipulating compulsory teaching of Hungarian in all primary schools. However, the result of this process is rather disputable: the teaching of Hungarian as a subject was unsuccessful in 1,340 of the 3,343 non-Magyar schools, i.e. 40 percent (Faluhelyi 1946: 166). In 1890, 1,600 of the 2,600 teachers in 1879 who had no sufficient knowledge of Hungarian or did not know the language in the non-Hungarian schools, had still no control of the Hungarian language. In 1906, 27 years after the introduction of the Law XVIII in 1879, this was still true for 957 of the non-Hungarian teachers. Finally, in 1905 the minister of Culture and Education had to admit that 40 percent of the population of Hungary was still completely ignorant of the Hungarian language and that 83 percent of the non-Hungarian citizens did not speak the official state language.” László Marác, “Multilingualism in the Transleithan Part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918): Policy and Practice,” *Jeziškoslovje* 12, no. 2 (2012): 289.

16. Pieter Judson, “Encounters with Language Diversity in Late Habsburg Austria,” in *Language Diversity in the Late Habsburg Empire*, ed. Markian Prokopovych, Carl Bethke, and Tamara Scheer (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 18.

17. Norman Stone, “Army and Society in the Habsburg Monarchy 1900–1914,” *Past and Present*, no. 33 (1966): 100.

represented a norm rather than an exception.¹⁸ Moreover, despite the centralized pressures of Magyarization in the last decades of the nineteenth century, recent research conducted by Ágoston Berecz on the use of languages in the written administration of Transylvanian and Banat towns with Romanian and German majorities reveals that a significant part of local bureaucracy (the minutes of the town council, the announcements and the contact with the public, and sometimes even official documents sent to the counties or ministries) was either bilingual or written in the language of the local ethnic majority. For instance, council meetings in Braşov/Brassó/Kronstadt and Sebeş/Szászsebes/Mühlbach were minuted in German and translated into Romanian. In Bistriţa-Năşăud/Beszterce-Naszód/Bistriz-Naszod County—where Meltzl lived with his family in the 1870s—“the death certificates were trilingual, while the local Romanian magistrates issued their sentences on Romanian-language forms.”¹⁹

Not only does the *Acta Comparationis* program, as fashioned by Meltzl, resonate with the multilingualism of the empire, but it tends to reproduce the asymmetries within linguistic use and representation. Firstly, because, as has often been noted, polyglottism or decaglottism—as theorized by Meltzl—were not fully materialized, since most of the texts in the journal were in German or Hungarian, the two dominant languages of the Dual Monarchy. In addition, much like the administrative structures of the empire, the journal reflects an epistemological hierarchy regarding language function. Nicholls has convincingly disclosed the ranking beneath Meltzl's allegedly equalitarian system—one based on two distinctions: between folk literatures and artistic literatures, and between immature artistic literatures and those positioned at the top of the aesthetic pyramid, meeting the classicist standards endorsed by Meltzl's tastes.²⁰ The effort of the *Acta Comparationis*, and that of Meltzl as a scholar is to promote Sandor Petőfi as a representative of the Austro-Hungarian empire in the Emyrean heaven of world classicism. To this, I would add that the *Acta Comparationis* language policy pursues a distribution of knowledge that endows major European languages (German, French, English, plus Hungarian, the newcomer) with the task of managing the conceptual framing of comparatism, while relegating minor languages to the role of providing the raw material for archival or analytical purposes. Once again, the language policies adopted by the Transylvanian journal reflect the hegemonic structure embedded in other state institutions: a note regarding the “Literary lectures at the University Kolozsvár, winter term 1879/1880” reveals the fact that the history of Romanian literature, as taught by Gergely Szilasi in Hungarian, is reduced to the study of the language dialects or that of Romanian mythology.²¹ *Acta Comparationis* texts about Romanian literature are hosted in German, Hungarian or French, languages invested with the mission of conceptualizing and organizing subaltern literary material. Even languages or literatures accepted by Meltzl into the canon of decaglottism, frequently commented in the journal, fall in the same category: The Portuguese, the Dutch, the Icelandic. This division of comparatist labor—by no means specific to Meltzl or *Acta Comparationis*, but present across most nineteenth- and twentieth-century comparatism—should nevertheless temper claims that the journal's program marked “a tectonic shift [...] from a largely European-oriented discipline.”²²

In light of the above observations, the claim that Meltzl or the *Acta Comparationis* expressed “writing from borderline positions both culturally and institutionally”²³ is unsubstantiated and it reflects a process still pervasive in today's discipline of comparative literature. I refer to it as a process of mirrored colonialism, which signals the tendency to read the *Acta Comparationis* project not as a reflection of European colonialism in its Austro-Hungarian version, but as a tectonic movement from a minor position. This only serves to further obscure the subaltern voices that twenty-first-century comparative literature seeks to empower. The fact that Meltzl's much-discussed manifestos, which accommodate Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* within the ambitions of the newly founded Dual Monarchy, have been labeled symptoms of writing from the periphery erases the agency of the communities whose languages or literatures failed to meet the Eurocentric standards of decaglottism.

18. It is true, however, that the multilingualism of the state employees does not constitute a norm when looking at the wider population: “Although the Hungarian Kingdom acknowledged a state of multilingualism in which twelve minority languages had an official status next to the Hungarian state language, multilingualism was in fact a state of ‘separate’ monolingualism practiced in the different national communities. Multilingual speakers were actually a very small minority. A large majority of the inhabitants of the Hungarian Kingdom, i.e. 77 percent, were monolingual, only knowing their mother tongue and being unable to communicate with people outside of their ethnic group [...] only 23 percent of the inhabitants, that is 4,880,000 people were bi- or multilingual.” Marácz, “Multilingualism,” 281.

19. Ágoston Berecz, “German and Romanian in Town Governments of Dualist Transylvania and the Banat,” in *Language Diversity in the Late Habsburg Empire*, ed. Markian Prokopovych, Carl Bethke, and Tamara Scheer (Leiden: Brill, 2020): 151.

20. Nicholls, “Aesthetics and Anthropology.”

21. “Literary Lectures at the University Kolozsvár, Winter Term 1879/1880,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, Totius Seriei, 7, no. 64 (1880): 1310.

22. Damrosch, “Rebirth,” 99.

23. Damrosch, “Rebirth,” 100.



National Literatures' Index of Porosity: Hungarian Literature as World Literature

A more realistic approach to the nineteenth-century Transylvanian project would be to acknowledge its European/colonial/imperial entanglements in order to identify those particular details or micro-projects that, while not entirely escaping hegemonic structures, nevertheless resist them in meaningful ways. Once we recognize that *Acta Comparationis* is rooted in the political or cultural asymmetries of the nineteenth-century, a more nuanced discussion about the limits and ambitions of early European comparatism can be reopened. Most of the misreadings of *Acta Comparationis* stem from the fact that its aims were roughly equated with the principles derived from "The Present Tasks of Comparative Literature". However, a closer investigation of the journal archive reveals tensions and contradictions irreducible to a unidimensional critical narrative. When considering the vast material displayed by the journal's twelve years of existence, one might discover that its aims and practices are at the same time narrower and broader than generally described by recent advocates of World Literature Studies. For instance, the first issue of the journal reveals that, rather than committing to a transnational project from the outset, the journal was preliminarily conceived as a medium for establishing Hungarian literature as a world literature.²⁴ The introductory text of *Acta Comparationis*, "Introduction"²⁵ echoes Goethe's famous statement that "Left to itself every literature will exhaust its vitality, if it is not refreshed by the interest and contributions of a foreign one."²⁶ Similarly, the editorial team claims: "Just as no individual can exist without the companionship of others, so too can no nation thrive without constant interaction in the intellectual or literary sphere."²⁷

The abstract plea for constant interaction and polyglottism is visibly undermined by the periodical's aim to promote national literature within a new imperial context, one in which Austria-Hungary was torn between the high prestige of the German language and literature and the lower status of its Hungarian counterpart: "Accordingly, our journal will have two primary missions, corresponding to what we might call passive and active forms of translation: first, introducing the best of Hungarian literature to the world, and second, conversely, presenting the best of foreign literature to domestic audiences—akin to export and import."²⁸ If the new monarchy should prove a viable political construct, founded on an equal partnership between its two hegemonial cultures, then the global reputation of Hungarian literature is in need of urgent heightening. Other important sections of the first issue of *Acta Comparationis* further endorse this crucial mission, which in fact persists throughout the existence of the journal. The effort to increase the traffic value of Hungarian literature relies on several mechanisms that include the establishing of an international network of scholars entrusted with the translation and promotion of Petőfi's and Loránd Eötvös's works, the intensifying of translations from other literatures, or the publishing of Hungarian folk literature.

Other texts published in the first issue are of no lesser importance for the future development of the *Acta Comparationis*. An essay authored by Meltzl himself signals what the scholar identifies as the major impasse of Hungarian literature, that of not receiving sufficient international recognition:

"Nevertheless, we are painfully aware that the leading men of Hungarian literature could have been more sensitive toward the problem of translation, as most of the translators were mere crooks. This explains why less significant literatures like that of the Serbs have already received Goethe's glorifying attention, while the Hungarian literature, with its Eötvösés and Petőfis, was hardly introduced to the neighboring great German literature after the March days, and even afterwards this happened only because the glorious fight for freedom had already attracted a great deal of attention in Western Europe and received the warmest sympathy in the liberal circles of Germany."²⁹

24. This fact did not prevent nationalists to heavily "criticize the multilingual practice and the alleged foreignness of the ACLU," as documented by Levente T. Szabó in "Negotiating the Borders of Hungarian National Literature. The Beginning of the *Acta Comparationis* and the Rise of Hungarian Studies," *Transylvanian Review* 12, Supplement no. 1 (2013): 47–61.

25. See "Introduction," trans. T. Szabó Levente, forthcoming.

26. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Some Passages Pertaining to the Concept of World Literature," in Hans-Joachim Schultz and Philip R. Rhein, *Comparative Literature: The Early Years. An Anthology of Essays* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 8.

27. "A mint az egyes individuum az ö embertársát legkevésbé sem nélkülözheti, úgy az egyes népek sem élhetnek meg szakadatlan közlekedés nélkül a szellemi vagy irodalmi téren." "Előszó," *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténeti Lapok*, January 15 (1877): 1. Translation by T. Szabó Levente.

28. "Ezek szerint szaklapunknak két főfeladata lesz, mely megfelel a passzív és aktív két rendbeli fordítói irodalomnak, amint mi szeretnénk elnevezni: vagyis egyrészt a magyar irodalom javának bemutatása külföldön, és másrészt megfordítva, külföldi irodalmak javának bemutatása itthoni földön, megfelelően az exportnak és importnak." "Előszó," 3.

29. "Mindamellett azonban fájdalom nines tudomásunk arról, hogy a magyar irodalom vezénylő férfai valami nagyon kényesen viseltettek volna azon fordítók iránt, kik voltaképen csak—ferditők. S innen, esak is innen van, hogy p. o a sokkal jelentéktelenebb és valamivel keletibb szerb irodalom már Goethe dicsőítő kritikájában részesült, holott a magyar irodalmat, az Eötvösöket, Petőfiket alig sikerült a martiusi napok után bemutatni a szomszéd nagy német irodalomnak és ekkor is főleg csak azért, mivel a dicső szabadságharcz ugy is már roppant figyelmet gerjesztett Nyugat-Europában, és névleg Németország liberális köreibben részesült a legmelegebb sympathiában." Meltzl, "A ki a világ költészetébe bevezette a magyart," *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténeti Lapok*, I sz, January 15 (1877): 5.

Those held responsible for this shortcoming are the translators accused of either squandering their time on irrelevant material or lacking the necessary skills to render Hungarian literature in other languages. The fortunate exception, celebrated as such, is the German scholar Georg Friedrich Daumer, who includes Petőfi-inspired lyrics in his 1855 *Polydora, ein Weltpoetisches Ledensbuch*. In the article, Meltzl praises both Petőfi's poetry as worthy of being included in any world literature anthology, and the artful translation of Daumer, elevated to a Goethean level for his vivid interest towards the literatures of other nations: "While Goethe was the originator of the peculiar and still generally misinterpreted concept of *Weltliteratur* [...], the man I am talking about discovered and established *Weltpoesie*."³⁰ Daumer's 1855 synthesis of world poetry represents, in Meltzl's view, the redress of an historical injustice inflicted upon Hungarian poetry:

"his rare man, to whom Hungarian literature owes incomparably more than to all the other forces, zealously worked on the painstaking mediation between Hungarian and foreign literatures, and even introduced Hungarian poetry to world poetry [...] it was only at 55, when he had already traveled through the entire world of poetry, that he came across the Hungarian poetry, the existence of which he had not even suspected (next door!) until then. In his first relevant work, *Hafis*, which was published in 1846 and is still one of the most widely read books, the Hungarian folk song is sought in vain along the literature of the Turkish, Arab, Hebrew, Indian, Gipsy, New Greek, Olah, Illirian, Latvian, Littau and Estonian people, among which it could have been placed."³¹

"The lion's share"—in Meltzl's words—is given to Hungarian poetry only in the 1855 *Polydora*, when the epilogue that Daumer claims to have been inspired by a Hungarian folk song is, according to Meltzl, in fact derived from a Petőfi poem: "We can proudly point that a poem by Petőfi serves as the closing word for world poetry!," the Transylvanian scholar exclaims.³² Figures of mediation—those who position Hungarian literature alongside other major literatures or ally the groundwork for its academic study in universities and academies—are consistently celebrated in the pages of the journal. One prominent example is Wilhem Schott, "the well-known Orientalist, who is probably the foremost representative and expert of the Hungarian language at a non-Hungarian university not only in Europe, but on the entire earth,"³³ whose lectures at the "the University of the Metropolis of the New German Empire cover not only the languages and literatures of the Chinese, Japanese, Tibetans, Mongols, Turks and Finns, but also that of the Hungarians," and who is described as "the very first example of this kind at a university!"³⁴ Any reaction from abroad is eagerly recorded in the pages of the journal: the Spanish translator of Petőfi, Ramon L. Mainez, sends Meltzl news and samples of his work in progress,³⁵ while Dora d'Istria, Meltzl's great collaborator and friend, publicly confesses her enthusiasm upon reading the same poet in French translation: "Ever since I read the French translation of this truly original writer, I realized that he deserved a place among the foremost poets of our century."³⁶

The thread of Hungarian literature not being sufficiently acknowledged worldwide runs through the entire history of *Acta Comparationis*. A 1877 note on the German translation of Peter Hunfalvy's *Hungarian Ethnography* laments that "such important publications, which aim at the public abroad, are sadly only published with domestic publishing houses,"³⁷ while Hungarian literature is thought to have failed the test of internationalization when compared to neighboring literatures: "Looking comparatively at the literary translation of the period, our old observation remains that in Germany, poets from all national literatures, notably from the Slavic nations, are

30. "Mig Goethe a 'Weltliteratur' sajtóságaos és még máig általánosan félremagyarázott fogalom felállítója volt, (miben Rückert, Platen és Minckwitz követték őt,) addig az, kiről most szólok, a 'Weltpoesie'-t fedezte és állította fel." Meltzl, "A ki a világ," 5–6.

31. "Es nem jellemző-e, hogy ez a ritka férfi, kinek a magyar irodalom összehasonlíthatatlanul többet köszön, mint valamennyi többi erőnek, kik valaha buzgóan működtek a magyar és külföldi irodalmak közt való fáradságos közvetítésen, sőt a ki egyedül bevezette a magyar költészetet a világgöltészetbe, hogy ez a férfi mondom nem fordított [...] Így tehát csak 55 éves korában, midőn már rég bejárta az egész 'világgöltészet'-et, bukkant a magyar költészetre is, melynek ő existenciáját (a szomszédban!) addig nem is sejtette! Legelső idevágó művében, (*Hafis*, mely 1846-ban jelent meg és máig a legolvasottabb könyvek egyike.) hiába keresnők a magyar népdalt a török, arabs, héber, ind, cigány, újgörög, oláh, illyr, lett, litthai és est népek irodalmi közt, melyeknek jutott hely." Meltzl, "A ki a világ," 5–6.

32. "Büszkén mutathatunk reá hogy Petőfinek egy költeménye szolgál a világgöltészet-nek zárszavául!" Meltzl, "A ki a világ," 7.

33. "[...] des bekannten Orientalisten, der wohl der einstige Vertreter und Kenner ungarischer Sprache ist auf einer ausserungarischen Hochschule nicht nur Europas, sondern der ganzen Erde." – *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténeti Lapok*, VII sz., Április 15 (1877): 162.

34. "Schott's Vorlesungen an der Universität der Metropole des neuen deutschen Reichs erstrecken sich neben den Sprachen u. Litteraturen der Chinesen, Japaner, Tibeter, Mongolen, Mandschu, Türken, Finnen auch auf die der Ungarn. Das allererste Beispiel dieser Art auf einer Universität." M.[eltzl], "Zu Wilh. Schott's 70. Geburtstag," *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténeti Lapok*, XIII szám., September 15 (1877): 267.

35. *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténeti Lapok*, XIII szám., September 15 (1877): 273.

36. "Lorsque j'ai lu la traduction française de cet écrivain vraiment original, j'avais déjà constaté qu'il méritait une place parmi les premiers poètes de notre siècle." *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténeti Lapok*, XIII szám., September 15 (1877): 274.

37. "Schade, dergleichen wichtige Publikationen, die doch nur für das Ausland berechnet sind, in einem inländischen Verlag erscheinen zu lassen." *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténeti Lapok*, II sz., Január 31 (1877): 5.



extremely popular and skilfully translated; *only Hungarian literature is omitted*.³⁸ On a more optimistic note, the same text—placed under the heading *Foreign review*—concludes, however, that “at least the large number of original German poems with a Hungarian theme, which, although it has not shown a decline in recent years, can provide some consolation as proof that Germany is interested in us [...]”.³⁹ It is not hard to observe that Meltzl regards the German language as the very vehicle capable of placing any minor culture—and especially Hungarian culture—on the route of world values. In Meltzl's hierarchy of the World Republic of Letters, to speak in Pascale Casanova's terms, German culture is situated on top.

In fact, although reviewers of *Acta Comparationis* have rightly noticed that most articles are written in two languages, their rank and function within the journal's structure have largely gone unexamined. On closer inspection, the predicament stated in *The Present Tasks*, according to which “the critical articles of a comparative journal would appear in that language with which they are principally concerned” is frequently violated—not only in the cases of so-called small literatures, which are often presented in German, French or Hungarian—but also with regard to Hungarian literature itself, which is often discussed in German.⁴⁰ Much of the performative nature of the *Acta Comparationis*—which can be read both as a scientific project and as an object of art celebrating the diversity of world cultures—lies in the witty display of the languages under which Meltzl places the periodical's headings or articles. The function of the journal's two main languages reflects their role as assigned by Meltzl in his awareness of the asymmetries among national literatures and his efforts to position Hungarian literature as a world literary force. Facts, anecdotes or bibliographical events about the Hungarian culture—under headings like *Literary review* or *Correspondence*—are customarily written in Hungarian. However, when it comes to higher cultural equations regarding the status of Hungarian literature within international networks or its institutionalization in the field of science, German becomes the privileged mediator. It is no coincidence that Eötvös, whom Meltzl considers not only a great writer but also a key figure in the development of modern Hungarian institutions, is portrayed in German.

Meltzl and his close collaborators, reputed scholars at German universities (some of them his former teachers), often praise German literature and language as the *lingua franca* of world literature. According to Johannes Minckwitz, professor at Leipzig University, German “reproduces in its sounds [...] — the deepest, highest, most beautiful, and most sublime that any people has ever expressed,”⁴¹ while Meltzl himself notes that “throughout Europe the knowledge of German literature should be regarded as one of the main elements of complete education.”⁴² Moreover, the presumed superiority of German language is quite ingeniously explained by its exceptional capacity to absorb foreign elements: “One of the secrets of the superiority of the modern German people and language lies in, or at least in my opinion is extremely closely related to, the phenomenon that there is no nation on this earth whose language has such an enormous number of foreign words.”⁴³ The secret to becoming a powerful literature, the Transylvanian scholar argues—explicitly countering nineteenth-century nationalist organicisms—lies not in rejecting interaction with other cultures, but in their harmonious inclusion through translation. This is why—holding the German case as exemplary—if a literature wishes to become relevant on a transnational scale, it must import as much foreign material as possible. The high index of porosity is what allows a given literature to rise to centrality in Meltzl's projected World Republic of Letters. Consequently, the process of consecrating Hungarian literature, evident throughout the entire history of the journal, follows a two-fold strategy. Alongside efforts to translate it into all the languages of the earth, Meltzl insists on the urgent need to incorporate the best achievements of other literatures. In his words, “To devour the masterpieces of foreign nations so that they become ‘the blood and sap’ of our nation: this is an indispensable prerequisite for a higher level of education.”⁴⁴

38. “Az összehasonlító és fordítói irodalomra nézve, folytonosan áll régi észrevételünk, hogy Németországban kiváló előszeretettel és ügyességgel ültetnek át ugyan minden nemzet irodalmából, jelesen a szláv nemzetekéből, költőket is; *csak egyedül a magyar irodalmat mellőzik*.” *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténeti Lapok*, XL szám., Deczember 31 (1878): 916.

39. “legalább a magyar tárgyú eredeti német költemények nagy száma, mely apadást az utóbbi években sem mutat, némi vigaszt nyújthat s bizonyítja, hogy érdekléssel viseltetik irántunk Németország.” *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténeti Lapok*, XL szám., Deczember 31 (1878): 916.

40. Hugo Meltzl, “Present Tasks of Comparative Literature,” translated by Hans-Joachim Schulz and Phillip H. Rhein, in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature. From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 45.

41. “die diese Sprache besitzt, das Tiefste, Höchste, Schönste und Erhabenste, was irgend ein Volk dargestellt hat, in ihren Lauten reproduciert darzustellen.” Johannes Minckwitz, “Beitrage zur Sprachvergleichung. Prosa, poesie, rhythmus und übersetzungskunst,” *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténeti Lapok* XXXVI szám., vol. IV, no. 6 (1878): 854.

42. “Dans toute l'Europe la connaissance de la littérature allemande devrait être regardée comme un des principaux éléments de toute éducation complète,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, Totius Seriei, 5, no. 41 (1879): 930.

43. “A modern német nép és nyelv superioritásának egyik titka abban rejlik, vagy nézetem szerint legalább is felettébb szoros kapcsolatban van azzal a tüneménnyel, hogy nincsen ezen a kerek földön nép, melynek nyelvében az idegen szavak száma oly óriási nagy volna.” Lomnitz, “A műfordítás alapelvei. Petőfire való tekintettel,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, 6, no. 52 (1880): 1107.

44. “Idegen nemzetek remek műveit felemészteni, úgy, hogy nemzetünknek is ‘hedvévé és vérévé’ váljanak: ez a magasabb polgárisodás mellőzhetetlen feltétele.” Lomnitz, “A műfordítás,” 1107.

Minor Literatures and “Anxieties toward the Grounds of Comparison”

To move forward the discussion on the cultural hierarchies embedded in the *Acta Comparationis* ethos, one might ask: how does the periodical engage with literatures that are granted neither the consecrating power of German literature nor the emancipatory mandate of Hungarian literature? Both World Literature proponents and (postcolonial) detractors have pointed out the imbalance between the journal's declared polyglottism—or at least decaglottism—and its actual practices, that favor a handful of European literatures. Even though the journal clearly reflects the division of labor specific to nineteenth- and even twentieth-century comparative literature—where certain languages or cultures provide the theoretical infrastructure, while others only supply the raw material of analysis—the massive archival project of *Acta Comparationis* is not to be overlooked or downplayed. A most telling example of the significance of this project, relying on the journal's scientific backbone, is to be found in an article where Meltzl praises the invention of the phonogram, labelled as a correspondent of what the herbarium is for botany. For the Transylvanian scholar, the instrument is not just a technical device, but a visionary tool facilitating Goethe's universalist project, “a phonographic encyclopedia of world literature” that would register “a characteristic specimen of the folk poetry of every people on earth in the original text, along with a musical supplement and a faithful reproduction, in one of the three major modern languages.”⁴⁵ The phonogram is the object that allows Meltzl to push forward—according to an utterly modern ethics of science—the concept of his German predecessor: “Goethe's world literature, which not only wants to encompass north and south, east and west, but also the past and the future, should not be significantly promoted by such an invention?”⁴⁶

Until such project becomes technically attainable, *Acta Comparationis* launches the call for an Encyclopaedia of World Poetry, inviting contributors around the world—this time, in English!—to submit specimens “accompanied by details as to their source, and by a literal interlinear translation in one of the European languages.”⁴⁷ Important documents for this ambitious undertaking are already gathered in every issue of the journal. An inventory of the literatures (mostly folk poetry) published under the heading *Varia* exceeds the aims of the high-end decaglottism. It is difficult to imagine a nineteenth-century publication—or indeed any publication—that hosts samples from so many languages around the globe. What is even more remarkable is that, alongside languages or literatures with clear-cut national identities, *Acta Comparationis* also chronicles literary specimens of regional, emergent or communities on the brink of extinction. English, French, Spanish, Portuguese or Chinese literature, prominently featured under the special sections of the heading “Literary review,” cover consistent parts of the journal's map. It is nevertheless true that *Acta Comparationis* also publishes literature from Provence, Sicily, Transylvania (Szász, Szekler, Romanian, Romani), North America (Indian languages and dialects), Martinique Island or Tunisia. Most literary fragments are translated into what the journal deems to consider as languages of international use—especially German—and some of them are accompanied by brief commentaries about their provenance, genre, methods of transcription, routes of communication with similar phenomena.

Does the way different literatures are approached reflect the colonial and Eurocentric outlook discernible in the theoretical articles of the journal? When taking into consideration that most of the minor literatures are only assigned the function of archival material, one may be inclined to respond affirmatively. On the other hand, the distinction between so-called artistic and folk literatures, which underpins the discriminatory logic of decaglottism, is mitigated in practice. While it is true that Meltzl tries to convince the world that with Petőfi or Eötvös, Hungarian literature overcomes its folk stage of development, this process does not prevent the scholar from archiving folk literature as well, whose presence in the economy of the journal is considerable. While in theory Meltzl operates with the model of stadial progression, as Nicholls has rightfully pointed out, in practice, folk and artistic literature work as two dimensions that fertilize one another.⁴⁸

In spite of the exoticizing frame of reception, which denies them the attribute of artistic maturity, so-called minor literatures are reviewed rather comprehensively. Significant in this respect is the periodical's coverage of Romani literature, transcribed in several dialects whose provenience is meticulously mentioned (Bistritz,

45. “charakteristisches Specimen der Volkspoesie jedes Volkes des Erdballs im Originaltext, nebst Musikbeilage u. getreuer Reproduction, in einer der drei grossen modernen Sprachen, enthielte.” H. V. Meltzl, “Das Phonogramm. In seiner Bedeutung für die Vergleichende Litteraturkunde und Sprachforschung,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, Totius Seriei 5, no. 55 (1879): 993.

46. “Und die Goethe'sche Weltlitteratur, welche ja nicht nur Nord und Süd, Ost und West, sondern auch Vergangenheit und Zukunft umfassen will, sollte durch eine solche Erfindung nicht wesentlich mitgefördert worden sein?” Meltzl, “Das Phonogramm,” 991.

47. *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 6, no. 14 (1879): 1224.

48. See Nicholls, “Stadial Change.”



Kolozsvár, Bontsida, Temeszvár) or pursued internationally.⁴⁹ For instance, a short text in the first issue of the *Acta Comparationis* informs the reader that the *Song of Songs* had been edited in a Romani translation in Trieste.⁵⁰ Furthermore, a note signed I.M. showcases the journal's appreciation of Romani literature as a whole: "It is well known already that the Rom possess a very respectable national lyric, but for ought we know, even Mr. [George] Borrow has not laid a proper stress on the fact that they possess a very remarkable national epic literature. Their national ballads and lyrical poems are called at least in Transylvania Sili (silabau = I sing). We shall therefore soon publish some such very characteristic, and as they appear to us, very old ballads. The fairy lore of the Gipsies is also extremely rich."⁵¹

The journal keeps its promise and regularly publishes Romani lyrical poetry. The most memorable is the ballad *The Black Wodas* (accompanied by its translation in English), which is highly praised by Meltzl himself. In his account, the piece "makes the impression of an antique tradition in its form as well as its contents," while there are "certainly few with such beauty and perfection of form in the ballad poetry of the entire literature of the world."⁵² Even if the ballad is read in Eurocentric terms, where the high status of antiquity is invoked to legitimize the Romani creation, the Transylvanian scholar's effort to resist such hegemonial protocols of knowledge remains visible. In fact, even if smaller literatures are not given the attention they deserve in the general economy of the journal, and the asymmetries of languages or literatures are not fully challenged, Meltzl's concept of comparative literature acknowledges the "anxiety toward the grounds of comparison," whereby "the more powerful entity [...] implicitly serves as the standard."⁵³ The rejection of fixed standpoints—those that risk reifying power dynamics within comparative literature—is one reason critics have described Meltzl as a proponent of fluid identities. This vision is reflected in symbolic gestures, such as the reordering of the journal's title two years after its inception:

"From New Year's Day 1879 our paper continues to appear in a new form. From now on, it has the main Latin title at the top, while the Hungarian title comes as the second main title, a humble host accompanying the guests. In this way we hope that the strong scientific character of our polyglot journal becomes clearly visible [...] and from now on we will be spared the accusation that we are doing something to satisfy a petty local-patriotic entitlement. But we also have no intention of galvanizing a mummy with the introduction of Latin, alongside which, of course, every modern language in our literary exchange is considered to have equal rights."⁵⁴

The fact that most of the articles, concerned with literary exchange in Europe and sometimes outside its territory, also register the location of writing (whether it be Paris, Leipzig, Melbourne or Boston) contributed to the impression of a journal based in Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg yet located everywhere in the world. Perhaps no issue of *Acta Comparationis* materializes the paradox of situated ubiquity better than the one published on the 15th of January 1884, where the sixteen pages of the paper offer the reader a journey across four continents, not zoomed out in their most "representative" literatures or phenomena, but zoomed in so as to register minor literatures or genres: a "Japanisches kinderspiel" stands along a song of rite of the North American Iroquois community, transcribed in its own language, while a "Maurisch-Arabische Volkslieder aus Tunis" is accompanied by a "Transilvanischen Zigeunerlieder" from Bontsida/Bontsida/Bruck.⁵⁵

49. Although the Romani community is far from being privileged among other ethnicities of the empire, its special status in Hungaria was noted by travelers in the second half of the nineteenth century. While not avoiding certain racist presupposition, important observations in this respect were made by Emily Gerard, the Scottish author interested in the Transylvanian folklore: "In every other country where the gypsies made their appearance they were oppressed and persecuted—treated as slaves or hunted down like wild beasts. So in Prussia in 1725 an edict was issued ordering that each gypsy found within the confines of the country should be forthwith executed; and in Wallachia, until quite lately, they were regarded as slaves or beasts of burden, and bought and sold like any other marketable animal. [...] In Hungary alone these wanderers found themselves neither oppressed nor repulsed, and if the gypsy can be said to feel at home anywhere on the face of the globe it is surely here; and although Hungarians are apt to resent the designation, Tissot was not far wrong when he named their country 'Le pays des Tziganes,' for the Tziganes are in Hungary a picturesque feature—a decorative adjunct inseparable alike from the solitude of its plains as from the dissipation of its cities." Emily Gerard, *Land Beyond the Forest. Facts, Figures and Fancies from Transylvania* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1888), 242.

50. *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténeti Lapok*, I sz, January 15 (1877): 26.

51. *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, Totius Seriei 5, no. 41 (1879): 932.

52. M.[eltzl], "The Black Wodas. An Inedited Gipsy Ballad. Original Text with Translation," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, Totius Seriei 6, no. 51 (1879): 11.

53. Shu-mei Shih, "Comparison as Relation," in *Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses*, ed. Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 79.

54. "Von Neujahr 1879 weiter erscheint unser Blatt in neuer Folge; und zwar trägt es den lateinischen Haupttitel hinfort an der Spitze, während der magyarische als zweiter Haupttitel, ein bescheidener Wirt dem Gasten folgend, an letzte Stelle kommt. Wir hoffen auf diese Weise den streng wissenschaftlichen Charakter unseres polyglotten Blattes auch äusserlich unzweideutiger, als bislang auszudrücken; u. hinfort verschont zu bleiben, von dem Vorwurf, dass es uns etwas um Befriedigung eines localpatriotisch abderitischen Kitzels zu tuen sei u dgl. m. Aber ebenso wenig beabsichtigen wir Galvanisierung einer Mumie, mit der Einführung des lateinischen, neben welchem selbstverständlich jede moderne Sprache sie mag sein, welche sie will—in unserem litterarischen Verkehr nach wie vor als gleichberechtigt gilt." *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, Totius Seriei 5, no. 41 (1878): 934.

55. *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, Totius Seriei 15, nos. 141-142 (1884).

Conclusion

The exercise of revisiting of the origin stories of comparatism within the broader call for the decolonization of the discipline must be accompanied by a closer examination of the juxtaposed hierarchies (well established or embryonic) embedded in these projects. Furthermore, such critical unpacking should strive to include in the scholarly conversation all the actors engaged in this relational arc. The narrative of Meltzl and *Acta Comparationis* as a project of writing from the borderline not only reinforces Eurocentric or North American hegemonial positions, according to which anything outside this symbolic territory can be labelled as “margin,” but also risks obscuring other relations of subalternity. Rather than a unilinear narrative, *Acta Comparationis* unfolds several juxtaposed stories, equally relevant for a de-romanticized birth of the discipline: the story of a multilingual Eastern European empire that yields a cultural project parallel to those of more established Western empires; the story of the Hungarian culture, newly elevated to an imperial status, attempting to overcome the hegemony of German language by using it as a vehicle for gaining world recognition; the story of the universalist ambitions of *Acta Comparationis*, which maps an impressive array of languages and literatures, yet only assigns them primarily archival functionalities; the chronicle of a Transylvanian journal disputed between the multilingualist declarations of the empire and the monolingual aspirations of its constituent ethnicities; and, not least, an exemplary meta-narrative which acknowledges the fact that asymmetries are foundational to the establishment of the discipline. *Acta Comparationis* offers a forceful example of how “inequality is constitutive for the inaugural moments”⁵⁶ and that, rather than being born under universalist presuppositions, cultural comparison emerged as a symptom of entangled subalternities.

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