

Early Spectra of Comparatism: Meltzl and Maiorescu

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Abstract: The article begins by enquiring what the project of redescribing the history of a phenomenon such as Romanian comparatism entails theoretically. I provide a brief operational sketch based on two axes, the historical/hermeneutical and the memorial/auratic. I propose the image of a two-fold spectrality for the key figures analyzed, Hugo Meltzl and Titu Maiorescu: theoretical specters that can be identified within their texts and the haunting spectrality of their possible or repeated return. The article offers comparative/contrasting readings of two significant texts, Meltzl's "Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur" [Preliminary Tasks of Comparative Literature] (1887-1878) and Maiorescu's "Literatura română și străinătatea" [Romanian Literature Abroad] (1882), showcasing their distinct visions of comparatism.

Keywords: Comparatism, world-literature, modernity, Hugo Meltzl, Titu Maiorescu

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The destinal autoscopy of humanist disciplines continues unabated; self-scrutinizing rewritings of the past with a view towards the present or future are always going on somewhere. Like other strands of the humanities, comparative literature has subjected itself to the typical ritual of death/revival or end/not-end, of post(s) and other transforming prefixes, in a wholly modern historiological rite of renewal. In the context of the project this essay is a part of, a global history of Romanian comparatism through an inter-imperial lens, I provide a brief *procedural* preamble, which synthesizes what I believe is being done in research of this type. The first operative dimension is the discipline's working relation with its own history. Once a discipline has refashioned itself into a multiverse of studies, as comparative literature seemingly presents itself nowadays, one would imagine that a freer relation to the temporality of works would be frequently entertained in contemporary theoretical work. That a dispensation from the holy of holies in critical thought—the mechanics of historical influence as cultural molding dominant—would perhaps be in effect. That a look back towards the origin story would not always be *de rigueur*. That awareness about the contingency of our observations would embolden us to go against the grain of the apparent necessity of other contingent observations. Yet, even at a cursory glance, this is not what we see. Therefore, if we do not see the wondrous-monstrous theoretical hybrids that a freer relation to history and theory would—in theory—make possible, what is it that we do see?

More than twenty years ago, at the very end of an extraordinary book that—prodded by historical circumstance—sought to tell the story of modernity (or, rather, that story's figure in the carpet) one last time and be done with it, Fredric Jameson, gazing Janus-like three ways into the past, present and future, wished the following: "What we really need is a wholesale displacement of the thematics of modernity by the desire called Utopia. We need to combine a Poundian mission to identify Utopian tendencies with a Benjaminian geography of their sources and a gauging of their pressure at what are now multiple sea levels. Ontologies of the present demand archaeologies of the future, not forecasts of the past."¹ Very little of that displacement seems to have been actualized. Instead of orienting themselves towards ontologies of the present, the humanities chose—or were compelled—to play a safer game altogether, the same game that the thematics of modernity always had them playing: the forecasting of the past. I suggest this is what we see: a stable model—crystallized in its operations—the direct inheritor of the prevalent foundational and conceptual mechanics of modernity. There are two axes that shape the operations of theoretical work in the field:

1. Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 215.



a) A *historical/hermeneutical* axis that posits history as the ultimate explainer and historical facts (or, I would argue, observations of other historical observations, which may or may not be historical facts) as the agents that legitimize and delegitimize ideas and the use of concepts. This can be called a “historical-cultural” logic and is the default explanatory mode of much of today’s studies. It shapes our approach to culture, the dynamic and power vocabularies we use (change, influence, impact, circulation, inheritance, development, exclusion etc.), the finiteness and scope of understanding: cultural products are embedded in their historical contexts and the best way to understand them is through those contexts. Sometimes, not only the best, but the only conceivable. In fact, this reminds one of Mark Fisher’s famous observation that it is now impossible to imagine an alternative to capitalism.² Indeed, it’s well-nigh unthinkable to posit a different relation to history/historicity, or a different situation of theory in relation to history. In literary studies, the historical/hermeneutical axis works via what might be called *the continuum corollary*. By this, I mean that a silent presupposition common to a lot of interpretive work today posits that there is a continuum between historical social life and literary texts. In other words, we use literary texts (understood here in a wider sense including theoretical texts) as eminently illustrative examples to describe social or historical symptomatology. Or, better put, the literary is described as a social/cultural symptomatology, a tendency against which an early comparatist such as Georg Lukács warned.³ The historical/hermeneutical strain checks at least three of the four maxims of modernity in Jameson’s *A Singular Modernity*: there is always *periodization*, modernity is a *narrative category*, and only *situations* of modernity can and are narrated.⁴ Historically, the “historical method” as the proper way of envisaging a discipline as scientific was a problem of and for the nineteenth-century. Granted, the historicism of yore was unhistorical by today’s standards, and that is where the intervention of contemporary work claims to set things right and back in their historical filiations and dependences, but this is a difference of degree. The critical and historical retrospectiveness of the discipline as a necessity for its present and future self-definition remains virtually the same. One peculiar fact (which nonetheless appears totally normal today) is that not only has it survived to this day, but that it has been adopted as the *de facto* guarantor of the scientific nature of all research in the humanities.

b) A *memorial/auratic* axis that establishes the play between obsolescence and relevance in historical/hermeneutic work. It enshrines the effigies and scans for what it desires to revive. On the one hand, it establishes the types of obsolescence that are forever remanded to the past, on the other, it discovers/creates the aura of past things that can be fore-cast as relevant for the present. The memorial axis is also indebted to a nineteenth-century model: that of national cultures as predilect spaces for memorialization. As such, the sphere of academic discourse may be encroached upon by the sphere of administration, which deems certain national subject matters, and their comparative global, world-intricacies worthy of financial support. This shapes not only the landscape of preponderant explorations, but the discourses of inquiry in the humanities. Most of the contemporary work in literary or comparative studies today is inscribable within the matrix defined by the two axes. The histories, which are always of the re-writing/revivifying kind, are shaped by the morphology of present concerns, current ethical sensibilities and contemporary zones of interest. They are, in the best sense of their explicit or implicit intentions, political histories and historiological interpolations: they write the present as a forecast of a past redescribed in the play between ossified v. vivified. They double as spectral histories: specters of the past populate them, across the divide between obsolescent and relevant, ossified and vivified. At the same time, the image of the past is broken down into spectra, so that the conceptual strata through which it passes be (ideally) identified. The readings in this article address this two-fold spectrality in the texts of two foundational figures, Hugo Meltzl and Titu Maiorescu, who were contemporaries but in all probability were unaware of each other. I am concerned here with the philosophical spectra that shape their theoretical assumptions, many of which are implicit or unacknowledged, as well as with what specters from their writing, if any, that still haunt our contemporaneity or have contributed to the present landscape of the discipline. Two very different models of comparison, as well as two distinct comparative stances emerge, informed by clusters of ideas and epistemic models in circulation at the time, but also by their particular embedded position within an inter-imperial province (but with multiple foci of cultural nationalism)⁵ and, respectively, a fairly young modern national state, Romania. Nevertheless, their geopolitical, philosophical and ideological differences do not render futile the attempt of setting them side by side and comparing them.

The importance of Meltzl and Maiorescu can hardly be overstated; their auras extend well across their fields. On the one hand, Meltzl as the co-founder and main theoretical mind of the first comparative journal in the world, the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* and the proponent of a program of approaches to world literatures according to a principle that appeared revolutionary at the time, the principle of polyglottism. On the other, Maiorescu

2. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zer0 Books, 2009), 2.

3. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, translated from the German by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962), 332–34.

4. Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 94.

5. I am indebted here, of course, to the trailblazing work of Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă in *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022).

as the national figure who shaped the physiognomy of the Romanian literary system and literary modernity in the nineteenth-century, with a resonance extending well into the twentieth century. As Anca Parvulescu, Alex Goldiș and Levente T. Szabó argue in the "Introduction" to this volume, they can be regarded as "nodes" in the "emergence of comparatism globally," which shape "modes of relation."⁶ Or, to go with our metaphor of spectrality, in its first sense, the specters of Meltzl and Maiorescu still visit the contemporary theoretical scene and are still revisited. In the other, the following pages can be seen as an exercise in isolating and analyzing their various spectra.

Prolegomena, primordiality, purity, provinciality

In his famous programmatic three-part text, "Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur" [Present Tasks of Comparative Literature] (1877-1978),⁷ Meltzl is a Kantian. His tasks are *prolegomena* to a future science of comparative literature. The texts delineate principles that act as conditions of possibility and regulatory guidelines. The undertaking is futural, the tasks for the journal are preliminary: as Angus Nicholls has argued, the key attribute in the title (*vorläufig*) really should be translated as "preliminary"/"provisional, rather than "present."⁸ In a Kantian vein of clearing terminological mistakes, Meltzl is careful to delineate the disciplinary frontiers as a pre-condition for understanding the project: for instance, the journal is *polyglot* not *philological*, and it represents an inaugural undertaking: "the very first such effort in this area,"⁹ echoing Kant's "completely new science,"¹⁰ which he urges his readers to "discover for the first time."¹¹ The discipline must therefore be defined and established, but an even ampler effort is required, Meltzl acknowledges: the material on which it will operate also has to be constituted. The enormity of the task only becomes apparent in its eventual failure, or, using a less severe term, the restriction of the spectrum against the unattainable ideal. Like Kant, Meltzl initially gestures with intense impatience and displeasure at his predecessors, in this case, German literary historians and particularly Gervinus' misunderstanding *Weltliteratur* as a cornerstone for cultural nationalism. Like Kant, Meltzl constructs his argument around a triad or a constellation of three disciplines: one that is dismissed as apparently corrupted, unsalvageable or obsolete (you have your pick of two with Kant, between the old metaphysics and the history of philosophy, whereas for Meltzl this is literary history), another that is emergent in its own practice (critical philosophy for Kant, comparative literature for Meltzl, who, as Szabó shows, "calls his method a critical one"¹²) and, at the other end of the historical relation, a future discipline (metaphysics as a possible science for Kant, world literature for Meltzl). The middle term is crucial here: the emerging practice, the work of the present, as yet preliminary, can help rescue, if only partially, the history of literature from its disgraced ancillary condition. As a parenthesis, it is very interesting that a triad of servitudes is mentioned: literary history is the handmaiden of political history (*ancilla historiae politicae*), of the nation, and "at best" (which suggests a tacit hierarchy of the masters) of philology.¹³ It's better to be the handmaiden, or the houseboy, if you will, of philology, rather than of the nation, or of political history seems to be the tacit implication.

The reform of literary history Meltzl speaks of is, again, Kantian: it is made possible by comparative work, *after* a clarification of principles or concepts, and the elimination of preconceptions¹⁴. This will allow the future discipline to become itself, to "consolidate" itself, to use Meltzl's term, which in turn will hopefully bring the ideal of world literature closer. In this relation of re-forming the obsolescence of the past through accurate historical-comparative discernment for a future science, comparative literature is truly a *practice*, an operational mode, rather than a science itself. It's

6. Anca Parvulescu, Alex Goldiș and Levente Szabó, "Introduction: *Acta Comparationis*—An Alternative Genealogy of World Comparatism," *Transilvania*, no. 4 (2025): 1-14.

7. The text was published sequentially in *Acta Comparationis*: the first part in issue 9, May 15, 1877, the second in issue 15, October 15, 1877, and the third in issue 24, October 28, 1878. The first two parts of the text in English: Hugo Meltzl, "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature." Translated by Hans-Joachim Schulz and Philip H. Rhein. In *Comparative Literature: The Early Years* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1973). I use the text as reprinted in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*. Edited by David Damrosch, Natalie Melas and Mbongsieni Buthelezi (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 41-49. The third part, as translated by Angus Nicholls in "Three Translations from the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*: 'Preliminary Tasks of Comparative Literature, Part III: Decaglottism'; 'Laws of Comparative Literary Research'; and 'Goethe's World Literature'," *Comparative Literature* 76, no. 3 (2024): 285-293.

8. 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*, eds. Antje Flüchter, Kirsten Kramer, Rebecca Mertens, and Silke Schwandt (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, Bielefeld University Press, 2024), 106-107.

9. Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 42. "Auf diesem Gebiete ohnehin die allererste Erscheinung," "Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 1, no. 9 (May 1877): 179.

10. Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*. Revised edition. Translated by Gary Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 262.

11. Kant, *Prolegomena*, 255.

12. Levente T. Szabó, "The Glocality of *Acta Comparationis Litterarum*: Local Interpretations of Educational Freedom, Coercive Innovation, and Comparative Literature," *Hungarian Studies Yearbook*, December 2020 (II), 62.

13. Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 42-3.

14. Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 43.



something that is being done, safeguarded by principles and, as with Kant, it will eventually end up substituting itself for the phantasm of the future science. This isn't explicit in the text of "Preliminary Tasks," with the exception, perhaps, of the mention that "world literature [...] can only remain an unattainable ideal,"¹⁵ but it is really acknowledged in the ninth and final thesis of "Goethe's World Literature: Nine theses on the Fiftieth Anniversary of Goethe's Death," published in 1882 in *Acta*: "Accordingly, in this critical-aesthetic sense, the very first *truly human and truly Goethean* world literature is nothing other than our science of the future: COMPARATIVE LITERATURE."¹⁶

Like Kant, Meltzl situates the practice in an uncomfortable ideological position, attempting to thread it between the Scylla and Charybdis of unacceptable visions of the culture/world. For Kant, these were idealism and skepticism, for the Transylvanian scholar they are nationalism ("the unhealthy national principle,"¹⁷ or the "scandalous delusion of the national," as it appears in the 1873-4 keynote¹⁸) and cosmopolitanism ("foggy cosmopolitanizing theories"¹⁹). Meltzl doubtlessly saw these forces unfolding all around in what Kant would have called a dialectical battlefield. It is a tension that echoes through the age and can be detected, for instance in H. M. Posnett's *Comparative Literature*, the first English language book on the subject. It even figures, as we shall see, in Măiorescu's article on "Romanian Literature Abroad," which I will be looking at in the next section—and can be, at its core, considered a friction between emergent cultural nationalisms and one of the spectra of Occidentalism in circulation, its appearance as "cosmopolitanism," or, as David Damrosch calls it "a projected form of nationalism."²⁰ Meltzl's preliminary model for comparative literature, in its Kantian resemblance, is idealistic and utopian, at least in the widest imaginable extension of the principle of polyglottism, which alone affords the full presence of "original forms" and therefore "true comparison."²¹ In fact, I would suggest that the model in its entirety is "descensional": it begins from a pair of principles of unequal stature, with translation always a step below polyglottism because of its indirectness, and it is whittled down, especially in the third part of the triptych, to a manageable scale. The attributes of the manageable scale reveal interesting political and ideological presuppositions that were obscured by the universalist drive of the first formulation of the project. The devolution from principles is, on the one hand, pragmatic, and, on the other, implicitly shaped by cultural pressures in effect: it impacts editorially, regarding what was possible for a journal of the sort, published out of pocket, in a province of the Empire with multiple nationalist cultural pulses throbbing everywhere.

Of course, the most tantalizing question *for us*, a point of interest shaped by the present, pre-liminally, is: what is Meltzl's ideological position? No straightforward answer is possible: on the spectrum between pioneer multiculturalist and self-oblivious participant in the same imperial cultural logic, the specters of Meltzl flare up in *different* locations, but more often than not in a *liminal* configuration with some sort of instability in the conjunction of power and cultural ideology. Ildikó Toth-Nagy places Meltzl "between provincialism and universalism,"²² Szabó argues for an "in-between place for their journal between Hungarian national literature and transnational literary flow"²³ and, in a subsequent work, proposes the interpretation of the *Acta* position as a *glocal* phenomenon "at the interface of the local and the global literary cultures,"²⁴ Damrosch spotlights Meltzl and Posnett in "borderline positions both culturally and institutionally," from which they can understand the ease with which cosmopolitanism could collapse into its seeming opposite, becoming a form of imperial nationalism.²⁵ In turn, Parvulescu and Boatcă have identified the inter-imperial flare with its attendant peril: "As interglottism spurs monoglottism, regional inter-imperiality breeds nationalism and spurs global coloniality."²⁶ The discipline would consolidate, then, on less than solid, shifting ground, choosing, as Szabó has argued,²⁷ the fundamental uncomfortable hybridity of national field vs. transnational comparative critical method, and even retreating in order to ensure

15. Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 47. "Die wahre 'Weltliteratur' kann also unseres bescheidenen Ermessens nur ein unerreichbares Ideal bleiben," "Vorläufige Aufgaben," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 1, no. 15 (1877): 313.

16. Hugo Meltzl, "Goethe's World Literature: Nine theses on the Fiftieth Anniversary of Goethe's Death," 293. "Demgemäss ist ohne zweifeil die allererst in diesem krit.-aesthet. sinne wahrhaft humane und wahrhaft Goethe'sche weltliteratur nichts andres, als unsre zukunfts-wissenschaft: VERGLEICHENDE LITTERATURKUNDE." "Goethes Weltliteratur: Neun Thesen zur Semisaecularfeier des Todes Goethes," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 11, no. 105 (1882): 69.

17. Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 46. "Dieses ungesunde 'Nationalitätsprinzip,'" "Vorläufige Aufgaben," 312.

18. Levente T. Szabó, "Negotiating the Borders of Hungarian Literature: The Beginnings of *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* and the Rise of Hungarian Studies (Hungarologie)," *Transylvanian Review* 12, Supplement no. 1 (2013): 48.

19. Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 45. "Kosmopolitistelnden Nebeltheorien," "Vorläufige Aufgaben," 310.

20. David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2020), 32.

21. Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 44.

22. Ildikó Toth-Nagy, "Zwischen Provinzialität und Universalität. Hugo von Meltzl als Vorläufer der vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft." In *Hugo Meltzl und die Anfänge der Komparatistik*, ed. Horst Fassel (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005), 49–64.

23. Szabó, "Negotiating the Borders," 48.

24. Szabó, "The Glocality," 62.

25. Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures*, 31.

26. Parvulescu and Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern*, 113.

27. Szabó, "Negotiating the Borders," 56–8.

a "strengwissenschaftlichen Charakter," a strong scientific character for the journal, which seems to them endangered by the parochialism of local patriotism.²⁸ The very formula of the prolegomena that "Preliminary Tasks" seems to adopt is intended for scientific solidity.

Clusters of questions still arise: doesn't in-betweenness indeed become or befit comparatism? Hasn't the emerging method inadvertently found its groove in the uncertainty of the non-place in a very specific and overdetermined Transylvanian place? Was the tension between belonging and in-betweenness too pressing, and an aristocratic retreat was in order? Is an essential fault line of the nineteenth century exposed in the distinction, one that still endures in our theoretical vocabulary and our cultural politics? Was Meltzl ahead of his time and was thwarted because no solution was historically possible, and continuing the enterprise, against the loss of cultural recognition and money, was a gesture of defiance towards the "short-witted" contemporaries, but also a gesture toward a future when such recognitions would become possible? The memorial effigy can easily become auratic. But in these multiple receptions, as of different signals, a whole *spectrum* of contingent possibilities is illuminated.

Also, how are we to understand the contradictions in Meltzl's position? To give a glaring example, the following statement: "this unhealthy national principle therefore constitutes the fundamental premise of the entire spiritual life of modern Europe"²⁹ (together with other indictments of nationalism) is separated by less than a page from this statement:

"The ideals of Comparative Literature have nothing to do with foggy "cosmopolitanizing theories"; the high aims (not to say tendencies) of a journal like ours would be gravely misunderstood or intentionally misrepresented if anybody expected us to infringe upon the national uniqueness of a people. To attempt that would be, for more than one reason, a ludicrous undertaking which even an association of internationally famous scholars would have to consider doomed from the start—supposing such an association would be foolish enough to get together for such a purpose. It can safely be assumed that the purposes of Comparative Literature are more solid than that. It is, on the contrary, the *purely national of all nations* that Comparative Literature means to cultivate lovingly—here within the narrow framework of a journal where every nation is made to institute healthy (or just attractive) comparisons, which would not result from other approaches. Our secret motto is: nationality as individuality of a people should be regarded as sacred and inviolable."³⁰

It is understandable that the theoretical positions at *Acta* change over time, that they are inconsistent in different texts, but these two statements occur in such proximity that they should detonate off each other. They don't for everyone: Damrosch, for instance, quotes this passage and has no comments to make about it. One way to interpret them would be to assume that Meltzl is paying lip service to the overwhelming pressures of the Hungarian national culture, and of others emerging around Europe. Or he could be equating cosmopolitanism with socialism or communism and wishes to distance himself from them, as he rejects it in the same breath with "universal fraternization or similar international *nephekokkugia*."³¹ The English translation is partial, not only for omitting Meltzl's parenthesis—"Johannes Scherr's word"—but also for not rendering the entire compound borrowed from the now all-but-forgotten German-Swiss literary and cultural historian: "fraternization swindle." Johannes Scherr's works, as Andrew Cusack argues, recommend him as "the single most significant contributor to the 'worlding' of German literature,"³² and some of the ideas about the national *Geist* of literature may have come to Meltzl from him, together with, as seen above, scoffing at "cloud cuckoo land" of international socialist/communist fraternization. Incidentally, this is a very different concept of cosmopolitanism than the elitist Goethean vision of "internationally famous scholars," which Meltzl also envisions, this time for his journal and for the future discipline. If we understand the meaning of cosmopolitanism as delineated by Pheng Cheah, "viewing oneself as part of a world, a circle of political belonging that transcends the limited ties of kinship and country to embrace the whole of deterritorialized humanity,"³³ then at least in terms of its affective resonance, Meltzl seems to flip the note from cozy

28. Szabó, "Negotiating the Borders," 58.

29. Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 46.

30. Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 45. "Mit kosmopolitistenden Nebeltheorien haben die ideale vergleichender Litteratur gar nichts gemein u. es hiesse die hohen Ziele (um nicht zu sagen: Tendenzen) eines Blattes wie das unsrige kurzzeitig missverstehen oder absichtlich missdeuten, wenn Jemand uns zumutete, dass wir die nationale Eigenart irgend eines Volkes anzutasten im Sinne hätten. Das wäre aber auch mehr als aus einem Grund ein höchst lächerliches Beginnen, auf dessen Gelingen selbst der bedeutendste internationale Gelehrtenbund von vornherein verzichten müsste — vorausgesetzt, dass ein solcher überhaupt närrisch genug wäre sich zu solchem Zwecke zusammenzuschaaen. Die Ziele der vergleichenden Litteratur sind wohl etwas solider. Ist es doch grade das Rein-Nationale jeder Nation, das sie liebevoll cultivieren möchte und zwar auf dem Engen Raum eines Journals, wo dann jede Nation gezwungen ist heilsame (oder auch nur schöne) Vergleiche anzustellen, welche ihr auf andrem Wege entgehen würden! Unser geheimer Wahlspruch lautet im Gegenteil: Heilig u. unantastbar sei die Nationalität als Volksindividualität!" "Vorläufige Aufgaben," 310–311.

31. Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 45. "Mensehenbruderschaftschwinde! (J. Scherr's Wort.) oder ähnlicher internationaler *νεφελοκοκκugia*," "Vorläufige Aufgaben," 310.

32. Andrew Cusack, *Johannes Scherr: Mediating Culture in the German Nineteenth Century* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2021), 82.

33. Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 3.



to frightening. The techniques of restriction that render bearable the hostile vastness of the world combine the circumscription of the national and the provincial. The irreducible tension between the universalism of polyglottism or “panglottism” and the embeddedness of culture in a specific language finds one solution in the manageable project of an anthology, which scales down the uncharted territory of world poetry to manageable size. We also recognize in Meltzl’s “national uniqueness,” as well as in the constant mentions of cultivation as the mission of the journal, Herderian specters, albeit filtered through a multitude of other nationalist perspectives. Meltzl seems here fully committed to enshrining *nationality as individuality of a people* as a principle, calling it—and unveiling it—as a *secret motto* (besides the public ones from Eötvös Loránd and Friedrich Schiller³⁴). A type of universality is opposed to another type of universalism. One can perhaps also recognize here the echoes of a Kantian-sounding universalism towards nations, as sketched in *Of Perpetual Peace*.

We witness a buckling under pressure in Meltzl’s theoretical writings. The very devolution from polyglottism to decaglottism can be read as such: Angus Nicholls has identified the submerged colonial ethnographic propensities, the organicist and social evolutionist presuppositions, the traces of Weimar classicism of this move.³⁵ The deafening silence surrounding subaltern languages of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, conditioned by the strictures of laws governing language use and the university in Transylvania is another example, amply discussed by all commentators: Szabó, Theo D’Haen, Damrosch, Parvulescu and Boatcă, Nicholls. In his contribution to this volume, Alex Goldiș synthesizes it as not merely the resonance of the empire’s multilingualism, but, more poignantly, “the asymmetries within linguistic use and representation.”³⁶ These scholars point to the “struggle,” as Szabó calls it,³⁷ by which the journal constantly attempted to negotiate a “niche somewhere midway between state-sponsored Hungarian ethnonationalism, on the one hand, and their own purportedly polyglot and antinationalist conception of comparative literature, on the other.”³⁸ They also point to, as Parvulescu and Boatcă show, entrenched hierarchies of imperial languages.³⁹ Nevertheless, the passage above doesn’t seem to strain against an oppressive dictate. Rather, it seems to embrace the national as the secret core, not just any “national,” but the “*purely national of all nations*” (Meltzl’s emphasis). The conflation of universalism, essentialism and individualized national character almost makes this sentence ambivalently undecidable: the purely national may just as well be a universal essence and the most particular character itself. I would argue that this stance is connected with the insistence on the principle of polyglottism as “*direkte Verkehr*”⁴⁰ (“*direct commerce*”), on preserving the purity of “*litteraturlosen Völker*”⁴¹ (the “*literatureless peoples*”⁴²), and on the weight folk literature maintains in Meltzl’s aesthetics, by a primate of primordially and purity. One of Meltzl’s constant fascinations, which can be read as the anthropological colonial reflex towards primitiveness, is with primordial purity. In this reading, “the purely national” as the primordial reality of nations chimes in tune with the polyglot character of the intended enterprise. “Sacred” and “inviolable” are commonplace political terms in the language of nationalisms, but they are also attitudes towards primordially, and the two meanings are here in superposition. The future science of comparative literature, at least in this interpretation, appears nostalgic and passéist, quite at odds with “the nineteenth century evolutionist paradigm of simple to complex development.”⁴³ Meltzl’s *Prolegomena* sketch, perhaps against best intentions and oblivious filiations, proves an unstable compound, attempting to keep together elements from a variety of theoretical models that are hardly compatible.

To add a final ingredient to the mix, let me say a few words on the idea of place, this place from which the puzzling compound of the discipline was envisioned, this time orienting it spectrally towards the future. Meltzl is keenly aware of the situation from which he speaks, of his peripherality: far away from the expected regions where the auroral effort should be happening in the “present”: only the German, the French, and the Italian, he mentions, even have a name for this new thing (a “*designation*” is his term). But they do not yet have what Meltzl has: a journal and a vision for the future. The provincial principle of hope has always been to be the first, or the best, at something, and Meltzl is certainly proud of being the first at something that barely exists yet brims with enormous potential. Like Kant from Königsberg, Meltzl from Klausenburg thrums with anticipation to lay the groundwork for the future science, from his little provincial “capital,” where, as Szabó argues, a pocket of excessive local freedom may have been created, institutionally but against the control of the state.⁴⁴

34. Meltzl, “Present Tasks,” 44.

35. Angus Nicholls, “Aesthetics and Anthropology in the Early Years of Comparative Literature: The *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*,” *Comparative Literature*, 76, no. 3 (2024): 113–16.

36. Alex Goldiș, “Meltzl and World Literature Studies: A Case of Mirrored Colonialism,” *Transilvania*, no. 4 (2025): 31–41.

37. Szabó, “Negotiating the Borders,” 56–7.

38. Nicholls, “Aesthetics and Anthropology,” 304.

39. Parvulescu and Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern*, 101–104.

40. Meltzl, “Vorläufige Aufgaben,” 309.

41. Meltzl, “Vorläufige Aufgaben,” 311.

42. Meltzl, “Present Tasks,” 45.

43. Nicholls, “Aesthetics and Anthropology,” 305.

44. Szabó, “The Glocality,” 62.

In theory, the *province*, if we may rescue something from the imperial ruin that burdens the term, would end up short-circuiting not only the fixities of imperial geography by settings its sights beyond the capital/nation/empire and connecting to points *without* (outside and in the absence of) the Empire, but re-configuring the Globe by *anthologising* it, a fragmented and fragmentary collection, but also a network of *pure provinces*. Nicholls has shown how this was related to the hopeful reliance on fastest technology of the age: the postal system (an arrangement that was to endure for a century or more where literary journals are concerned).⁴⁵ Not only is the province wishing to connect itself to points outside of the immediate empire, but it also wants to become the collection point, the *hub*, as we would call it today, of what is epitomal in world poetry: in the trimmed down guise of two poems each, straddling the “developmental” barrier between *Volksliedliteratur* and *Kunsliteratur* folklore and “artistic” literature. In so doing, it would negate the constraints of its geographic, historical, imperial, national, linguistic relations of power contesting their respective hegemonies. As the province vanishes in its global connections, the figure of a network perhaps starts to emerge: a network of friends and acquaintances with the same literary and cultural affinities, the proto-formula for the networks of today. If Meltzl envisioned something of the sort, it was not too bad a ghost from the future to envision.

Controlling the echo and the loop of foreignness

At first sight, Titu Maiorescu is the opposite of Meltzl: instead of a peripheral voice seeking to boom across the imperial and inter-imperial territories, an endeavor misunderstood, if not scorned by most of his contemporaries, Maiorescu shaped the dominant ideology of literature in Romania, one that would keep being revisited for well over a century and shaped the conceptual horizon of criticism, as shown, for instance, by Andrei Terian in the case of George Călinescu.⁴⁶ Unlike Meltzl, but perhaps *like* Meltzl’s contemporaries of a more nationalist bent, Maiorescu shows little interest in semi-peripheral literatures, other than the Romanian, which he understands as both minor/peripheral and central, in a cognitive dissonance common to central and eastern European literary nationalisms. Furthermore, similarly to Meltzl, he is also part of the binomial tension of culture at the end of the nineteenth century between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, within which he is the embodiment of the former pole. Boatcă has reset this outlook as a vision that postulates “the borderline between the Western core and the Eastern European periphery as a new locus of enunciation from which it was possible to rethink modernity.”⁴⁷ Thinking and writing “from the periphery, not only about it” would thus set Meltzl and Maiorescu in similar postures in the “peripheral regions of the world-system,”⁴⁸ enmeshed in comparable power relations.

As is the case with Meltzl, Maiorescu’s patchwork of philosophical filiations is of interest, as it anchors the text and provides clues for historical/hermeneutical symptomatology. Traditionally, Hegel⁴⁹ and Schopenhauer have been mentioned as trademark influences, and Lessing has been put forth by Ana-Stanca Tabarasi.⁵⁰ Recently, Teodora Dumitru has argued convincingly⁵¹ that Schopenhauer and Johann Friedrich Herbart are the main influences on Maiorescu’s theory of poetry. While I agree with Dumitru’s argument as regards the theory of poetry, I’d keep Hegel around, especially for the cases in which Maiorescu talks about literature/art in social terms, as his ascensional logic of sublimation (i.e. through form, art elevates/raises the material to universality etc.) is undoubtedly Hegelian. To the axis thus configured (Herder–Hegel–Schopenhauer–Herbart), an overall stadial vision of cultural/spiritual development, derived from social evolutionism, which Maiorescu mentions explicitly in the article I am concerned with, ought to be added. There is also a detectable concern for a futural vision of literature that I will call proto modernist. Its symptom is the realization—often implied or tacit—that the forms of the future might not be the ones on which literary nationalism has staked its claims (folk poetry, lyrical poetry), but others that are currently emergent: social prose: the novella and novel that circumscribe their material to the lower classes. Maiorescu still sticks with peasantry as the embodiment of national character, but there’s a half-step towards conceiving the modern novel as a social realist novel.

“Romanian Literature Abroad,” or, as I’d like to (mis)translate it, “Romanian Literature and Foreignness,” published on New Year’s Day, 1882, in *Convorbiri literare*, strikes out from the beginning with the most sonorous note that is heard throughout Maiorescu’s work: an ancient Herderian mystique of embodiment, the base note of the entire critical superstructure (as it is, incidentally, for Meltzl): “It goes without saying,” he writes, “that part of this interest is directed towards Romanian

45. Nicholls, “Stadial Change,” 100.

46. Andrei Terian, *G. Călinescu: A cincea esență* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2009), 96–99.

47. Manuela Boatcă, “The Eastern Margins of Empire: Coloniality in 19th Century Romania,” *Cultural Studies*, nos. 2–3 (2007): 374.

48. Boatcă, “The Eastern Margins,” 381.

49. See, for instance, Liviu Rusu’s “Studiu introductiv,” in *Titu Maiorescu: Din “Critice”* (Bucharest: Editura Tineretului, 1967), 15–16.

50. Ana-Stanca Tabarasi, “Titu Maiorescu și modelul său G. E. Lessing,” in *Studii de istorie a filosofiei românești*, Vol. IV (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2008), 29–44.

51. Teodora Dumitru, “About the Mechanistic–Scientist Origin of the First Theory of Poetry in the History of Romanian Literature: The Influence of Schopenhauer and Herbart on Titu Maiorescu,” in *The German Model in Romanian Culture*, edited by Maria Sass, Ovio Olaru, and Andrei Terian (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2023), 25–51.



literature, as well, as the most direct *manifestation of the character of the people*.⁵² I will be reading Maiorescu's text here somewhat against the grain of its most obvious theoretical, ideological and strategic points, hoping to outline an eerie, almost imperceptible variant of "comparatism." The procedural mechanics of Maiorescu's report (the text is mostly that, a report, o "dare the seamă," or a "state of the art" account) is a kind of echo-gauging: what echoes from afar of our literature here, *translated* there, can be detected and *retranslated* so that the reception under western eyes can be brought home for appraisal and celebration? The work of translation-reception-retranslation provides the critic with a shrinking sample from the passing of literary works through this compound sieve of foreignness and return, but he will take his victories where he can find them. Implicitly, this loop of foreign recognition reinforces national sentiment and bolsters the conviction that the literature is developing and developing as it should. A Goethean echo sounds here, pointing to the question of world literature: or, at least, to a first step of German literature as a foreign/world literature taking "notice" of a new national literature, if not yet to the Goethean dream of a "sense of community" among "literators."⁵³ As Vladimir Biti notes, following Anne Bohnenkamp, Goethe's idea of world literature was: "directly connected with *his perception of the international reception* of his own works. [...] It was not that he initially and anxiously *looked after* the foreign mirrors but instead, in a creatively sovereign reaction, *reflected* on their mirroring, mirrored their refractions back, retransferred their transfers, received their reception, retranslated their translations."⁵⁴

There's certainly an anxiety of recognition bubbling beneath the surface of Maiorescu's attempt at retranslating the foreign echo as validation, a mirrored effect of what Biti calls the "imperial self-securing system of world literature."⁵⁵ As Emanuel Modoc argues in his article for this volume, this would connect Maiorescu to Meltzl's "Eurocentric view, which, not unlike Goethe's, did not propose to jettison the national out of literature, but merely to overcome its pitfalls while also maintaining a hegemonic hierarchy."⁵⁶ It can be argued that a similar drive for recognition animates both Meltzl and Maiorescu, but from different ends of the process and across the irreducible difference of world vs. national literature. The former advocates for universal recognition, with all the caveats and the compromises mentioned above, whereas the latter desires recognition almost as a vindication. Maiorescu is blind here to the semi-peripheral world around, obviously, but more in the sense that the *terra incognita* beyond the borders of the national culture is really not his purview. Comparison, in his view, is a univocal, vertical, aspirational relation between the younger, minor culture and the major one, mediated through the historical-rhetorical figures of development and delay (which have continued to infuse cultural debate in Romania for a century afterwards and still do). Maiorescu concedes that the recent interest in Romanian literature has been intensified recently by historical events: "the bravery of our army in the war across the Danube," i.e. the victories in the Russo-Turkish War, spurring Western interest for the "entire life of the Romanian nation," which has shown "greater value than was presupposed."

For Maiorescu, the West is almost exclusively Germany, and he relishes in the emergence there of "an entire movement of literary criticism relating to our intellectual life, that is, to that part of it which is expressed in poetic form."⁵⁷ A double critical reading is engaged: the reading of German critics and a reading by Maiorescu of the German critics, which is mostly detectable in *selection*, as he programmatically refuses to provide his own opinion. What he searches for, however, is an *effect*, the measure of recognition: "the effect produced upon the foreign audience by the Romanian literature it has had access to."⁵⁸

The way in which the interplay between the communal and the individual functions rhetorically is relevant for the theoretical parallax of the continuum between the literary and the national. Whereas elsewhere the gist of criticism for Maiorescu is the individualization of the artist for better assessment (as, for instance, Meltzl does with Petöfi), here the national literature is a generic entity that is symptomatic for the generic nation. The echo is tuned to the foreign effect, or vice versa, as individual expressiveness is diffused into a socialized foreign reception: "Romania can gaze contentedly and proudly upon the healthy and strong growth of its national literature, which in lyrical poetry has almost reached the height of the most beautiful productions of this genre among other nations," Maiorescu reads from *Literarische Beilage der Montags-Revue* (1881) about the collection of *Romanian poetry* translated by Carmen Sylva and Mite Kremnitz. The general diagnostic is followed immediately by individualizing notes for a poet or another (Alecsandri and Eminescu in this first example). I would suggest that we deal here with the same register of the "aesthetic" found in Meltzl recanting of polyglottism and its decanting down to decaglottism, which was identified and precisely analyzed

52. Titu Maiorescu, "Literatura română și străinătatea," in *Critice*, vol. 1 (Bucharest: Minerva, 1984), 443. All excerpts in my translation from Romanian.

53. See Stefan Hoesel-Uhlig, "Changing Fields: The Directions of Goethe's *Weltliteratur*," in *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 40.

54. Vladimir Biti, *Tracing Global Democracy: Literature, Theory, and the Politics of Trauma* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 160.

55. Biti, *Tracing Global Democracy*, 161.

56. Emanuel Modoc, "Nationalizing Meltzl: Thomas Frühm's Concept of *Weltliteratur*," *Transilvania*, no. 4 (2025): 91-100.

57. Maiorescu, "Literatura română și străinătatea," 443.

58. Maiorescu, "Literatura română și străinătatea," 444.

by Nicholls⁵⁹ as the matrix at the intersection of aesthetics and anthropology. One encounters not only the same legitimizing hierarchy between poetry and prose, or the novel, as well as the same legitimizing canon (world languages have world-level literature to which minor national languages aspire), but also the same Goethean distinction between health and (tacitly here) sickness⁶⁰, transplanted unto the organicism of the growing body of a national literature. In fact, the German reviewer seems to prefer the “natural simplicity” of Iacob Negruzzi’s poems to the murkier (“lack of clarity”) “pessimism” of Eminescu.⁶¹ A different reviewer—for the *Neue Preussische (Kreuz-) Zeitung*, then chimes in exactly the same terms, mentioning the preponderant bent of “the Romanian muse towards sorrow,” which warrants Mihai Eminescu’s presence, but also the sporadic “livelier bursts of joy” in the volume.⁶² There exists, for these reviewers, a very clear background register for assessing poetry, which colors interpretation with the hues of Weimar classicism and Romanticism (unhealthier pessimism) decanted through Schopenhauer.

An interesting question here is that of silent control. What I mean by this is the invisible hand of the critic editing the foreign reception before disseminating it back in the country. Maiorescu explicitly mentions a few of these control moves, such as glancing over views on Romanian literature, albeit favorable, from publications of “lesser importance for the literary opinion in Germany”⁶³—i.e. sticking to the big shots. It would be an interesting subject for another paper to follow up on the selection of German magazines, map their ideological position and draw the conclusions about Maiorescu’s selective control. But in the text I am concerned with here, most of the editorial process is unseen and some of it can be reconstructed. For instance, Maiorescu quotes a passage from *Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung* commending works by Ioan Slavici, Iacob Negruzzi, Alexandru Odobescu and Nicolae Gane, but also the general appraisal of the book (*Rumänisches Skizzen*, 1877) as “far above the literature of ordinary novels,”⁶⁴ which not only betrays the German scorn towards the popular variety of novels, but also confirms Maiorescu’s bedrock aesthetic assumption about value stemming from the continuum between text and “national character,” as evinced by another passage selected from the same journal, discussing the sequel volume (*Neue Rumänisches Skizzen*, 1880). Here the German reviewer notes that works by Slavici (“Gura satului”) and Gane (“Andrei Florea”) “allow us to watch from extremely close up the life of the Romanian peasant, that is of the Romanian nation almost in its entirety.”⁶⁵ The perfect co-extensiveness of the peasantry to the nation, which must have pleased Maiorescu no end, barely obscures the imperial patronizing gaze of the German urban intellectual towards the rural periphery of the Romanian state. This must have been a common perception, because Maiorescu quotes passages from two other magazines, *Magazin für die Literatur des Auslandes* (which Meltzl also appreciates as “good”) and *Gegenwart*, that both equate the national character with the peasantry (“common man in his peaceful rural idyll”⁶⁶). Two associations arise from the German reviewers, concurrent with Maiorescu’s own views: first, the “awakening of the national feeling of the people,” previously ignored by Western eyes, as simultaneous with the emergence of “powerful literary workmanship;” and second, the tendency to equate the rural with realism: “characters are so alive, drawn with such palpable realism [...] they stand before as they were pulled right out of life [...] The author depicts his little tableau which such precision and realist surety.”⁶⁷ The conjugation of the two falls squarely within the bounds of an imperial hierarchical and developmental model: the foreignness of Romanian rural prose for German eyes situates it in a place that is at the same time primordially direct (“right out of life”), civilizationally remote and historically lagging behind Western developmental standards: “all [these novellas] bear the mark of a young literature, which proceeds guardedly... on a less beaten track. In all of these pieces the element is missing in which the literature of Europe with its old civilization nowadays finds its centre of gravity: psychological analysis. This lack becomes, depending on the subject matter, either a flaw, or a merit.”⁶⁸

Romanian literature, then, is markedly “young,” with the complicated ambivalence of the term in its Occidentalist acceptance: refreshingly energetic *and* stadially yet to accede to the discovery of individual psychology as a literary tool. Residual romanticism (young literatures as refreshing in their directness of impression, as in their realist naivety) *and* social evolutionism (stadial change, in Nicholls’ terms, can only situate them on a lower rung, or in a historical-cultural delay) are *both* in play here *at the same time*, fused in an aesthetic-anthropological mechanism that shapes both appraisal and aspiration. To give another example, the *Gegenwart* reviewer scoffs at

59. Nicholls, “Aesthetics and Anthropology,” 323-4.

60. Nicholls, “Aesthetics and Anthropology,” 324.

61. Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea,” 445.

62. Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea,” 446.

63. Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea,” 446.

64. Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea,” 447.

65. Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea,” 447–48.

66. Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea,” 448.

67. Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea,” 448.

68. Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea,” 448.



the embedded exoticism of the German outlook on younger nations, while praising folk literature in a way that is entirely consonant with Meltz's views: "The ironic remark about 'interesting nationalities' has been greatly abused. Yet Romanian folk life is truly interesting and undeserving of irony. It possesses a treasure trove of folk songs of which it cannot be ashamed (first collected by Alecsandri), it has proverbs full of wisdom."⁶⁹ Yet, implicitly, the reviewer confirms the model of Romanian literature "organically" emerging from the folk literary corpus, wherein one finds their value, even as they transcend the merely folk relevance to be raised to the status of "artworks": "[*Popa Tanda* by Slavici] is a jewel of the book, even *from the standpoint of the artwork as such*, besides its value for the history of culture."⁷⁰

The dynamics of foreignness is employed by Maiorescu mostly as a positive feedback loop, reintroducing selected parts of the output, as circulated "abroad," through the circuit of foreignness and back, into the system to confirm basic assumptions and retrench the description of the system itself. This may include reinforcements of value judgments that are less apparent within the system, such as the fact that writers well received in Germany are less celebrated at home: "many readers will ruefully realize that the writings of certain of our authors, which abroad are elevated next to Turgenev and Auerbach, are less known and, it would appear, less treasured in their own homeland. But let us only speak of it among ourselves, so that foreigners might not hear us. And until foreigners hear us and understand us in our very language, let us hope that we will have redressed the matter and abandoned the indifference in which we dwell today."⁷¹ Incidentally, this part of the loop could easily be included in the panoply of reflexes and complexes characteristic of "small literatures" as discussed by Pascale Casanova,⁷² as it is still being played in the twenty-first century in relation to "certain of our authors," such as Mircea Cărtărescu. We can easily detect in the passage above—and, by extension, in a large part of Maiorescu's text—the comparatist reflex of a small literature trying to *tune* itself between internal and external appraisal, between the hush-hush interiority of making itself presentable, and the national aspiration to the status of a major culture ("when foreigners will hear us and understand us") mentioned by Maiorescu perhaps not without a hint of self-irony. We can also choose to read it, as I do here, as a form of re-entry within the system of the distinction between at home and abroad, self-reference and foreignness. A part of this is also the homage Maiorescu pays to Wilhelm von Kotzebue, not only for the translations of Romanian folk poetry, but also for his "original works":

"The matter of these works is extracted from the life of Moldavian Romanians and is treated with such accuracy, such love of truth and, concomitantly, love of Romanians, that they paint a faithful icon of our country of 30 years ago, which surely contributes to making us better understood and appreciated abroad. We will endeavor to have these writings of Mr. Kotzebue translated into Romanian, for if they be interesting to Germans, they will surely be even more interesting and precious to Romanians, before whom they set the mirror of an age forever past."⁷³

The foreign mirror, this mirror of foreignness, presents a "faithful icon". Maiorescu uses the figure of the realist mirror mixed with language that is connoted religiously here, about something that preserves not only a faithful image of something historically and perennially relevant, here and abroad, but also one that is irredeemably past, a reliquary of sorts. A form of (re)translation—autochthonous matter getting the *foreign* treatment, matter passed through *foreignness* and *returned* to us transformed—does not betray fidelity. If anything, it enhances it, contrary to the descending logic of Meltz's principles of comparatism. A form of re-entry is envisioned that is at once memorial and auratic, historical and presentist. This retranslation will enshrine the past historically as faithful, but its other effect is to outline—like a contrast substance—the epochal obsolescence of that age: "Only twenty-five years have passed since the age therein depicted, yet we can hardly recognize ourselves in Mr. Kotzebue's sketches."⁷⁴ The returned form can be used internally to create the *effect of modernity*, the recognition shock of the present, of historical and civilizational progress (always a comparative effect), about which Maiorescu is ambivalent: the modern nation has been irreversibly changed, it attuned itself to Western models, yet does this not threaten the very core of the aesthetic model that Maiorescu is devoted to? He provides a quick and grazing dismissal, remarking that "only the Romanian peasant, for better and worse, and the beauty of nature have remained unchanged and are still the steadfast element in the great motion of the Romanian homeland."⁷⁵ Yet the question seems to have cut deeper than the mere reaffirmation of aesthetic tenets can bandage,

69. Maiorescu, "Literatura română și străinătatea," 449.

70. Maiorescu, "Literatura română și străinătatea," 449, my emphasis.

71. Maiorescu, "Literatura română și străinătatea," 449.

72. Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, translated by M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 175–187.

73. Maiorescu, "Literatura română și străinătatea," 451.

74. Maiorescu, "Literatura română și străinătatea," 451.

75. Maiorescu, "Literatura română și străinătatea," 452.

because he whips up a succinct theory of the novel by way of explanation of the “unexpected favor” Romanian literature has enjoyed abroad. It is a surprising turn of the essay, as if the reflection on foreignness compels him to reformulate his theoretical standpoint, as if some tension in the loop requires better description. Nonetheless, I suggest it can be understood in the same logic of re-entry as the examples above, in which the comparative detour through foreignness gets reintegrated in the system and enhances its complexity. The redescription begins from the core itself, or what Pascale Casanova calls the “Herder effect,”⁷⁶ the precursor and complement of the modernity effect:

“What must have struck a chord with foreigners in the poems of Alecsandri, Bolintineanu, Eminescu and Șerbănescu, and the novellas of Slavici, Negruzzi and Gane is, besides their aesthetic measure, their national originality. All these authors, abandoning the blind imitation of foreign conceptions, were inspired by the characteristic life of the people and have presented to us what the Romanian is, what he thinks and feels in the most elevated part of his ethnic character. This original element of matter, dressed in the aesthetic form of universal art, keeping even in this form as a remnant of its primitive soil, must have delighted any enlightened man and drawn his sympathetic attention towards our people. For any people’s individuality has its absolute value, and as soon as it is expressed in the powerful form of the beautiful, it is met with resounding love throughout mankind as an integral part of it.”⁷⁷

This is a peculiar combination of Herderianism and—*pace* Teodora Dumitru—Hegelianism, particularly reminiscent of passages on artistic inspiration and originality in “The idea of Artistic Beauty, or the Ideal” (“true inspiration takes fire on some specific material which the imagination seizes with a view to expressing it artistically,”⁷⁸ “if we ask further wherein artistic inspiration consists, it is nothing but being completely filled with the theme, being entirely present in the theme, and not resting until the theme has been stamped and polished into artistic shape,”⁷⁹ “originality is identical with true objectivity”⁸⁰ etc.). Starting from the aesthetic matrix set above and from the reading material at hand, which features a motley comparative crew of Romanian and Western European authors (Slavici, Creangă, Flaubert, George Sand, Turgenev, Dickens), Maiorescu declares himself convinced that “one can straightforwardly formulate a new aesthetic principle of the modern novel, in contradistinction with tragedy.”⁸¹ While the tragic hero is active (apud Aristotle and Goethe), the heroes of novels (Maiorescu also calls them “romantic heroes”) are essentially passive, beset by the burden of circumstance, “as under a fatality” and they therefore “portray in themselves the whole impersonal power of class tradition.”⁸² This little impromptu theory saunters anachronistically from Aristotle to Goethe, from Herder to Hegel, to the typologies of the realist novel, and shoots way past Hegelianism and really close to defining the lower classes as the proper subject matter of the modern novel: “the hero of the novel is from the very beginning fatally set within the limits of class and within the limits of nationality, and their evolution resides in the struggle of their suffering with these limits towards a catastrophe of feeling. In this evolution, the romantic hero is elevated from the strictures of time and space towards a universal human feeling.”⁸³

Granted, the final twist is, again, Hegelian, echoing a passage in “The End of the Romantic Form of Art”: “art strips away from itself all fixed restriction to a specific range of content and treatment, and makes *Humanus* its new holy of holies: i.e. the depths and heights of the human heart as such, Mankind in its joys and sorrows, its strivings, deeds, and fates.”⁸⁴ In between the universalist overtones, Maiorescu, like Meltzl, dismisses the novels of “cosmopolitan cultured society,”⁸⁵ but unlike Meltzl, seems to believe—correctly, as it turned out—that the novel would become the artistic form of the future, where the stakes would be, in both new, peripheral and “old Europe” literatures. On an entirely incidental note, it’s surprising to see some of these ideas about the novel and the hero of the novel pop up in similar formulations in Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel*.

A final note: the overall mould of Maiorescu vision is by and large stadial, not Hegelian, or stadial *cum* Hegelian if we allow for a teleology of cultural evolution: not only are there stages of evolution within literature, but, as we discover towards the end of the essay, literature itself is a stage in an evolution of spirit. In “poetic literature we [Romanians] are in progress,” Maiorescu states futurally, whereas “in scientific literature we are backward”:

76. Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, 78.

77. Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea,” 452.

78. G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, volume I. Translated by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 287.

79. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 288.

80. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 294.

81. Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea,” 453.

82. Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea,” 453.

83. Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea,” 454.

84. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 607.

85. Maiorescu, “Literatura română și străinătatea,” 454.



"The cause of this disproportion must be deeper and, if we were called to express it in a single sentence, we would use the following formula from the theory of evolution applied to the spiritual life of the people: the psychological layer of our generation is ready for lyrical poetry and the popular ["poporan" in the original Romanian, i.e. socially focused on the peasantry or the working class] novella, but it is not yet ready for the scientific work. The logical concatenation of a lengthy chain of ideas, which is science, is a later stage of intellectual development and requires a stronger abstract thinking than is found today in most of our heads."⁸⁶

The stadial distinction between poetic literature and scientific literature rests on a distinction between intuitive and abstract knowledge (implicit here), which, as Dumitru has shown,⁸⁷ is traceable back to Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. I would argue that it is molded here on historical development, rather than remaining within the sphere of the subject. We smile perhaps at this quirky hapless variant redolent of "ontogeny repeats phylogeny"—the development of the biological individual's spirit repeats the stages of a process of evolution of the world cultural spirit—which combines social evolutionism and Hegelianism, even as variations of this same idea (without the pseudo-scientific bio-babble) can still be read nowadays in the laments of the contemporary lag in the sciences and humanities. Part of Maiorescu's afterlife in Romanian modernity is that spectra of his theories have become part of the background radiation of our thinking about culture, while his mode of comparatism—with retranslated foreignness as the criterion of self-description—is a specter that still haunts. Still, in his unconcerned conceptual mélange, so characteristic of the wild wild nineteenth century, in the unsupported flights of association, the inevitable blind spots, there seems to abide a kind of agitated freedom of ideas that cannot be encompassed by merely dubbing it either unscientific or a conservative nationalist aesthetic.

At loop's end: the memorial and the auratic

Coeval but likely oblivious of each other, enmeshed in similar power-relations emerging successively from inter-imperial, post-imperial historical and cultural landscapes, and therefore predisposed to what Nicholls calls "hegemonic modes of comparison,"⁸⁸ Meltzl and Maiorescu nonetheless conceived of distinct, contrapuntal profiles of comparatism. Indeed, if Meltzl had veered closer to ethno-nationalist drive of his time, he would not have been far from Maiorescu. On the other hand, it is more difficult to imagine Maiorescu paying real attention to other national literatures in Eastern Europe or elsewhere. Both can be analyzed spectrally as compounding irreconcilable philosophical and theoretical conceptions, in a process of adapting their foreignness to the national, the peripheral, the provincial. Both intermittently espouse universalisms, while paying attention to the specific (in its turn, a universal category) and both politically lean towards conservatism. Both are tentative harbingers of a future modernity that will define their ideas more keenly.⁸⁹ Meltzl's posterity is closer to the auratic end of the spectrum, even if we shun the alluring hagiography of "the first" journal,⁹⁰ whereas Maiorescu has been long enshrined as a memorial effigy, if not entirely confined to a past, obsolete understanding of culture in modernity, as I have argued here. In a significant way, we are part of the same loop of historical/hermeneutic redescription that was beginning to be woven into the future of comparatism.

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86. Maiorescu, "Literatura română și străinătatea," 465.

87. Dumitru, "About the Mechanistic-Scientist Origins," 26.

88. Nicholls, "Stadial Change," 98.

89. For Meltzl, most commentators outline this valence; for Maiorescu, see Boatcă, "The Eastern Margins," 381-2.

90. Parvulescu, Goldiș and Szabó, "Introduction."

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