



(Anti)Imperial Narration in the Mock-Epic Form: Budai-Deleanu and the Transylvanian Project

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Abstract: This article fills the blank space separating two important moments in the transnational and multicultural history of Transylvania. I place in relation *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* [Acta] and the Transylvanian School [SA], an early landmark in the establishment of Transylvanian Romanian national culture. While both movements initiate in Transylvania, *Acta Comparationis* avoids referencing The Transylvanian School, while at same time entertaining the same type of inter-imperial duplicity with regards to the emancipation of the marginal as the Transylvanian School itself does with regards to the emancipation of the Roma. A close analysis of a mock-epic poem by Ioan Budai-Deleanu against the background of the two schools reveals that the inter-imperial position allows a selective plea for nationhood and ethnic dignity while at the time protecting imperial, cultural and socio-political hierarchies and power structures.

Keywords: inter-imperial, translation, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, Şcoala Ardeleană (The Transylvanian School), Țiganiada (The Gypsyad), Ioan Budai-Deleanu

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Almost eighty years before the publication of the first issue of *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* [Acta], a particular school of thought emerged from the regional conditions of inter-imperial Transylvania.¹ *The Transylvanian School* [Şcoala ardeleană—SA] refers to a group of scholars united by their common aspirations with regards to the civil, social, political and cultural rights of Transylvanian Romanians in the Habsburg Empire. Mostly known for the linguistic, historical and literary works of Gheorghe Şincai (1754–1816), Petru Maior (1756–1821), Samuil Micu-Klein (1745–1806), and Ioan Budai-Deleanu (1760–1820), SA authored a political manifesto, a memorandum titled *Supplex Libellus Valachorum Transsilvaniae* [A Pleading Memo of Romanians in Transylvania] which, in spite of being presented to the Austro-Hungarian emperor Leopold II, the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, in 1791, and then again to Francis in later years, failed to produce immediate effects in the lives of Transylvanian Romanians. However, its symbolic value energized the later project of a unified Romanian nation, and fueled a series of cultural and linguistic reforms. The *Supplex* was but one piece in a series of memoranda the peripheralized nations of the Empire sent to Leopold II, enabling him to later ease some of the monarchical control and imperial pressure, as well as to use their proposed measures when envisioning a more bureaucratic, administration-led empire.

My research was prompted by the observation that, in spite of its multilingualism, diversity, anti-imperial stance and multiculturalism, *Acta* fails to mention this once-influential school of thought born in the same region. The SA projects, works, or representatives are not referenced at all, historically, critically, or as counterpoints to the *Acta* endeavours. The first question of why this omission occurs may remain purely rhetorical, but a reading of how SA aligns with the *Acta* school of comparatism—which emerged nearly a century later in the same culturally, politically and confessionally charged place in the Austro-Hungarian Empire—may yield compelling insights, especially within the framework of inter-imperial analysis. Coloring the blind spot of the *Acta* collaborators and editors with regard to SA, exploring the possible meanings of this discursive ellipsis and problematizing its conspicuous absence could add nuance and realism

1. I use inter-imperiality in the sense Laura Doyle gave it in *Inter-Imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), and Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă later developed in *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022), to describe the geopolitical condition of parts of East and Central Europe whose existence and course is not a matter decided locally, at an intra-European level, but in the flexions generated by multiple imperial pressures and pulls, leading to a multitude of positions taken either within, between, or against imperialism.

to the often-romanticized cosmopolitanism of Hugo Meltzl's project, which sometimes occupies the revered place of an origin myth in the history of comparative literature, as Alex Goldiș² contends following David Damrosch's posit.

Methodologically, I aim to carry out a horizontal comparison of ideological, religious-confessional and cultural positions of the two schools,³ mainly through their representatives Budai-Deleanu and Meltzl. This comparison is grounded in historical research, with special attention to the web of relations and tensions that shaped intra-imperial negotiations between institutionalized authorities and growing anti-imperial struggles for the autonomization of thought, expression and creativity from monarchical constraints. I analyze one of the most important literary texts written by Budai-Deleanu, a mock-epic titled *Tiganiada* [The Gypsiad],⁴ in order to explore the textual and discursive strategies of encoding a doublesided and apparently irreconcilable stance: on one hand, a claim to imperial citizenship; on the other, a drive for national-ethnic empowerment. My goal is to bridge the gap between the historical inscription of the two movements (*SA* and *Acta*) within the culturally complex and comparatively diverse climate that led to the formation of modern Transylvanian culture. I also hope to identify a potentially missing link between the region's eighteenth-, nineteenth-century inter-imperiality and the present-day afterlives of the two schools, and to shed some light on the transfer of knowledge and prestige between imperial powers and the local and regional pushbacks striving for greater autonomy and freedom at all levels of life.

At first sight, the two schools of thought—the national-centered, politically-oriented *SA*, and the cosmopolitan-directed and culturally framed *Acta*—could not be more different in scope, aim and action. The question of *SA* being left by the wayside and not getting mentioned in the pages of *Acta* would appear a non-issue. The former's apparent devotion to the Romanian national cause, rather than to a transnational vision of localities, and its clear contribution to the ensuing establishment of a national culture, language, institutions and state—as opposed to the nationless or borderless dissemination of literature, language, and knowledge, generally considered specific to the latter—all seem to point in the direction of a principial hostility between the two schools. However, the clarity of this presumed opposition begins to fade when one takes into account other national biases, which make their way into *Acta*, whether as inadvertent slips or objects of criticism. In this context, *SA* could have served as a useful counterpoint or even a cautionary tale in the debate on national literatures. As far as *Acta* is concerned, multiethnicity, polyglottism and multiculturalism, as well as gender diversity and micro-cultural hybridity, were heavily promoted by the editors and their collaborators. However, on closer inspection, this romanticization of a purportedly democratic project, in which everyone is welcome and could meaningfully contribute, uncovers embedded inequities. These include the abandonment of full-fledged polyglottism in favor of a more preferential decaglottism, and the relegation of women contributors to rather menial positions of intermediaries among male authors and editors (as demonstrated in the present volume, especially in Szabó Levente's paper).⁵ Conversely, *SA* romanticized the idea of an anti-imperial movement grounded in national autonomy and ethnic dignity, only to cozy up to an imperial argument when proposing a symbolic imperial lineage to ancient Rome. This move was intended to restore political and civil dignity to Transylvanian Romanians, setting them apart from other ethnicities. By entertaining this duplicitous positioning with regard to imperiality and the professed dismantling of all inequalities, the two schools of thought—deeply embedded in the history of the multicultural, interglottal Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg—reveal surprising similarities in their inter-imperial maneuvering, while apparently functioning as foils to each other.

Knowledge Routes on Maps of Power Structures

Between 1872 and 1919, the Royal Hungarian University (renamed Royal Hungarian Franz Josef University in 1881), of Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg, where *Acta* was founded, trained over 40.000 students representing the diverse ethnicities of Transylvania: Hungarians, Romanians, Germans, Jewish, Armenians, Roma, etc. as well as the impressive religious hybridity of the Transylvanian world: Protestants (Calvin and Lutherans), Catholics (Roman and Greek), Eastern-Orthodox, Jewish and others. However, of these students, only a little over 2006 (6,5%) were Romanians, despite being the numerically dominant ethnicity in the region. As it is to be expected, the disparity generated frustration among Transylvanian Romanians, while also opening up a space for the Romanian elites to intervene in the transactional relations between imperial authority and the resistance of regional elites to imperial control. The disparity between the numeric majority of Romanians and the representation of the Romanian

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

3. While I am perfectly aware that the nature of the *Acta* project, with its numerous collaborators, languages, cultural interests, spanning over a decade, does not have the homogeneity that would preliminarily define a "school of thought," the elements I take into account enjoy enough consensus among the *Acta* editors and collaborators to speak of a coherent, non-contradictory "school."

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5. See Levente T. Szabó, "Unraveled and Rewoven Ties: Women (Proto)comparatists in the Networks of the First International Journal of Comparative Literary Studies," *Transilvania*, no. 4 (2025): 53–63.



language is mirrored in *Acta*. Romanian culture is categorized under the label of primitive folklore creativity, as shall be further discussed, due in part to a “scientific impulse” modeled after the biological sciences and “the stadial evolutionism of its era,” according to which some cultures exist in a more “embryonic” stage than others, which were seen as responsible for the right, tutored development of the first ones.⁶

In 1698, the Habsburgs had promised the Romanian Eastern Orthodox population of Transylvania the right to preserve their faith and religious traditions, and mainly their social status, in exchange for the Orthodox recognizing Papal authority under the *Union Agreement with Rome*. This is how a very active, vital strand of Romanian intellectualism was born under the religious tutelage of the Jesuits and the *Uniates*, the Greek Catholics. Higher education in academic hotspots like Vienna or Rome became accessible to many Transylvanian Romanians, eager to further spread Greek Catholicism among the burgeoning generations of imperial subjects. This policy of supporting student and faculty migration between Transylvania and Catholic academic centers within the Empire was encouraged—and at times funded—by imperial authorities, as it promised to strengthen the Catholic presence in the Eastern parts of the Empire. These regions, particularly Transylvania, had previously enjoyed a degree of political independence under Ottoman suzerainty, which had allowed Protestantism to thrive as a form of anti-imperial resistance. In turn, the Hungarian and German nobility of Transylvania embraced Protestantism as a means of resisting both the Empire and the Catholic pressure, so they spared no efforts to strengthen their ties to Europe’s Protestant centers of power, mainly by encouraging their students and professors to train themselves there. The choice between academic centers like Leipzig or Heidelberg (where many Protestant Transylvanians were sent, with support from political and confessional Hungarian elites), and Vienna or Rome (where many Greek Catholics and Orthodox students were sent, on stipends and scholarship funded by imperial Catholics) clearly mapped out two geo-culturally routes of student migration and a “concurrence of spatial rearrangements of intellectual authority and political power, financial and emotional support by communities, and personal relations and networks of scholars.”⁷ The competition of power between the two routes was a well-known issue at the time, evidenced by the fact that Dora d’Istria—a great supporter of Meltzl and contributor to *Acta*, who enjoyed the reputation of an icon of nineteenth-century comparatism—suggestively spoke of the “Jesuit tyranny”⁸ and of the journal’s need to address and oppose it.

A continuous ebb and flow between Transylvania and Austro-Hungarian, Italian and German universities had been in place since the sixteenth century and continued into the nineteenth century, both as a means of transferring academic prestige and building the reputation of particular professors, as well as a vehicle of intellectual, political and confessional changes. Much less documented, it remains unclear how and if another ethnic and racial population of the region, the Transylvanian Roma, fall within this mobility network, given their spread into multiple groups in Central and Eastern Europe, such as “the *Vlach* (Wallachia), the *Kalderasá* (coppersmiths), the *Kovači* (blacksmiths), the *Čurari* (sieve makers), the *Aurari* (gold washers), the *Rudari* (miners), the *Ursari* (bear leaders), and the *Lingurari* (spoon makers).⁹ While, like other ethnic groups, the Roma were summoned to take part in national or anti-imperial struggles, by traditional accounts they did not express a unified national or religious identity, although latest research proves the opposite¹⁰. Instead, they were often either forced into an imposed national or religious category or had to choose from among other existing imperial identities. Transylvania was on the one hand a Calvinist outpost, as most of the social elites were Protestants, and a site of anti-imperial tension on the other, following the failure of the sixteenth century Calvinist Transylvanian elites to “protect” the region from the Catholic Habsburgs.¹¹

Budai-Deleanu (1760–1820) was enrolled as a student in Vienna in 1777, where he met his future peers who would later form the core of SA. Their commonality of education, place of birth, and knowledge dissemination played an important role in the coagulation of the group. He dabbled, as most of his fellow students, in physics and mathematics, numismatics, archaeology, statistics, linguistics, aesthetics, music, etc. Mostly, he focused on political sciences and

6. See Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 3–4; Angus Nicholls, “Aesthetics and Anthropology in the Early Years of *Comparative Literature: The Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*,” *Comparative Literature* 76, no. 3 (2024): 302–303.

7. See Peter Meusburger and Ferenc Probáld, “Scientific and Cultural Relations between Heidelberg University and Hungary over Five Centuries,” in *Geographies of the University. Knowledge and Space*, ed. Peter Meusburger, Michael Heffernan, and Laura Suarsana (Cham: Springer, 2018), 43–133; Sándor Tonk, *Erdélyiek egyetemjárása a középkorban* [Peregrination of Transylvanian Students in the Middle Ages] (Budapest: Kriterion, 1979); Gábor Almási, “Touring Europe: Comparing East-central European Academic Peregrination in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century,” in *Study Tours and Intellectual-religious Relationships*, ed. Gábor Almási (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), 17–34; Gábor Almási, *A Divided Hungary in Europe: Exchanges, Networks and Representations, 1541–1699*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2015).

8. See Marta Questa, “Elena Ghika (Dora D’Istria). Storia di una principessa rumena a Firenze, negli anni immed atamente precedenti la nascita di Dino Campana”, available at: <https://www.campanadino.it/index.php/epoca-campana/27-marta-questa-elena-ghika-dora-d-istria>, accessed 9.03.2025.

9. See David M. Crowe, “From Persecution to Pragmatism: The Habsburg Roma in the Eighteenth Century,” *Austrian History Yearbook*, no. 37 (2006): 100.

10. See Luiza Medeleanu. “Absence and Presence of Rromani Voices in *Acta Comparationis: Early Roma Comparatists*.” *Transilvania*, no. 4 (2025): 65–75.

11. More on this in Meusburger and Probáld, “Scientific and Cultural Relations,” as well as in Almási, *Study Tours*.

law, taught by the renowned Joseph von Sonnenfels, a former mentor and teacher of Emperor Joseph II and the source of much of Budai-Deleanu's political thinking and emulation of ideas on social justice. After a brief return to the Transylvanian Blaj/ Balázsfalva/ Blasendorf, the place of his secondary education, Budai-Deleanu returned to Vienna between 1784 and 1787, where "Johann Delian einen Wallachen aus Siebenbürgen" served as a precentor to Saint Barbara Church, due to his frequent conflicts with Ioan Bob, the Bishop of Blaj/ Balázsfalva/ Blasendorf. Highly appreciated by Vasile Balș, an officer on the Aulic Council of War under Joseph II, young Budai-Deleanu was hired as a scrivener/ copyist and translator in the Council's office. While holding this position, the young scholar translated into Romanian a textbook for the secondary school teachers in Bucovina, a set of Austrian laws, among which a code of civil procedure (*Rânduiala judecătorească de obște*), a civil code (*Carte de obște care cuprinde în sine toate pravilele cetățenești*), a penal code (*Pravila de obște asupra faptelor rele și pedepsirea lor*), all of which would serve as useful preliminary work in his lifelong engagement with legal studies and his ambition to build a legal career.

The last turn in Budai-Deleanu's career is his moving to Lemberg/Liov/Lvov/Livău, in 1787, the Capital city of the imperial province of Galicia at the time. There, he was appointed legal secretary to the Province Tribunal—*Tabula Regia*—and married the Armenian Marianna Mikolajewic. He lived there for the rest of his life, until 1820, holding various positions within the judicial system as "a cog in the great wheel of Habsburg bureaucracy."¹² Between 1790 and 1791, he visited Transylvania again, where he became involved in editing the *Supplex Libellus Valachorum*, which he is widely believed to have written almost entirely himself. It is possible that he intended to resettle in Transylvania, but this was never realized, likely due to ongoing tensions with the still-serving and controversial Bishop Ioan Bob.¹³ Budai-Deleanu wrote on law, education, ethnography and folklore (*De originibus populorum Transylvaniae* [On the Origin of the Peoples of Transylvania]), linguistics and literature (*Temeiurile gramaticii românești* [Foundations of Romanian Grammar], *Dascălul românesc pentru temeiuurile gramaticii românești* [Romanian Textbook on the Foundations of Romanian Grammar], *Teoria ortografiei românești cu litere latinești* [Theory of Romanian Writing in Latin Script], *Lexicon românesc-nemțesc și nemțesc-românesc alcătuit de Ioan Budai, chesaro-crăiescul sfetnic la județul nemeșilor din Livău* [Romanian-German and German-Romanian Dictionary by Ioan Budai, legal and imperial advisor of Liov/ Lvov/ Lviv]), and he translated both literary and legal papers.¹⁴

In spite of his remarkable erudition and polymathic education, he is best remembered as a literary figure for his two poems: the satirical *Trei Viteji* [Three Brave Men], a national, creative recycling of the Quixotic narrative, and the mock-heroic *Țiganiada* [The Gypsyiad]. Finalized by 1812, the epic remained virtually unknown fifty years after its author's death, being partially published in *Buciumul* magazine between 1875–1877 (1877 also marking the founding year of *Acta*), and only saw full publication in 1925, over a century after it was written, in a revised, definitive version edited by Gheorghe Cardas. Beyond the challenges of retrieving Budai-Deleanu's manuscripts from his heirs, their publication was also delayed due to the translation and annotation efforts involved. Renewed interest in Budai-Deleanu's work in the early 1900 is probably spurred less by curiosity for his erudition, and more by concerted efforts by Romanian cultural policy-makers in Romanian productions attesting to a valuable national literature production. *De originibus populorum Transylvaniae* also received a belated reception, more than a century and a half later, partly due to the difficulty of the Latin text, elaborated by Budai-Deleanu in multiple versions, eruditely and rhetorically overdone. Ladislau Gyemant, its editor and translator for Editura Enciclopedică in 1991, places this work above SA's generational culture and historiographical vision, aligning it instead with the Göttingen school of historical thought from the second half of the eighteenth century¹⁵.

In turn, Meltzl (1846–1908), after completing two preparatory years in Leipzig (1864–1866), enrolled at Heidelberg University in 1866, earning his PhD in 1872 under the supervision of Karl Bartsch (1832–1888), a renowned scholar of German and a thorough erudite. Bartsch is responsible for introducing young Meltzl to the Goethean "world literature" view on the literatures of the world, as well as to universalizing assumptions about the aesthetic and moral values of German literature. The auspicious opening of the University of Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg in the same year as his doctoral defense, 1872, enabled the newly minted Doctor of Philosophy to become full professor of German at the age of twenty-six and to specialize in comparative literature. His manner of work, indebted to

12. Caius Dobrescu, "Soft'Commerce and the Thinning of Empires: Four Steps Toward Modernity," in *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, ed. Christian Moraru, Andrei Terian and Mircea Martin (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 79.

13. More accounts on how bishop Bob apparently took advantage of his position to champion his own agenda with the imperial representatives instead of the Supplex, as well as on how he is made responsible for censoring Gheorghe Șincai and having him imprisoned, throughout the four volumes *Școala Ardeleană*. Antologie de texte alcăt. și coord. de Eugen Pavel, pref. de Eugen Simion (Bucharest: Editura Fundației Naționale pentru Știință și Artă, 2018). For extensive information on the education and life of Budai-Deleanu, see Ioan Chindriș and Niculina Iacob, *Ioan Budai-Deleanu în mărțurii antologice* (Cluj-Napoca: Napoca Star, 2012).

14. For a comprehensive view on Budai-Deleanu's works, see Ladislau Gyemant and Aurel Răduțiu, *Repertoriul actelor oficiale privind Transilvania tipărite în limba română (1701-1847)* (Bucharest: Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1981); Ladislau Gyemant and Aurel Răduțiu, *Repertoriul izvoarelor statistice privind Transilvania 1690-1847* (Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic, 1995).

15. Gyemant and Răduțiu, *Repertoriul actelor*, 84.



Bartsch, was to go as close as possible to the roots of as many world literatures as possible—a principle that would later inform his founding and editorial work on the multilingual, culturally diverse *Acta comparationis*. While Budai-Deleanu's cultural battle will always be waged with an eye to the political, social and civil injustice lived by Transylvanian Romanians—and thus never “purely” literary—, for Meltzl the solution was to step deliberately away from the political transactions and into the elusive realm of “pure poetry” and “pure literature.” However, this escapist run away from national and imperialist pressures gains its own political meaning in retrospect. Apart from holding a privileged position, Meltzl was building his own resistance point against imperial control by self-servingly protecting the Protestant worldview against a Catholic one. Budai-Deleanu, Meltzl, and their respective circles negotiated their position across the inter-imperial Transylvania with “unequal agency,” as Parvulescu and Boatcă put it. Both engaged in a double game: that of navigating transnational negotiations of cultural and geopolitical power, and of maneuvering within overlapping imperial allegiances and biases.¹⁶

Looking at the creator of *Acta*, one can notice a politicized absence, and a very loud silence: while being a full professor at the newly founded University of Cluj/ Kolozsvár/ Klausenburg, Meltzl did not initiate or speak of any inner academic reform in institutional terms, in a possibly more inclusive direction, one that would have allowed for an all-encompassing participation of the diverse students and academics to contemporary knowledge production and to transactions of cultural prestige. While he occasionally sided with some of his less privileged colleagues, Meltzl fancied a Goethean Republic of Letters, defined as a cultural edifice standing against narrow nationalisms and imperial interdictions¹⁷ as well as a Romantic and somewhat abstract structure. While this was indeed a stance against toxic institutional formations which imposed severed limitations to how much one could fight them without being ousted from the university, it ultimately failed to account for the lack of an explicit political positioning in the middle of a very politicized setting. One cannot overstate how Meltzl's text *A kritikai irodalomtörténet fogalmáról* [On the Concept of Critical Literary History],¹⁸ delivered as an opening speech of the academic year 1875–1876 at the University, attacked the reductionism and narrow-mindedness of nationalist literary history, forcing literature to become a mere *ancilla nationis*, and proposed instead a critical approach grounded in a certain “artistry” of the literary historian and a willingness to apply “spirit and principles” to the reading of literature.

Meltzl's points of contention define a battle against the dangers lurking within what he overtly recognized as cultural landmarks: the German and Hungarian literatures and cultures. He failed to take concrete institutional action to improve academic conditions in line with the values he promoted in *Acta*. It remains unclear whether Meltzl had the awareness, authority and willingness to defend minoritized worldviews in real life, mostly the worldviews of those whose ethnic and national (re)affirmation took part in their own emancipatory battles. His otherwise all-inclusive view and transnational take on cultures, languages and literatures do not match his silence on real life minoritization. Nevertheless, Meltzl's insistence on the circumstantiality of geopolitical conditions and on the important role of certain less-favored cultures, as well as his belief that comparative literature should reroute cultural traffic and prestige away from geopolitical borders and animosities, are still invaluable tenets of the early days of the discipline.¹⁹

In spite of the cultural imprint SA had left on multicultural Transylvania, its representatives and works are nowhere to be found in the references of *Acta*, either apologetically, or critically. Their absence from the large network of references to the previous century is most probably not completely unrelated to the ethno-national and confessional inter-imperial tensions, which act as an intrinsic mode of erasure. Even though Budai-Deleanu, Șincai or Maior wrote quite extensively on the life, language, everyday habits and folklore of the people in Bukovina or Transylvania, they are not even referenced by a Romanian contributor to *Acta* and most fervent nationalist like Grigore Silași. Cosmin Borza's review of Silași's contributions²⁰, available in the current volume, shows that, while extensively writing and researching on SA in his own papers, Silași only gets to publish in *Acta* a few short translations into Romanian from the lyrical works of Sándor Petőfi (in 1877), Schiller and Schopenhauer (in 1881), Goethe (in 1882); as well as a concise clarification, written in Hungarian, regarding the Romanian mythological character Ileana Cosânzeana (in 1886).

Although lacking the international magnitude of *Acta* and the cosmopolitan involvement of a huge number of collaborators, SA is one of the invisible cultural markers shaping the very climate that would eventually give rise to one

16. Parvulescu and Boatcă, *Creolizing*, 8 and the following.

17. See Cosmin Borza, “Peripheral Nationalism, Inter-imperial Comparatism: The Case of Grigore Silași,” *Transilvania*, no. 5 (2025): 1–12

18. Hugo von Meltzl, *A kritikai irodalomtörténet fogalmáról. Egyszerűsített bevezetésül a német irodalom újkorának történetéhez*. Felolvasás, mellyel a kolozsvári királyi egyetemen a német irodalom kritikai története Opitzon kezdve című előadásait 1873. október 22-én megkezdte (Bécs: Faesy und Frick, 1875), 6–9.

19. See Levente T. Szabó, “The Subversive Politics of Multilingualism in the First International Journal of Comparative Literary Studies,” in *Paradoxes du plurilinguisme littéraire 1900. Reflexions théoriques et études de cas*, ed. Britta Benet (Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2015), 229–250.

20. See Borza, “Peripheral Nationalism, Inter-imperial Comparatism.”

of the most impactful cultural results of this inter-imperial space, fraught with nationalistic tensions, namely the long eighteenth-century Transylvania. Looking more closely however, SA itself operated with a faulty measure when, engaged in the battle for emancipatory rights and national anti-imperial recognition, its proponents failed to recognize their own double standard when dealing with a different oppressed group, namely the Roma population.

What Makes a “Tolerated Nation”?

In *The Gypsyiad*, Budai-Deleanu imagines a fifteenth-century event, namely the liberation of the enslaved Roma population by Vlad the Impaler, in exchange for their armed support in Vlad’s battle against the Turks.²¹ Describing a political development that would have seemed preposterous to the fifteenth-century reader, the story is framed as a farce in Latin and German documents from the court of king Matthias Corvinus (who reigned between 1458 and 1490). The real emancipation of the Roma in Transylvania, Moldova and Wallachia will have to wait for Roma representatives’ endeavors to take hold and for Enlightenment ideas and reforms to generate enough pressure from multiple empires in order to happen. The emancipation takes the form of assimilationism in Transylvania, and abolition in Moldavia and Wallachia. The so-called *first-emancipation* targeted the enslaved Roma belonging to the court and the monasteries, all the way to the boyar-owned slaves, freed by the *Legiurea pentru emancipatia tuturor țiganilor din Principatul Românesc* [The Law for the Emancipation of all Gypsies in Wallachia], the act passed by Barbu Știrbei (ruler of Wallachia between 1849 and 1856) in 1856, based on a text authored and edited by politicians and ideologues Petre Mavrogheni (1819–1887) and Mihail Kogălniceanu (1817–1891). The idea of emancipation that Budai-Deleanu must have had in mind had little to do with an intentional effort to fight for Roma emancipation or to anticipate how the change could proceed.

To Budai-Deleanu, the story serves as an analogy for the oppressed condition of Transylvanian Romanians, who by the end of the eighteenth century had lost most of their political, civil and administrative rights. In 1473, the so-called privileged estates of Transylvania (the nobles, the Saxons, and the Szeklers) formed an anti-peasant “brotherly union” (*Unio Trium Nationum*), which initially included Romanian nobility along with the Hungarian counterparts, but later excluding the former. The *Leopold Diploma* of 1691 recognized the existence of only *three ethnical nations* enjoying full political rights in Transylvania (the Hungarians, the Saxons, and the Szeklers), divided into four *receptus* religions or confessions: Catholic, Lutheran, Calvin and Unitarian, dubbing the most numerous Romanians “a tolerated nation.” This sparked a persistent political and civil struggle, led by the Romanian elites and joined by ethnic Romanians of lesser means, for emancipation and imperial recognition. The main arguments in favor of shedding the degrading label of “tolerated nation” were gathered by the SA members and their followers from history (in connection to the Roman tradition), literature (with a stress on folklore creations, testifying to the existence of worthy forms of popular creativity), language (in strengthening the Latin component of the Romanian language and toning down and even denying the impact of other influences), but also from statistics and law. Perhaps the most compelling political tool in the campaign for Romanian emancipation in Transylvania, however, was religion: Greek Catholicism, as already discussed, had been strategically elicited by the Empire and offered a pathway to freedom and imperial recognition. One cannot overstate how, by weaponizing religious choice, these imperial policies contributed to the affirmation and strengthening of the idea of *national* religion—an idea that would become central in future national struggles.

By the time Budai-Deleanu began working on his mock-epic, the emancipatory fight was still far from successful, despite the SA having elaborated a *Supplex*, which was repeatedly presented to the imperial court. Their petition formed part of a growing trend of memorialist engagement by peripheral national groups—inter-imperial yet largely unsuccessful efforts to challenge imperial constraints. The *Supplex Libellus Valachorum Transsylvaniae*, a Romanian memorandum taking part in a widespread memorandistic movement throughout Europe at the end of Joseph II’s reign and at the start of the reign of Leopold II, was written and rewritten, as well as presented to the imperial court in Vienna starting with 1791. Drawing from *The Declaration of Human Rights*, but also from the Hungarian legal system, claiming recognition for the Romanian ethnic majority in Transylvania on both statistical grounds, but also on grounds of “natural right,” the *Supplex* mainly demanded the following: 1. a reintegration of Romanians as a rightful nation among the others in Transylvania, and the retraction of their imperial designation as a “tolerated nation”; 2. the restitution of civil and other legal rights to the Romanians; 3. equal treatment for Greek-Catholics as for the other imperial religions; 4. proportional representation of Romanians in the governing structures. Although the *Supplex* was blocked and rejected in Vienna, it constituted a critical pressure mass from the subject nations that would, in time, change some imperial policies. Along with the national petitions, Emperor Leopold embraced the idea of Joseph von Sonnenfels, the well-known official credited to have led the political theory of the monarchy according to Enlightenment ideas. Accordingly, the Emperor repositioned the police as a more service-oriented authority (including in matters of community health and solving of minor social disputes), taking away some of its controlling powers. At an educational and cultural level,

21. He is also known as Vlad Draculea or Vlad Dracul III, reigning over Wallachia in today’s Romania for three terms between 1448 and his death in 1476.



an entire line of studies on literature, folklore, language and linguistics emerges from the works of national schools, including SA, along with remarkable pieces of imaginative literature.

The authorial choice in *The Gypsyiad* to adopt the form of the mock-heroic genre is consistent with the epic's central idea: the antigenre is inherently parodic to a former heroic epic, that becomes dysfunctional during the Enlightenment, so it offers itself as a logical discursive receptacle of the hidden, comically-tragic complaint of a narrator who had to come to terms with his failure to produce his desired political change.²² The narrative mechanics and rhetorical conventions are now employed in the service of a derealized heroic world and of representing a bitter *levitas* of unfulfillment. Moreover, by ridiculing its characters, the mock-heroic genre is in itself anti-idealist in content, as well as intertextual in rhetoric. In this case, the epic presents the actions of the "gypsy camp" as they reluctantly respond to Vlad's call to arms while attending to their own self-identifying struggles. The epic itself, fully titled *Țiganiada sau Tabăra țiganilor. Poemation eroi-comico-satiric. Alcătuit în doasprăzece cântece de Leonachi Dianeu, îmbogățit cu multe însemnări și luări aminte critece, filosofice, istorice, filologice și gramatece de către Mitru Perea și alții mai mulți în anul 1800* [The Gypsyiad or the Gypsy Camp. A Heroi-Comedic-Satirical Poem. Made into twelve chapters by Leonachi Dianeu, enriched with plenty of notes and observations of the critical, philosophical, historical, philological, and grammatical kind by Mitru Perea and many others in the year 1800], is preceded by two introductory texts. As a rule, early modern introductory texts do not serve an explanatory-summarizing role, as much as they are part and parcel of the text itself, very often providing the author's key to deciphering the textual code. The authorial alter-ego, anagrammed as Leonachi Dianeu (just as Mitru Perea anagrams Budai-Deleanu's closest SA peer, Petru Maior) claims Roma heritage for both himself and his friend, and introduces the epic with a few noteworthy ideas included in the Prologue.²³ The first establishes that a nation's memory depends on its writers' willingness to engrave its past and its heroes for posterity; that the heroic epic genre needs a "full poet and mature language",²⁴ rather than having no story to tell, it is always preferable to tell a light, joyful story, "a toy, for the education of a new taste in Romanian poetry."²⁵

This is followed by the "Epistolie închinătoare către Mitru Perea, vestit cântăreț!" [Courteous epistle to Mitru Perea, famous bard!], which opens with the mention of the thirty years of Leonachi's exile. His narrative begins with fighting in imperial wars—first on the Austrian side, and later, after being taken prisoner, on the French side under Napoleon. It ends with his present-day reflection, in the shadow of the pyramids, on the former glory of the Roma people.²⁶ This is the starting point of the central allegory in the poem: "the entire story looks like an allegory all over to me, where by gypsies you must understand other peoples as well, which entirely conduct themselves like the gypsies of lore. Word to the wise! [...] For I am a gypsy myself, just like you, and I have worked this writing for our gypsy people, so that they know the ancestors they had, and they learn from these words of wisdom when the time comes to be cautious."²⁷ There are multiple points of reference to the plight of Transylvanian Romanians in this very short introduction of the epic. The first is the didactic purpose of the imaginative act itself—it serves as a mnemonic script intended to preserve the memory of past heroes. Whatever the story in the epic, it is framed as a cautionary value, and it has a consequently molding scope. The second point, even more important to the present article, relates to the return to origins: Leonachi professes his joy of travelling back to "the nest of our ancestors and our true folk!... For I had heard and it is known that our gypsy kind comes from Egypt and the mighty pharaohs."²⁸

Analyzing Budai-Deleanu's authorial position in *The Gypsyiad*, Caius Dobrescu defines it as *paraimperial*, in the sense that it chooses solitary escapism from imperial pressures. To Dobrescu, Budai-Deleanu carves out for himself "a private world within the imperial system," taking a different route than his fellow Transylvanian School luminaries, who are very much preoccupied with the Latin roots of the Romanian language and the Roman roots of Romanian history in order

22. For the anti-genre, see Ritchie Robertson, *Mock-epic Poetry from Pope to Heine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

23. Based on this literary self-identifying device, some of the most prominent figures in present-day Roma culture in Romania, include Budai-Deleanu and Petru Maior among the ethnic "Roma who made a name for themselves." For instance, in a workbook meant for Roma children and published in 2006 by Delia Grigore and Gheorghe Sarău, *Istorie și tradiții rome*, the authors adhere to this view, while at the same timing deconstructing stereotypical representations of Roma in literature, including in *The Gypsyiad*.

24. The edition used for quotations is I. Budai-Deleanu, *Țiganiada* [The Gypsyiad]. Introductory notes, chronology and selective bibliography by Ioana Em. Petrescu, reproducing the 1959 edition of Jacques Byck (Cluj: Dacia, 1984). For this quote: Budai-Deleanu, *Gypsyiad*, 26: "un poet deplin și o limbă bine lucrată." Unless otherwise specified, translations from *The Gypsyiad* are mine (Mihaela Ursa).

25. o jucăreauă, vrând a forma un gust nou de poezie românească." Budai-Deleanu, *Gypsyiad*, 27.

26. Speaking about his wait in the shadow of the pyramids, Budai-Deleanu may also be alluding to the the Viennese masonic lodge of Egyptian rite, of which he apparently was a sympathizer (see Chindriș and Iacob, *Ioan Budai-Deleanu*).

27. "toată povestea mi se pare că-i numa o alegorie în multe locuri, unde prin țigani să-nțăleg ș-alții, carii tocmai așa au făcut și fac, ca și țiganii oarecând. Cel înțelept va înțelege! [...] Fiind eu țigan ca și tine, am socotit cuvios lucru de a scrie pentru țiganii noștri, ca să să priceapă ce felu de strămoși au avut și să învețe a nu face și ei doară nebunii asemenea, când s-ar tâmpla să vie cândva la o tâmplare ca aceasta." Budai-Deleanu, *Gypsyiad*, 30–31.

28. "cuibul strămoșilor noștri și neamul nostru adevărat!... Căci auzisem totdeauna, și deobște să zice, cum că soiul nostru țigănesc să trage de la Eghiptet și purcede din faraonii cei slăviți." Budai-Deleanu, *Gypsyiad*, 28.

to defend the political, social and cultural dignity of their people.²⁹ While Dobrescu is right to highlight Budai-Deleanu's high appreciation of a different kind of imperialism, namely the "imagination empires" budding in Italian literature—from Luigi Pulci's *Morgante* (1483), to Lodovico Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* (1532) and Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (1581)—, he exaggerates the relaxed, escapist, and parapolitical (not only para-imperial) dimensions of the epic. I would rather insist that Budai-Deleanu tries his hand once more at a different kind of *Supplex*, fully aware of the political implications of subjecting himself to the imperial consequences of such an ethno-national-centric endeavor. Furthermore, his goal is to involve the very notion of imperialism (with its well-known trail of transnationalism, other-world logic, "universalism," "totality," "commonality," anti-parochialism) in his inter-imperial plea in favor of the restoration of Romanian dignity in social, ethnic and cultural terms within the Austrian-Hungarian empire.

Far from diverging from the SA's quest for Romanness and Latinity, Budai-Deleanu *joins* them once more as well as chimes in the tune of imperialist greatness. In establishing a double analogy between the Transylvanian Romanians and the enslaved Roma population, the author means to draw attention, via the Roma's racialization, to the Romanians' ethnicization. Furthermore, he draws a *line of continuity* between the Romans and Romanians, as well as between the Latin and Romanian languages. The symbolic lineage is analogue to the one imagined in Romantic orientalizations of the Roma, very common at the time, linking "the lost empire of Egypt" and the Roma population. The narrator's imaginary quest, under the guise of a countryless Roma man, in search of the "nest" of his people, their lost originary Empire of Egypt, is but a *rephrasing* of the author's very active quest, as a SA memorandist, to find the imperial point of origin that would legitimate a claim to equal citizenship for his own disenfranchised people. Notably, while practicing this national allegory of identity loss, Budai-Deleanu reproduces the silent erasure of the real, social situation faced by the Roma throughout the empire, which does not get represented, but instead is covered under stereotypical othering operations.

Translation Imperii Gone Awry

The self-narrative of the imperial descent of the Romanians directly from the Romans gained traction once Romanian nationalism meets the Hungarian one in Transylvania and becomes a quite common literary trope in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Romanian literature.³⁰ For Budai-Deleanu, it served the purpose of claiming national dignity in the name of the commonality of imperial elitism. This is not to say that Budai-Deleanu's genuine empathy towards the vulnerable and minoritized Roma people absolves him of naturalizing racism, or of perpetuating racialized stereotypes that undermine the very project of self-identification. Rather, it is to stress that imperialism and imperial heritage are used by the Transylvanian writer as devices of national redemption and of social recognition of status. He does not shy away from the implication that the oppressed should be seen for what they really are: old descendants of a former empire, very similar to the one enforcing the oppression at the present time. In itself, this boomerang move of the argument is intrinsically inter-imperial, since it appeals both to a transnational commonality, and to anti-colonial local resistance. In fact, the Latin connection and the exclusive claim to Roman heritage made by the SA ultimately serve, whether intentionally or not, to reinforce a segregationist worldview—one that would deepen national tensions in the twentieth century. Even if, at the time, this gesture appears as just another attempt to claim kinship with the grandeur of the Roman Empire, in the long run, as Marius Turda puts it, "glorifying the origins and the European heritage fuel a form of racism as secular religion, founded on the ritualized cult of the ancestors and on the obsessive worshiping of things past."³¹

Apparently, Budai-Deleanu follows closely in the footsteps of classical authors of mock-epic works, even observing the idea that the mock epic would be the creation of a single century, the eighteenth.³² However, an interesting transgression happens when he follows the mock-epic rule of representing the canonical tensions between "a Christian, freedom-loving, progressive Europe against a heathen, despotic, and immobile Orient."³³ While preserving a vilified image of the Turks and the Muslim world—cast as opponents of both Vlad's army and the forces of heaven—, Budai-Deleanu short-circuits the Oriental origin in "Eghipet" of the idealized Roma people with their indelible belonging to *the good side* of "here." The wise man Draghici, a father-figure to the Roma group, delivers a relevant oration in the first chapter of the poem: "So that we, the gypsies shall have our little country!.../ Where we can be our own masters!.../ [...] / Build good homes/ And live there together;/ Always be one mind and will,/ And better still one when times are ill."³⁴ Whereas the eighteenth-century mock-epic creates a textbook opposition between the progressive West and

29. Dobrescu, "'Soft' Commerce," 82.

30. See Parvulescu and Boatcă, *Creolizing*, 114 and the following.

31. Marius Turda, Tudor Georgescu and Maria Sophia Quine, *Historicizing Race: A Global History* (New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 103.

32. In Robertson's summary, "it begins with the fourth book of the *Dunciad*, published in 1742, in which Pope fully emancipates himself from mock heroic, and ends in 1847 with the book version of *Atta Troll*" (Mock-epic, 12).

33. Robertson, *Mock-epic*, 11.

34. "Noi țigani să avem țărișoară!.../ Unde să him numa noi dă noi!.../ [...] / Faceți-vă bune așezământe/ Și lăcuiți dăpreună aice;/ Fiți purure într-o minte ș-o voie,/ Mai vârtos la vreme dă nevoie." Budai-Deleanu, *Gypsias*, 33–36.



the dogmatic East, Budai-Deleanu stresses a different tension: the one between the oppressed and internally divided Roma nation (standing for the Transylvanian Romanian), and the oppressive and forceful “foreign language speakers.” In the same oration, Draghici warns his people that, unless they leave their differences aside and take each other’s hand sharing love and compassion, they will end up enslaved and will perish before being given the opportunity “to make a nation of the world/ As you will be landless and nameless.”³⁵ Draghici’s framing of “the evil other” in linguistic terms is especially meaningful. The verification key of the imperial oppression is, not only in this first chapter, but also throughout the epic, the linguistic one. A Biblical mixing of the languages, with its long tradition of interpreting human struggles as failures to communicate due to this divine fracture, makes its way in *The Gypsyiad* to mark the most creditable proof of estrangement. Consequently, coming together, achieving commonality against the oppressor boils back to denouncing multilingualism and to *speaking the same language*. The author does not choose a logocentric, monolingual argument purely for poetic reasons. We can safely assume this poetic choice is also a transfer of borrowed ideas of national unity, as well as a translation of imperial control, as Austro-Hungarian policies made a strong point of imposing a certain “imperial” language to their peoples. Monolingualism thus issues one of the most interesting paradoxes in Budai-Deleanu’s thinking: on the one hand, it is topicalized as a desired condition of nationhood, while on the other, in his real life, the scholar was anything but monolingual and did his best to expand polyglottism in his interactions. One of his main research interests is in comparative linguistics and philology, a field to which he brings his contribution with *De originibus populorum...*, but also with comments in the margin of Hesiodus’ *Theogony*, which stress the importance of old languages to the study of history and culture.³⁶

Within the SA, there is a discernible resistance to *translatedness*—a paradoxical mistrust of foreign languages expressed by one of the most polyglot and polycultural generations of eighteenth-century Romanian intellectuals. Despite their linguistic competence, frequent references to failed communication appear in their work, ultimately contributing to the monolingualism that would underpin the Romanian national project in the following century. For instance, in 1812, Petru Maior laments not only the linguistic but also the ontological fracture between German officers or Serbian bishops and the communities they are meant to lead in battle or in faith—a fracture that, for him, epitomizes the eternal rift between literate elites and the people. As far as Romanians are concerned, he ponders, “the illiterate and the scholars have used the same language, which is why they do not need to learn grammar, as they drink it along with their mothers’ milk. A non-educated peasant understands the books just as an educated man, both in their words, and in their grammar, which is why little thought was given by Romanians to devise grammar and vocabulary books.”³⁷ This assertion likely explains the SA’s scepticism—if not outright opposition—toward multilingualism. For Maior, Budai-Deleanu and their contemporaries, multilingualism represents national fragmentation, while monolingualism, framed as “the natural argument,” becomes a strategic tool in the struggle for ethnic and national emancipation.

On the contrary, the core on which *Acta*’s transnationalism is predicated is polyglottism. However, things get more complicated when we split the actuality of this ideal. When listing the ten languages founding *Acta*’s decaglottist program, the editors also seem to curb their supposedly unbiased representation to admit of “that language to which our literary journal first and foremost belongs: the Hungarian (with Eötvös and Petöfi).”³⁸ Even if specified in linguistic terms, the “belonging” metaphor anchors what is, of course, a pragmatic allegiance: issued in a Hungarian university, *Acta* does not shy away from its heritage, in spite of its cosmopolitan intent. Embedded within *Acta*’s transnational ideal lays a paradigmatic inter-imperial and national bias towards Hungarian language,³⁹ similar to the one towards the values of German culture. As Parvulescu and Boatcă mention, Meltzl “placed Romanian and Romani literatures [...] strictly within the framework of folklore, mirroring colonial and imperial differences as well as the geopolitics of knowledge production at work globally.”⁴⁰ In other words, both Romanian and Romani literatures fall under the “folk” category of what Nicholls calls “a two-tiered colonial theorization of literature” distinguishing between “literatures of the folk song” (*Volksliederlitteraturen*) and “artistic literatures,” written by individual authors (*Kunstlitteraturen*).⁴¹ In order to make the literary and cultural study of *Acta* work

35. “nice veți mai face un neam pă lume,/ Ci veți hi fără țară și nume.” Budai-Deleanu, *Gypsyiad*, 37.

36. Chindriș and Iacob, *Ioan Budai-Deleanu*, 28.

37. Pavel, *Școala ardeleană*, vol I, 848. See the chapter, Petru Maior, *Animadversiones in recensionem Historiae de origine Valachorum in Dacia* [Animadversii împotriva rețenției Istoriei pentru începutul românilor în Dacia], Buda, 1814.

38. “Zehn moderne Litteraturen mit wahrhaft weltlitteraturischen Erscheinungen,” “Volksliederlitteraturen.” Hugo Meltzl, “Vorläufige Aufgaben der Vergleichenden Litteratur. III. Der Dekaglottismus,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, no. 24 (1878): 494–501; Angus Nicholls, “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.

39. Nicholls, “Aesthetics,” 301: “the ACLU profiled Hungarian literature for very particular political reasons, while also neglecting other significant languages spoken within and close to the Austro-Hungarian Empire: these included not only Romanian (which was especially important for Transylvania) but also Czech, Serbo-Croat, Slovene, and Slovak, not to mention Russian.”

40. Parvulescu and Boatcă, *Creolizing*, 102.

41. Nicholls, “Aesthetics,” 317.

as a “scientific” endeavor, the editors entail an evolutionist framework which allows for the “local (especially German) aesthetic values and Eurocentric prejudices” to be presented as *universal* values. The canonical elevation of Hungarian authors benefits from this dual framework, their inclusion into the pantheon of universality being enabled by the flexibility of such discursive double measures.⁴²

Returning to *The Gypsyiad*, we cannot fail to notice that by 1877, Meltzl and his contributors must have been aware of its existence, which not only would have undermined their rationale for an exclusive focus on Romanian folklore—based on the supposed absence of “real literature”—but also could have offered a fertile challenge to the journal's anti-imperialism. The “developmental model” of understanding cultural systems has resulted, as Parvulescu and Boatcă argue, in the marginalizing of both Romani and Romanian literatures “within the local literary system” of Transylvania.⁴³ By 1870, there had already been several unsuccessful attempts to publish *The Gypsyiad*.⁴⁴ In 1867, B.P. Hasdeu (1838-1907), a renowned Romanian writer and Latinist philologist, had also published *Răzvan și Vidra*, a drama featuring an alleged Moldavian ruler of Roma origin, further proof that more Romanian authors pushed writing—albeit othered and idealized—accounts of historical, heroic involvement of Roma characters. Arany János (1817-1882), one of the most iconic Hungarian writers of the 1850-1870 period, also authored a heroic epic entitled *A nagyidai cigányok* [The Gypsies in Nagyida], initially published in 1851 and republished also in 1867, in which the Roma are contrasted to the Hungarians and the Austrians. In 1888, *The Gypsy Lore Society* was founded, marking the recognition of Roma studies as a field of research in its own right. Between 1875 and 1877, Theodor Codrescu published a first version of the epic *The Gypsyiad*, ridden with interpretative errors and transcription mistakes. Some other, less than professional attempts by Virgil Onițiu, Mihail I. Procopie followed, culminating in Gheorghe Cardaș's complete edition in 1925—which still contained a number of transcription errors. The first reliable edition of *The Gypsyiad* will have to wait until 1953 to be re-edited by Jacques Byck, and later annotated with critical comments, in 1974–1975, by Florea Fugariu. The work is still awaiting translations to other languages, but has enjoyed an update to “a modern, clear, accessible and free-flowing” version published by Cristian Badilita in 2018 with Tracus Arte.

A Polyglot Army on the Run

A secondary analogy emerges within the allegorical correspondence between the Transylvanian Romanian and the Roma characters of *The Gypsyiad*: having failed to form a nation, the Roma are warned by their elder, Draghici, that they may end up just like the condemned Jewish people, without a country and living on the road. The reference to the perpetual wanderings of the Biblical Jews through the desert recurs in the poem, always teleologically pointing toward the purported failure of a national project.⁴⁵ Moreover, it gains further dramatic and historical weight when the narrator mentions the fall of mighty peoples and empires, whose descendants have become the laughing stock of others simply because their forefathers failed to look after their country. The Transylvanian Jews were offered an imperial deal after 1867, described as *Magyarization in exchange for emancipation*, quite similar to the *Union Agreement to Rome*, extended two centuries earlier to Romanian Eastern Orthodox communities.⁴⁶ The Jewish population was not asked directly for a religious compromise, but for a *linguistic* one: they were expected to adopt the Hungarian language for their social and civil interactions. The demand could possibly have stemmed from a clear understanding on the part of imperial policy makers of the value of speech and speech tabuization in Jewish culture. After emancipation, many Jews declared themselves Hungarian on the census, further strengthening the above mentioned dynamic between minority and majority. By the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, parallels drawn between “the history of Transylvanian Romanians being treated like citizens without a country and the history of Jewish discrimination” had become a recurrent trope of Transylvanian Romanian nationalism, only deepening the implied antisemitism, which “traveled between Romanian-speaking populations on the same routes that allowed other forms of mobility.”⁴⁷

Two symmetrical fictions come into play in this telescopic change of historical references. The first one is the Romantic fiction of *nation-seeking*, a specification of *home building* and the *search for a country*. The second is the fictional articulation of *a critique of a Roma reason* and of *Romaness*, following the model explained by Achille Mbembe in his critique of “black reason”⁴⁸: a biological and cultural fiction is articulated in the text via a

42. *Acta*, 24 (1878): 494.

43. Parvulescu and Boatcă, *Creolizing*, 102.

44. For the historical account of the publishing journey of Budai-Deleanu's manuscripts, see Pavel, *Școala ardeleană*, mainly volume 2.

45. The comparative analysis of representations of otherness in Jewish characters vs. Roma ones has fertile ground in the Romanian culture of the 18th and the following centuries. However, it is not the purpose of this paper, for reasons of space and concision.

46. Ladislau Gyémánt, *Evreii din Transilvania în epoca emancipării/ The Jews of Transylvania in the Age of Emancipation (1790–1867)* (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2000).

47. Parvulescu and Boatcă, *Creolizing*, 60.

48. Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (New York, USA: Duke University Press, 2017).



deposit of ideas, discourses, and translated social and cultural practices, ultimately leading to a tragi-comical identification of *Romaness* with the non-human. For Budai-Deleanu, this *becoming non-human* is instrumental to a self-hate narrative of his own, providing the darkest background for his fictional account of how the Transylvanian *Romanianness* became politically deprecated and socially abused. For Budai-Deleanu's generation, however, the employment of the above-mentioned bio-cultural fiction only served to deepen segregation and perpetuate derogatory treatment of the Roma people.

Not all context-related reading of the content of *The Gypsyiad* is to be presumed on Budai-Deleanu's political theory. At times, the text imports not only parodical replicas of imperial policies and practices, but also, perhaps, more sarcastically exaggerated forms that ridicule imperial dysfunctions. For example, especially for the battle scenes in the epic, where the Romas try to cheat fighting the Turks and instead enjoy a royal feast, one can read a more anecdotal signalling of an imperial blunder attributed to Joseph II, which must have been well known at the time of SA's emancipatory struggles. Let us remember that, in the poem, Vlad disguises himself and his men as Turks in order to check on the Roma ad-hoc army. Witnessing their reluctance to fight, he shames them for trying to back out of their agreement. After this episode, the Turks really come upon the Roma camp, but suspecting that, once again, Vlad and his army are testing them, the Roma fight heroically. In the real history of the hostility between the Austrians and the Turks, a particular episode happening in Caransebeș/ Karansebes (in today South-Western Romania) brought great embarrassment to the Emperor and which bears striking resemblance to the fictional episode.

Determined to "rid the world of this barbarous race"⁴⁹ of Turks, Joseph II decided to attack them by taking Belgrade first. A series of indecisions and poor judgments on his side inadvertently prolonged the campaign, during which the imperial soldiers were decimated by malaria and dysentery even before firing a single shot. Waiting for the command to charge, Joseph's men frequently lost their temper and reportedly "fights broke out among this patchwork of ethnic auxiliaries: the Hungarians fought with the Croats, the Lombardians hated the Slovenes, and none of them liked the Austrian officers."⁵⁰ A hilarious input of prayers apparently followed in support, both on the "holy" side of the emperor, and of that of the infidels, retrospectively similar to the involvement of the Christian saints and Satan's hordes in the fictional fight between the Roma brave men and the Turks. The closest resonance to the epic description of the fictive battle is to be found in the decisive battle of Caransebeș/Karansebes, in September 1788, when a drunken shootout erupted between the emperor's hussars and his foot soldiers. Mistaking each other for enemies, they fuelled the chaos by yelling "The Turks! The Turks!" and confusing their commanders' orders to stop, "Halt!," with the Muslim call "Allah!"

What is memorable in the narration of the shameful imperial flop described by Erik Durschmied is the effect of the fake polyglottism in keeping Joseph's army together: "quickly the panic took hold of the entire army, and it became pointless to try telling that polyglote force what had happened at the other end of the bridge. [...] Owing to their varied ethnic backgrounds, most regiments couldn't converse with each other, which made them imagine that the shadows rushing at them were the enemy."⁵¹ The magnitude of the panic and devastation that follows within the same army remains difficult to fathom: "Two days later, the Grand Vizier and his army finally showed up before Karansebes. They didn't find an Austrian army. They did, however, find some 10,000 dead and wounded Austrians whose heads were speedily lopped off by the Turks."⁵² Aside from the real human tragedy, the episode could have easily inspired Budai-Deleanu's imagined battle between Vlad's misguided army of Roma, feasting instead of fighting, and then engaging in fighting what they believe to be the fake Turks. Extremely relevant in the context of this paper on cultural emancipation is the highlighting of broken communication channels and the confusion of languages in an alter Babel tower—a suitable metaphor for a defective, crumbling imperial authority. The parodical key of the mock-epic is, in the case of this anecdotal reworking, the concrete representation of a parodical state and a mock-governance.

Colonizing Gaze Meeting Exoticised Subjects

The reception of *The Gypsyiad* in Romania⁵³ has largely failed to foreground the issue of the racialised depiction of the Roma and Budai-Deleanu's stereotypically charged view, which makes the epic all the more urgent to revisit. As part of the school canon of Romanian literature, the epic has quite a few interpretations which have been canonized. Two of them are particularly impactful: Nicolae Manolescu's interpretation follows quite closely a matrix given by Mikhail Bakhtin in his interpretation of Rabelais' masterpiece as an epic of the stomach, as a fixation of the heroic ideal at the epithymic level of primary impulses and visceral indulgences, such as gluttony,

49. See Erik Durschmied, *How Chance and Stupidity Have Changed History: The Hinge Factor* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2000) for the narration of the episode.

50. Durschmied, *Chance*, 53.

51. Durschmied, *Chance*, 57.

52. Durschmied, *Chance*, 58.

53. For the canonical readings of *The Gypsyiad*, I recommend the Pavel edition of the SA works, Pavel et al., *Scolia ardeleana*, volume II, 2018.

lust, or anger. Manolescu (1939–2024), the most influential Romanian critic of the seventies and eighties, held immense symbolic capital and prestige, and for the better part of the twentieth century served as the authoritative commentator of the poem. Later on, the most historically informed and context-related interpretation belongs to the literary theorist and historian Ioana Em. Petrescu (1941–1990) who, in her reading of the particular Eastern-European and mainly Transylvanian features of the Enlightenment, insists that the poem is in fact a textbook treatise on the pursuit of happiness. This view strongly relates to how the SA luminaries understand national emancipation, and mostly points out that, as far as the Eastern part of the Empire is concerned, Enlightenment does not rely on cosmopolitanism, but rather on nation-building or even nationalism. While more culturally aware than Manolescu or his peers, who do not even question Roma-related stereotypes of representation, Petrescu nevertheless stops short of offering a full cultural deconstruction of Roma oppression and slavery. Subsequent interpretive proposals, such as the already mentioned one of Caius Dobrescu (b. 1966) or Adrian Miroiu (b. 1954), move away from the aesthetic concern for form, allegory, metatextuality, shifting instead toward ideological readings of the socio-political reflection and political theory founding the poem.

Chapters X through XII—among the least rewarding from a purely aesthetic-literary perspective—are particularly revealing of Budai-Deleanu's political theory, advocating for a neo-institutional form of governance. The political theoretical stance of the poem is profoundly influenced by the absolutist views of Sonnenfels, especially concerning the need for social awareness and for the citizens to feel part of the social body, which is also a moral body. As such, the epic follows the perspective on imperality which Joseph II must have held, most clearly articulated in Janalău's plea in favor of a constitutional approach, starting from educating and training good citizens and "building good habits."⁵⁴ As rightfully noted by Miroiu, the epic narrates how the mobilization of the Roma people for a common cause is done from the outside, by the intervention of Vlad the Impaler, and dissipates once the external pressure is lifted. One could add to that the fact that the narrator himself explains how "Urgia" [The Wrath] is the biggest enemy of the Roma camp, coming from outside, and having no match among the people.⁵⁵ In Miroiu's view, the externalization of both agency and responsibility accounts for a final redemptive move of the epic: while constantly blaming inner dissensions, mindlessness and lack of reason, as well as warning against the fatal dangers of negligence toward national and historical responsibility, the narrator finally decides to redeem his own people. The textual explanation brings to the fore the figure of the Archangel Gabriel, bearing the divine message that the Turks' time has yet not come to die, and that the Roma's time has not yet come to be free. In the most hyperbolic fashion, in the end Vlad is ready to accept his fate and destiny. Meanwhile, Romândor (an archetypal name and character, interestingly representing a strong assimilation of the collective Roma character into one individual, essentialist metaphor of the Romanian) moves against the decision of the angels, God and destiny, choosing a fight to the death, a possible allusion to Budai-Deleanu own dissent from the political path the Transylvanian Romanian leaders had chosen for the nation.

The reception of *The Gypsyiad* from the standpoint of Romani studies is slowly building momentum.⁵⁶ A conventional forefather in the field of Gypsology is considered to be the German author Heinrich Grellmann, who in 1783 compiled Transylvanian and Hungarian samples of Roma songs and habits, facts of language and life. Quite well received, Grellmann's view becomes the ultimate reference in matters of description, classifications, or research of the Roma until the twentieth century. However, a racialised perspective is discernible even in the earliest studies that claimed scientific legitimacy and purported to advocate for Roma emancipation. Heinrich Wislocki (1856–1907), one of the most renowned and most active collaborators of *Acta*, together with Grellmann, initiate *Roma Studies* (also named "Romology" or "Gypsology"). Yet while doing so, both scholars operated with deeply racist assumptions. Wislocki described his work as a contribution to the emancipation of "these miserable and unfortunate beings," while Grellmann proclaimed, with equal condescension, that "perhaps it is reserved for our age, in which so much has been attempted for the benefit of mankind, to humanise a people who, for centuries, have wandered in error and neglect."⁵⁷ Not only does he claim a civilizing and "humanizing" mission, but he also goes to great lengths to justify his interest for the Roma, as if he might otherwise be suspected of harboring disreputable sympathies. At the same time, he is chiming in the deprecation tune when he imagines himself as a biologist repulsed by his object of study, or when essentializing the Roma into cannibalistic subhumans incapable "to complete any thing which requires perseverance or application," and surely enough incapable of literary creation.⁵⁸ A lot of the elements of Grellmann's

54. Adrian Miroiu, *Ispita idealului. Despre lumile perfecte și cele fezabile* (Bucharest: Tritonic Books, 2019), XI, 44 and the following.

55. Miroiu, *Ispita*, 155–156.

56. Cristian Suci, "G.H.M. Grellmann și sursele timpurii ale stereotipurilor științifice despre romi," *Studia Universitatis Cibiniensis*, Series Historica, no. 5 (2008): 133–145.

57. See Suci, "G.H.M. Grellmann," 133, and H. M. G. Grellmann, *Dissertation on the Gypsies, Being an Historical Enquiry, Concerning the Manner of Life, Oeconomy, Customs and Conditions of These People in Europe, and Their Origin* (London, 1783), 18.

58. Grellmann, *Dissertation*, chapter XIV: "Concerning the Toleration of the Gipseys by the different States of Europe," 95.



profiling of the Roma and the Romani culture make the basis of the following centuries' *vulgata* understanding of the matter and travel culturally across nations as "given facts."

While the transfer of such heavily racialized views—shrined in the honorable cloak of "scientific" interest for the wellbeing of the Roma population—is transparent in Budai-Deleanu's work, it also makes its way in the interest *Acta* manifests toward the Romani culture, which indeed is represented rather vicariously and quite unifacted in the form of folk songs. A racial bias makes its way even in discourses of declared Roma supporters, meant to address issues of Romani culture. This bias was not limited to representations of Romani culture in *Acta*. It continued to permeate nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature, where portrayals of Roma characters and communities—whether positive or not—were typically authored by non-Roma writers and still reflected internalized, racialized, and "othering" perspectives.⁵⁹ Budai-Deleanu must have known, given his education in Vienna and his knowledge of the imperial ethos, about Maria Theresa's efforts to sedentarize the nomad Roma, either by forbidding them ownership of horses and carts, or by turning them into "new citizens" or "new Hungarians," and by not allowing them to get married.⁶⁰ The idea of an analogy between the subservient condition of the two ethnicities, the Roma and the Romanians, could have taken shape in his imagination against this very background.

The widespread interest in the "noble savage" amid proponents of nature over nurture and society helps explain part of the eagerness to transform Roma people into metaphors for advancing social, intellectual, and biological agendas in the eighteenth century. The European interest for the Roma' ways of life often answers the very Occidentalist desire to revive and empower the "wild," "natural," "primitive" and "superior" forces of their own cultures, a sort of frozen cultural mammoth accounting for the beginning of their own histories, literatures, cultures. This is perhaps why Roma people, communities and lifeways have not benefited from a *socializing view* that would allow others to support *their* need for freedom and abolishment of *their* oppression. They do not figure prominently in discussions of slavery and serfdom, as they are more often viewed through an exoticist, aestheticizing, and idealized lens, even by those who claim to advocate for their value, like the figures previously discussed. A scientist fallacy, in which biological determinism is conflated with sociocultural dynamics, is at least partially responsible for the topicalization of the Roma subject and representations both in *Acta*, *The Gypsies*, and elsewhere—sometimes in heavily racialised, Romanticized forms. To this romanticization, the nineteenth century added a deepened methodological reliance of comparative literature on the biological model. The idea that cultural systems, languages, and literatures follow similar rules and algorithms reinforced a bias toward "naturalness," contributing to a complex blend of Romantic philosophy and scientific claims in biology—one that would later feed into eugenics, racialization, and segregationist ideologies. In interwar Romania, for instance, a series of eugenist papers is published by Ion Chelcea, later to be collected in his *Gypsies in Romania* [Țiganiii din România] in 1944, a volume published with the Central Institute of Statistics, recommending and outlining measures for Roma eradication.

Speaking about the Germanes embedded in the early years of comparative literature, Angus Nicholls points to how comparative philology—the pilot science of comparative literature—imported its methods from biology, embryology and the Goethean "morphology," while being infused by colonial epistemologies.⁶¹ Moreover, a considerable number of published research at the time drew on the opposition between the alleged "primitive" civilizations and "advanced" ones.⁶² Making Roma characters into exotic, marginal and—most importantly—*othered* figures is but the expression of their social exclusion, a sign that their everyday presence as Europeans has not been normalized, but instead is exoticized, if not violently racialized for exclusion. While in Western Europe "the nomad gypsy" is an enduring metaphor of exoticism and marginality, designating both "people of a Golden Age and savage tribes opposing civilization," Eastern-European literatures, and especially the Romanian one, seem to assimilate "the gypsy" as a fleeting, marginal, pauper, often criminal nomad: "to the traditionalists, the forever nomad and alien gypsy is contextually categorized as a stranger to rural *eternity*, or as a familiar marginal at best."⁶³ There is no paradox in associating idealized representations of the Roma people or Roma individuals with the social hostility or indifference of other imperial citizens to the conditions of Roma's real life. Rather, it is precisely this social compartmentalization

59. See Teodora Dumitru, "Obiectul artei și problema reprezentării romilor în literatură," *Transilvania*, no. 10 (2023): 1–18; Maria Chiorean, "Racialized Modernity in Late-Nineteenth-Century Romanian Literature," *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 9, no. 1 (2023): 30–55. The authors rightfully comment on how these early racialised views not only fall within the essentialist fallacy, but also invite hierarchization.

60. See Suci, "G.H.M. Grellmann," 135–140.

61. Nicholls, "Aesthetics," 295.

62. Edward Augustus Freeman, *Comparative Politics* (1873), Edward Burnett Tylor, *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* (1865), *Primitive Culture* (1871): "these thinkers presumed that societies evolve through uniform stages from simple to complex formations, with northern Europe—often described as 'Indo-European' or 'Aryan,' most notably by Müller and Freeman—standing at the apex of a continuum that descends and condescends to colonized non-European cultures." Nicholls, "Aesthetics," 296.

63. Pavel Cristian Suci, *Imaginea romilor în literatură*, PhD thesis defended in 2010 at the Babes-Bolyai University, https://doctorat.ubbcluj.ro/sustinerea_publica/rezumat/2010/filologie/Suci_Pavel_Cristian_Ro.pdf. Accessed February 20, 2025.

that has fueled idealization as well as deprecation, the two sides of the same *othering* coin. Given this widespread belief in the sameness of how biological and social systems work, *The Gypsyiad* functions as a comic and intentional misrepresentation of Budai-Deleanu's probable belief that a Romanian statal organisation would work its way up from this kind of primitive, preliminary form of "a state for the gypsies."

Conclusion

The duplicity of both *SA* and *Acta*, identifiable in all forms of double-sidedness, is proper to inter-imperiality, which "both precedes coloniality and coexists with it, while it outlasts imperialism," in a creolizing interglottal map in which freedom of the marginal is cautiously staged.⁶⁴ The reason why Budai-Deleanu picks the Roma for his allegorical depiction of the unjust treatment of Transylvanian Romanians may seem entirely emancipatory. However, it is predicated on a sedimented, metabolized trope of understanding the Roma as the lowest form of human condition, which is what Budai-Deleanu wants to say his people have been reduced to in the empire. In other words, a "colonial difference" is already in place when the allegory is initiated, securing the propagation of inter-imperial hierarchy.⁶⁵ For their part, Meltzl and his collaborators also play a double game of passionately defending, and making space for polyglottism, multiculturalism and anti-nationalism, while at the same time "tailoring" the actual texts and perspectives to suit certain national and imperial sensitivities. The focus of this article on Budai-Deleanu and *The Gypsyiad*, rather than the more widely recognized accomplishments of Meltzl, is deliberate. It stems from the novelty of placing *The Gypsyiad* in a comparative framework with *SA* and *Acta*, and from the asymmetry between two equally romanticized and idealized cultural projects: the cosmopolitanism of *Acta* and the ethno-national activism of *SA*. My contribution aims to uncover their corresponding repressed double-sidedness: the silences and absent positions the two authors and their movements allow at the core of their assertions. Probably the most consequential absence or silence has to do with their fluid engagement with imperiality, which on the one hand denies imperial domination and control, and on the other complicitly integrates the need for imperial authority, the claim to "sameness" as a guarantee of emancipation.

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64. Parvulescu and Boatcă, *Creolizing*, 23.

65. Parvulescu and Boatcă, *Creolizing*, 86.



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