

Negotiating the Borders of Hungarian National Literature

The Beginnings of the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* and the Rise of Hungarian Studies (Hungarologie)*

T. SZABÓ LEVENTE

1. A forgotten primary context of the ACLU: the Hungarian reception of the founding years

THE FOUNDING of the first international comparative literary journal, the *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok / Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* was not a success story at all in one of its own primary cultural frameworks, the Hungarian literary field. From japing comments to telling silence, the reactions of the literary field were almost unanimous in the 1870s and 1880s, and most of the significant Hungarian literary scholars of the time kept themselves away from a literary venture that seemed for them, at least, odd. The few editors and literary figures that were interested in the review founded by Sámuel Brassai and Hugo von Meltzl / Meltzl Hugó, perceived and portrayed it as an excellent ideological tool for propagating the grandeur of Hungarian literature and culture in a transnational cultural field. The surprisingly high number of the international collaborators of the ACLU usually obscures the similarly surprising lack of the local scholars and nineteenth century Hungarian stars of the literary field that would contribute to the periodical published between 1877 and 1888. There are only a few Hungarian literary figures who published or simply lent their names to the contributors' list of the review, or for the series of various booklets, offprints and publications printed under the aegis of the review.¹ Though even these authors are noteworthy, there is clearly a matter here that needs to be clarified: the rarely noticed and discussed

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cleavages between the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* and almost the whole Hungarian literary field needs further explanation and discussion. This lack of interest of the leading Hungarian scholars to take part in the decade-long life of the founding journal of global comparative literary studies can certainly be traced back also to interpersonal relationships. Sámuel Brassai was certainly an *enfant terrible* of the Hungarian press, literary and scholarly life already from the 1830s when he founded the popular journal *Vasárnapi Újság* and began a thorough and fierce campaign for the popularization of the latest achievements of the sciences. His unique, highly personalized acid comments and his deep faith in the transforming power of science, arts and logic made him a feared sharp-tongued figure of the Hungarian cultural life of the second and third quarter of the nineteenth century. His much younger co-founder of the journal, Hugo von Meltzl / Meltzl Hugó, found a perfect partner in him for a common scholarly venture. The youngest faculty of the Cluj / Kolozsvár University in the founding year of the university (1872) had a similarly lively and witty (for some, similarly irritating) style and personality. But the holder of the university chair of German (later, also Italian and French) studies was not only an eccentric scholar, but also a radically critical figure, questioning even the foundations of his own discipline and chair: in the years of his professorship he rewrote the basic assumptions regarding the national and Germanic literatures, a gesture that could cost him his chair at many other universities of the time. Even though they could be taken as *les enfants terribles* of the Hungarian scholarly field and journalism, they estranged much of their Hungarian contemporaries not necessarily with their style and character, but with what they thought and wrote on literary and cultural matters in the *Acta Comparationis*. In this paper, I will argue that the conceptual and cultural foundation of the *Acta Comparationis* constituted so strong a cleavage within the Hungarian cultural and literary field that it could not be integrated into the canonical Hungarian framework and scholarly practices of the time, and was constantly misunderstood. But this was due also to the founders who tried to negotiate an in-between place for their journal between Hungarian national literature and the transnational literary flow, planning to be an organic part also of the Hungarian literary field.

2.1. The “foreign” ACLU? A vindicative literary politics, the emergence of modern Hungarian studies (Hungarologie) and the *Acta Comparationis*

IN AN essay published in 1875, and delivered earlier at the beginning of the 1873-1874 university year as a keynote address of the German studies at the University of Cluj / Kolozsvár, Meltzl called his discipline comparative literary studies, terming his method a critical one. In *Acta Comparationis*, in 1877, he and Brassai already defined this discipline not as German studies, but comparative literature, and foregrounded the review as a kind of prolonging of their university scholarly projects. Thus even though

the formation of the comparative literary studies in East-Central Europe was strongly linked to *Germanistik*, it actually worked as a reinterpretation of the discipline.

In the keynote address, Meltzl surprisingly defined the discipline he would deliver in the forthcoming university year, as an antipode of the idea of the national. He even caricatured German national literary history: "What a pity! In the marsh of our materialistic days when we wish to use everything for political purposes, and when the *idea of the national* is foregrounded in the sciences, but especially in the arts, we confuse the literature and the politics of a nation. . . . What an abnormal thing! The abnormality of this type of thinking has already been proved by the former centuries. But this abnormality is popular not only in our homeland. There is no community that is bound more to this scandalous delusion (*szédelgés*) than the French (who made it popular for the first time) and the German people. That is why their latest pieces of literature are so worthless, even though they excel in number."² After this highly provocative beginning, he went on with similarly challenging assertions that most probably made his Hungarian readers and some of his audience raise their eyebrows, since he came to question the notion and working of the national in the works of some of his most influential contemporaries: "Literary history should always have some type of core. . . . But the most famous and huge mistake ever made is the one committed by those who choose *the politics of race and the scandalous delusion of the national (szédelgés)* as the core of their narratives. . . . And since the Hungarians have learned from the Germans exactly what they should have forgotten, even the Hungarian writers came to use this notion as a compass to deal with *national literature*. (This is the case of Toldy, who is followed by some younger writers.)"³ At this point the young rising star of the second Hungarian university, who had just returned from his overseas studies and was one of the few professors with doctorate in his institution, called into question not only the present, but also the future of the national as a conceptual tool for Meltzl's *Geisteswissenschaften*. But probably his strongest challenge of the established interpretive canon of German studies was to cast doubt on the *nature* of the basic texts of German national literary history: "So, national literature is in vogue, but as everything that is in vogue has to become outdated. I foresee only a shorter span of life for such a literature. . . . What a tautology to speak about national literatures. Could we call the *Nibelungenlied* a national epic poem? Not really, since we can trace its origins till India."⁴ This blurring of the borders among national literatures did not make them completely useless and obsolete for Meltzl, but changed their nature fundamentally. Therefore his critique of national literatures should not be perceived as a radical literary fundamentalism erasing the literary nation, but as a repositioning of its framework and its features. For instance, both for him and Brassai the alleged linguistic purity and insularity of the national literatures seemed obsolete. That is why both of them envisioned national literatures (including "national" German and Hungarian literature) in a ceaseless in-between and hybrid position, always creatively blurring and reframing the boundaries, being in an everlasting multi-layered transfer.⁵ This utopia of transnational literary hybridity and multilingualism made for both of them reassess the role of literary translation. Therefore translation came to represent for both scholars the epitome of literary modernity and

modernization. Both of them imagined the future of literary studies centred around this literary endeavour, that had such an instable status and uncertain value for the most of the nineteenth-century literary systems, that often perceived it as the transgression or the elimination of the “uniqueness,” “purity,” and “monolithic nature” of the national literatures.

This highly specific imagination of the foundation and study of comparative literary studies was facing rather different types of ideologies of the national when aimed at representing Hungarian literature and being part of the Hungarian literary field. It is enthralling and at the same time a telltale sign to see how the core of the assumptions of Brassai and Meltzl became reinterpreted and reconfigured in the reception of their fellow Hungarian scholars and intellectuals.

After the first number of the *Acta Comparationis* had been published, the most popular and widely-read newspaper of the time, the *Vasárnapi Újság*, commented upon the polyglottism of the review and confronted the Transylvanian endeavour with an ideal Brassai and Meltzl did not entirely share in their journal. According to the columnist of the newspaper: “[i]ts multilingual character is not an inconvenience any more after one gets used to it.”⁶ Thus the *Vasárnapi Újság* perceived the multilingualism hardly as a critique of the national literary models in vogue, but a kind of supplement of these projects. That is why they envisaged the *Acta Comparationis* as being the perfect international medium, a kind of “multilingual lawyer” of the Hungarian national literature on the global literary and cultural scene. From this vantage point, the polyglossia of the review was projected as a proper agora to gather, systematize and circulate a highly positive image of Hungarian culture and literature. That is why the *Vasárnapi Újság* greeted so enthusiastically the samples of the much-awaited translations of E. D. Butler from Hungarian poets published by the ACLU, whose collaborator he became from the first issue of the review. The translations of the clerk of the British Museum from Mihály Vörösmarty, the major poet of the Hungarian Romantic literary movement, were cheered as the beginning of the awaited period when the international literary world would have to tackle the real values of Hungarian culture: “We have recently commented upon the praiseworthy intention of Mr. E. D. Butler, the clerk of the British Museum who knows Hungarian well, to publish his collection of translations from Hungarian poets. Now we have the occasion to make sure of the success of his translations. Recently, the *Összehasonlító Lapok* [sic], edited by professor Brassai and Meltzl from Kolozsvár, published two translations of Butler among its pieces of miscellaneous data. The first is the *Hontalan*, the other *Az elhagyott anya*, both of them were written by Vörösmarty.⁷ Except that he left out the last two verses of the latter, which are a must for a proper allegorical understanding of the poem, especially for foreigners, he translated both of the poems so faithfully and beautifully as it had never been done before with a Hungarian poem translated into English. He hit off the poetic likeness and the original meaning of the poems so much, that we could have never wished for such a perfect introduction of Hungarian poetry into English literature, an introduction we have been waiting for such a long time. Let us highlight that the eccentric, but *interesting and useful* [italics mine—L. T. Sz.] *Összehasonlító Lapok* [sic] published already its eighth issue.”⁸

The joy of the *Vasárnapi Újság* was not incidental at all, but a historically and culturally embedded gesture, a moment of more than a half-century “vindicative tradition.” The term was coined by the doyen of the contemporary Hungarian literary historians, Péter Dávidházi in a series of publications relating to the afterlife of the Hungarian reaction to the Herderian prophecy. As it is well-known, Herder predicted that Eastern Europe will be completely taken over by the Slavic communities, and the Hungarians will be assimilated by this numerous surrounding cultural power.⁹ According to Dávidházi, this haunting vision of the cultural inferiority and distopia resulted in the invention of a rhetorical tradition that appropriated the biblical metaphors of *vindicatio* into new, nationalized topoi of the defense of the national culture and literature.¹⁰ The new figure of the writer (especially that of the poet, then of the literary historian) as a Paraclete, an advocate of the national community, acting on its behalf, was clearly a recycling and reinterpretation of the Christian usage into a powerful modern concept, that modelled Hungarian modern self-definition for a long time onwards. The writer-Paraclete seems to have taken over many traces of the original role attributed either to Jesus, or the Holy Spirit: he becomes a councillor, an advocate, a comforter, mostly in hard times. The sacred origins of the pattern recasted an aura of sacredness around the national poet and the national literary historian, reminding not only of the origins, but also to the long cultural career of the Parakletos.

These narratives of the emerging modern Hungarian literary intellectuals used every possible situation and datum in order to asseverate the transnational role of the Hungarian writers and culture in the past and in the present (and thus to infirm the Herderian prophecy). Of course, almost this whole late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Hungarian vindicative tradition was written in Hungarian, therefore the most severe complaints and the highest expectations were linked to the emergence of those cross-national cultural communicative mechanisms that would “accurately” render the “true cultural profile” of the Hungarians. Up until the midst of the nineteenth century there were very few such endeavours and most of them were dismissed due to their alleged partiality or misunderstanding of the original message. Cultural mediators like the bilingual and bicultural Kertbeny Károly were thought to be lacking the genuine knowledge of Hungarian culture or the literary talent to convey Hungarian literature into another culture.

That is why the complete disappearance of the Latin language as a mediating platform among national scholarly and literary cultures around the early nineteenth century, brought about an ever stronger dilemma on how to “vindicate” the national culture effectively? What would be the most operative institutional and linguistic forms to plea the grounds of a “strong” Hungarian literature and nation?

These dilemmas came to the foreground when the *Vasárnapi Újság* thought the polyglottism of the *Acta Comparationis* would be tolerable in exchange of the seemingly higher goal the review represented: the vindication of the Hungarian culture in a cross-cultural and transnational scene. The permissive and concessive attitude, and the eulogy of the translations published in the ACLU were therefore due to a fairly long cultural tradition that tried to find the best solution for an international cultural representation.

ACLU was seen as a “useful” and “interesting” tool. It was hoped that the journal would somehow thematize Hungarian literature abroad, and control the discourse upon it.

Vasárnapi Újság was not the only one to frame the *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Literatur* in this way. This hermeneutical misunderstanding, at least partially, of the aims of the review recurs also in other media products of the time, even in the Transylvanian ones. For instance, the supplement review of *Kolozsvár*, entitled *Hölgyfutár* (but having no direct connection with the famous, or sometimes, ill-famed daily literary newspaper of the early 1850's with the same title) devoted even a larger study to the newly published ACLU. Its author interpreted the review and its alleged goals within national vindicative ambitions. Therefore the text imagined the global cultural field as a competitive realm of the different nations in which all the scholarly disciplines, especially literary history, were meant to defend an alleged national honour: “We often complain about the fact that the Western countries hardly ever learn about our literary and cultural life. Would anything leak about us abroad, it becomes distorted, it loses its original character and magnificence, and this is the way it reaches those foreigners who usually sit in judgement on matters of culture and cultural value. . . . Being in possession of an advanced education and a vivid literary life, the huge nations hardly ever feel the need to do discovery trips into the spiritual realms of the smaller nations and to make an effort to master their languages, given also the hazard of such a venture.”¹¹ The already well-known topoi of the unworthily overshadowed culture, that is ceaselessly misunderstood by the foreigners and needs to be vindicated, drives the author of the review towards the necessity of establishing a lively transnational cultural propaganda: “That is why the sole possibility for these small nations is to present themselves on this world market [sic]: to bring forth everything they consider noteworthy of themselves. . . . I have touched upon these miseries of our literature only to greet two novel enterprises with even a greater pleasure: both the academy-backed review of Hunfalvy and the *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok*, started by Brassai and Meltzl, are the means that could heal this woeful, moreover shameful state of our Hungarian literature. Both reviews are ideally suited for a noble cause: to present our endeavours and attainments for those foreign cultures that, until now, have learned about us only by means of false sources. Both of these efforts can bear witness to the viable character of our race.”¹²

The comparison of the ACLU with the *Literarische Berichte aus Ungarn*, edited by Pál Hunfalvy, is absolutely telltale. The *Literarische Berichte* was founded by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and edited for three years (1877–1880) by one of its most influential linguists, with the overt aim of promoting Hungarian scholarly and literary results and controlling the discourse upon Hungarian culture abroad. The quarterly was transformed into a monthly *Ungarische Revue* (1881–1885),¹³ published in Leipzig, and had an unprecedented financial and institutional background. Beyond the Hungarian Academy, the publication was supported by the Hungarian National Museum, the Kiszaludly Literary Society, the Historical Society, the Society of Natural Sciences and several other societies, being the first modern state-funded periodical to become specialized on cultural diplomacy and transnational cultural mediation in modern Hungarian culture. A long historical narrative of the forgotten nation, and a culture that has to deal

with an underserved underdog role, due to the insularity of its language and the paramount and belated influence of the Latin language, introduced the *Literarische Berichte aus Ungarn*, preparing the final vindicative arguments Hunfalvy brought up so as to explain the goals of the new publication: “Es ist wohl keine übertriebene Behauptung, dass Ungarn das Ausland vielleicht unter allen Ländern Europas am besten kennt. . . . Ungarn . . . und die ungarische Nation liegen so zu sagen im Herzen Europa’s, an den Ufern der mittleren Donau, welche von jeher die Heerstrasse aus dem Orient in den Occident gebildet hat. Die Entwicklung und die Fortschritte Ungarns und der ungarischen Nation können demnach dem übrigen Europa nicht gleichgiltig sein; somit darf auch die ungarische Literatur auf das Interesse des Auslandes Anspruch machen.”¹⁴ The final part of the argument presented the founding of the review as an answer to a double wish, both of the foreigners and the Hungarians to find up-to-date information on Hungarian culture, but the closing of the argument made visible also its vindicative component and moral overtone. According to it, the new publishing enterprise and self-presentation in front of Europe was primarily a moral duty of the cultural community: “Und ein solches Interesse ist auch in anderer, wohlwollenderer Form schon zu wiederholten Malen zu Tage getreten. Man wünscht genauere Kunde über Ungarn und über dessen geistige Bestrebungen zu erhalten. Dieser Wunsch wurde insbesondere durch die beiden internationalen Congresse, den der europäischen Statistiker und den der Archäologen und Anthropologen, welche im September 1876 in Budapest tagten, ausgesprochen. Das lebhafteste Verlangen nach hinreichender Belehrung über die ungarische Literatur und das gesammte geistige Leben der Nation, welchem Genüge zu leisten wir bis zur Stunde unterlassen haben, klang fast wie ein Tadel; und wir fühlen selbst, dass wir diesen Tadel verdienen. Die Nichterfüllung dieser Pflicht gegen das Ausland war zugleich ein uns selbst zugefügtes Unrecht.”¹⁵

It is clearly visible that the *Hölgyfutár* hermeneutically misunderstood and repositioned the role and the aims of the emerging *Acta Comparationis* and comparative literature, and, similarly to many other voices, greeted Brassai and Meltzl as the founders of a multilingual, and thus highly efficient tool in transnational cultural politics—a kind of eccentric version of the *Literarische Berichte aus Ungarn*. The very same attitude seemed familiar also to the *Fővárosi Lapok* that saw the new journal as a national Paraclete, part of the “persuading” mechanism we spotted at the vindicative national narratives: “Our literature could benefit from the review, and we strongly believe that the alliance of a prominent senior scholar and a young aspiring teacher will succeed in the laborious task of making the foreign cultures devote more attention to the quality products of our literature.”¹⁶ This ceaseless strong emphasis on the vindicative elements in the reception of the first issues of the *ACLU* makes visible the cultural pattern the *Acta Comparationis* had to face when making his way into Hungarian culture.

2.2. National and global at the same time? Negotiating the borders, negotiating on the border

BUT THE bitter, ironical, furious or resigned comments of Brassai and Meltzl from the ACLU uncover even more the structural “misunderstanding” and reinterpretation of the *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok* along the vindicative cultural tradition, and the fragility of the comparative method in the form the founders of the ACLU imagined it. Since many of their contemporaries mistook the goal and methodological mechanisms proposed by Brassai and Meltzl for transnational cultural propaganda, they had to fight again and again with the complaints of being unintelligible, non-efficient or “too complicated” for such aims.

In an issue published on November 15, 1877 the editors commented upon a censorious review that heavily criticized the multilingual practice and the alleged “foreignness” of the ACLU in the monthly of the most important Hungarian literary society, the Kiszaludy Társaság.¹⁷ Along their short presentation of the *Rivista di Letteratura Popolare*, they (but most probably Meltzl, the later professor of Italian at the University of Kolozsvár / Cluj) used the Italian publication to scrutinize the acid comments and to reflect on its own position: “this review [i.e. *Rivista di Letteratura Popolare*] publishes in all the Romance languages, including Spanish and French; i.e. they also obey by the principles of our specialized review. The naive member of the Kiszaludy Society, who attacked our review in the reports of the association on these grounds, should take note of this.”¹⁸

A similar, but more bitter and vehement attack was directed against not one, but many Hungarian periodicals in a later issue. Brassai and Meltzl conceptualized the dilemmas of Hungarian intellectual life vis-à-vis the aims of the ACLU not necessarily as a repudiation of the paradigm they were about to create, but more like an ever-growing distance of their ideals from that of the Hungarian public life represented mostly by the press. Resuming a reference to the *Acta Comparationis* in *Das Ausland* edited by Friedrich von Hellwald, the editors used the occasion to position themselves towards a series of leading Hungarian periodicals. The critique could also be read as the growing irritation of Brassai and Meltzl in the face of the never-ending “misreading” of their aims, including the conceptual role of multilingualism in the *Acta Comparationis*: “Just like the *Athenaeum*, the *Academy* etc., the famous *Ausland* [sic], edited by v. Hellwald Fridrik, had at its disposal only a few issues of our periodical. Nevertheless it commends our periodical in its issue published on July 2. Such succinct reviews should be templates for much of our press, especially for the *Fővárosi Lapok*, *Magyarország és a Nagyvilág* and all the others. They just misinform and mislead the public willfully or involuntarily on new problems they do not even understand. Instead of it, they should simply announce the publication of a piece of the scholarly specialized press, an academic journal would not expect anything else from the entertaining press.”¹⁹

But the initial year of the first international academic journal of comparative literary studies must have been a sobering experience for the founders. They were too often brought to book for the lack of vindicative gestures and for their multilingual

“foreignness.” The vindicative tradition that was enforced and recontextualized with the publishing of the *Literarische Berichte aus Ungarn* proved to be too big a burden to bear for the new, comparative literary method looking for recognition. Of course, we should not single out only the vindicative tradition of Hungarian literature and culture causing the insularity of the *Acta Comparationis*.

Certainly, the deliberate scholarly option to publish a highly specialized journal accounted already for the publishers for the small audience they would have. Of course, the rationale of the inevitably small reading public of the scholarly specialized journals did not exclude the longing for a larger public. The motif of the scarcity of the reading public recurred even many years after the start of the *Acta Comparationis*: in the era of the rise of the mass public and modern literary professionalization, it was certainly hard to tackle with the scarcity of the public. “Wir sind ein aristokratisches Blatt in jeder Beziehung (und zwar im guten Sinne des Wortes wie ich hoffe) und gedenken es auch in alle Zeit zu bleiben.”—wrote Meltzl in a letter to Julius Frauenstädt in March 1878.²⁰ In another letter he commented playfully and ironically on the complete lack of Transylvanian readers: “Zur Zeit zwar viele—platonische Abonnenten, aber nur einen einzigen zahlenden besitzt.”²¹ But according to another letter to Gwinner, the lack of the subscribers was not seen as a local problem arising from the uneasy relationships with Hungarian literature, but a more global and long-term question: “Diese gemütliche Art des Erscheinens darf sie nicht Wunder nehmen bei einem Blatte, wie das unserige, das fast keine Abonnenten besitzt und in dieser Art redigiert, noch lange keine in genügender Zahl haben wird.”²² This explanatory narrative of isolation was far more visible and long-term than the one arising from the initial confrontations with Hungarian press and literary criticism, that occurred mostly in the first year of the periodical. But this latter one is still important, since the *Acta Comparationis* was eager to be considered part of the Hungarian literary life, and the failure of this project had its part in the long-term financial and scholarly problems of the ACLU.

In a comment dating from early 1878, partly as an answer to the accusations of “foreignness,” the editors still emphasized that the journal belonged to the Hungarian literary field: “The last columns of the supplement of our periodical are dedicated to Germany and the other foreign lands concerned. But, since our periodical is, after all, a Hungarian journal, let us highlight some of the contents of the supplement also for the readers of our country.”²³ But already in May 1878, an editorial comment admitted woefully that the ACLU renounced to persuade those skeptical and combative readers who tried to integrate it into Hungarian literature as part of a vindicative strategy.²⁴ This new attitude could also have been at the origins of the process the ACLU distanced itself from the Hungarian press in general, and of the Hungarian scholarly journals, in particular. As the editors wrote in September 1878: “the mutual exchange of the issues of our journal is possible only in case of the overseas specialized scholarly journals.”²⁵ Of course, this was less a rupture, but more like a process of slow distancing from the world of the Hungarian press and culture, after the shock of the initial year.

Brassai and Meltzl followed the institutionalization of Hungarian studies (Hungarologie) and the transnational mediation of Hungarian literature and culture also in the later years.

Many of their comments tell of their deep interest and especially their own inner struggle with the vindicative model of *Hungarologie* / Hungarian studies. For instance, according to an unusually long editorial comment from December 1879, which surprisingly was not linked to current literary and cultural events, even though it was published in the review column of the ACLU, Brassai and Meltzl did not simply and plainly deny vindication, but revealed their multi-faceted relationship with this tradition. The language, in this case Hungarian, of the almost two-column-long comment, left no doubt that it was a Hungarian audience they targeted. Their comments were filed under the title *German literature*, but the alleged relationship of contemporary German criticism to other national cultures constituted only a take-off for the argumentation: “As regards the state of affairs in comparative literature and translations, an older observation of ours is still valid. Germans are inclined to translate every kind of European national poetry, including the Slavic ones, they neglect only Hungarian literature. But Hungarian literature is solely responsible for these conditions. With a quiescent and passive attitude, it left a whole decade to pass away unnoticed, after Hungarians regained their constitution.”²⁶ The argument went that Hungarian literate left the immensely important field of translation and transnational literary communication unused, handing over the field to the often malevolent, semi-official, government-funded, German-language press that misled and misadvised the foreigners regarding even the most elementary issues. The ACLU labelled them “pseudo-Hungarian and pseudo-German literature” that hindered the direct contact of the valuable and genuine German and Hungarian literature with each other. The *Acta Comparationis* saw this tendency as a highly political one, far outside from the imagined borders of its beloved comparative literature, but it couldn’t help commenting on, using the metaphors and narratives of the vindicative tradition: “We do not want to become the thesaurus of such quotations. Our aims are related solely to literary history, even though, in this case, its interests are touched upon in a corrupted way. . . . We are determined to leave unnoticed this problem, but let us call the attention of our readers to it for the last time, lest posterity would charge us with indolence.”²⁷ Even though, seen from a specific Hungarian angle, the immense German field of translations is unpromising at the time being, at least the large number of the German poems with Hungarian theme has remained stable in the last few years. This could reassure us that Germany is interested in us, unless our language and other barriers restrain it. Hungarians have the duty to turn aside all these obstacles by engaging the attention [of Germany and the foreigners] *directly*, and thus to make the foreigners slightly understand Hungarian language. (A good example of this is the commented edition of one of our philologues, that could be read and used in Germany, in spite of its Hungarian notes. But one could take as example our small polyglott academic journal that thoroughly familiarized many foreign scholars with the Hungarian language.)²⁸

Even though the founders of the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universalium* often emphasized the complete autonomy of literature and of the scholarly work, the vindicative paradigm of Hungarian literary history seemed too strong a tradition to avoid. Brassai and Meltzl did not simply reject this paradigm and the narratives, cognitive metaphors, topoi associated with it, but struggled with it, making it clear that one of the most impor-

tant primary contexts of the first international comparative literary journal was certainly the Hungarian literary field. Though largely neglected, the reception of the ACLU in the Hungarian literary field can reveal this multi-faceted relationship of Hungarian literature with the vision of comparative and world literature represented by the *Acta Comparationis*, but also the dilemmas of the ACLU regarding the role and transmission of Hungarian literature abroad.

As I argued, the ACLU originally thought of itself as part of Hungarian literature, was deeply concerned with its overseas transmission, but never accepted the role of being a simple popularizer or propagandistic tool. It seems that the founders of the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* tried to negotiate an in-between place for them and for the emerging discipline of comparative literary studies, initially situating themselves between the global literary processes and another emerging modern discipline: Hungarian studies (*Hungarologie*). This complex negotiation could be viewed also from another perspective: the founders of the ACLU were trying to situate the emerging international Hungarian studies as close as they could to their ideals of the “modern discipline”²⁹ of comparative literary studies. The multiple Hungarian responses to this attempt tried either to assimilate the new literary project of the ACLU to the vindicative paradigm and discursive field of 18th- and 19th-century literary Hungarian nation-building, or repudiated it as being too “foreign,” “cosmopolitan” and “disturbingly multilingual.” This multiple negotiation of the *Acta Comparationis* for its scholarly place in the Hungarian scientific field was further complicated by the beginnings of the conscious, state-funded *Hungarologie*: the *Literarische Berichte aus Ungarn* seemed to strong a rival to compete with. But it was not only the (financial and institutional) support of the Academy and important scholarly and literary association that divided the *Literarische Berichte* from ACLU. A series of editorial principles (including the non-hierarchical view of languages) and the imagining of Hungarian studies as an independent and critical, even self-critical, discipline, harmoniously integrated into a comparative literature, were such ideals that made ACLU distance itself slowly from the Hungarian literary networks and institutions. The changes in the main title of the journal, from the beginning of the new series onwards, may be seen as reflections of the new phase of the ever-growing dilemmas and inner struggles of the editors with one of their primary literary contacts, Hungarian literature and culture: “Our journal, which was planned to be published just for two years, will go on also next year. Bene vixit qui bene latuit. But it will have a changed, Latin and Hungarian main title. Nonetheless, it will continue to be a devoted Hungarian journal, as it has always been before. We ask that small, but distinguished audience we have gained in our country, deign to take notice of our German-language editorial message that is to be published next year, in our next issue.”³⁰ But the editorial remarks of the next issue, which was also the first of the new series, contained also a sharp self-criticism on some of the principles that had been previously followed by the journal: “Von neujahr 1879 weiter erscheint unser Blatt in *neuer folge*; und zwar trägt der lateinischen haupt-titel hinfort an der spitze, während der magyarisches als zweiter haupt-titel, ein bescheidener wirt den gästen folgend, an letzte stelle kommt. Wir hoffen auf diese weise den *strengwissenschaftlichen* charak-

ter unseres polyglotten blattes auch *äusserlich* unzweideutiger, als bislang auszudrücken; u[nd] hinfort verschont zu bleiben, von dem vorwurf, dass es uns etwan um befriedigung eines localpatriotisch-abderitischen kitzels zu tun sei u. dgl. m. Aber ebensowenig beabsichtigen wir galvanisierung einer mumie, mit der einföhrung des lateinischen, neben welchem selbsverständlich jede moderne sprache—sie mag seine, welche sie will—in unserem literarischen verkehr nach wie vor als gleichberechtigt gilt.²³¹

It seems that Brassai and Meltzl agreed to distance themselves exactly from those first years of the journal, when they actively negotiated a place in the Hungarian cultural system, trying to place comparative literature close to Hungarian literature, and vice versa. Instead of it, they consciously opted for an even more international and more specialized journal, less implied into Hungarian cultural matters, and especially less integrated into the Hungarian literary life. “Bene vixit qui bene latuit.”—quoted the editors one of the famous elegiac epistles of Ovid from the *Tristia* (III 4a. 25): the decision to become even more “hidden” and “invisible” towards the canonic Hungarian literature was certainly not an easy one to take. The *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* and Hungarian literature parted one more step further at the beginning of the new series in January 1879.



Notes

1. For a detailed account of these, see my former analysis: T. Szabó Levente, “Negotiating World Literature in the First International Journal of Comparative Literary Studies: The Albanian Case,” *Studia UBB Philologia* 2 (2012): 33–51.
2. Meltzl Hugo, *A kritikai irodalomtörténet fogalmáról. Egyszersmind bevezetésül a német irodalom új korának történetéhez. Felolvasás mellyel a kolozsvári egyetemen a Német irodalom kritikai története Opitzon kezdve (Új kor) című előadásait 1873. október 22-ikén megkezdette* (Bécs: Faesy és Frick cs. k. udvari könyvtárosok kiadása, 1875), 6.
3. Meltzl, *A kritikai irodalomtörténet fogalmáról*, 8. Ferenc Toldy was the unquestionable authoritative literary historian of the 1850s-early 1870s. Holder of the only chair in literary history at the University of Pest till his death in 1875, author of several systematic literary histories, collections and editions of historical literary texts, he has been thought to be a kind of founding father of modern, narrative Hungarian literary history. For a thorough analysis of his oeuvre, see: Dávidházi Péter, *Egy nemzeti tudomány születése: Toldy Ferenc és a magyar irodalomtörténet* (Budapest: Akadémiai–Universitas, 2004), 164–207.
4. Meltzl, *A kritikai irodalomtörténet fogalmáról*, 8–9.
5. For the creative possibilities of this ideal, see: Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004).
6. “Magyar költemények angol fordításban,” *Vasárnapi Újság* (May 20, 1877): 315; cf. also the comments in: “Az Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok,” *Vasárnapi Újság* (July 8, 1877): 427.
7. *Hungarian poems and Fables for English Readers*, trans. E. D. Butler (London: Trübner & Co., 1877). In Edward Dundas Butler’s translation the titles are: *Homeless (Hontalan)* and *The forsaken mother (Az elhagyott anya)*.
8. “Magyar költemények angol fordításban,” 315.

9. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. Band 4 (Riga und Leipzig: J. F. Hartknoch, 1791), 19–20. László Péter suggested there was a strong link between the reception of Herders' prophecies regarding Hungary and the haunting nineteenth-century Hungarian vision of *nemzethalál* (the nation's death): Péter László, "Language, the Constitution and the Past in Hungarian Nationalism," in *Hungary's Long Nineteenth Century: Constitutional and Democratic Traditions in a European Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 185.
10. Dávidházi, *Egy nemzeti tudomány születése*, 164–207. Dávidházi Péter, "Az Úrnak útait az emberek előtt igazgatni.' A Bessenyei fivérek és a vindicatio szerephagyománya," in *Per passivam resistentiam. Válogatott hatalom és írás témájára* (Budapest: Argumentum, 1998), 85–102. This narrative was partly modelled by former topoi of lamenting, especially of *Querela Hungariae*. See: Szilasi László, "Hajlam a búra (A magyar irodalom panaszos alaphangjának retorikai gyökerei a régiségben)," in *A sas és az apró madarak (Balassi Bálint költői nyelvének utóélete a XVII. század első harmadában)* (Budapest: Balassi, 2008), 254–264.
11. Szana Tamás, "Irodalmi levelek II," *Hölgyfutár* (15 March 1877): 82.
12. Szana, "Irodalmi levelek II," 83.
13. The title alluded to another modern attempt of Hungarian studies from the 1860s, edited by Szende Riedl (Manswet Riedl), the first international professor of modern Hungarology. The short-lived *Ungarische Revue. Beiträge zur Kenntniss der Vergangenheit und Gegenwart Ungarns* was published in 1868, following another attempt of Riedl to popularize Hungarian culture abroad: the publishing of *Irodalmi Lapok* in Prague, in 1860.
The allusion of the titles and the similar attempts are not a coincidence, Hunfalvy and Riedl were closely related in their early scholarly years. In 1857–1858, Riedl was one of the main collaborators, then editor of the *Kritische Blätter* in Prague, providing the review with a series of pioneering Hungarological treatises. In the same period Hunfalvy came to be the second Hungarian collaborator, informing the readers on Hungarian cultural and scholarly news, too. Their relationship has not been investigated from the angle of the institutionalization of modern Hungarian studies yet. On the Prague years of Riedl, see: Sas Andor, *Riedl Szende hídverési kísérlete a cseh és magyar szellemiség között a Bach-korszak Prágájában: 1854–1860* (Bratislava-Pozsony: Slovenská Grafia, 1937); Kemény G. Gábor, "Riedl Szende prágai korszaka és harca a tudományos kritikáért," *Irodalomtörténet* 2 (1950): 70–90. Although the term Hungarian studies (Hungarologie) was coined only in 1922 by Róbert Gragger in the *Ungarische Jahrbücher*, its institutional history, including the nineteenth-century rise of the state-funded institutions of modern national cultural diplomacy, goes back to the earlier century. For a summary of this process: *Magyar mint idegen nyelv. Hungarológia. Tankönyv és szöveggyűjtemény*, eds. Giay Béla and Nádor Orsolya (Budapest: Janus–Osiris, 1998), 7–162.
14. "It is probably not an exaggerated statement that perhaps Hungary knows best all the foreign countries of Europe. . . . Hungary . . . and the Hungarian nation are in a way, so to say, in the heart Europe, due to the banks of the middle Danube, which always formed a military itinerary from the Orient and the Occident. Therefore the development and the progress of Hungary and the Hungarian nation cannot remain unknown to Europe; consequently also the Hungarian literature can make claim on the interest of the foreigners." Paul Hunfalvy [Hunfalvy Pál], "Einleitung," *Literarische Berichte aus Ungarn* 1 (1877): 9.
15. "Such an interest has come to light in other, more benevolent forms already for several times. One wishes to receive more exact pieces of news on Hungary and about the intellectual endeavours. This wish was expressed particularly by the two international Congresses, the one of the European statisticians and the other of the the archaeologists and anthropologists, which met in Budapest in September 1876. [They spoke about how] one's thirst for knowledge on Hungarian literature and the whole Hungarian intellectual life had been

- unsatisfied. We, too, feel that we deserved this admonition. The non-payment of this duty toward the foreign countries was a wrong caused to ourselves.” Hunfalvy, “Einleitung,” 10.
16. K, “Összehasonlító irodalomtörténeti [sic] Lapok. (Brassai és Meltzl Hugó közlönye),” *Fővárosi Lapok*, (January 26, 1877): 103.
 17. Cf. *Kisfaludy Társaság Évlapjai* 1877: 35.
 18. “Olasz irodalom,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (November 15, 1877): 357. I follow the international consensus of referring to the *Acta Comparationis* with its later Latin main title, even though the Latin (main) title will be introduced only with the new series (the so-called *Novae Seriei* of the periodical, beginning from the fifth volume)—a circumstance I will comment on in the conclusions of my article.
 19. “Correspondance,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (December 31, 1877): 423–424.
 20. “We are an aristocratic journal in all respects (namely, I hope, in a good sense of the word), and we plan to remain so in all times.” The context of the excerpt sheds light also on the self-interpretation of the founders in view of modern professionalization, including specialization: “. . . das sogenannte ‘Publicum’ hier eigentlich niemals existiert hat, noch existieren wird. Innerhalb unseres distinguierten Kreises, welcher schön langsam sich von Tag zu Tag, von Jahr zu Jahr vergrößert, haben wir wahrlich nicht die geringste Zeit noch sonstige Gelegenheit, das Publicum zu missen. Wir sind ein aristokratisches Blatt in jeder Beziehung (und zwar im guten Sinne des Wortes wie ich hoffe) und gedenken es auch in alle Zeit zu bleiben. Sollte der greise Brassai, der mit seinem 80 Jahren noch das jugendfrischeste Herz hat, mich überleben, so bin ich überzeugt, daß auch er das Blättlein in demselben liberal-aristokratischen Sinne fortführen wird, in welchem ich es selbst führe” Thomas, Frühm and Rudolf Borch, “Unbekanntes aus dem Schopenhauer-Kreise: Der Briefwechsel Hugo von Meltzls mit Julius Frauenstädt und Wilhelm von Gwinner,” *Jahrbuch der Schopenhauer-Gesellschaft*, 17 (1930): 204.
 21. “At the time being we have many Platonic subscribers, but only one who pays.” Frühm and Borch, “Unbekanntes aus dem Schopenhauer-Kreise,” 265. He was playfully referring to his mother-in-law.
 22. “One should not be surprised of this comfortable type of appearance at a journal that, like ours, has almost no subscribers, and edited in this way, it won’t have sufficient ones either.” Hugo von Meltzl to Gwinner, August 23, 1878. Frühm and Borch, “Unbekanntes aus dem Schopenhauer-Kreise,” 225.
 23. “Olvasóinkhoz,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (January 18, 1878): 452.
 24. *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (May 15, 1878): 600
 25. “M-Sziget,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (September 15, 1878): 76.
 26. “Német irodalom,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (December 31, 1878): 176.
 27. In this regard, our latest cautionary article can be read in the third issue of the *Keresztény Magvető*. We warned that the Slavic people start French bulletins and other literary enterprises overseas, which already have tangible results. These should be neutralized with similar overseas periodicals, since otherwise *periculum in mora*. [original footnote of the editors, most probably written by Meltzl—L. T. Sz.]
 28. “Német irodalom,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (December 31, 1878): 176–177. The editor of the commented edition of Pindar, the text alluded to, was Hóman Ottó, a former colleague and employee of Brassai at the Transylvanian Musaeum Society / Erdélyi Múzeum-Egylet. His edition appeared in Leipzig in 1876, and it was unfavourably reviewed in the Hungarian *Egyetemes Philologiai Közlöny*, a rival journal of *Acta Comparationis* in matters of the comparative method, but following a completely different methodological under-

standing of world literature. The unfavourable review led to a fierce answer and debate, but the edition of Pindar was discontinued. Cf. Hóman Ottó, ed., *Pindar versezetei: Kritikai és magyarázó jegyzetekkel. Kiadta Hóman Ottó, I. kötet*, Lipcse, 1876.

29. In the foreword to the journal, the editors called their new discipline of comparative literature a modern one, an attribute that was yet provocative in Hungarian literary field of the 1870s: “Előszó,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (January 15, 1877): 1.
30. “Olvasóinkhoz,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (December 31, 1878): 178.
31. “From the beginning of 1879, our journal will appear in a new series; and therefore, from now on, it will have the Latin main title on its headline, while the Hungarian will come as the second one. A modest landlord will always follow his guest. We hope, that thus we will express unequivocally also outwardly the strictly scholarly nature of our journal, even more than till now; and from now on, we will avoid the reproaches that we were a patriotic and short-witted tickling and such like. And we are similarly indisposed to galvanize life into a mummy by introducing Latin. Besides this, evidently, all the modern languages—take either of them!—will have the same right in our literary relationships.” “An unserte Leser,” *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 1879: 18. Meltzl thought, the use of the capital letters for German nouns made the German language too complicated, therefore in some of the texts written by him he used lowercases.

Abstract

Negotiating the borders of Hungarian national literature:
the beginnings of the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* and the rise of
Hungarian studies (Hungarologie)

The beginning of the first international comparative literary journal, the *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok / Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, has hardly ever been investigated from the perspective of the Hungarian literary field, even though the founders of the review often emphasized their belonging to Hungarian literature. The article explores this lesser-known primary context of the journal, revealing the cultural and historical patterns behind the misunderstanding and repudiation of the new discipline. It presents the founding editors, Sámuel Brassai and Hugo von Meltzl / Meltzl Hugó as cultural mediators, negotiating the place of early comparative literary studies on the borderline between Hungarian national literature and the transnational literary-cultural flow. From this angle, the change of the Hungarian main title of the journal into the Latin one is interpreted as a decisive phase in this cultural-literary identification and negotiation.

Keywords

Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum / *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok*, history of reception, literary nationalism, modern literary professionalization, Hungarian studies.