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Global Regionalism

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As the discipline of Comparative Literature expands beyond its traditional concentration on the literatures of a few European great powers, our expanded range of vision involves rethinking Europe itself as well as the larger global production of literature. Already in the 19th century, comparatists were deeply engaged in sorting out relations between major powers and minor literatures, as can be seen in the ambitious early journal *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, edited in the 1870s by the Transylvanian comparatist Hugo Meltzl. This article discusses Meltzl's journal and its struggles against the great-power cosmopolitanism represented by Meltzl's rival, the German comparatist Max Koch. As an illustration of the importance of trans-national perspectives in understanding European identity, the article concludes with a discussion of the recording of pagan myth in medieval Iceland.

Rethinking Europe concerns relations of national identities and collective memories, and the collective memories on which nations build are often transnational in nature. These concerns are very current today, but from the beginning, Comparative Literature as a discipline has been involved in rethinking the cultural-political landscape of Europe, even as it has worked to see European literature within the broader world at large. If comparatists are striving for a more fully global vision today, this expansion also involves an expanded conception of Europe itself.

Comparative Literature has often been accused of 'Eurocentrism,' yet during the past century, much of Europe has often been farther than China from the discipline's field of vision. In 1960, Werner Friederich, founder of the *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature*, noted wryly that the term 'world literature' was rarely being applied to anything like the full world, even the full European world:

> Apart from the fact that such a presumptuous term makes for shallowness and partisanship which should not be tolerated in a good university, it is simply bad public relations to use this term and to offend more than half of

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> humanity. … Sometimes, in flippant moments, I think we should call our programs NATO Literatures – yet even that would be extravagant, for we do not usually deal with more than one fourth of the 15 NATO-Nations.

If we now want to rethink Europe beyond the long-dominant great-power terms, this isn't so much a new idea as a return to a crucial early debate as Comparative Literature began to become an academic field in the third quarter of the 19th century. Here, I would like to consider the inaugural essay of the first journal of comparative literature, the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, founded in 1877 by the Hungarian comparatists Hugo Meltzl and Samuel Brassai. Turning from theory to literature, I will then look at a noteworthy literary example from Iceland, one of the peripheral regions of Europe long disregarded in most comparative studies, so often oriented to the work of a few literary 'great powers.'

In the 1870s, Hugo Meltzl was already fully alive to the problem of the dominance of major powers over minor literatures, and he exerted himself mightily to combat it. In 1877, Meltzl joined up with his older colleague Samuel Brassai at Cluj to found the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*. In a programmatic essay announcing the journal's purposes, 'Present Tasks of Comparative Literature,' Meltzl set forth the editors' intention as nothing less than 'the *reform of literary history*, a reform long awaited and long overdue which is possible only through an extensive application of *the comparative principle*'.[1] Meltzl argued that Goethe's cosmopolitan conception of *Weltliteratur* had been pressed into the service of narrowly nationalistic concerns: 'As every unbiased man of letters knows, modern literary history, as generally practiced today, is nothing but an *ancilla historiae politicae*, or even an *ancilla nationis*' – a handmaid of political history or even of the nation itself.

Where Goethe had looked forward to German as taking a prominent role in cultural exchange, Meltzl and Brassai sought to showcase languages and literatures usually overlooked from great-power perspectives. This desire led to their most dramatic editorial decision: to admit no fewer than ten official languages for their articles. They printed the journal's title in all ten languages, although in a concession to identifiability, they printed the Latin title in large type, along with the German title (*Zeitschrift für vergleichende Literatur*), followed by seven others in smaller type. Last of all came the Hungarian title, in medium-sized type, 'like a modest innkeeper following his guests' as Meltzl put it – in German – in a note 'An unsere Leser' in 1879.

In keeping with their multilingual emphasis, Meltzl and Brassai established an editorial board of genuinely global scope, with members from Hungary, Germany, England, France, Italy, Switzerland, Holland, Portugal, Iceland, Sweden, Poland, the USA, Turkey, India, Japan, Egypt, and Australia. By assembling so wide-ranging a team, and by founding their journal on 'the Principle of

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Polyglottism,' the editors sought at once to protect the individuality of smaller literatures and to explode nationalistic exclusivity altogether. As Meltzl said in his inaugural essay,

> Today every nation demands its own 'world literature' without quite knowing what is meant by it. By now, every nation considers itself, for one good reason or another, superior to all other nations. … This unhealthy 'national principle' therefore constitutes the fundamental premise of the entire spiritual life of modern Europe. … Instead of giving free reign to polyglottism and reaping the fruits in the future … every nation today insists on the strictest monoglottism, by considering its own language superior or even destined to rule supreme. This is a childish competition whose result will finally be that all of them remain – inferior.

The *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* was intended to set this situation right, both by its radical mixing of languages and also by its broad literary strategies. Meltzl and Brassai developed a two-pronged approach for their journal. First, they would compare masterpieces of global world literature (mostly composed in large, politically powerful and culturally influential countries). Secondly, they promoted the study of oral and folk materials. These could be found in every country and language, and so the study of folksongs became a centerpiece of the journal's project, a powerful way to level the cultural playing field for countries not yet on the map of world masterpieces.

In his inaugural essay, Meltzl urged attention to 'the spiritual life of "literatureless peoples," as we might call them, whose ethnic individuality should not be impinged upon by the wrong kind of missionary zeal.' He went on to condemn a recent Russian *ukaz* that had prohibited the literary use of Ukrainian in the Ukraine. Meltzl was so outraged by this action that he denounced it with his own form of religious zeal: 'It would appear as the greatest sin against the Holy Spirit even if it were directed only against the folksongs of an obscure horde of Kirghizes instead of a people of fifteen million'. It was evidently the Russian censorship of minor literatures that caused Meltzl to exclude Russian from the ten official languages admitted to his journal – a remarkable decision, really, to punish Russia by excluding its language from the pages of a young journal of enormous ambition but limited readership.

Discussions of globalization today sometimes use ecological metaphors to describe less-spoken languages and their literatures as endangered species; Meltzl was perhaps the first person ever to use such imagery. 'In a time when certain animal species such as the mountain goat and the European bison are protected against extinction by elaborate and strict laws, the willful extinction of a human species (or its literature, which amounts to the same thing) should be impossible'. He was particularly concerned to distance his project from a leveling

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cosmopolitanism that would ultimately overwhelm smaller literatures: 'It should be obvious,' he wrote,

> that these polyglot efforts have nothing in common with any kind of universal fraternization. … The ideals of Comparative Literature have nothing to do with foggy, 'cosmopolitanizing' theories; the high aims (not to say tendencies) of a journal like ours would be gravely misunderstood or intentionally misrepresented if anybody expected us to infringe upon the national uniqueness of a people. To attempt that would be, for more than one reason, a ludicrous undertaking which even an association of internationally famous scholars would have to consider doomed from the start. … It can safely be assumed that the purposes of Comparative Literature are more solid than that. It is, on the contrary, the *purely national of all nations* that Comparative Literature means to cultivate lovingly. … Our secret motto is: nationality as individuality of a people should be regarded as sacred and inviolable. Therefore, a people, be it ever so insignificant politically, is and will remain, from the standpoint of Comparative Literature, as important as the largest nation.

Meltzl and Brassai's journal was a bold experiment, but how did their polyglottism work in practice? Looking at their actual publication reveals a mixed situation of a pragmatic reality more constrained than the utopian polyglottism suggested by the journal's ten official languages. If it had truly been written in so many languages, the journal could not, after all, have been comprehensible to more than a handful of readers at most. In actual practice, the journal's working languages were chiefly two: German and Hungarian. In examining the articles written in four volumes covering the years 1879–1882, I find that half of all the articles were written in German, while another 20% were written in Hungarian. The remaining 30% of the articles were written mostly in three languages (English, French, and Italian), with also a handful of short items in Latin.

No articles appeared in such less-spoken 'official' languages as Icelandic and Polish. Poems from around the world were regularly given in the original, but always with a translation into one of the journal's dominant languages. So the journal's polyglottism was far more limited in practice than in theory, and yet even so it appears to have had a limiting effect on the journal's readership. In one of the few full-scale articles ever written on the *Acta*, Árpád Berczik has found that, in its best year, the *Acta* achieved a circulation of only a hundred copies, a number that actually declined in the journal's later years.

For its select readership, however, the *Acta* provided a lively venue for the sharing of ideas and information among its far-flung correspondents, and the journal gave Meltzl an opportunity to work out his strategies for a practical mode of comparison on a truly global scale, while at the same time he was creatively negotiating the cultural politics of relations between small and large literary powers. It is ironic, then, that his journal's impact was limited in his own time, and not only because of the polyglottism that would have made the journal difficult

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for many readers. Equally serious was the growth of comparative studies in France and Germany, for the scholars located in these great powers had little of Meltzl's interest in the literatures of smaller nations – and less interest still in working with scholars in those nations.

According to Árpád Berczik, 'the death blow' to Meltzl's struggling journal was the appearance in 1887 of a rival journal, published in Berlin under the editorship of Max Koch, a professor at Marburg. As Meltzl himself complained, this new and better placed journal seemed intended to siphon off readers and contributors from Meltzl's journal, as Koch's title, *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Literaturgeschichte*, was suspiciously close to the *Acta*'s own German title, *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Literatur*. Although Meltzl had studied in Berlin and likely knew Koch, it was particularly galling that he learned of the new journal not from Koch himself but only through newspaper reports. In a plaintive editorial note, Meltzl tried to rally his readers, not precisely to boycott his new rival, but at least to remain loyal to his journal:

> We have recently learned from news reports that a journal of comparative literary history is supposed to be starting publication in Berlin. As pleased as we are that even in Goethe's homeland this great branch of comparative literature … is finding a freestanding home, we must equally lament the – surely coincidental! – choice of a title, which is bound to cause much confusion with the German title of the *Acta Comparationis*. We therefore wish here to plead in advance for care to be taken, so that at least the learned public may note the difference between the *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Literatur* (since January 1877) and the *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Literaturgeschichte* (since Summer 1886).

Koch's journal was not just a personal affront to Meltzl but a real step backward methodologically. Written entirely in German, its articles were contributed almost exclusively by German scholars, and their emphasis was heavily on German literary relations; the first issue, for example, included articles on Goethe, Uhland, Kleist, Lessing, and 'Germanische Sagenmotive im Tristan-Roman,' among other German-oriented articles, while also including articles on Chinese poetry and African fables. The Berlin journal did sometimes treat folk poetry as well. If Koch was indeed trying to steal Meltzl's thunder, it may not have been a coincidence that the early issues of Koch's journal often focused on Transylvanian and Hungarian folklore. The very first issue included a short article on a theme from *Tristan* as found in Transylvanian Gypsy and Romanian poetry, while the second issue featured a prominent article 'Zur Litteratur and Charakteristik des magyarischen Folklore.'

Neither of these articles mentioned Meltzl or his journal at all, nor was the *Acta* mentioned in Koch's inaugural essay for his journal, although Koch discussed a wide range of previous efforts in comparative study. Koch's essay concluded by

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emphasizing comparative literature's national value: 'German literature and the advancement of its historical understanding will form the starting point and the center of gravity for the endeavors of the *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Litteraturgeschichte*'. Meltzl kept his journal going for another year after the Berlin journal appeared, but then gave up; Koch's journal had won.

The great-power perspective became dominant in Comparative Literature for a full century thereafter, but finally we may now be able to return to the perspective Meltzl was already developing a century and a quarter ago. We can pursue research that attends to regional as well as global concerns, studying minor literatures as well as great-power productions. In doing this, we can move beyond Meltzl's basic schema of global folk art versus great-power masterpieces, and can see that writers in all sorts of locations have very often been regionalists and globalists at one and the same time.

Current discussions of globalization often focus largely or exclusively on contemporary literature and culture, yet the global penetration of regional culture is not at all a new phenomenon. As a case in point, I would like to take the case of literary production in medieval Iceland. In converting to Christianity and making a parallel shift from runes to the Latin alphabet, the 11th-century Icelanders set the stage for the explosion of vernacular writing of sagas and skaldic poetry in the ensuing three centuries.

Iceland provides a fascinating and well-documented case of free choice to enter the new world of Christian Europe, and this was a new literary world as well as a religious and political world, bringing with it the Roman alphabet and its literary legacy, which helped shape the writing down of Iceland's rich oral traditions. A subtle but far-reaching orientation of local lore toward Christian and classical traditions came with Christianity and the Roman alphabet, and these traditions can be found in Norse texts where one might least expect it, such as in Snorri Sturluson's *Prose Edda* (c. 1240). This is the fullest medieval compendium of pagan Germanic myths, which Snorri has assembled, he says, as a resource for poetic allusions and tropes. He is anxious for young poets to know the stories behind the epithets and metaphors traditionally used in skaldic poetry, lest the old poetic language become obscure and die out. Yet in his preface he does much more than present the myths as a poetic repertory. Instead, he boldly connects the northern gods to classical history, euhemerizing them as legendary heroes later taken for gods, and he actually offers linguistic analyses to link them to Troy:

> Near the center of the world where what we call Turkey lies, was built the most famous of all palaces and halls – Troy by name. … One of the kings was called Múnón or Mennón. He married a daughter of the chief king Priam who was called Tróán, and they had a son named Trór – we call him Thór … he traveled far and wide exploring all the regions of the world and by himself overcoming all the berserks and giants and an enormous dragon and many wild beasts.[3]

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Snorri goes on to relate that Thór's descendant Óðin journeyed north with his family and began to rule in Germany and then Sweden: 'There he appointed chieftains after the pattern of Troy.' Snorri even claims that the collective name for the Norse gods, the Æsir, derives from their homeland, 'Asia'.

Though Snorri was a devout Christian and insisted that Thór and Óðin were mortal heroes, he opens the body of the *Prose Edda* with a virtual parody of the Christian Trinity. A Swedish king, Gylfi, goes to see the powerful Æsir who have created such a stir in the region, and when he comes to their castle he finds 'three high-seats one above the other, and a man seated in each.' Their names are Hár, Jafnhár, and Thriði – 'High One, 'Just-as-High,' and 'Third'. This parodic Trinity then answers his questions about ancient times, retelling the great Norse myths. Finally, the Æsir tire of all the questions and end the session – not by dismissing Gylfi but by themselves vanishing, with a final word of admonition from High One:

> 'And now, if you have anything more to ask, I can't think how you can manage it, for I've never heard anyone tell more of the story of the world. Make what use of it you can.'
>
> The next thing was that [Gylfi] heard a tremendous noise on all sides and turned about; and when he had looked all round him, he was standing in the open air on a level plain. He saw neither hall nor stronghold. Then he went on his way and coming home to his kingdom related the tidings he had seen and heard, and after him these stories have been handed down from one man to another.

As a writer from a peripheral region of Europe, Snorri was well aware that his traditions are in danger of being overwritten by the global traditions that entered Iceland in Christianity's wake. As a result, a concern over cultural memory pervades the *Prose Edda*. In his prologue, Snorri describes the early growth of the human race in terms of a material gain but also a memory loss: 'As the population of the world increased … the great majority of mankind, loving the pursuit of money and power, left off paying homage to God. This grew to such a pitch that they boycotted any reference to God, and then how could anyone tell their sons about the marvels connected with Him? In the end they lost the very name of God and there was not to be found in all the world a man who knew his Maker'. Snorri is nominally talking about the ancients who forget the true God and fall into paganism, yet his own book is precisely devoted to telling young poets about the marvels performed by the pagan gods whose names are now being boycotted under Christianity. The concern for cultural memory is expressed within the *Edda* by no less a figure than the chief god Óðin:

> Two ravens sit on his shoulders and bring to his ears all the news that they see or hear; they are called Hugin ['Thought'] and Munin ['Memory']. He sends them out at daybreak to fly over the whole world, and they come back at breakfast-time;

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by this means he comes to know a great deal about what is going on, and on account of this men call him the god-of-ravens. As it is said:

Huginn ok Muninn	Hugin and Munin
fliúga hverian dag	fly every day
iørmungrund ifir.	over the vast expanse of the earth.
Óumk ek Hugin	I fear for Hugin
at han aptr ne kome,	that he won't come back –
þó siámk ek meirr um Munin.	but I'm more concerned about Munin.

It is a rare country that develops its own script and its own literature in fundamental independence from other societies; ancient Egypt and Shiang China are more the exception than the rule. Most literatures – from Latin to French and from Hebrew to Icelandic – have been formed within broad systems grounded in the power of cultural traditions to cross the boundaries of time, space, and language. Arising within a transcultural context, a local or national literature must negotiate a double bind: the new influences that can help shape a people's traditions also brings with them the threat of the local culture's absorption into a broader milieu.

As Snorri's case can suggest, regional European writers have repeatedly found creative ways to negotiate these continental and global tensions. Noah's raven could find nothing to bring back to him, but Óðin's ravens are more successful: they bring back news from around the world. God of wisdom, Óðin is blessed – and cursed – with foreknowledge, and he knows he can only use the ravens' reports for a time, until the gods enter their fated twilight and fade from memory: one day Munin will fail to return. Óðin is also the god of poetry, however, and perhaps he foresees the day when poets will adopt the script brought by the new dispensation that will displace him. Resisting the oblivion threatened by the advancing culture, these poets will use the foreign script to celebrate their former patron and his marvelous deeds, and their poems will keep alive the memory of the raven named 'Memory.'

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