



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Rebirth of a Discipline: The Global Origins of Comparative Studies

David Damrosch

Comparative Critical Studies, Volume 3, Issue 1-2, 2006, pp. 99-112  
(Article)

Published by Edinburgh University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ccs.2006.0006>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/199716>

# Rebirth of a Discipline: The Global Origins of Comparative Studies

DAVID DAMROSCH

In charting the forward trajectory of comparative literature, one way to get our bearings is to look to the past. We need to understand the ways our discipline's history has shaped and constrained our field of vision, while conversely we may also find alternative roads opened up by early comparatists and now ripe for further exploration. These alternative paths can be especially valuable as we seek to carry forward the tectonic shift now underway from a largely European-oriented discipline to a truly global perspective. Centrally concerned to mark this shift, the new ACLA report chaired by Haun Saussy includes several suggestive forays of a counter-historical sort: Saussy's introduction unfolds a nascent global perspective in Madame de Stael and Goethe, and Katie Trumpener emphasizes Herder's Estonian and Lithuanian interests. Writing elsewhere, contributor Emily Apter has recently recovered the fascinating forgotten history of Leo Spitzer's Istanbul years, with his direct involvement in Turkish culture and linguistic reform.<sup>1</sup> All these essayists share the concern forcefully articulated by Gayatri Spivak in *Death of a Discipline* that the older great-power perspective often found in comparative studies not be continued in another guise under the rubric of a cosmopolitan multiculturalism.

My argument here will be that the present expansion to a global or planetary field of vision does not represent the death of our discipline so much as a rebirth of perspectives that were already present in the formative early years of comparative literature as a discipline. Here I propose to examine the work of two pioneering comparatists who were directly involved in the intellectual and institutional shaping of Comparative Literature as a field of study: the Transylvanian comparatist Hugo Meltzl, principal editor of the first journal of comparative literature, the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universalium* (1877–88),<sup>2</sup> and the Irish scholar Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, who

established our discipline's name in English with the publication in 1886 of his book *Comparative Literature*. As I hope to show, both in their complex personal positions and in their intellectual agendas, Meltzl and Posnett offer important early models for a genuinely global comparatism, even as the eclipse of their projects offers cautionary lessons we should still heed today.

While Posnett's and Meltzl's methods diverged dramatically, each of them sought alternatives to the dominant modes of literary and cultural study, the nationalistic and the cosmopolitan. Writing from borderline positions both culturally and institutionally, Posnett and Meltzl understood the ease with which cosmopolitanism could collapse into its seeming opposite, becoming a higher form of nationalism in great-power perspective. The problematic interplay between nationalism and cosmopolitanism was already fully present in the parent discipline from which Comparative Literature evolved, historical philology. Supranational in method, philology was often strongly nationalistic in its emphases, as can be seen clearly in the work of the great philologist Jacob Grimm. Published in the revolutionary year 1848, his two-volume *Geschichte der deutschen Sprache* was explicitly intended to demonstrate linguistically the true unity of 'our unnaturally divided fatherland,' as he put it in a dedication to the literary historian Georg Gottfried Gervinus. A strong advocate for national unity, Gervinus had inspired Grimm by constructing literary history as the history of a nation without visible borders, an emphasis signaled in the title of his monumental five-volume *Geschichte der poetischen Nationallitteratur der Deutschen* (1835–42). In dedicating his volume to Gervinus, Grimm eloquently evoked 'the people's freedom, which nothing can hinder any longer, of which the very birds twitter on the rooftop. [...] O, that it would come soon and never withdraw from us!'<sup>3</sup> Carrying Gervinus's nationalistic emphasis into the linguistic realm, Grimm proudly proclaimed the national triumph of the German language, seen in the very shifts in consonants his 'Grimm's Law' explained:

Since the close of the first century the weakness of the Roman Empire had become manifest (even though its flame still flickered from time to time), and among the unconquerable Germans the awareness of their unstoppable advance into every region of Europe had grown ever stronger. [...] How else could it be, but that so forceful a mobilization of the people would stir up their language as well, shaking it out of its accustomed pathways and exalting it? Do not a certain courage and pride lie in the strengthening of voiced stop into voiceless stop, and voiceless stop into fricative? (306–307)

At times, such nationalism could be countered by cosmopolitan perspectives that sought to transcend national cultural politics, yet in the nineteenth century cosmopolitanism itself was often a projected form of nationalism. August Wilhelm Schlegel had given a clear expression of a nationalistic cosmopolitanism as early as 1804:

Universalism, cosmopolitanism is the true German trait. For a long time our lack of a unified direction has placed us in an inferior position in relation to the limited and therefore more effective national tendencies of other peoples. But this lack, if transformed into something positive, becomes the totality of all directions and will establish superiority on our side. It is therefore not an all too sanguine hope, I believe, to think the time close when German will be the general language of communication of all civilized nations.<sup>4</sup>

\* \* \*

By the 1870s, the unstoppable march of German fricatives had yielded a unified and powerful Germany, and as Schlegel had hoped, German was becoming a crucial language of civilization, or at any rate of international scholarly exchange. Yet German speakers outside German territories still found themselves in complex situations of divided or multiple cultural loyalties. This was very much the case for the principal editor of the first journal of comparative and world literature, the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*. Hugo Meltzl (also known as Hugo von Meltzl and Hugo Meltzl de Lomnitz: even his name took multiple forms) was born in 1846 among the German-speaking minority in Transylvania. He learned Hungarian only in school, and learned Romanian as well, then went to Leipzig, Heidelberg, and Berlin for college and graduate study, writing a doctoral dissertation on the philosophical predecessors of Schopenhauer. He then returned to his native region at age twenty-seven to become Professor of German Language and Literature at Cluj-Kološvar.

Four years after his arrival in Cluj, in 1877 Meltzl joined up with his older colleague Samuel Brassai to found the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*. In a programmatic essay announcing the journal's purposes, 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*.'<sup>5</sup> Meltzl argued that Goethe's cosmopolitan conception of *Weltliteratur* had been pressed into the service of narrowly nationalistic concerns. (It is notable, for instance, that in his *Geschichte der deutschen Sprache*, in the dedication to Gervinus, Jacob

Grimm spoke of Goethe as the very embodiment of German identity: ‘without him we never truly feel ourselves as Germans, so strong is the native power of national language and poetry,’ iv.) Meltzl wished to rescue Goethe’s conception of world literature from an emphasis on a national literature’s absorption of foreign influences and its own impact abroad: ‘A journal like ours, then, must be devoted at the same time to the art of translation and to the Goethean *Weltliteratur* (a term which German literary historians, particularly Gervinus, have thoroughly misunderstood). [...] 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.

As a telling example of the myopic distortions involved in such nationalistic literary history, Meltzl cited a German discussion of a form of lyric (the ‘Tage- und Wächterlied’). The German literary historians traced its origin to Wolfram von Eschenbach, ignoring the fact that ‘Lieder of this type were sung eighteen centuries ago in China (as those contained in the *I’Ching*) and are frequently found among the folksongs of modern peoples, for instance, the Hungarians’ (57).

Meltzl’s example reveals the double strategy by which his journal would seek to counter the literary nationalism of the European great powers: first, by widening the field to include masterpieces of other cultures (China, in this example), and second, by expanding the European arena to include the literatures of smaller countries: in this instance, not at all randomly, Hungary. Where Schlegel – and indeed Goethe – had looked forward to German as taking a prominent or even dominant 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, though in a concession to identifiability, they printed the Latin title in large type, along with the German title (*Zeitschrift für vergleichende Litteratur*), 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 polyglot 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 U.S.A., Turkey, India, Japan, Egypt, and Australia. By assembling so wide-ranging a team, and by founding their journal on ‘the Principle of 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 on ‘Present Tasks of Comparative Literature,’

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. (60–61)

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, as is indicated by Meltzl’s double evocation of Chinese and Hungarian ‘Lieder’: first, to compare masterpieces of global world literature (mostly composed in large countries with highly developed literary cultures), and secondly, to promote 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 ‘Present Tasks of Comparative Literature,’ 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,’ and 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 used religious language to denounce it: ‘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’ (60). 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' (60).

Meltzl's journal, then, opposed great-power hegemony and sought to protect the literatures of smaller nations and less commonly spoken languages, promoting contact and mutual appreciation of traditions whose distinctness should be preserved and even enhanced in the process. Meltzl was particularly concerned to distance his project from a leveling 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. (59–60)

\* \* \*

Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett does not appear to have known of Meltzl or his work, but from his position in Ireland he developed his own critique of a centralizing cosmopolitanism. Born in 1854 or 1855 in northern Ireland, Posnett studied classical philology and law at Trinity College, Dublin, where he became a tutor while also practicing law in Dublin. He wrote studies on law and on historical method before turning to his study of comparative literature, which he completed just before sailing for New Zealand, where he had won appointment to the chair in classical philology at Auckland. There he taught philology, English, French, and law for five years, returning to Ireland and the practice of law thereafter.

Posnett's methods were in some respects diametrically opposed to Meltzl's: he worked on his own rather than with a group, amassing a mountain of evidence through wide and somewhat random reading, relying often on translation rather than concerning himself with polyglottism. Yet his perspective was as global as Meltzl's: his book gives substantial space to India, China, and the Arab world as well as to the ancient Mediterranean and modern Europe, and he sought worldwide correlations of literary and social developments that enabled him to give equal weight to folk literature and to literary masterpieces. Like Meltzl as well, Posnett took a dim view of cosmopolitanism, which he identified particularly with France:

In the literature of France, since the firm establishment of centralized monarchy in the seventeenth century, we everywhere feel the presence of that centralizing spirit which in the Académie Française found a local habitation and a name. [...] [and which is] capable of its best defence from the standpoint of cosmopolitan culture. From this standpoint national centres like Paris and its Academy become the best substitute for a world-centre which differences of language and national character cannot permit. (343–44)

Posnett contrasted Parisian cosmopolitanism unfavorably with a more decentralized, regionally varied British culture:

the true makers of national literature are the actions and thoughts of the nation itself; the place of these can never be taken by the sympathies of a cultured class too wide to be national, or those of a central academy too refined to be provincial. [...] Here, then, we have two types of national literature – the English, blending local and central elements of national life without losing national unity in local distinctions such as Italy and Germany have known too well; the French, centralizing its life in Paris, and so tending to prefer cosmopolitan ideals. (345)

As Posnett clearly saw, cosmopolitanism in his day did not entail a general free circulation around the globe, but instead the imposition outward of a major power's values and influence, a nationalism writ large. Long before Benedict Anderson, Posnett argued that national unity is fundamentally a fiction, useful in various ways but not to be taken too literally: 'What is a "nation"? [...] The word "natio" points to kinship and a body of kinsmen as the primary idea and fact marked by "nationality". [...] But the "nations" of modern Europe have left these little groups so far behind that their culture has either forgotten the nationality of common kinship, or learned to treat it as an ideal splendidly false' (339–40).

Posnett attacked neoclassical literary values along with French



cosmopolitanism, and for comparable reasons. If nations are not essential unities, neither are human beings, and there can be no single set of literary norms governing the artistic productions of differing groups:

Literature, however rude, however cultured, expresses the feelings and thoughts of men and women. [...] It is incumbent, therefore, on the champions of universal literary ideas to discover the existence of some universal human nature which, unaffected by the differences of language, social organisation, sex, climate, and similar causes, has been at all times and in all places the keystone of literary architecture. Is there one universal type of human character embracing and reconciling all the conflicting differences of human types in the living world and in its historical or prehistoric past? Can really scientific reasons be advanced in support of the sentimental belief in that colossal personage called 'man,' whose abstract unity is allowed to put on new phases of external form, but whose 'essence' is declared to remain unaltered? (21)

These considerations introduced Posnett's chapter on 'Relativity of Literature,' in which he asserted that literary production varies by the stage of social life in which it is produced. Admittedly, Posnett envisioned cultural relativity in a rather absolutist way. Building uncritically on the work of Herbert Spenser and the legal historian Sir Henry Maine, Posnett adopted a simple evolutionary scheme, summarized by Joseph Leerssen as the progression 'vom *clan*-System zum Stadtstaat, weiter zur Nation und schließlich zu einer universalen Kultur und "Weltliteratur".'<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, though, Leerssen misstates the progression as Posnett actually gave it, for Posnett saw world literature as arising in imperial settings in late antiquity, long *before* the birth of the modern nation. Posnett himself noted that his ordering might seem counter-intuitive, but he insisted that the facts would bear him out: 'it may be said that our order of treatment [of world literature] – after the literatures of the city commonwealth and before those of the nation – is not in harmony with prevailing ideas of literary development. Why not pass, it may be asked, from the city commonwealth to the nation, and from national literatures reach the universalism of world-literature?' (240) He answered that modern European nations are heirs of Greco-Roman ideas and institutions, and so he must first treat the 'days of world-empire and world-literature' before turning to national literatures (241).

In keeping with his anti-cosmopolitanism, Posnett spoke of world literature in quite negative terms: 'The leading mark of world-literature [...] is the severance of literature from defined social groups – the universalizing of literature, if we may use such an expression'

(238). The Roman Empire became Posnett's model for a rootless cosmopolitanism whose literary productions lack any vital connection to a defined social group: 'A society of such limited sympathies and unlimited selfishness was unsuited to the production of song. [...] if imagination depends on the existence of some genuine sense of human brotherhood, be it wide as the world or narrow as the clan, we must admit that the social life of Imperial Rome was such as must destroy any literature' (266, 268). Publishing his work as he moved from the inner to the outer margins of the British Empire, Posnett saw clearly the dangers of an imperial cosmopolitanism.

\* \* \*

How successful were Posnett and Meltzl in achieving their ambitious goals? Posnett was bitterly disappointed that his book failed to win many adherents. It was, notably, translated into Japanese within a few years of its publication,<sup>7</sup> but it received little attention elsewhere. A brilliant, querulous autodidact, Posnett had read his way so far beyond the bounds of ordinary academic training that few were prepared to follow his lead, and for his part Posnett made little effort to engage with contemporary scholarship. Indeed, his book's preface advertised his position as doubly marginal – methodologically as much as geographically. Posnett began by roundly declaring that 'To assume a position on the border-lands of Science and Literature is perhaps to provoke the hostility of both the great parties into which our modern thinkers and educationists may be divided.' He closed the preface by alluding to his shifting geographical position: 'Should errors of print or matter have escaped the author's notice, he would beg his readers to remember that this work was passing through the press just as he was on the eve of leaving this country for New Zealand' (v, vii). Posnett's global perspective may have led him to seek his appointment at Auckland, yet his move took him far from the Continental venues where the new discipline of comparative literature was being developed, and he made no further substantial contribution to literary studies. He returned to the subject once more, fifteen years later, in an article in which he proclaimed his pioneering role in coining the name 'Comparative Literature' and complained that subsequent scholars had ignored him while pursuing narrower concerns.<sup>8</sup>

Meltzl and Brassai's journal was far more directly engaged with the scholarly community, and the journal's international board collectively had the linguistic knowledge that Posnett lacked. But how did Meltzl's

polyglottism work in practice? The journal is often alluded to in discussions of the early history of Comparative Literature, but it has rarely been examined directly.<sup>9</sup> Doing so 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, and 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 1879-82, I find that half of all the articles (76 out of 156) were written in German, while another twenty percent were written in Hungarian. The remaining thirty percent of the articles were written mostly in three languages (English, French, and Italian), with also a handful of short items in Latin.

No articles at all 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.<sup>10</sup>

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 the promotion of Hungarian literature on the world stage. He pursued this goal with his double strategy of a focus both on transcendent masterpieces and on folk literature. In Meltzl's view, Hungary had produced one writer of genuinely world-class stature: Sandor Petöfi. Already in 1868 Meltzl had published a German translation of Petöfi's lyrics, and as a student of philosophy in Leipzig in 1864-66 he had communicated his enthusiasm to his classmate Friedrich Nietzsche. In the *Acta*, Meltzl devoted a continuing stream of articles to Petöfi's work. Over the course of the journal's life, Meltzl arranged for translations of lyrics by Petöfi into no fewer than thirty-two languages, and his analyses were intended to show a broad European public that here was a Hungarian poet who deserved a prominent place at the table of world literature.

Rather than seek to promote other established Hungarian writers of

(in his view) lesser literary merit, Meltzl placed his second great stress on his region's contribution to world folk poetry, showcasing lyrics not only in Hungarian but also in Romanian, and several times including Gypsy folksongs. In this effort he had some real success: the first English translation of Romanian folk poetry was published in New York in 1885, based on poems printed in the *Acta*.<sup>11</sup> In his journal, Meltzl delighted in finding the circulation of folk motifs across wide geographical areas. In one article he discussed a lyric found in similar forms in Iceland, Sicily, and Hungary, concluding: 'These are the marvels of comparative literature!'<sup>12</sup> In the journal's second volume, Meltzl issued a call for contributions to an ambitious anthology (never realized), to be named *Encyclopaedia of the Poetry of the World*. Merging his two emphases, Meltzl asked his contributors to send in two poems from every possible country in the world: one folk poem and one literary work, each of them to be given in the original and in 'a literal interlinear translation in one of the European languages' (2:177).

By these means Meltzl was working out 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 for many readers. Equally serious was the growth of comparative study 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 Litteraturgeschichte*, was suspiciously close to the *Acta*'s own German title, *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Litteratur*. Though 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 his readers as well:

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 Litteratur* (since January 1877) and the *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Litteraturgeschichte* (since Summer 1886).<sup>13</sup>

Koch's journal must have seemed to Meltzl to represent a real step backward, as well as a personal affront. 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 periodically treat folk poetry as well, and if Meltzl felt that Koch was trying to steal his thunder, he could hardly have thought it a coincidence that these treatments 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. Koch's essay ranged widely over the tasks of comparative study (source study, aesthetics, comparative literary history, interarts comparison, and folklore) and he mentioned dozens of precursors in comparative study from the seventeenth century to his own day, yet the people he discussed were almost exclusively German writers and scholars. He concluded by emphasizing the national value of comparative study: '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*.'<sup>14</sup>

Meltzl kept his journal going for another year after the Berlin journal appeared, but then gave up; Koch's journal had won out. More broadly, the great-power perspective became dominant in Comparative Literature for a full century thereafter. In 1960, the comparatist 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:

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 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.<sup>15</sup>

It is only in recent years that comparatists have begun to recover the fully global perspective that Posnett and Meltzl already achieved. We can now return to the origins of comparative literature with new appreciation for the complexities of the pioneers' situations – Posnett's world-spanning provincialism, Meltzl's polyglot antic cosmopolitanism. Little read in their authors' lifetimes, Posnett's *Comparative Literature* and Meltzl's *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* make fascinating reading today, and together they can help guide us in the rebirth of a discipline of genuinely global scope and impact.

## NOTES

- 1 'Global *Translatio*: The "Invention" of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933', in *Debating World Literature*, edited by Christopher Prendergast (London: Verso, 2004), pp. 76–109; reprinted in Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 41–64.
- 2 At first the journal was published with a Hungarian title, *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok*; a 'New Series' began in 1879 under the expansive Latin title. Meltzl founded the journal together with his older colleague Samuel Brassai, a professor of mathematics, Sanskrit, and comparative philology. Meltzl did most of the actual editing, however, and was sole editor after 1882.
- 3 Jacob Grimm, *Geschichte der deutschen Sprache* (Leipzig, 4th ed., 2 vols., 1880), pp. iv–v.
- 4 *Comparative Literature: The Early Years*, edited by Hans-Joachim Schultz and Phillip H. Rhein (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1973), p. 74.
- 5 Hugo Meltzl, 'Present Tasks of Comparative Literature', *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* I (January 1877), 179–182 and II (October 1877), 307–315; reprinted in Schultz and Rhein, *Comparative Literature*, pp. 56–62, this quote p. 56.
- 6 Joseph Th. Leerssen, *Komparatistik in Großbritannien 1800–1950* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1984), p. 61.
- 7 See K. Saito, 'The First Introduction of Posnett's *Comparative Literature* by Shoyo Tsubouchi', *Hikaku Bungaku Nenshi* (October 1965).
- 8 H. M. Posnett, 'The Science of Comparative Literature', *Contemporary Review* 79 (1901), 855–872.
- 9 A valuable collection of essays on Meltzl has recently appeared, the first ever devoted to his work: *Hugo Meltzl und die Anfänge der Komparatistik*, edited by

- Horst Fassel (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005). Particularly useful are contributions by Horst Fassel (pp. 25–40) and by Ildikó Tóth-Nagy (pp. 49–64) that discuss Meltzl’s complex (and shifting) relations to universalism and regionalism.
- 10 Árpád Berczik, ‘Hugó von Meltzl’, *Német Filológiai Tanulmányok* 12 (1978), 87–100. Berczik has also written an illuminating article on Meltzl’s theories of translation: ‘Weltliteratur, Komparatistik und Übersetzungskunst’, *Acta Litteraria Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 22 (1980), 119–133.
  - 11 Henry Phillips, *Volk-songs: Translated from the Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (Philadelphia, 1885).
  - 12 ‘Islandisch-Sizilianische Volkstradition in Magyarischem Lichte’, *ACLU* 3 (1879), 117–118.
  - 13 Quoted in Berczik, ‘Hugo von Meltzl’, 98–99.
  - 14 Max Koch, ‘Zur Einführung’, *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Litteraturgeschichte* 1 (1877), 1–12; 12.
  - 15 Werner Friederich, ‘On the Integrity of Our Planning’, in *The Teaching of World Literature*, edited by Haskell Block (Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1960), pp. 9–22; pp. 14–15.