Peripheral Nationalism, Inter-imperial Comparatism: The Case of Grigore Silași

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Abstract: The article analyzes the work of Grigore Silași (who also signed his name Szilasi Gergely) as a case study to examine the impact of ethnocentric and nationalist ideologies prevalent in Transylvania during the late nineteenth century on the reception of *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*'s program. Silași was the first professor of Romanian language and literature at Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg University and distinguished himself as a nationalist militant through his social, political, or cultural initiatives, as well as his scholarly contributions on Romanian linguistics, philology, folklore, and literature. Furthermore, he attained the status of "martyr" for the Romanian nation after being dismissed from the university in 1884 due to a Romanian-Hungarian interethnic conflict. Such a multifaceted figure provides a distinctive, albeit often overlooked lens for assessing the prospects and highlighting the limitations of comparative practice in nineteenth century Transylvania. In particular, the article argues that Silași's formulation of a comparative analytical framework aimed to strengthen a peripheral nationalism interested not in local exceptionalism, but in accessing a privileged transnational cultural network that could provide identity legitimacy for a subaltern nation.

Keywords: Grigore Silași, nationalism, inter-imperial comparatism, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, Transylvanian interethnic conflict.

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The Burden of Comparison: 1867/1868 and 1877/1878

> "Why do they no longer wish to grant the Romanian language a rightful position in this country? Is it due to insufficient refinement? However, one must ask, when and in what manner was its cultivation actively encouraged? And yet, whether they like it or not, it will soon be able to compete with any other language in Hungary and Transylvania. Why are the Romanians accused of the greatest crime for having stood up, for eighteen years—as always—for the unity of the Empire? Well, today they are no longer required to exhibit this *virtue* in the same way as in the past; they are told that His Majesty's will is for them to rise in favour of dualism. Let it be so, but then they should not be expected to embrace dualism enthusiastically; they will be subjected even in this regard, but not at the expense of their sense of national identity, nor to establish and uphold the supremacy of another nation, nor, finally, to allow the Hungarians to dispose of all the revenues of Transylvania as they please. [...] When Lieutenant Kapolnai claims that the Wallachian people are actually a Gypsy people of three million souls, and when Dr. K. Th. Richter, in the October 30 issue of *Presse*, says that the Moldavian-Wallachian nobleman traces his lineage from the pigsty, and when spirits are so enraged, and when Bucharest journalism steps in to combat such unprecedented slander, then the Romanian nation from Transylvania has to endure all repercussions!"

The statement originates in a letter dated December 1868, one year after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, when Transylvania—an autonomous region of the Austrian Empire for over one hundred and fifty years, with a 54% Romanian population—was incorporated into Hungary. I begin this article with a lengthy excerpt from this letter because I find it particularly indicative of the thesis I aim to substantiate: when read through the lens of the position expressed here by Grigore Silași, the cultural program of *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* not only does not contradict but in fact emerges as a direct consequence of ethnocentric and nationalist ideologies in late nineteenth-century Transylvania.

The author of the letter is George Barițiu (1812–1893), arguably the most influential Romanian intellectual in Transylvania during the second half of the nineteenth century.[1] Barițiu was a nationalist militant, a participant in the 1848 Revolution, the founder of the Romanian press in Transylvania, a former deputy in the Pest Parliament and the Imperial Senate in Vienna, and a founding member of the Romanian Academy. He was, above all, a cultural and political broker (his correspondence comprises over 11,000 letters). The letter is addressed to Grigore Silași (1836–1897), a Greek-Catholic priest, doctor of theology, and vice-rector of the St. Barbara Institute in Vienna.[2] Between 1865 and 1867, Silași, a fervent advocate of Școala *Ardeleană* [The Transylvanian School], served as editor of a Vienna-based magazine with the symbolically nationalist title *Sionul românesc* [Romanian Sion].[3] He was often consulted when Barițiu submitted petitions to Emperor Franz Joseph I on behalf of the Romanian cause in Transylvania. In fact, the excerpt quoted at the beginning of this article comes from the German section of the letter, which was meant to be conveyed *ad litteram* to the emperor via the emissary Silași. In November 1868, Silași had an audience with the emperor to present the petitions of the Romanians opposing the union of Transylvania with Hungary and the authority of the Hungarian Parliament to legislate in Transylvania.[4] At the end of the audience, Silași learned of the monarch's dissatisfaction with Romanian intellectuals in Transylvania, who allegedly "conspire with the neighbouring principalities against the Monarchy."[5]

The mixture of victimization and self-congratulatory tones in Barițiu's letter to his emissary at the imperial court is driven by the precarious circumstances of the Romanian population following the Austro-Hungarian

1. "Warum will man der romanischen Sprache in diesem Lande keinen Spielraum gewähren? Dass sie nicht gebildet sei? Aber wann und wie hat man die Bildung derselben befordert? Und trotz dem und alle dem wird sie in kürzester Zeit die Concurrenz mit jeder anderen in Ungaru und Siebenbürgen aushalten können. Warum rechnet man den Romanen als das grosste Verbrechen an, dass sie 18 Jahre, ja stets für die Reichseinheit eingestanden sind? Gut, heute fordert man von Ihnen diese *Jugend* in dem früheren Sinne nicht mehr; sie sollen von nur an für den Dualismus einstehen, es ist der Wille S' Majestaet, heisst es. Auch gut, nur solle man ihnen nicht zumuthen, dass sie den Dualismus enthusiastisch empfangen; sie werden auch in diesen Punkte gehorchen, doch wie ich glaube, nicht um den Preis ihres nationalen Seins und auch nicht um die Übermacht eines andern Volksstammes- zu begründen und zu befördern, und endlich auch nicht, damit die Ungarländer über sämmtliche Einkünfte Siebenbürgens, nach unbeschränktem Belieben verfügen. [...] und wenn Nauptmann Kapolnai sagt, das walachische Volk sei eigentlich ein Zigeunervolk von drei Millionen und wenn dr. K. Th. Richter in der *Presse* von 30 Oct. sagt, dass cler moldauwalachische Adel seinen Ursprung aus dem Schweinstalle herleitet, und wenn hiedurch die Gemüther in höchstem Grade erbittert werden, und wenn dann die Bukarester Journalistik gegen solch unerhörten Schimpf auch in die Schranken tritt, dann soll für all clas die romanische Nation in Siebenbürgen büssen!." For a Romanian translation, see *George Barițiu și contemporanii săi*: "De ce nu mai vreau să acorde limbii române teren în țara aceasta? Fiindcă nu este destul de cizelată? Dar cînd și cum s-a promovat cultivarea ei? Și totuși, vrînd-nevrînd, ea va fi nu peste mult în stare ca să înfrunte concurența oricărei alte limbi în Ungaria și Transilvania. De ce li se impută românilor drept cea mai mare crimă că ei, de optsprezece ani—ca și întotdeauna—s-au ridicat pentru unitatea Imperiului? Ei bine, astăzi nu li se·mai pretinde de la dânșii această *virtute* în sensul de altădată, li se spune că voința Maiestății Sale este ca ei să se ridice în favoarea dualismului. Să fie așa, numai atunci să nu li se pretindă ca să primească cu entuziasm dualismul; ei vor fi supuși și în această privință, dar după părerea mea nu cu prețul entității lor naționale, și nici de aceea ca să fundamenteze și să susțină supremația unei alte seminții, nici de aceea, în fine, ca astfel cei din Ungaria să dispună după plac de toate veniturile Ardealului [...] cînd locotinentul Kapolnai spune că poporul valah e de fapt un popor țigan de trei milioane de suflete, și cînd dr. K. Th. Richter, în numărul ziarului *Presse* din 30 octombrie spune că boierul moldavo-valah își trage obîrșia din staulul porcilor, și cînd spiritele sunt îndirjite în cel mai înalt grad, și cînd și jurnalistica din București intră în arenă pentru combaterea unei asemenea ponegriri nemaipomenite, atunci trebuie să plătească națiunea română din Transilvania!" (236–237).

2. Grigore Silași also went by the first name Grigoriu. He sometimes used a Hungarian version of his name: Szilasi Gergely. For a comprehensive overview of Silași's educational and intellectual trajectory, see the "portrait" authored in Márta Zabán and Cosmin Borza, "Transnational Routes and National Constraints of Transylvanian Comparatism: A Portrait of Grigore Silași," *Transilvania* (2025) (forthcoming).

3. Școala Ardeleană [The Transylvanian School], also known as the Latin School, was an Enlightenment-inspired Greek-Catholic cultural movement. It emerged in the late eighteenth century and the early decades of the nineteenth century and employed historiographic, linguistic, and philological arguments in the political debates within the Habsburg Empire. To secure political rights for the Romanian citizens of Transylvania, its members sought to scientifically elucidate both the Latin origins of Romanians and their continuity in the territory north of the Danube river, encompassing Transylvania. One of their main goals was to reformulate the Romanian alphabet and language in accordance with their Latin origins. They often faced criticism for the abusive "purification" (*Latinization*) of the Romanian language. See Mihaela Ursa, "(Anti)Imperial Narration in the Mock-Epic Form. Ioan Budai-Deleanu and the Transylvanian Project," *Transilvania*, no. 5 (2025): 13–27.

4. In May 1868, in Blaj/Balázsfalva, before an assembly of over 60,000 Romanian peasants, the Blaj Pronouncement was launched, with Barițiu as the main initiator. This was a protest document against the union of Transylvania with Hungary, which was subsequently published in Romanian newspapers in Transylvania, Romania, and several Western countries. The document announced that Romanians did not recognize the Hungarian state institutions and boycotted participation in the political elections of the Hungarian state.

5. Barițiu,"Către Grigore Silași," 232: "Well, so His Majesty told you straight to your face: 'Dass die Leute augenscheinlich conspiriren mit den benachbarten Fürstethümer gegen den Bestand der Monarchie.' When a monarch gets such an idea stuck in his head, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to inform them of the genuine state of affairs. Oh, Lord, if His Majesty knew the people of Transylvania and the overall status of this land like the glorious Joseph II did! Only then will he understand the systematic and secular persecutions and slanders being launched against us." ("Ei, dară Mai[estatea] Sa ți-a spus-o d-tale verde: 'Dass die Leute augenscheinlich conspiriren mit den benachbarten Fürstethümer gegen den Bestand der Monarchie.' Când unui monarc îi intră un/asemenea cui în inimă, e foarte greu, sau tocma preste putință de a-l informa despre adevărata stare a lucrurilor. O, Doamne, de ar cunoaște Maiestatea Sa pre oamenii din Transilvania și toată starea acestei țeri, așa precum o a cunoscut odinioară fericitul Iosif II! Atunci și numai atunci s-ar convinge despre sistematicele și secularele persecuțiuni și calumnii câte se pun în mișcare asupra noastră."). The letters Silași addressed in 1867–1868 to Barițiu were published in the appendix of Gh. Platon and V. Russu, "Grigore Silaşi, luptător pentru cauza națională a românilor," *Analele* științifice *ale Universității "Al. I. Cuza" din Iaşi*, Secțiunea III. Istorie, XIX, fasc. 1 (1983): 35–54.

Compromise of 1867. Prior to the establishment of the dual monarchy, Transylvanian Romanians, comprising 16% of Hungary's population, had enjoyed a degree of protection from the Habsburg rulers, who had leveraged their national demands for autonomy/self-determination to diminish the authority of the Hungarian nobles within the empire.[6] Their quasi-privileged condition—at least as a horizon of expectations—collapsed after 1867, hence the state of alarm proclaimed by Bariţiu: "Why do they no longer wish to grant the Romanian language a rightful position in this country?" At first glance, following the 1867 Compromise, the Romanian language and culture were accorded a status considered "equal" to that of other nationalities within the Kingdom of Hungary. Such rights were enshrined by the 1868 Nationality Act/Law and the 1868 Education Act, both characterized by historians as "liberal," "inclusive," even "progressive" in terms of their stated principles.[7] Nevertheless, before the actual implementation of the Nationality Act (otherwise highly controversial), Bariţiu asked Silaşi to inform the Emperor in Vienna about the "unprecedented slander" targeting Transylvanian Romanians.[8] Moreover, he regarded as unacceptable the assimilation of Romanian citizens of Transylvania into what the Law on the Equality of Nationalities Act XLIV 1868 described as "one nation—the indivisible unitary Hungarian nation—of which every citizen of the fatherland is a member, no matter to what nationality he belongs."[9] At the same time, it is crucial to emphasize the explicitly racialised framework through which Bariţiu interpreted the principle of "equality," as he regarded the association of Romanians with a "Gypsy people" as the ultimate "slander"—a "calumny" surpassed only by the claim that Romanian nobility descended from the "pigsty."

A significant validation of Transylvanian Romanians' contention that the institutionalization of the principle of "equality of nationalities" in the Kingdom of Hungary was merely a formal provision was the founding—in 1872, in Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg—of the Royal Hungarian University (renamed Royal Hungarian Franz Joseph University in 1881), whose language of instruction was exclusively Hungarian. As Onisifor Ghibu extensively details in *Şcoala românească din Transilvania şi Ungaria* [The Romanian School in Transylvania and Hungary] (1915), Transylvanian Romanian elites had sought the establishment of a Romanian-language university since the 1840s, receiving assurances from imperial authorities.[10] In the months leading up to the university's inauguration, the Prime Minister of Hungary, Count Menyhért Lónyay de Nagylónya et Vásárosnamény, was convening meetings with various Romanian intellectuals to garner public support for the university's fouding, assuring them of the inclusion of multiple departments that would offer instruction in the Romanian language.[11] However, when the university opened in 1872, even the Romanian language and literature lectures were required to be conducted in Hungarian.

The professor selected to deliver Romanian language and literature courses was none other than Bariţiu's "emissary" to the emperor's court: Grigore Silaşi. Although the appointment of a Greek-Catholic priest incited dissatisfaction within the Romanian Orthodox community, which constituted the majority in Transylvania during the 1870s, Silaşi rapidly established himself as one of the most vigorous Romanian nationalists in Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg.[12] His cultural, social, and administrative endeavors were devoted to promoting Romanian culture and language, in the assertive spirit articulated in Bariţiu's letter with the specific aim of being "able to compete with any other language in Hungary and Transylvania."[13] "To compete" (with other languages) is, in essence, the pivotal concept for The Iulia Reading Society of Romanian Students at the University of Cluj, founded by Silaşi shortly after his appointment. The society's mission was to advocate for the "preservation of Romanian identity," "the vitality of the Romanian nation," "the cultivation of the language," "the flourishing of literature," and "the rejuvenation of the Romanian people."[14] Iulia

6. See Robert Bideleux and Ian Jeffries, *A History of Eastern Europe: Crisis and Change* (London: Routledge, 1998), 251–252.

7. Ágoston Berecz, "The Hungarian Nationalities Act of 1868 in Operation (1868–1914)," *Slavic Review* 81, no. 4 (2022): 994–1015. See also László Marácz, "Multilingualism in the Transleithanian Part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918): Policy and Practice," *Jezikoslovlje* 13, no. 2 (2012): 269–298.

8. Robert William Seton-Watsonţs seminal interpretation, articulated under the pseudonym Scotus Viator in his work *Racial Problems in Hungary* (London: Archibald Constable & Co. Ltd, 1908), posits that the law was consistently disregarded, serving merely as the cultured facade of a duplicitous endeavour to "Magyarize" non-Hungarian nationalities. For a critique of Seton-Watson's view, specifically on the policies of multilingualism in the Hungarian Kingdom, see Marácz, "Multilingualism." For an early confirmation, from Romanian nationalist perspectives, of Seton-Watson's theory, see G. Sima (Onisifor Ghibu), *Şcoala românească din Transilvania şi Ungaria: Dezvoltarea ei istorică şi situaţia ei actuală* (Bucharest: Institutul de Arte Grafice Carol Göbl, 1915).

9. See the English translation of the 1868 Law of Nationalities in Seton-Watson, *Racial Problems*, 429–433.

10. Sima (Onisifor Ghibu), *Şcoala*, 85–87.

11. See Opincarul, "Corespondenţa particulară a *Tribunei* (Catedra de limba şi literatura română de la Cluj)," *Tribuna*, no. 143 (1886): 570.

12. See Márta Nagy Zabán, "The Relationship Between National Identity and Literature Education in Cluj in the Last Quarter of the 19th Century," in *Storia, identitá e canoni letterari*, ed. Ioana Both, Ayşe Saraçgil, Angela Tarantino (Firenze: Firenze University Press, 2013), 207–208.

13. Bariţiu, "Către Grigore Silaşi," 278.

14. "salvarea românismului," "vitalitatea poporului roman," "cultura limbii, înflorirea literaturii şi regenerarea poporului român." See *Reportu generale despre starea şi activitatea societatiei de lectură Julia a junimei universitarie din Clusiu, dela înfiinţarea ei până la finea a. 1876/7* (Cluj, 1878), 1, 9, apud George Andrei Iavorenciuc, "'Societatea de lectură *Iulia*' a studenţilor români de la Universitatea din Cluj," *Caiete de antropologie istorică* XIV, no. 1–2 (2015): 144–145.

Society was conceived by Silași as an informal university in the Romanian language, serving as an alternative to the Hungarian state university that had recently appointed him.[15] The society would become a central actor in 1884 during what was described as the "harshest ethnic conflict and debate" at the university.[16]

Although he authored only few ideologically charged scholarly works at the outset of his academic career (e.g., "A dácziai román nyelv régisége" [The Antiquity of the Romanian Language in Dacia][17] and "Însemnătatea literaturii române tradiționale" [The Significance of Traditional Romanian Literature][18]), Silași's presence became increasingly prominent in both cultural and political circles, as well as in the Romanian-language magazines of the time (especially in *Gazeta Transilvaniei*, edited by Bariț iu since 1838). In 1875, Moldován Gergely/Grigore Moldovan, school inspector in Torda-Aranyos/Turda-Arieș, an administrative county close to Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg, publicly denounced Silași as an "extremist nationalist," deeming him unfit for a position at a Hungarian state university. In 1876, Silași's lectures at the Iulia Society incited protest in the local press (the magazines *Kelet* [East], *Magyar Polgár* [The Hungarian Citizen], and Ébredés [Awakening]). Former students complained about the professor's instruction of Romanian language courses in Romanian. The "scandal" escalated to such a degree that Ágoston Trefort, the Hungarian Minister of Religion and Education (from 1872 to 1888), communicated with the rector of the Transylvanian university, stating that Silași "not only conducts his courses in the Romanian language, but also, during certain lessons, permits himself to make provocative statements against the Hungarian nation and seeks to disrupt the harmonious coexistence among nationalities."[19] The Romanian language and literature professor was subsequently investigated by his colleagues in the university council; following his denial of having taught in Romanian, he was not subjected to institutional penalties. Instead, he formally resigned from the leadership of Iulia Society.[20] Márta Nagy Zabán contextualizes the 1876 "Silași case" within the broader setting of the Balkan anti-Ottoman Wars and the impending Russo-Turkish conflict, which was regarded as a threat to the Kingdom of Hungary. In 1877, coinciding with the Kingdom of Romania's declaration of independence and growing speculation about the Russian Empire's possible support for an invasion of Transylvania, student rallies in both Budapest and Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg demonstrated in favour of the Turkish victory.[21] Not coincidentally, that same year, Silași was elected a member of the Romanian Academy in Bucharest.

Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok (renamed *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* in 1879) was first published against this backdrop on January 15, 1877. Edited by Hugo Meltzl and Sámuel Brassai, both professors at the Royal Hungarian University, the journal featured a motto from József Eötvös, the Minister of Education at the time of the 1868 Nationality Act's enactment. Silași was listed on the front page among the contributors of the journal as early as issue 3, dated February 15. His collaboration would be intermittent: he published short translations into Romanian of lyrical works by Sándor Petőfi (in 1877), Schiller and Schopenhauer (in 1881), and Goethe (in 1882); as well as a concise clarification, written in Hungarian, regarding the Romanian mythological character Ileana Cosânzeana (in 1886).[22] No explicit accounts exist of Silași's position on the cultural program of the comparative literature journal edited by his university colleagues. However, it is plausible that several principles articulated by Meltzl in the journal's programmatic texts from May and October 1877—"Vorläufige Aufgaben der Vergleichenden Litteratur" (I–II)—may have evoked memories of the provisions of the 1868 Nationality Act and their implementation.

Meltlz's assertions regarding the importance of polyglottism, the "national uniqueness of a people," "the sacred and inviolable" nationality as "individuality of a people," alongside his condemnation of "the childish competition" of labelling one's "language

15. See Dimitrie Vatamaniuc, "Student la Cluj," *Steaua* XVII, no. 9 (1966): 26–34.

16. Levente T. Szabó, "Cultural Brokers, Forms of Hybridity and the Emergence of the First International Comparative Literary Journal," *Philobiblon: Transylvanian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research in the Humanities* 22, no. 2 (2017): 78.

17. Szilassi Gergely, "A dácziai román nyelv régisége," *Erdélyi Múzeum*, no. 3 (1874): 87–90. I express my gratitude to Márta Zabán for enabling access to bibliographic resources in Hungarian.

18. Dr. Silașî, "Însemnătatea literaturii române tradiționale," *Transilvania. Foaia Asociațiunii Transilvane pentru literatura* **și** *cultura poporului romanu* VIII, no. 3 (1875): 31–34; no. 4 (1875): 37–40; no. 5 (1875): 51–52.

19. "nu numai că își ține cursurile în limba română, dar cu prilejul unor lecții se lasă răpit a face declarațiuni agitatorice contra națiunei maghiare și tinde a tulbura pacinica bună înțelegere între naționalități." Ioan Lupaș, "Societatea studențimii universitare 'Iulia' din Cluj și activitatea membrilor ei," *Lumea universitară*, no. 2–3 (1922): 22.

20. Nagy Zabán, "The Relationship," 208.

21. Nagy Zabán, "The Relationship," 209–210.

22. Sanda Ignat suggests that certain unsigned translations of Romanian folk songs and introductory remarks may be attributed to Silași; see Sanda Ignat, "Unerdierte Rumanische Volkslieder aus Siebenburgen in der *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*," *Caietele Echinox*, no. 6 (2004): 44–51.

superior or even destined to rule supreme,"[23] would likely have reminded Silași, a Transylvanian Romanian citizen of Hungary, that his post-1872 activity had been met with both criticism and scandal. Between 1872 and 1877, Silași did not regard as "childish" his involvement in the "competition" to showcase the "superiority" of the Romanian language and literature. On the contrary, he viewed this activity as an essential undertaking for the preservation of his nation, especially in juxtaposition to Hungarian, which was the language "destined to rule supreme" in the University of Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg. As I previously emphasized, since 1868, the official promotion of polyglottism, linguistic equality, and the equal rights of nationalities had been met with skepticism and resistance by the Transylvanian Romanian intelligentsia, who regarded such rhetoric as disingenuous—masking the systematic devaluation of the Romanian language. Subsequently, Transylvanian Romanians fostered a national discourse that strongly focused on monolingualism. The same combative rationale likely shaped their reaction to the shift from polyglottism to the principle of decaglottism in the third part of "Vorläufige Aufgaben der Vergleichenden Litteratur"—a shift that entailed the incorporation of Hungarian literature into the "ten modern literatures in Europe with truly world-literary characteristics" and the categorization of Romanian literatures within the "literatures of the folk song."[24]

Conditions of Possibility for the Emergence of Comparatism

Silași's activity after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise highlights the interpretative possibilities that the Transylvanian Romanian intellectual community may have explored in its efforts to delineate the underlying reasons for the position of Romanian literature and language in *Acta Comparationis* and its canon of decaglottism. During the 1870s, calls for the "equality of nationalities"—or what Minister Trefort referred to as "harmonious coexistence among nationalities"—were articulated in Transylvania from a standpoint of political dominance. The full emancipation of Hungarian Jews following the 1867 Compromise was, in fact, inextricably linked with their assimilation and instrumentalization as main partners to the Magyarization of national minorities.[25] In the same vein, the Transylvanian German-speaking Saxons steadily asserted their subjugation within the newly established Hungarian state and repeatedly sought support from Imperial Germany.[26] In this context, the principle of polyglottism appears as an utopian ideal, at best a mode of cultural naïveté, or else a rhetorical construct masking the empire's linguistic, social, cultural, and political hierarchies. The imperial or, to use Laura Doyle's term, the inter-imperial political underpinnings of *Acta Comparationis*'s poly/decaglottism have been convincingly addressed by David Marno, Alfred J. Lopez, and Theo D'haen.[27] In Anca Parvulescu and Manulea Boatcă's 2022 study, these dynamics received a more contextually appropriate conceptual alternative: interglottism—a phenomenon rooted in the linguistic hierarchies of Transylvania's intricate imperial history.[28] Nonetheless, less attention has been paid to the comparatist practices contemporary with *Acta Comparationis*, some of which were likely influenced by the journal's cultural program, but arguably more so by the multifaceted interethnic conflicts of late nineteenth-century Transylvania. An analysis of Silași's work reveals that the comparative practices of intellectual communities lacking political agency often fostered a form of genuine intra/inter-imperial comparatism: one shaped by, and reflective of, the cultural and political hierarchies of the historical context, rather than striving to project utopian ideals and tasks beyond imperial entanglements.

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23. "die nationale Eigenart irgend eines Volkes," "Heilig u. unantastbar sei die Nationalität als Volksindividualität," "Heilig u. unantastbar sei die Nationalität als Volksindividualität," "indem jede ihreindem jede ihre Sprache für die superiore, oder gar zur Allein-Herrschaft berufene hält; ein kindischer Wettlauf." Hugo Meltzl, "Vorläufige Aufgaben der Vergleichenden Litteratur. II. Das Prinzip des Polyglottismus," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, no. 15 (1877): 307–315; Hugo Meltzl, "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature," translated by Hans-Joachim Schulz and Philip H. Rhein, in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongsieni Buthelezi (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 44–47.

24. "zehn moderne Litteraturen mit wahrhaft weltlitteraturischen Erscheinungen," "Volksliederlitteraturen." Hugo Meltzl, "Vorläufige Aufgaben der Vergleichenden Litteratur. III. Der Dekaglottismus," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, no. 24 (1878): 494–501; Angus Nicholls, "Three Translations from the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*: 'Preliminary Tasks of Comparative Literature, Part III: Decaglotism;' 'Laws of Comparative Literary Research;' and 'Goethe's World Literature'," *Comparative Literature* 76, no. 3 (2024): 285–293.

25. Raul Carstocea, "Uneasy Twins? The Entangled Histories of Jewish Emancipation and Anti-Semitism in Romania and Hungary, 1866–1913," *Slovo* 21, no. 2. (2009): 64–85.

26. Jonathan Kwan, "Transylvanian Saxon Politics and Imperial Germany, 1871–1876," *The Historical Journal* 61, no. 4 (2018): 991–1015.

27. On the concept of inter-imperiality, see Laura Doyle, *Inter-Imperiality: Vying Empires, Gendered Labor, and the Literary Arts of Alliance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

28. See David Marno, "The Monstrosity of Literature: Hugo Meltzl's World Literature and its Legacies," in *World Literature, World Culture*, ed. Karen-Margrethe Simonsen, Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (Århus: Aarhus University Press, 2008), 37–50; Alfred J. Lopez, "Hugo Meltzl and That Dangerous American Supplement; Or, a Tale of Two 1877s," *Comparative Literature* 61, no. 3 (2009): 220–230; Theo D'haen, *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature* (London: Routledge, 2012), 52–58; Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2022), 98–104.

Romanian Language as *Primus Inter Pares* Language

An exemplary instance of inter-imperial comparatism can be found in Silași's philology and linguistics studies.[29] For example, a polemical work against the Hungarian linguist of German descent, Pál Hunfalvy, titled *Apologie: Discuțiuni filologice* și *istorice maghiare privitoare la români* [Apology: Hungarian Philological and Historical Debates Regarding Romanians] (1879) stands out. Next to it is the three-volume study *Renașterea limbei românești* în *vorbire* și *scriere* [The Rebirth of Romanian Language in Speech and Writing] (1879–1885); its main theses were reiterated for popular dissemination in articles such as "Să latinizăm au ba" [Should We Latinize or Not?] and "Oare mai ales din franceză să împrumutăm?" [Should We Primarily Borrow from French?].[30] The aim of Silași's application of comparative linguistics theories and methodologies in these texts is overtly ethnocentric and nationalist: to demonstrate the antiquity, originality, and even the superiority of the Romanian language among Romance languages, which were regarded as foundational to the Indo-European language family, and thus situated at the apex of the global linguistic hierarchy.[31]

Silași employs the term "rebirth" (as featured in the title of his most comprehensive study on linguistics) to convey two interrelated meanings: first, the international acknowledgement of the Romanian language's privileged status, and second, the purification of the language from many foreign influences, so it might more faithfully represents its Latin roots. Both objectives are supported by an appeal to militant comparative rhetoric and, despite the scientific erudition evident in many of his studies,[32] to a lesser extent, by sustained comparative assessments. Silași draws on hyperbolic and mythic terminology imbued with xenophobic undertones: despite the "plagues" and "stains" attributed to "foreign contacts," which have "uglyfied its noble visage," the Romanian language preserved an

> "overall physiognomy that has nonetheless retained the original, beautiful, classical features of its Latin heritage, characteristics that are, in multiple facets of its structure, even more original, more primitive, and more ancient than those of its Western sisters [...] For several centuries, she was fated to be dressed in Cyrillic rags, which could not obscure her slender figure and ancient Roman stature."[33]

Silași contends that, in comparison to Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and even Provençal, Romanian has better preserved the original Latin vocabulary and morphological derivations. This historical "miracle" is elucidated through the theories of Petru Maior, the most learned representative of the Transylvanian School, whose ideas, as Silași asserts, would be significantly reinforced by recent scientific advances in linguistics and comparative philology.[34] In *Disertație pentru începutul limbei românești* [Dissertation for the Beginning of the Romanian Language] (1812), Maior had advanced the intriguing linguistic-historical assertion that "Romanian is the mother of Latin," positing it as the "pure" derivative of the vernacular Latin spoken by the Romans who conquered Dacia. From this spoken Latin, through grammatical standardization and under the influence of Greek, a more cultured—but also corrupted and hybrid—Latin emerged.[35] In turn, Silași laments the increasing divergence of modern Romanian from its Latin roots, attributing this trend to various foreign influences—Hungarian, German, Greek, Turkish, and Slavic—on the vernacular. Hence, the primary aim of Romanian comparative linguistics, as he sees it, is to identify and eliminate these hybridizations that compromise the

29. According to Gabriel Vasiliu ("Păreri despre limbă ale lui Grigore Silași," *Cercetări de lingvistică* XVIII, no. 1 (1973): 11–19), Silași held the following courses at the University of Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg: "Despre limba și literatura română" (1872), "Istoria limbii și literaturii române" (1872–1883), "Gramatica română, analiza limbii române" (1872), "Originea și dezvoltarea istorică a limbii române" (1872), "Dialectul românesc din Macedonia în paralelă cu limba română de dincoace de Dunăre" (1872–1879), "Derivarea în limba română" (1872, 1874, 1882), "Topica limbii și versificația" (1872, 1873, 1875), "Istoria lingvisticii românești" (1873, 1876, 1881), "Limba română din Istria și limba retoromană în paralel cu morfologia limbilor surori" (1875, 1877, 1884), "Elemente străine în limba română" (1875), "Formarea cuvintelor în limbă" (1876, 1879), "Fonetica și ortografia limbii române" (1877, 1879, 1881), "Elemente de limbă armeană din vest și est comparate cu restul limbilor semitice" (1878), "Sintaxa limbii române pe baza istoriei limbii" (1879).

30. See Gregoriu Silasî, *Apologie. Discuțiuni filologice și istorice maghiare privitoare la români. Cartea prima: Paulu Hunfalvy despre* Cronica *lui Georg. Gabr. Șîncai* (Clusiu: Edițiunea „Amicul Familiei," 1879); Gregoriu Silasî, *Renașterea limbei românești în vorbire și scriere*, I–III (Clusiu: Edițiunea „Amicul Familiei," 1879–1885); Gregoriu Silași, "Să latinizăm au ba?," I–II, *Familia* XVIII, no. 3 (1882): 28–30; no. 4 (1882): 44–46; Gregoriu Silași, "Oare mai ales din franceză să împrumutăm?," *Familia* XVIII, no. 14 (1882): 164–168.

31. Gabriel Vasiliu, "Primii profesori de limba română de la universitatea din Cluj (1872–1919)," *Acta Mvsei Porolissensis* XIX, no. 444 (1995): 443–444. See also Platon, Russu, "Grigore Silași."

32. Octavian Șchiau, "Erudiția profesorului Grigore Silași," *Studii și cercetări etnoculturale*, no. 3 (1997): 89–92.

33. "cu tóte plagele suferite și cu tóte pétele provenitórie dein contactu strainu, ce i hêdiescu nobilele-i vultu, fisionomi'a ei in generale totu a pastratu traseturele originali, frumóse, clasece ale descendentiei sale italece; trasetur, nu intr'unu puntu alu structurei sale, inca mai originali, mai primitive sî mai stravechie decâtu ale suroriloru sale apusene [...] Fostu-i-a sî ace'a ursitu, cá pre unu restempu de mai multe secle se imbrace sdrentile ciriliane, fóra cá acestu vestmentu diforme se-i fia potutu ascunde de tiêsiu svelt'a figura sî talia antica romána." Silași, *Renașterea*, I, 5.

34. Silași, *Renașterea*, III, 358.

35. For a comprehensive overview of Petru Maior's and the Transylvanian School's conceptions of language, see Maria Ștefănescu, "Limbă și națiune," in *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România*, vol. II: *Patrimoniu* și *imaginar lingvistic*, ed. Elena Platon (Iași: Polirom, 2020), 151–172.

language, while proposing Latin-derived alternatives or reformulations of borrowed terms that more closely resemble Latin vocabulary.[36] Silași's linguistic project is thus inherently contradictory: while he champions the Latin purity of the Romanian language by prioritizing vulgar Latin over cultured Latin, he simultaneously insists that contemporary vernacular/spoken Romanian must be corrected by a cultured Romanian, one devised by Latinist linguists.

The historical context in which Silași articulates his beliefs differs significantly from that of the Transylvanian School's assertions at the end of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. For instance, in the Kingdom of Romania, the excessive purification and Latinization of the Romanian language was met with strong criticism from Titu Maiorescu, a foundational figure of the Romanian literary system in the nineteenth century, as demonstrated by Rareș Moldovan in an article included in this special issue.[37] Hence, Maiorescu became Silași's main ideological opponent. As Moldovan aptly notes, Maiorescu, a conservative proponent of gradual and organic cultural progress, perceived comparison as "a univocal, vertical, aspirational relation between the younger, minor culture and the major one, which is mediated through the historical-rhetorical figures of developement and delay."[38] This view clarifies Maiorescu's advocacy for the retention of Slavic words embedded in Romanian popular language or those from other origins lacking equivalents in Romanian (such as the technical terms), as well as his endorsement of borrowings from Romance languages, particularly French.[39]

Such initiatives incited Silași's indignation, whose conservative views starkly contrasted with those of Maiorescu. Silași claimed that the Romanian language and culture were not minor; rather, they had been temporarily relegated to subordinate status by other cultures. The restoration of their esteemed position, their "rebirth," required rejecting both regional and Western models and re-establishing a connection to their Latin roots.[40] Consequently, Silași's studies consistently approached linguistic comparison from these assertive perspectives: the Romanian language was deemed minor and inferior solely because dominant cultures either failed to appreciate it or lacked the knowledge to do so. In a series of polemical stances against Maiorescu, Silași labeled French the "most dulled" of the Romance languages, claiming it retained only remnants of Latin—"here a leg, there an arm, there an eye"—due to its significant German influence. Using overtly gendered terminology, Silași likened French to an "old lady, weathered by time," while envisioning its fusion with Romanian as "monstruous" (the latter imagined as a "sturdy young man from the mountains [...] tall and proud like the fir tree of the Carpathians").[41] Likewise, Silași perceived the regional influence of Hungarian, German, Greek, Turkish, Russian, and Bulgarian as contributing to the decline of Romanian and advocated for its re-Latinization. Yet, he also acknowledged a concern: the Romanian population might not completely grasp this new, cultured, and *latinized* language.

Romanian Literature as Primordial Literature

The same regressive, primordialist, and mythologizing comparatist perspective pervades Silași's studies in folklore and literary history. A few years before *Acta Comparationis* embraced a positivist, evolutionary framework of stadial progress—grounding its principle of decaglottism in the distinction between modern literatures of "true classicism" and folk literatures—Silași proposed a reversal of this hierarchy.[42] In an 1875 article titled "Însemnătatea literaturii române tradiționale,"[43] Silași asserts that traditional, folk literature, historically regarded as the "Cinderella" of literary studies, is now reassessed by "modern science" as more representative of a nation's identity and distinctiveness than artistic literature: "Folk literature predominantly prevails in those regions and social strata where written literature has minimal or no penetration."[44] One year later, Silași insists that folk poetry is "the most genuine and faithful copy,

36. Silași's linguistic ideas exhibit receptiveness to lexical analogies derived from the Latin model, prompting some researchers to assert that the Romanian language and literature professor refused to endorse the theory of "total purification"; see Vasiliu, "Păreri despre limbă."

37. Rareș Moldovan, "Early Spectra of Comparatism: Meltzl and Maiorescu," *Transilvania*, no. 5 (2025): 28–40.

38. Moldovan, "Early Spectra."

39. See Titu Maiorescu, "În contra neologismelor," *Convorbiri literare*, no. 8 (1881): 281–293.

40. For further insight into anti-colonial sentiment in nineteenth century Romania and its contextualization within Romanian debates on coloniality, see Teodora Dumitru, "Stages in the Saga of the Interpretation of B. Fundoianu's Colonial Theory: From E. Lovinescu until Today," *Dacoromania litteraria*, no. 11 (2024): 56–89.

41. "cea mai tocită dintre tóte, întru atâta, cât de cele mai multe ori din corpul vorbei latine dênsa abiá re'inù aşá dicând ici un picior, colo o mână, colo un ochiu [...]A împrumutá neajunsele românéscăi mai ales din francesa, ar fi asemene cu acea, [...] când ai vră să cununi pe un Romanaș voinic de munte, innalt și mandru ca bradul din Carpați [...] sĕ-l cununi și însoțești cu o bĕtrână mult brăsdată pe față de plugul adversităților timpului, entru ca fructul însoțirii și legăturei lor să fie un nonsens, se fie p'aci un monstru." Silași, "Oare mai ales," 167.

42. See Angus Nicholls, "Aesthetics and Anthropology in the Early Years of Comparative Literature: The *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*," *Comparative Literature* 76, no. 3 (2024): 113–116.

43. Silași, "Însemnătatea literaturii."

44. "literatur'a traditiunale inca totu domina preste acele regiuni si pàture sociali, la cari literatur'a scrisa de comune petrunde pré pucinu séu neci-decumu." Silași, "Însemnătatea literaturii," 32.

the photographic portrait of the people's inner self: of the inclinations and aspirations they nurture, of what they were, what they are, what they can be."[45] Simultaneously, he states that folk literature is more suitable than written literature for the advancement of comparative studies, as it uniquely reveals the common origins and evolution of cultures along with their nationally distinctive characteristics ("the soul" of a nation).[46]

Silași thus employs comparison in a programmatic ethnocentric/nationalist sense. Throughout "Însemnătatea literaturii române tradiționale," the author identifies Greco-Latin myths (Icarus, Persephone, Baucis and Philemon, Venus) and their unique adaptations within Romanian legends, songs, fables, ballads, and so forth. In some folklore studies, Silași emphasizes the novelty and distinctiveness of Romanian culture, defined by highly positive attributes such as faith, kindness, hospitality, marital fidelity, patriotism, and respect for parents.[47] In other works, he reiterates the integration of Romanians into what he considers the most esteemed and innovative cultural "family" globally—the Indo-European one—by emphasizing "the striking affinity of mythical legends in their fundamental aspects across all Indo-European cultures."[48]

It is difficult to assess the extent to which this comparatist approach, shaped by national mythologies and inter-imperial ethnic conflicts, might have permeated Silași's studies on Romanian artistic literature. In an "Autobiography" written in 1885,[49] Silași states that he is gathering materials for a history of Romanian literature, a project he ultimately does not fulfil.[50] The failure to complete the historiographical project may be attributed to Silași's involvement in the interethnic scandal of 1884. On May 14 of that year, a large group of Hungarian students, allegedly incited by various local Hungarian newspapers,[51] disrupted the celebrations of Iulia Society commemorating the 1848 Revolution, subsequently launching a violent attack on the residence of Silași, whom they regarded as the spiritual leader of the Romanian nationalists in Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg. The earlier complaints against the professor, claiming that he had conducted university courses in Romanian, were amplified by allegations of inciting disobedience against the Hungarian state and making disparaging remarks about Hungarians.[52] The following day, Silași was booed and insulted at the faculty entrance. His lecture was disturbed by a group of students demanding he justify the charges brought against him.[53] On May 19, 1884, Silași was investigated by his university colleagues; upon his refusal to provide written responses to inquiries concerning his political activities, he was suspended.[54] The suspension was reinstated in 1885 and he was forced to retire in 1886. He would be replaced—by direct order from Minister Trefort—with Grigore Moldovan/Moldován Gergely, the very figure who had denounced Silași in 1875. It is worth noting that the university had to proceed with Moldovan's hiring despite the lack of documentation attesting his qualifications. In this context, university representatives had to contend that instruction in Romanian language and literature did not require remarkable academic proficiency, as both remained nascent and rudimentary. The implicit claim recalled the nineteenth-century fierce competition among languages for prestige and local cultural relevance[55]:

> "It is well known that the linguistics of this language, despite the fact that science has nearly integrated it into the comprehensive comparative linguistics of the Romance languages, has not yet evolved in terms of depth or scope to the extent that the standards of any of the evolved European languages could be applied to it. This is due to the fact that the language has only recently begun to evolve into a literary language, and its literature, which has its true cradle

45. "atari poeme sunt de regula copi'a cea mai genuina si mai fidela, portretulu fotograficu alu internului seu: alu simtieminteloru si dorintieloru, aplecàriloru si aspiràriloru ce nutresce, acea ce a fostu elu, ce este, ce póte fi, scurtu alu caractrului acelui poporu." Grigoriu Silasi, "Românul în poezia sa populară," *Familia* XII, no. 35 (1876): 409.

46. Silași, "Românul în poezia," no. 35 (1876): 409–413; no. 36 (1876): 421–427; no. 37 (1876): 433–438.

47. Silași, "Românul în poezia."

48. "Impregiurarea acestei afinitati batetórie la ochi a legendeloru mitice in punctele loru esintiali la tóte popóele indoeuropene." Silași, "Însemnătatea literaturii," 37.

49. Gregoriu Silași, "Autobiografie," *Tribuna* XIV, no. 8 (1897): 30; no. 9 (1897): 1.

50. Ioan Lazariciu's *Istoria literaturii române:* în *usul tinerimii studioase* (Sibiu: W. Krafft, 1884), derived from Silași's lectures at the University of Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg, is not relevant in this regard as it mostly comprises historical data and brief biographies of authors.

51. "3 (15) Maiu in Clușiu," *Gazeta Transilvaniei* XLVII, no. 63 (1884): 1; no. 64 (1884): 1; Iustus, "Tulburările din Clușiu," *Gazeta Transilvaniei* XLVII, no. 65 (1884): 2; "Încă o dată în causa dl. dr. Gr. Silași," *Tribuna* I, no. 171 (1884): 1.

52. See Ioan Lupaș, "Profesorul Grigore Silași – o victimă a intoleranței ungurești," in *Comemorarea prof. dr. Grigore Silași* (Biblioteca Centralei reuniunilor de meseriași, comercianți, industriași şi muncitori români cu sediul în Cluj, 1937), 7–14. Lupaș informs that Romanian students signed congratulatory telegrams to the newspaper "Gazeta Transilvaniei," which had transitioned into a daily publication, referencing the "usurped rights of the Romanians." Additionally, an honorary member of the "Iulia" Society, professor Aron Densușianu from Iași, urged the editors of the newly founded daily to apply "fire whips" to the "back of the hippopotamus," a transparent metaphor for the Kingdom of Hungary.

53. See Lupaș "Profesorul Grigore Silași," 12. This commemorative text also recalls (without bibliographic reference) that Hugo Meltzl allegedly persuaded Silași to postpone his lecture in order to evade insults from the protesters, but the Romanian professor declined. Furthermore, Lupaș asserts (once again, without bibliographic evidence) that a colleague at the University, János Szamosi, purportedly orchestrated an assault, from which Silași evaded by abandoning his residence at night.

54. See Levente T. Szabó, Márta Zabán, eds., *Dokumentumok a kolozsvári Bölcsészet-, Nyelv- és Történettudományi Kar Történetéhez (1872–1892)* (Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca: Kolozsvári Egyetemi Kiadó, 2012), 220–230.

55. See Mircea Minică, "Poly- or Decaglottism? On the Hierarchization of Languages in Nineteenth-Century Comparative Linguistics," *Transilvania*, no. 5 (2025): 41–54.

in the former Transylvania, has not yet fully overcome the initial challenges. Consequently, the history of its literature does not span a long period or contain a wealth of rich material. At present, its linguistics is primarily in the data collection phase; its advancement necessitates diligent and persistent effort rather than broad and deep knowledge, which as yet can hardly be obtained on its bases."[56]

Isolated from the academic world, a retiree with minimal income, "worn out of the intrigues and disturbances [...] of the Hungarians from Cluj and the university in Cluj," as he confessed to Bariţiu in a letter from 1886,[57] Silași was offered the position of Greek-Catholic bishop in various Transylvanian cities. However, in 1890, he only secured the position of director at the Economul Bank (founded in 1886 with the backing of the Greek-Catholic Church, at Silași's initiative). Until his withdrawal from public life in 1895, precipitated by escalating health issues, and his subsequent death in 1897, Silași's scientific contributions were limited. Nonetheless, in 1887 and 1888, he published the initial installments of his most promising comparative literature project: "Din literaturile limbilor neolatine" [From the Literature of the Romance Languages][58] and "Literatura provensală" [The Provençal Literature].[59] In light of the contentious political and cultural conflicts he had endured, Silași toned down his militant comparatist approach and overt national mythologizing, although his primordialist leanings and nationalist commitments remained inconspicuous.

In the introductory article of the series "Din literaturile limbilor neolatine," Silași asserted that a comparative history of Romance literatures was crucial for Romanian literature. Given its isolation amid "foreigners" at the regional level, Romanian literature might achieve autonomy and national distinctiveness on a worldwide scale ("the genius" of its own people) only through reintegration into the wider family of Romance literatures.[60] Among the Romance languages, Provençal appeared to Silași to be the most significant; like Romanian, he saw it as the most authentic continuation of Latin. He referenced François Just Marie Raynouard's *Grammaire comparée des langues de l'Europe latine dans leurs rapports avec la langue des troubadours* (1821) to emphasize that the romantic literature of the troubadours distinguished itself from the medieval chaos first, whereas Provençal was "the old mother of the other languages of Latin origin."[61] Silași's research draws upon several bibliographic sources from French, Italian, and German cultures; yet, the original contribution is limited.[62] Conversely, the subsequent aim of Silași's research on Provençal literature is defined by folklorist Dumitru Pop as downright "prophetic": "The restoration of genetic and consanguineous ties, alongside the revival of solidarity among the peoples constituting the vast Romance family, during a time of impending threats from rising powers on the continent, are exemplified by the endeavour of the erudite Romanian professor from Transylvania, which thus appears lucid and prophetic to us."[63]

In fact, the significance of the comparative approach adopted by Silași in 1887–1888 is better understood when connected to the ongoing interest that *Acta Comparationis* demonstrates in Provençal culture. It is difficult to ascertain whether Silași was inspired by his colleagues at *Acta Comparationis*. Regardless of the absence of such influence, the differences between the two forms of engagement with Provençal literature are crucial for comprehending the comparative perspective employed by Silași. *Acta Comparationis*'s deep appreciation for Provençal literature and for promoting and translating the works of Frédéric Mistral is read by Levente T. Szabó as a plea for literary regionalism (the transnational that served "very local goals"), a potential alternative to extreme nationalism and an intellectually exciting model of opposing the power relations upheld by the European major cultures.[64] For Silași, instead, Provençal literature served as an anti-imperialist statement, but also as an ethnocentric/nationalist one: Silași's comparative approach is emblematic of peripheral nationalism, concerned not with local/regional emancipation or exceptionalism, but with securing access to a transnational and consecrated cultural

56. "Márpedig köztudomású dolog, hogy ennek a nyelvnek a nyelvészete, ha szinte belevonta is a tudomány a román nyelvek összehasonlító nyelvészetének tágas körébe, mindaddig, amíg magának a rumun nyelvnek nyelvtanára szorítkozik, se terjedelem, se mélység tekintetében nem fejlődött még oda, hogy az európai mívelt nyelvek akármelyikének mértékét lehessen rá alkalmazni, hiszen maga a nyelv aránylag csak meglehető rövid idő óta kezdett irodalmi nyelvvé válni és irodalma, melynek voltaképpeni bölcsője a volt Erdély, ha mutathat is fel már számottevő eredeti műveket, mégis úgyszólván nem küzdötte át magát a kezdet nehézségein, s így irodalmának történelme sem terjed sem hosszú időre, sem bőséges anyagra. Nyelvészete nagyobbára még az adatgyűjtés korszakában van; fejlesztése inkább szorgalmas és kitartó munkásságot kíván, mint széles és mély tudást, amelyet ez idő szerint még alig van honnan meríteni." Szabó T. and Zabán (eds.), *Dokumentumok*, 285.

57. "Sum sătul [...] de șicanele și intricile [...] ungurilor din Cluș și de la universitatea din Cluș." Grigore Silași to George Bariţiu, letter from June 10, 1886, in Dumitru Suciu, "Grigore Silași (1836–1897)," *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie "G. Bariț" din Cluj-Napoca*, tom. XLV (2006): 293.

58. Gregoriu Silașî, "Din literaturile limbilor neolatine," *Amicul Familiei* XI, no. 2 (1887): 21–22.

59. Gregoriu Silașî, "Literatura provensală," *Amicul Familiei* XI, no. 11 (1887): 137–139. The study is continued in nos. 14–18, 20–21 and 23, as well as in 1888 in nos. 2–5 and 8–9.

60. Silașî, "Din literaturile," 22.

61. "mam'a betrana a celorualalte limbe de stirpe romanica." Silasî, "Din literaturile," 22.

62. Dumitru Pop, "Grigore Silași și literaturile limbilor neolatine," *Studii și cercetări etnoculturale*, no. 3 (1997): 97–102.

63. "Reînnodarea unor legături genetice, cosanguine, resurecția sentimentului de solidaritate la popoarele ce alcătuiau marea familie a romanității, într-o epocă în care acestea se aflau sub amenințarea unor puteri în plină ascensiune pe continent, ilustrează mesajul savantului profesor român din inima Transilvaniei, care ne apare limpede și profetic." Pop, "Grigore Silași," 101.

64. Levente T. Szabó, "Frédéric Mistral és az Összehasonlító *Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok*," *Korunk*, no. 11 (2019): 3–11.

network capable of granting autonomy and legitimacy for the nation. As Silași emphasizes, the Provençal language and literature are not the despised, marginalized, and subversive "sisters" of Romance languages and literatures, but their "old mother." In turn, Romanian, as Provençal's "twin sister," becomes an indirect heir to a privileged position. Affiliation with the family of Romance literatures from such an entitled standpoint serves, of course, as a reaction to the minor status that Romanian could attain within the inter-imperial context of Transylvania. However, such an association also reflects an overly utopian pursuit, a typical outcome of the national complexes arising from a subaltern cultural status.

Conclusion

Silași's critical legacy has been constrained by the narrow interpretive lens of methodological nationalism. This perspective prevailed following the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 and the subsequent union of Transylvania with Romania, when the Romanian language and literature shed their subordinate status within the imperial framework. Consequently, Silași's early initiative in comparative philology and linguistics, and his efforts to integrate Romanian literature into a broader Romance literary comparative network, had only a limited impact on the history of comparatism. Reassessments of his work have largely appeared in local publications or in scholarship aligned with nationalist ideologies across different historical periods.. In the 1930s, for example, Silași was characterized as "one of our rare scholars from the recent past," "the honest man," and "the steadfast advocate of the national interest to whom the Transylvanian Romanians owe considerable gratitude, yet [...] have nearly entirely forgotten,"[65] as well as a "victim of Hungarian intolerance," an "apostle," and "martyr" of Romanianism.[66] In the 1960s and 1970s, Silași was rediscovered as "the brightest figure of Romanian culture in Cluj" during the late nineteenth century.[67] By the 1990s, he had come to be viewed as a valiant "fighter for the national cause."[68]

Against the background of such a limited critical legacy, Silași's work and activity in the late nineteenth-century Transilvanian cultural and political milieu, and, especially, in relation to *Acta Comparationis*'cultural program becomes newly eloquent. I have tried to show that Silași's comparative work offers a lens for comprehending both the opportunities and constraints of comparative practice in nineteenth-century Transylvania. Revisiting Silași's activity today supports a broader effort to historicize and contextualize the comparative endeavor of *Acta Comparationis*, a pursuit increasingly relevant in the context of recent hagiographic narratives regarding the origins of comparatism.[69] The case of Silași—his scholarly activities, institutional affiliations, politically engaged cultural initiatives, and his involvement in interethnic disputes—illustrates the nationalist constraints shaping inter-imperial comparatism in the nineteenth century. The principal conclusion of this article is that Silași engages in nationalist comparatism. However, it also emphasizes that this type of comparatism should be undertstood as a symptom of the broader inter-imperial comparatist paradigm that prevailed in Transylvania during that era. The Silași case demonstrates that the comparative endeavours characteristic of that region and historical period bore little resemblance to the idealized portrayal of the *Acta Comparationis*'s program, but are instead contingent upon the asymmetrical relations and/or national political initiatives within the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

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65. "unul dintre puținii noștri savanți din trecutul nu prea depărtat," "bărbatul integru" și "luptătorului neșovăelnic, cărui românimea ardeleană are atât să-i mulțămească, însă [...] l-a uitat aproape cu desăvârșire." Virgil Șotropa, "În amintirea lui Grigore Silași," *Arhiva Someșeană*, no. 12 (1930): 239–242.

66. "victimă a intoleranței ungurești," "apostol," "martir al românității." Lupaș, "Profesorul Grigore Silași." See also Nepos, "Grigoriu Silași," *Patria* XII, no. 223 (1930): 3. This article depicts the 1884 assault on Silași's residence in a sensationalist manner, laden with xenophobic and racist commentaries. Hungarian students purportedly ignited a fire of Silași's library and manuscripts, performed tribal dances around the flames, on the background of the Hungarian national anthem.

67. "figura cea mai luminoasă a culturii românești din Cluj." Dumitru Pop, "Grigore Silași, folklorist," *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Series Philologia*, no. 1 (1964): 28–56; Marin Oprea, "Omagiu cărturarului transilvănean Grigore Silași (1836–1897)," *Făclia* XXVI, no. 7907 (1972): 2.

68. "luptătorul pentru cauza națională." Platon, Russu, „Grigore Silaşi."

69. For a critique of such hagiography, see also Alex Goldiș, "Meltzl and World Literature Studies: A Case of Mirrored Colonialism." *Transilvania*, no. 4 (2025): 31–41.

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