Copyright and the Emergence of Comparative Literature: Between Hugo Meltzl and Victor Hugo

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Abstract: This article explores the intricate relationship between the pre-institutional phase of comparative literature and the ongoing international debate about copyright in late of nineteenth century. It examines how comparative literature as a discipline in the making has navigated the complexities of copyright and how the evolving institution of copyright has, in turn, influenced the development of literary comparatism. Specifically, the article frames the contrasting views of Hugo Meltzl and Victor Hugo regarding the evolution of comparative literature and literary protectionism, focusing on the positions expressed at the 1878 Parisian Congress. Meltzl denounces the commodification of literature in a capitalist society, particularly through literary fairs and book exhibitions, and advocates for a return to a more classical, anti-materialist approach. In turn, Hugo's perspective reflects the authoritarian, Gallo-centric viewpoint Meltzl criticized. Despite their differences, both thinkers share a commitment to the concept of literary genius. Finally, the establishment of universal copyright serves as an uncomfortable and even threatening indicator of the fundamental principles and missions that comparative literature, as an evolving discipline, has confronted.

Keywords: international copyright, comparative literature, World Literature, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum,* Hugo Meltzl, Victor Hugo, International Literary Congress, Paris, literary protectionism.

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One key point in the programmatic texts of *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* presents it as a breakthrough discipline intended to safeguard literary traditions at risk of being destroyed or endangered due to cultural and political domination: "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."[1]

This formulation follows Hugo Meltzl's depiction of the political context of imperialist subjugation leading to the Russian Empire banning the Ukrainian language through the *ukaz*.[2] Meltzl and Sámuel Brassai's thinking on literatures and "polyglottism" aims to promote a non-competitive model of World Literature. They emphasize the importance of protecting the diversity and equality of all literatures, ethnicities, and languages. The statement above could be read as a form of *non-authoritarian literary protectionism* (*i.e.* with the least possible involvement of powerful institutions, whether local or global). However, it is noteworthy that the principle set out in *Acta Comparationis* implies at the same time the autonomy of literature in relation to the political sphere. As a result, Meltzl's reluctance about regulating the circulation of literatures through the implementation of copyright

1. Hugo Meltzl, "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature," trans. Hans-Joachim Schulz and Philip H. Rhein, in *Comparative Literature: The Early Years*, ed. Hans-Joachim Schulz and Phillip H. Rhein (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973): 55–62. Republished in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature: From the European Enlightenment to the Global Present*, ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 46.

2. "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. […] The same is true for the spiritual life of 'literaturess people', as we might call them, whose ethnic individuality should not be impinged upon by the wrong kind of missionary zeal; rather is our duty to protect it honestly and preserve it, if possible, in its purity. (From this comparative-polyglot standpoint should be considered the ukaz of the Censorship Office of the Russian Ministery of the Interior of May 16, 1876—mentioned already on page 30—which prohibits the literary use of the Ukrainian language. It would appear as the greatest sin against the Holy Spirit even if were directed only against the folksongs of an obscure horde of Kirghizes instead of a people of fifteen million.)." Hugo Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 46.

highlights a strained relationship between two institutions that developed in the second half of the nineteenth century: the discipline of comparative literature and copyright law. At the time, copyright was increasingly becoming an institution in its own right, mobilizing its own agents and establishing its own rules, thereby challenging the ongoing work towards the consolidation of comparative literature. The tension stems from a shared objective: to better regulate and protect authors and their texts/ideas. Yet translation and polyglottism—core principles of *Acta Comparationis*—become increasingly strained in this context.

Meltzl grappled with a series of pragmatic questions pertaining to the early institutionalization of literary comparatism. As a result, he expressed resistance to what he perceived as the "pollution" of literature by both *intra*- and *extra*-European economic, political, and legislative agendas. Specifically, copyright appeared to challenge the university's role as a hegemonic cultural institution (especially in the German-speaking world) and its agents, by weakening scholars' control over the printing and reprinting of books.[3] Certain roles within the publishing realm, such as that of the editor, were gaining capital and influence, leading to new power dynamics between authors and editors, often accompanied by considerable disputes.[4] While the critical conversation around *Acta Comparationis* and its collaborators is extensive,[5] less attention has been paid to Meltzl's stance on copyright, and on the importing and exporting of texts during a period in which literary comparatism coexisted with the development of an international cultural infrastructure. Similarly, although the scholarship on copyright is substantial and well-systematized,[6] it has rarely been examined in relation to the emergence of comparative literature and the proto-concept of World Literature, which is itself anchored in translation and textual exchange. Copyright and comparative literature share a common *protectionist mission*: the former is oriented towards the producers of the texts and ideas, while the latter focuses on the protection of these productions—texts, translations, and ideas.

Levente T. Szabó has provided a gloss on Meltzl's position regarding authors' rights, problematizing the rise of "literary capitalism" in the context of international art exhibitions and book fairs, particularly as it manifested at the Paris Congress.[7] In Szabó's words: "Meltzl was disappointed by the congress's main themes. He was unnerved by the international guarantee of author's rights through the creation of a global copyright convention, despite the safeguarding of the social situation of the writers. [...] But he had already been dissatisfied with the international exhibitions themselves, too; it

3. "The vivid German debate on the legitimacy of reprinting started around 1770, and was dominated by academics rather than publishers, professional novelists or playwrights." Friedemann Kawohl, "The Berlin Publisher Friedrich Nicolai and the Reprinting Sections of the Prussian Statute Book of 1794," in *Privilege and Property: Essays on the History of Copyright*, ed. Ronan Deazley, Martin Kretschmer, and Lionel Bently (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), 207.

4. The case of the German poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock and his editor Carl Hermann Hemmerde resonated in the period.

5. Horst Fassel, *Hugo Meltzl und die Anfänge der Komparatistik* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag Stuttgart, 2005); David Damrosch, "Hugo Meltzl and the Principle of Polyglottism," in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, ed. Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (London: Routledge, 2011); David Damrosch, "Rebirth of a Discipline: The Global Origins of Comparative Studies," *Comparative Critical Studies* 3, no. 1–2 (2006): 99–112; Alfred J. López, "Hugo Meltzl and The Dangerous American Supplement: or, A Tale of Two 1877s," *The Americas* 3, no. 61 (2009): 220–230; Levente T. Szabó, "Cultural Brokers, Forms of Hybridity and the Emergence of the First International Comparative Literary Journal," *Philobiblion* 2, no. 22 (2017); Levente T. Szabó, "Egy kapcsolat története és miértjei. Frédéric Mistral és az *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok*," *Korunk*, no. 11 (2019); Levente T. Szabó, "International Exhibitions, Literary Capitalism, and the Emergence of Comparative Literature," *Journal of World Literature*, no. 7 (2022): 332–347; Levente T. Szabó, "The Glocality of the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum*: Local Interpretations of Educational Freedom, Coercive Innovation and Comparative Literature," *Hungarian Studies Yearbook* 2 (2020): 60–73; Antoni Martí Monterde, "Proyectos políticos y canon literario en los orígenes del comparatismo europeo," *Bulletin hispanique*, no. 1 (2014): 219–246; Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania across Empires* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022); Angus Nicholls, "The 'Goethean' Discourses on Weltliteratur and the Origins of Comparative Literature: The Cases of Hugo Meltzl and Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett," *A Journal of Germanic Studies*, no. 2 (2018): 167–194; Angus Nicholls, "Stadial Change and the Emergence of Comparative Studies in German-Speaking Europe Around 1870-1900: Hugo von Meltzl Reads Wilhelm Scherer," in *Comparing and Change: Orders, Models, Perceptions*, ed. Antje Flüchter, Kristen Kramer, Rebecca Mertens, and Silke Schwandt (Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press, 2024).

6. Paul Goldstein and Hugenholtz P. Bernet, eds., *International Copyright: Principles, Law, and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Ronan Deazley, Martin Kretschmer, and Lionel Brently, eds., *Privilege and Property: Essays on the History of Copyright* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010); Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose, eds., *A Companion to the History of the Book* (New-York: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2019); Graham Dutfield and Uma Suthersanen, eds., *Global Intellectual Property Low* (Cheltenham-Northampton: Eward Elgar, 2008); Mira T. Sundara Rajan, ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of Intellectual Property in Central and Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

7. "Les statistiques produites par l'Union des associations internationales, qui fournit la liste exhaustive des congrès internationaux tenus depuis les origines, leurs dates et lieux de réunion, attirent l'attention sur la conjonction entre la forme de congrès et le phénomène exposition universelle. On remarque d'abord que si la représentation quantitative des congrès internationaux est l'image d'une courbe à croissance exponentielle, partant d'une origine quasi nulle au milieu du XIXe siècle, pour atteindre le maximum de 242 en 1900, cette courbe n'est toutefois pas exempte d'accidents, manifestés par des points lors des années d'exposition universelle. D'autre part est lisible, dans certains cas, une coïncidence entre la géographie des expositions et les villes de réunion des congrès. [...] Il résulte de ce tableau qu'à partir de 1867, date à laquelle le nombre des congrès internationaux devient significatif, on trouve cinq illustrations particulièrement démonstratives de cette conjonction : les quatre expositions parisiennes (1867, 1878, 1889, 1900) et, dans une moindre mesure, l'exposition de Chicago (1893)," Anne Rasmussen, "Les Congrès internationaux liés aux Expositions universelles de Paris (1867-1900)," *Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle (Cahiers Georges Sorel)*, no. 7 (1989): 23–44.

seemed to him that their original educational and progressive ideas had been corrupted and became a spectacular form of global capitalism."[8] It can be inferred that Meltzl's negative outlook on such international gatherings stemmed from the lack of connection between international copyright and the literary domain. At stake was the challenge of modernizing international copyright during a time when Meltzl was engaged with the institutionalization of comparative literature.[9]

Copyright imagined itself as democratic but remained Eurocentric, being, in John Feather's words, "a product of European print culture and its worldwide offspring."[10] It also continued to harbor a nationalist-colonialist dimension, evident in its emphasis on *control*, *protection*, and *privilege*. In fact, legislation concerning the protection of authors' rights is strongly linked to national frameworks and geopolitical boundaries. A legislation focused on a single standardized *language*—as in the case of France or U.K.– poses a significant challenge to a multi-ethnic and multilingual empire such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which resisted legislative proposals that were gaining traction across Europe. Piracy was a particularly pressing concern, as emphasized by Ricketson:

> "The above sketch has concentrated on the contents of national copyright laws in the pre-1886 period. However, it will be clear that there is an equally important international dimension to the protection of authors' works. Literary and artistic works and musical compositions recognize no national boundaries, even where translation into another language is required for a work to be fully appreciated in a particular country. Thus, it was that after the need for protection of authors by national laws had been recognized, the works of these authors still remained vulnerable to copying and exploitation abroad. These activities, commonly referred to as "piracy," had been a long-established feature of European social and cultural life, and this continued to be the case for a considerable time after the enactment of national copyright laws. The attitudes of many countries to these practices were highly anomalous: whilst prepared to protect their own authors, they did not always regard the piracy of foreign authors' works as unfair or immoral."[11]

An international copyright addresses, as shown above, a desirable coordination between national protection for authors and exploitation of their works across borders. In the same vein, piracy continues to be a persistent issue that exposes inconsistent attitudes in both ethical and legislative terms. Hungary and Austria had two separate ministries of the interior. Frictions between them made it impossible to agree on a common agent to represent the empire in copyright debates. The Austro-Hungarian Empire thus chose not to reply to the circular addressed by the Swiss Federal Council in 1883 to "all civilized nations." It did, nonetheless, participate in the Berne meeting. At subsequent conferences, the Austro-Hungarian Empire was one of the major absentees, alongside the Russian Empire: "The reason for Austria-Hungary's absence is not clear, but as far as the Russian Empire is concerned it is worth noting that this country had long been wary of entering into bilateral copyright arrangements."[12] The Austria-Hungarian Empire did not sign *The Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works* released in 1866. Nevertheless, Austria and Hungary established distinct legislation regarding copyright. While the "Austrian Copyright Act was promulged on October 16, 1846,"[13] Hungary only enacted its first copyright in 1884.[14] The *Urhenberrecht,* the principle of author's rights within the German speaking world, and the French *droits d'auteur* strongly influenced the Austrian Copyright Law, as confirmed by the Austro-French Commercial Treaty of 1866,[15] which in turn shaped the Hungarian Copyright Act.[16] The dynamic

8. Levente T. Szabó, "International Exhibitions, Literary Capitalism, and the Emergence of Comparative Literature," *Journal of World Literature*, no. 7 (2022): 333.

9. "An important nineteenth-century innovation was the development of international copyright law. From the mid-1830s onward, a number of European states passed domestic legislation that empowered their governments to make treaties with other states that would provide mutual copyright protection. The relevant British legislation was in 1838, and the first treaty was signed with Prussia in 1846. Gradually, a network of bilateral treaties developed between the European powers, including, in Britain's case, extensions to colonies (which were included in the provisions of the 1842 Act). In 1886, largely in response to an initiative by various groups representing authors, five of the major European powers came together in Berne to negotiate a more general treaty: the following year the first Berne Convention came into force." John Feather, "Copyright and the Creation of Literary Property," in *A Companion to the History of the Book,* ed. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (New-York: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2019): 752.

10. Ibid., 745.

11. Sam Ricketson, "The Birth of the Berne Union," *Columbia–VLA Journal of Law & the Arts,* vol. 11, no. 1 (1986), 2.

12. Ibid., 6 and 7.

13. Péter Mezi, "The Development of Hungarian Copyright Law until the Creation of the First Copyright Act (1793-1884)," in *Cambridge Handbook on Intellectual Property in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Mira Sundara Rajan (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 43.

14. Ibid., 37.

15. Dwight C. Lung, "The Austro-French Commercial Treaty of 1866," *The American Historical Review* 41, no. 3, (1936): 474–491.

16. "Registration (from the French *enregistrement*) introduced in the Hungarian legal system by the 1866 Austro-French treaty was also regulated." Mezi, "The Development," 49.

between Austria and Hungary caused Hungary to assume a derivative, if not subordinate position,[17] hence the latter's efforts to achieve legislative independence on the question of intellectual property.

Transylvania, a peripheralized region within the empire, served as a co-opted ally in the attempt to establish the Hungarian copyright law. Both Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klaunseburg and Pest, as university cities, were involved in the preliminary stages of Hungarian copyright debate. As described by Péter Mezi, the Hungarian writer László Arany was given the task of extending copyright:

> "Arany's Bill extended protection to literary, musical, and artistic works. The term of protection was determined at thirty years, mostly based on international examples. [...] Arany designated the Royal Court of Law of Pest and Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca) as courts of first instance. The competence of these two fora would have been based on the place of residence of the infringing person. Arany explained that he chose to designate these courts competent, in part, because he regarded the two university cities as the seat of expert bodies consisting of university lecturers, representatives of the literary and artistic world, and booksellers, who Arany expected, albeit a little naively, to implement the law in practice."[18]

According to Stef van Gompel, two major theories of copyright were competing at the time: on the one hand, the eighteenth-century "John Locke's labour theory,"[19] underpinning ownership in the intellectual/literary realm[20]. On the other hand, German idealism fostered "the personality theory, which was based largely on the philosophies of Kant and Fichte." This second theory was embraced in the German-language academic milieu: "By regarding the person of the creator as 'the natural law basis of literary and artistic property', they believed that author's rights emanated directly from the quality of the authors' own intellectual creations. The law was seen as merely recognizing the existence, and regulating the exercise, of author's rights. This idea also became widespread among German academics and intellectuals."[21] The concept of copyright, grounded in German idealism, posits the author—the Creator—as the basis of literary and artistic property. This genius-focused perspective asserts that the author's rights stem from their intellectual effort and creativity, rather than being bestowed by law or society.

Against this background, the incisive two-part article written by Meltzl after the *Congrès littéraire international,* and published in *Acta Comparationis* under the title "La Réforme littéraire en Europe: Quelques observations à propos de l'ouverture du Congrès littéraire international à Paris en juin 1878" [The Literary Reform in Europe. Some Remarks on the Opening of the International Literary Congress in Paris in June 1878] aimed to highlight Meltzl's alarming assumption regarding the dangerous commodification of works of art through book fairs and exhibitions. In his opinion, this phenomenon diminished the value of art and literature by prioritizing financial gain. He also regarded "literary property," understood as an "administrative issue," as incompatible with his classicist idea of comparative literature. This early conception of comparative literature emerges as deeply entangled with the establishment of a universalist legislation on authors' rights. As in other spheres, European colonial powers reinforced their hegemony by proposing and promoting universal laws concerning copyright. Piracy, meanwhile, was practiced in peripheral or dominated countries such as Ireland or Belgium. As Ricketson states,

> "During the eighteenth-century English authors suffered from the activities of Irish pirates who could flood both the English and other markets with cheap reprints [...] French authors, in turn, suffered from the activities of pirates located in Switzerland, Germany, Holland, and in particular, Belgium. By the early nineteenth century, Brussels was a major center for the piracy of French books, and this led to considerable strains in the relations between France and Belgium."[22]

Symptomatically, the countries surrounding France, which was the most influential cultural center, used piracy as a method of building their own cultures. Translation served as a means to disseminate restricted knowledge,

17. As Péter Mezi outlined in his research on the development of Hungarian copyright, "It may have become clear that, by the reason of Austrian authority, the Hungarian copyright law was radically affected by the German-Austrian concept of *Urheberrecht.* However, through Austrian channels, elements of the French *droit d'auteur* also appeared in Hungarian legal practice. The new Act was in the fullest possible compliance with the requirements of the period," Mezi, "The Development," 50.

18. Ibid., 47.

19. Stef van Gompel, "*Les formalités sont mortes, vive les formalités!* Copyright Formalities and the Reasons for their Decline in Nineteenth Century Europe," in *Privilege and Property: Essays on the History of Copyright*, ed. Ronan Deazley, Martin Kretschmer, and Lionel Bently (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), 182.

20. "Instead, the justification for the protection of author's rights was increasingly found to exist in their identification as property rights." Ibid., 182.

21. Ibid., 183.

22. Ricketson, "The Birth of the Berne Union," 2.

thereby challenging the idea of private and inaccessible property.

While states like the U.K., and especially France, sought to enact laws regarding the circulation of literature within and beyond Europe by advancing a criterion based on a degree of civilization, Meltlz's position reflected concerns about the development of the discipline of comparative literature through the exchange of texts—ideally, free of financial and legal constraints. His vision was that such an exchange would benefit all countries and foster a more expansive literary landscape based on the principle of equality among all literatures. The conflict, in other words, was between the purportedly egalitarian autonomy of Meltzl's "literary fortress," sustained through various "weak ties" in a collaborative model, and a universalist autonomy advocated by Hugo via legal and commodifying mechanisms. This early phase of comparative literature was thus marked by a struggle over the control of literary exchange, rather than the specific individuals and elements involved in that exchange.

This dynamic encountered particular challenges in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which operated a bureaucratic system that acknowledged linguistic and ethnic diversity. *Acta Comparationis* reflected this diversity through its embrace of polyglottism: "Using essentialist ethnic metaphors, the ACLU is fairly often referred to as the meeting point of ethnically clear-cut cultures, languages as if the review had been the scenery of indissoluble ethnic and national identities."[23] The broader European debates around authors' rights clash with Acta' regionalist ethos. As Horst Fassel outlined, the major binary the journal enacted was that between "Regionalität—Universalität."[24] Regionalism thus became a tool within *Acta Comparationis*, connecting local ideals with other regions (see Szabó's research on the fruitful collaboration of French poet Frédéric Mistral with the *Acta Comparationis* due to the Nobel prize-winning French poet's provençalism.)[25] In a subtle yet significant way, the regionalism of *Acta Comparationis* was not easily adaptable to a system of cultural exchange predicated on national-worldliness, as the drafting of the universal copyright suggested (the French programme and later the Berne Convention). This incompatibility is connected to another issue: the idea of *independence* in literary studies that Meltzl sought as professor: "He often accused his own discipline of not being independent, being a kind of *ancilla nationis* as *The Present Tasks* and the similarly famous introductory essay label it."[26]

Acta's project depended on translation to stimulate comparatism. Translation was, in turn, one of the main issues that copyright addressed. The Berne Convention asserted "the right to translate"[27] a text and "the right to make adaptations and arrangements of the work."[28] Meanwhile, *Acta Comparationis* emphasized the principle of *polyglottism*, which meant that literary texts should also be published in their original language for the stake of preserving and protecting each language. Universal Copyright challenged *Acta Comparationis* by placing its two foundational principles—*translation* and *polyglotism*[29]—at odds with one another.

Against French Power, but still Authoritarian-Oriented: Hugo Meltzl *versus* Victor Hugo

Meltzl's two-part, critical position-taking on the Parisian Congress exposes the capitalist process into which literature was thrust. He provides a *defence* of what he considers to be comparative literature through an anti-capitalist and anti-materialist stance. Insofar as he reproduces the historical *querelle* between the ancients and the moderns, he is certainly on the side of the "ancients"—at least rhetorically ("it would be necessary everywhere

23. Levente T. Szabó, "Cultural Brokers, Forms of Hybridity and the Emergence of the First International Comparative Literary Journal," *Philobiblion* 2, no. 22 (2017): 68.

24. Horst Fassel (ed.), *Hugo Meltzl und die Anfänge der Komparatistik* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2005), 30.

25. "Egyetem egyetemi könyvtárában is forgatott nagy provanszál–francia szótárról is szót ejt. Mistral ugyanis már korai időszakától kezdődően az egykor nagy kulturális presztízzsel rendelkező, de időközben regionális és másodrangú nyelvváltozattá vált helyi okszitán felélesztésén, irodalmi és nem utolsósorban adminisztratív elismertetésén fáradozott, s az 1870-es évekre néhány társával együtt nagyon komoly helyi társadalmi támogatottsággal rendelkező, számos pontján a francia nemzeti irodalmi, kulturális és nyelvi egyszínűséggel szembemenő intézményrendszert hozott létre. Ebben a helyzetben bizony a transznacionális nagyon is lokális célokat szolgált, s az ACLU alapítói, Meltzl és Brassai, az erdélyiség, illetve a helyi nyelvváltozatok, kulturális értékek komoly teoretikusai és védelmezői jó érzékkel fedezték fel Mistralban a potenciális partnert." [(He) also mentions the comprehensive Provencal-French dictionary often perused at the university's library. For Mistral had worked from his early career on the revival and literary and administrative revaluation of the local Occitan, of great formal cultural prestige, but which in time had become a mere secondary regional dialect; together with a few colleagues, by the 1870s he had created an institutional infrastructure that enjoyed high levels of support from local society and on many points opposed French national literary, cultural and linguistic homogeneity. In this context the transnational indeed served highly local ends, and the founders of ACLU, Meltzl and Brassai, theorists and promoters of Transylvanianism and of local idioms and cultural values, had astutely recognized a potential ally in Mistral.] Levente T. Szabó, "Egy kapcsolat története és miértjei. Frédéric Mistral és az Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok," *Korunk*, no. 11 (2019): 3–4.

26. Levente T. Szabó, "The Glocality of the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum*. Local Interpretations of Educational Freedom, Coercive Innovation and Comparative Literature," *Hungarian Studies Yearbook*, II (2020), 62.

27. See "Summary of the Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works (1886)," available on: https://www.wipo.int/treaties/en/ip/berne/summary_berne.html. Last accessed on 15 March 2025.

28. Summary of the Berne Convention.

29. "Therefore, the principle of translation has to be not replaced but accompanied by a considerably more important comparative tool, the principle of polyglottism." Hugo Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 44.

to go back to a truly ancient simplicity"[30]). The ancients, in his view, are the ones who produce a real culture in need of protection. Meltzl thus criticizes the rise of literary book fairs and art exhibitions as fashionable inventions of the Western world and mercantilist modernity. His central critique targets these international configurations as industries which not only turn literature into a business, but contribute to an *amateurization* of literature, thereby undermining its true value: "Are scientific, literary etc. congresses less rich in oddities, mediocrities and trivialities, as soon as they cross the line of simple utilitarianism, having in view the elevation to higher regions?... Yes, our modern universal exhibitions are useful things, perhaps very useful — but nothing more; they could be called a 'Simmelsammelsurium' of rare items, cabinet pieces, amateur curiosities; in short, productions that never rise above the level of ordinary, everyday indigence."[31] From his aesthete and high-cultural *parti-pris* Meltzl labels modern culture as "pseudo-esthétique": "And what about the ideas presented and proposed at our international congresses?... They correspond strictly to this dissipated, poor spirit; showing all the inferiority of modern pseudo-aesthetic culture, which is bearable only insofar as it is limited to the Anas of an amateur, or more often of a homebody."[32]

Meltzl unsurprisingly questions the conditions of literature's dissemination. However, the main issue at stake is labor—the distribution of labor within literary exchange and, implicitly, within the evolution of comparative literature. The three sectors created by la *Société des gens de lettres* [The Society of Men of Letters] at this Parisian Congress are the following: "le droit de propriété littéraire," "la reproduction, traduction et des conventions diplomatiques," and "des associations et des institutions tendant à améliorer le sort des gens de lettres."[33] Practically, Meltzl considers this configuration a material concern, not the reform advocated by the Congress: "But is it true that literary reform in Europe, which the first International Literary Congress can address, would have nothing to reform but the single pecuniary situation? Indeed, it's more than the utilitarianism predicted, it's the lethal cutting away of the ideal of poetry." Meltlz's objects to what he considers the confusion of the *goal* with *the means*; he is convinced that illuminating the means defeats the real purpose: to "elevate the level of ideas"[34] and ultimately, the major goal– accomplishing an ideal "universal or comparative literary institute."[35]

Finally, Meltzl interrogates the status of periodicals ("la littérature périodique"). His bitter discontent targets the fact that genuinely popular content (accessible *for* the public, the people) should not be regulated and ruled by *money*. Once journalism becomes a paid profession, like any other work, it is spoiled, according to Meltzl: "real journalism should not be a job as it usually is these days."[36] He additionally denounces the "private trends" of the journalism at that time. At first glance, his position might appear socialist, aligning with accessible knowledge production. Looking to the roots of Meltzl's aesthetics, however, it becomes legible as a desire to centralize, to establish and to promote Enlightenment and classicist European principles against the "uniformity" imposed by commodifying knowledge, which risks standardization in an increasingly globalized capitalist order. He envisions an ancient Agora, where ideas and texts flow freely, but where, amid this exchange, certain authoritative figures articulate the truth and uphold quality. These "figures" are certainly not the market or economic capital.

The points I highlighted in Meltzl's article focus on the tendency to restrict literature and intellectual work to utilitarian ends, a limiting condition that could negatively impact the future evolution of World Literature. In contrast, the transcribed speeches from the 1878 Paris Congress clearly illustrate the rise of Gallo-centrism spearheaded by Hugo and other supportive intellectuals, who reinforced and legitimized another phase of French cultural imperialism, now promoted through socialist principles rooted in the ideals of the French Revolution and Romanticism. Consequently, for them, the protection of authors' rights appears a productive endeavor aimed at realizing an ideal "république littéraire"—a frequent expression used by the Italian delegate M. Mauro-Macghi in his enthusiastic remarks on the

30. "il faudrait partout remonter à une simplicité vraiment antique," Hugo de Meltzl, "La Réforme littéraire en Europe. Quelques observations à propos de l'ouverture du Congrès littéraire international à Paris en juin 1878 (II)," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, no. 31 (1878), 48.

31. "Les congrès scientifiques, littéraires etc. sont-ils moins riches en bizarreries, en médiocrités et trivialités, aussitôt qu'ils dépassent la ligne du simple utilitarisme, ayant en vue l'élévation à des régions plus hautes?... Oui, nos expositions universelles modernes sont des choses utiles, peut-être très utiles—mais rien de plus ; on pourrait les appeler un 'Simmelsammelsurium' des pièces rares, des pièces de cabinet, des curiosités d'amateurs ; bref des productions qui ne s'élèvent jamais au-dessus du niveau de l'indigence ordinaire et quotidienne," Hugo de Meltzl, "La Réforme littéraire en Europe. Quelques observations à propos de l'ouverture du Congrès littéraire international à Paris en juin 1878 (I)," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, no. 31 (1878), 13–14.

32. "Et les idées exposées et proposes dans nos congrès internationaux?... Ils correspondent strictement à cet esprit dissipé, pauvre ; montrant toute l'infériorité de la culture moderne pseudo-esthétique, qui n'est supportable qu'autant, qu'il se borne aux *Anas* d'un amateur, ou plus souvent d'un casanier." Ibid.

33. Ibid, 16.

34. "[É]lever le niveau des idées," Meltzl, "La Réforme (II)," 42.

35. "[I]nstitut littéraire universel ou comparative," Hugo de Meltzl, "La Réforme (I)," 17.

36. "[L]e vrai journalisme ne doit pas être un métier comme il l'est en général de nos jours." Ibid., 19.

Congress's operations and agenda.[37] France is positioned as the central reference point, thinking about the *Other* through the politics of fraternity (fr. *fraternité*) as shown in the following words of Hugo:

> "Nothing will prevail against France. France is in the public interest. France rises above the horizon of all peoples. [...] At this hour, France is showing the world her hospitality; let her also show it her clemency. Clemency! Let's put this crown on France's head! All celebrations are fraternal; a celebration that does not forgive someone is not a celebration. The logic of public joy is amnesty. Let this be the closing of this admirable solemnity: the Universal Exhibition. Reconciliation! Certainly, this meeting of all the common effort of the human race, this rendezvous of the marvels of industry and work, this greeting of masterpieces to one another, confronting and comparing, is an eminent spectacle!"[38]

The two standpoints provided by Hugo and Meltzl converge here in a canonical model of thinking anchored in the idea of *the genius* and *geniality*. While Hugo appears more relaxed, because of the French hegemony reaching its zenith during the Enlightenment, Meltzl seems to be outraged by his peripheral status. Undoubtedly, Meltzl had an underlying purpose to challenge a sharpened Gallo-centrism, even though he did not quote in his article the hegemonic tropes in Hugo's discourse. In part because Meltzl opposes the monopolizing forces of capitalism and materialism in the literary system, he sheds light on this topic; otherwise, his stance on proto-World Literature is not fundamentally different from Hugo's *et ali.* views.

Meltzl's reformist ideas about literature are more clearly articulated in another essential theoretical work published a few years earlier, titled "A Kritikai Irodalomtörténet Fogalmáról. Egyszersmind bevezetésül a német irodalom uj korának történetéhez" (1875) [On the Concept of Critical Literary History: For an Introduction to the History of the New Age of German Literature]. In this work, he reveals his critical, but conflicting convictions about World Literature's evolution and the status of national literatures. Although Meltzl adopts an anti-nationalist point of view by endorsing Goethe's idea of shady national character[39] within a genius author's work, he simultaneously resorts to methodological nationalism when re-examining German literature, particularly with a focus on Goethe as a pivotal and revolutionary figure. Meltzl's main objective in this article is to propose an alternative anti-nationalist and anti-materialist version of a so-called "national" history of German literature (and for any other national literature). The main point is the idea of a fundamentally *critical* principle that would "save" a literature from national reductionism.[40] At first glance, this may appear to be a compromise between national and worldliness, emerging during a time of technological and cultural advancement rooted in materialism and cultural marketing—showcased through book fairs and art exhibitions. Conversely, and less clearly, Meltzl's aim remains rather Germanocentric, by featuring German literature in competition especially with the two hegemonic literatures at that time: French and English.

Ultimately, Meltzl uses the same argument as Hugo: the *genius*.[41] The difference is that Hugo claims by examples names of great (*y compris* canonical) European and French authors, while Meltzl speaks more theoretically by

37. "Dans la république littéraire, Cervantes n'est pas seulement à l'Espagne ; comme Victor Hugo n'est pas seulement à la France, comme Dante –, me permettrai-je d'ajouter –, n'est pas seulement à l'Italie. [...] Dans cette république littéraire, où nous sommes entrés pour apaiser l'effervescence de nos sentiments patriotiques, règnent la paix, la confraternité." *Congrès Littéraire International de Paris 1878, présidence de Victor Hugo. Comptes rendus in extenso et documents* (Paris: Société des Gens de Lettres de France, 1878), 111.

38. "Rien ne prévaudra contre la France. La France est d'intérêt public. La France s'élève sur horizon de tous les peuples. [...] La France à cette heure montre au monde son hospitalité, qu'elle lui montre aussi sa clémence. La clémence! Mettons sur la tête de la France cette couronne! Toute fête est fraternelle ; une fête qui ne pardonne pas à quelqu'un n'est pas une fête. La logique d'une joie publique, c'est l'amnistie. Que ce soit là la clôture de cette admirable solennité: l'Exposition universelle. Réconciliation! Certes, cette rencontre de tout l'effort commun du genre humain, ce rendez-vous des merveilles de l'industrie et du travail, cette salutation des chefs-d'œuvre entre eux, se confrontant et se comparant, c'est un spectacle auguste!" *Ibid*., 107–110.

39. "De a valódi nagy szellem az egész világé, nem azon nemzeté" [The truly great spirit belongs to the whole world, not to the respective nation]. Hugo Meltzl, "A Kritikai Irodalomtörténet Fogalmáról. Egyszersmind bevezetésül a német irodaìom uj korának történetéhez," reading at the University of Cluj-Napoca, October 1873 (Bécs: Faesy és Frick cs. k. udvari könyvtárosok kiadása, 1875), 10.

40. "Azért óhajtanám, hogy a mindennemű előítéletekkel telt modern 'nemzeti' irodalomtörténetirásnak idejekorán gát vettessék, s épen ezért szándékom, a németek irodalomtörténetét oly álláspontról vizsgálni, melyet tudtommal eddig e téren még fel sem állítottak, habár csekély mérvben s öntudatlanul talán alkalmazhattak már. Ezen álláspont a kritikai." [I therefore wish that the modern "national" literary history abounding in every kind of prejudice be curbed at an early stage, and for this reason I intend to study the literary history of the Germans from a perspective that to my knowledge has not yet been established, although it may have been already employed, albeit only to a limited extent and unknowingly. This perspective is the critical one.] Meltzl, "A Kritikai," 9.

41. Meltzl preserves, however, a certain tense exceptionality in literature, hence his resistance to the establishing of the "private literary property." Moreover, he is not concerned by the idea of private literary property *per se*, or by the development of a universal legislation, but rather attacks something more subtle: the fact that copyright regulation offers protection and, implicitly, symbolic legitimization to anyone who publishes something and, by virtue of the legislation, becomes an *author*. Meltzl's perspective appears to revolve around the idea that legal endorsement concerning intellectual productions not only provides authors symbolic and financial capital, in terms of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological approach, but that this type of recognition is at odds with "authentic" acknowledgment derived from genuine value ("universality and versatility," Meltzl, "A kritikai," 10).

providing a method—"the critical method," which implies "the baptismal certificate of genius."[42] Surprisingly, however, this critical method is not applied to the concept of genius itself. As Meltzl notes, "this certificate [...] can only be issued by nature, not by any scholar, or any academic society, or the rapidly changing whims of fashion."[43] For Meltzl, as for Hugo, a genius writer is automatically a universal author, so that the protectionist mission is supplanted by a mission to prove the geniality of great authors emerging from small literatures or from so-called "literatureless people,"[44] while Western authors possess and inherent advantage. Meltzl denounces the German patriotic poets (Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock and Ernst Moritz Arndt) for being recognized as great authors. Therefore, Meltz's anti-capitalist and anti-nationalist standpoint is built on a shared concern: the symbolic legitimization through *strategy*—capitalism which corresponds to marketing and spectacular ("foggy"[45]) cosmopolitanism, and respectively nationalism, expressed through patriotic and superior discourse, rooted mostly in German nationalism. Both modes contradict the supremacist ideal to which Meltzl is strongly attached: that the author should be "a great heart/mind"[46] and should "raise the level of ideas."[47] While the article written in French and published in *Acta Comparationis* serves primarily as a defensive response to the Parisian Congress program and highlights Meltzl's anti-capitalist stance, the Hungarian text is more explicitly rooted in anti-nationalism. It offers a pointed critique of German nationalist poets such as Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock and Ernst Mortiz Arndt, arguing that their recognition is based not on literary merit but on patriotic fervor that reflects the German national(ist) spirit:

> "But what are we to say when, in our own days, with the remarkable improvements in transportation allowing us to travel across the globe in just a few weeks, narrow-minded and exclusive national viewpoints are still constantly emphasized and promoted in intellectual circles? For instance, when Klopstock or Arndt E.M. are declared great poetic geniuses simply because both were passionate patriots, when, in fact, Klopstock was at best a second-rate poet, and Arndt, a poet of the lowest rank. It truly seems that the closer physically different nations are to each other, the more they wish to remain spiritually distant. Every prejudice is a lie that first leads the individual astray, then misguides others, and this process continues."[48]

Meltzl's "critical method" is weakened, if not self-sabotaged, by the utopian vision on geniality and greatness of the authors. Moreover, it is striking that Meltzl fails to acknowledge any positive or even constructive aspects regarding the establishment of a European or universal copyright system, because he is focused exclusively on the utilitarian dimension of the topic, *i.e.* he focuses on criticizing John Locke's empiricist system, which he sees as more prominent than the one based on German idealism. Indeed, a more flexible system to author's rights appears, in his view, to pose a threat to the quality of literary works, but at the same time Meltzl avoids engaging in discussions about *a system of*

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42. "A kritikai módszer tehát az egyedüli helyes ut, nem csak az irodalom történetében, de egyáltalában minden tudományban. A kritikai módszer minden írótól, bár mely nagy hírnek is örvendene, előbb úgyszólván igazoló jegyet fog bekérni, mielőtt őt a halhatlanság termébe bocsátná. Ezen jegy a lángész keresztlevele, melyet csak a természet, nem pedig valamely tudós, vagy nem tudós társaság, vagy gyorsan változó divat hatalma állíthat ki. S miután a lángészben rendesen benfoglaltatik az egyetemesség és sokoldalúság, azt lehetne mondani: az irodalom kritikai történetében rendesen csak oly írónak lesz helye, kinek általános (internationalis) jelentősége van és ezzel a nemzeti irodalom modern barbár fogalmának utolsó támasza elesik." Meltzl, "A kritikai," 10. [Thus the critical method is the sole correct one not only in the history of literature but in every field of science. The critical method will, so to say, first demand a justifying mark from every writer, of however great fame, before admitting them to the hall of immortality. This mark is the birth certificate of genius, one that may be issued solely by nature, not by any scholar or scholarly corporation, let alone the power of mutable fashion. And since universality and multifacetedness are as a rule comprehended in genius, one might state that only such writers will have a place in a critical history of literature who are of general (international) significance, so it follows that the barbarian modern concept of a national literature will lose all underpinning.]

43. Ibid.

44. Hugo Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 45.

45. "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." Meltzl, "Present Tasks," 45.

46. "[D]es grands cœurs," Meltzl, "La Réforme (II)," 42.

47. "[É]lever le niveau des idées," *ibid*., 48.

48. "De mit mondjunk, ha napjainkban, midőn a közlekedési eszközök csakugyan bámulatos tökélyesitése folytán az egész földgömbet úgyszólván rövid néhány hét alatt átutazhatjuk, a szűkkeblu˝exclusiv nemzeti álláspontot valamely szellemi téren szüntelen hangsúlyozzák, sürgetik, ha például Klopstock-ot vagy Arndt E. M.-ot csupán azért nyilvánítják elso˝rangu´költői lángésznek, mivel úgy az egyik mint a másik nagy hazafi volt, mig igazság szerint Klopstock csak másodrangú, Arndt pedig éppen legutolso´rangu´költo˝. Valóban úgy látszik, hogy, minél közelébb áll testileg a különbözo˝nemzet, szellemileg annál messzéb szeretne egymástól maradni. Minden előítélet h a z u g s á g, melylyel az ember elsőbben saját magát, azután társát vezeti tévútra és minden hazugság egy másodikot szül és így tovább." [But what can we say if today, when thanks to the indeed admirable advancement of transport we can travel around the entire globe within a few short weeks, so to say, the narrow, exclusive national perspective is continuously promoted and encouraged in the various fields of knowledge ; when, for example, a Klopstock or E.M. Arndt is pronounced a first-order poetic genius solely because both have been great patriots, although if truth be told, Klopstock is at best a second-rate poet, whereas Arndt is hardly mentionable. It indeed appears that the closer the bodily distance between the nations, the more intellectually distant they wish to remain. Every prejudice is a lie with which one first misleads oneself and then one's fellows; every lie begets a further lie, and so forth.] Meltzl, "A Kritikai," 9.

privileges that the absence of a universal copyright legislation sustains and perpetuates to the detriment of present and future authors. In fact, Hugo's program begins with a very clear statement that serves as robust argument for the demonstration that follows, constantly trying to imply that establishing a universal copyright is a common and mutual endeavor, which means equality, not privilege. In contrast to the hegemonic vassal system that had normalized privilege in pre-revolutionary France—where privileged authors were those fortunate enough to be employed at the royal court—, Hugo underscores a decisive shift: "The happiest men of letters in recent centuries have been those who have had the good fortune to be adopted by the king or by great lords, and who have nevertheless remained free in their material servitude."[49] The subsequent step in Hugo's demonstration is to give prominence to the relative improvement in the conditions of the authorship at that moment, thanks to the foundational work of earlier advocates for authors' rights. He aligns intellectual labor and industrial labor in an egalitarian framework, in order to legitimize the intellectual activity as work deserving of payment:

> "Today, the man of letters who lives by his work is as honorable and honored as the merchant or the industrialist. He is a ploughman who ploughs paper; he is an industrialist, a merchant who takes ideas, fertilizes them and spreads them from one end of the world to the other. Today, the man of letters is independent, he lives the family life, he walks hand in hand with members of the most distinguished classes of society. It is in France, gentlemen, thanks to the efforts of active and courageous men, including Voltaire and Beaumarchais, right up to Scribe, who has been the most resolute and persevering agent of the decency of our rights, that this reform was first achieved, to radiate from there out into the world."[50]

Finally, Hugo announces the central declaration of the program: "In any civilized country, foreigners will enjoy the same rights to the ownership of their works as nationals."[51] A few years later, the Berne Convention would adopt the notion of "civilized nations" as a standard that "developing countries," as the Convention puts it, must strive to meet—advancing through a process of progress under cosmopolitanism. However, as *Acta Comparationis*' directory outlines, literary comparatism does not endorse this model of progress, instead advocating a mission of *protection* without *domination*.

Of course, the growth of capitalism is deeply intertwined with the development of private property and to the idea of privatization, but Meltzl tends to undermine the prevailing view of authors' rights at the time: the pragmatic approach rooted in John Locke's ideas, which is subtly embraced by the Parisian Congress. During this period, two major tendencies developed on the issue of copyright: the English model, grounded in Locke's empiricism (and viewing intellectual property as "labour exerted by an individual"[52]), and the German model, based on German idealism (especially the ideas of Hegel, Kant and Fichte's[53]). Generally, French thinking on "droits d'auteurs" aligns more closely with the English approach to copyright. However, the program launched by the 1878 Parisian Congress through Hugo's voice and prestige leans toward balancing the two above-mentioned directions on copyright, providing a universalist and cooperative model still deeply influenced by social ideals of the French Revolution, which could be applied internationally in the view of Hugo *et ali*. for the benefit of both French and foreign authors. In this context, Meltzl remains unconvinced by such a transactional system that negotiates between private and public tendencies concerning the literary field.[54]

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49. "Les hommes de lettres les plus heureux, pendant les derniers siècles, sont ceux qui ont eu la bonne fortune d'être adoptés par le roi ou par de grands seigneurs, et qui sont restés néanmoins libres dans leur servitude matérielle." *Congrès Littéraire*, 16.

50. "Aujourd'hui l'homme de lettres vivant de son travail est aussi honorable et honoré que le commerçant, que l'industriel. C'est un laboureur qui laboure le papier; c'est un industriel, c'est un négociant qui prend les idées, les fécondes et les répand d'un bout à l'autre du monde. Aujourd'hui l'homme de lettres est indépendant, il vit de la vie de famille, il marche de pair avec les membres des classes les plus distinguées de la société. C'est en France, messieurs, grâce aux efforts d'homme actifs et courageux, parmi lesquels il faut compter Voltaire et Beaumarchais, en arrivant jusqu'à Scribe, qui a été l'agent le plus résolu, le plus persévérant de la décence de nos droits, c'est chez nous que cette réforme c'est d'abord réalisé, pour rayonner de là sur le monde." Ibid.

51. "Dans tout pays civilisé, l'étranger jouira, pour la propriété de ses œuvres, des mêmes droits que les nationaux." Ibid., 17.

52. Kawohl, "The Berlin Publisher," 220.

53. "It is clear that Locke's theory on property is most appropriate to the protection of investment-based intellectual property such as industrial property, inventions and sound recordings. Hegelian thought, discussed further below, lends itself more to the ethical and human rights considerations, and hence is useful for explaining, for exempla, why we have moral rights under copyright law." Graham Dutfield and Uma Suthersanen, *Global Intellectual Property Low* (Cheltenham-Northampton: Eward Elgar, 2008): 55–54. "The German copyright discourse discourse was framed as an attempt to empower authors to verify their contribution to public discourse rather than simply to extract the best royalty share. Protection was justified for un individual expression of a person rather than as a Lockean fruit of the author's labour. The philosophers of German Idealism, such Kant, Fichte and Hegel, based their copyright theories on these concepts of person and personality." Kawohl, "The Berlin Publisher," 207–208.

54. This model is very appropriate to the ideas that conducted to the abolish of privileges within book realm in Prussia at the end of the eighteenth century: "After the draft version was published in 1791, it was proposed that book privileges be abolished altogether, since 'it is rather odd that something which goes without saying according to all natural rights should first have to be obtained through the grant of a sovereign privilege." Kawohl, "The Berlin Publisher," 213–214.

The Klopstock's case could have served as an example to strengthen Meltzl's controversial stance against ownership in the literary field. Briefly, as Friedmann Kawohl had already shown, the poet Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock—harshly criticized by Meltzl in "A kritikai" for being overly valorized in German literary history—was involved in a contentious dispute with his first editor, Carl Hermann Hemmerde, who held the rights for Klopostock's *Der Messias*. More clearly, Klopstock demanded autonomy to republish the present work and, moreover, intended to do so "on a subscription basis, hoping he would receive a Prussian privilege for this." In the end, Klopstock's request was rejected because he and his first editor failed to reach a compromise. The moral of the story might go like this: once another agent—the editor—interferes in the publishing process, the authors not only lose full autonomy over their work, but also forfeit access to certain local privileges. Of course, this is a particular case in which the author and his editor were unable to come to a mutual agreement. Certainly, however, a universal copyright system challenges the idea of specific local or national privileges—an issue that Meltzl surprisingly seems to overlook, especially since the Prussian copyright system (established in 1837 as "Prussian Copyright Act"[55]) was, at that time, one of the most robust in the German speaking world. In the same vein, the battle that Hugo was waging within the Congress aimed to elevate the author's status[56] in a French system that, although it had surpassed the era of royal dominance ("The System of Royal Privileges"[57]), continued to marginalize the author even after the French Revolution by preserving a system of privilege. Alongside a universal and pacifist vision of reconciliation, Hugo also refers to another, more pragmatic form of reconciliation, which Laurent Pfister describes as a result of the evolution of "droit d'auteur" in France during the eighteenth century — a topic that remained relevant in the nineteenth century. This involved the "balance between private and general interests, between private and public property, and between the exclusive rights of the author and his beneficiaries and the freedom of the public to make use of and exploit published works."[58]

Meltzl, however, advocated for a form of literary and knowledge production valued for its own sake — not one to be conditioned, regulated, and driven by another system designed to globally introduce new agents and amendments. For Meltzl, the only definitive and enduring criterion is that of *genius*, accompanied by the purity of elevated ideas. Furthermore, the convergence of the two perspectives occurs not only in the valorization of the genius figure, but also during the processes of publishing and republishing texts and books. While Hugo takes a more integrative approach—viewing the book, text, or journal as the result of collaborative efforts involving multiple contributors –, Meltzl treats the scriptural material (the text itself) as autonomous. For him, although the processes of creation and production are important, they recede into the background; only the ideas contained within the text truly matter. Some virulent observations on the supposed French reform regarding the literary networks are alluded by Meltzl in the last part of his reply on Parisian Congress:

> "These three big question marks, as they are treated, as they exist today, are nothing but a labyrinth of inveterate habits, narrow-minded marottes, and very often an abominable tissue of lies. To give only a few details, due to our lack of space, we will mention, in relation to our first question, the horrible abuse of writing pseudonymous or anonymous reviews of non-pseudonymous and non-anonymous books [...] Another question may serve at the same time as our second and third questions: Why does the publisher print his full name or company name on each copy of a new work that happens to be published by him? [...] This abuse is ruining our modern literature, because it only serves to exert a kind of pressure on modern critics, who are otherwise quite corrupt. [...] So don't put the name of the printer (or publisher) on the copies of a work, especially a new work; it should only appear in the three copies, one destined for the bookshop stock exchange, the other for the state library and the third for the public prosecutor's office. Never forget that our

55. Ibid, 222.

56. "Within a century, under the combined influence of various factors—legal and economic, social and cultural—the author passed from the periphery to the centre of (or at least to a very comfortable place within) the privilege system." Laurent Pfister, "Author and Work in the French Print Privileges System: Some Milestones," in *Privilege and Property: Essays on the History of Copyright*, ed. Ronan Deazley, Martin Kretschmer, and Lionel Bently (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2010), 136.

57. Ibid., 127.

58. Ibid., 136.

modern literature is absolutely bastardized."[59]

Neither Hugo nor Meltzl was an anti-modernist in the sense described by Antoine Compagnon,[60] as both connected the development of universal literature with the growth of the material infrastructure necessary to make comparative literature possible. The difference lies in their refractive approaches: on one hand, Hugo used the innovative tools of modernity; on the other, Meltzl refused to use or endorse these tools, perceiving them as products of Western authority. Consequently, the only form of power Meltzl sought to recognize was an absolute one—detached from any national-materialist foundations—namely, the power of genius, high quality, and essential ideas that stem from a classicist and autonomous conception of literature. Meltzl's reaction was embedded in an inter-imperial position, arguably even a peripheralized one, considering Transylvania's own marginal status within the power dynamics of Austria-Hungary. In turn, Hugo's *et ali.*'s program underlined a social-imperialist framework.[61]

Back to Our "Present Tasks": World Literature's Soft Empowerment over "National Literatures"

This article has framed the relationship between the pre-institutional stage of comparative literature and international copyright during a period of national building and modernization. More specifically, I have examined how comparative literature negotiated with copyright, and how copyright, as an increasingly autonomous institution, in turn has contributed to the development of literary comparatism, to the extent that the relationship between the two became co-dependent, though not necessarily balanced. This nexus intersects with broader issues such as national belonging and national language, the circulation of texts across geopolitical borders, free or controlled cultural exchange, the editing and publishing of texts in different places, the politics of translation, and, undoubtedly, the protection of both texts and authors. I have tried to answer the following question: How has literary protectionism shaped the idea of comparative literature, starting from the premise of their historical simultaneity, particularly as illustrated by the first comparative literature journal, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*? A version of this question continues to resonate today: How does World Literature today practice a symbolic protection of minor literatures within a decentralizing and uneven global order?[62]

Today's World Literature had been canonized and curated as a fictive institution whose major methodological aim is to empower minor and minoritized literatures, by practicing a kind of weak—if not outright superficial—decolonial perspective, strategically articulated in ways that reflect what Shu-mei Shih has called "asymmetrical cosmopolitanism."[63] The relatively recent projects such as the one lunched by Bloomsbury Publishing "X Literature as World Literature"[64] focus on the potential for internationalization of minor or historically invisibilized literatures. Invoking the binarism exposed by Franco Moretti, a national literature must be challenged within the uneven fortress and coercive leverage of World Literature. Not merely "a thorn in the side" of "local literatures"[65], as Moretti points out, but rather a not very precise formula of intertwined empowerment, protection, and, finally, domination through strategic staging. Moretti's competitive model of the national-worldliness dynamic reveals a circular restoring binary that endorses World Literature as a guarantor of international prestige, reproducing a canonical understanding of literature, doubled by the ongoing commodifying global order.

Nevertheless, World Literature continues to offer a form of *soft empowerment* over national literatures. First, it provides a mechanism for making certain supposedly important authors or essential features of historically minoritized literatures visible on the international stage—primarily through the English language and prominent publishers like Brill and Bloomsbury. Second, within an unequal global system, coloniality reappears in new forms,

59. "Ces trois grands points d'interrogation, comme on les traîte, comme ils existent aujourd'hui ne sont qu'un labyrinthe d'usances invétérées, de marottes bornées, et bien plus très souvent un abominable tissue de mensonges. Pour n en donner, que peu de détails, à cause de notre manque d'espace, nous mentionnerons, relativement à notre première question, l'horrible abus d'écrire des critiques pseudonymes ou anonymes sur des livres non-pseudonymes et non-anonymes ; [...] Une autre question peut servir en même temps notre deuxième et troisième question : Pourquoi *l'éditeur* fait-il imprimer son nom ou raison sociale complète en particulier sur chaque exemplaire d'un ouvrage nouveau qui parait par hasard chez lui ? [...] Cet abus ruine notre littérature moderne, parce qu'il ne sert qu'à une espèce de pression, exercée sur la critique moderne, sans cela assez corrompue. [...] Alors ne mettez pas sur les exemplaires d'un ouvrage, surtout d'un ouvrage nouveau, le nom de l'imprimeur (respectivement de l'éditeur) ; il ne doit paraître que dans les trois exemplaires, destinés l'un à la bourse des librairies, l'autre à la bibliothèque de l'état et le troisième au ministère public. N'oubliez jamais que notre littérature moderne est absolument abâtardie." Meltzl, "La Réforme (II)," 46–47.

60. See Antoine Compagnon, *Les antimodernes de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

61.See Mihnea Bâlici, "For a Post-Imperial Discipline," *Transilvania*, no. 5 (2025): 55-67.

62. Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

63. Shu-mei Shih, "Toward an Ethics of Transnational Encounters, or *'When' Does a 'Chinese' Woman Become a 'Feminist'?*," in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 78.

64. Examples include *Romanian Literature as World Literature*, *Polish Literature as World Literature*, *Bulgarian Literature as World Literature*, *Taiwanese Literature as World Literature*.

65. Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1 (2020): 68.

so that the national and the ethnic issues acquire various and equally controversial functions. In this context, World Literature assumes a democratic role by highlighting minorized or invisibilized areas, languages, ethnicities, and literatures. Yet, the contemporary commodified and rebranded notion of World Literature often reinforces its legitimizing function and proliferates in endlessly multiplying similar forms. That is precisely why the contentious and alternative notion of "Literatures of the World"—a formulation arising from the deliberations of the Twenty-Second Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association—appears to signal a paradigmatic shift in the conceptualization of World Literature.[66]

Finally, my point is that projects like "X Literature as World Literature" or "X author as World Literature" manufacture a so-called "worldliness" according to a logic of *cultural protection(ism)*, whereby national content becomes transnationalized and internationalized under the protective and empowering dome of World Literature—a framework that has become programmatically and strategically oriented toward minor literatures. There is in fact a certain pattern to the *mission* that comparative literature and now World Literature has assumed throughout its development: a sustained focus on *the relations* and the *imbrications* among national literatures, rather than on the individuality of each literature or language by deconstructing the forms of hegemony. In this vein, my argument is that relatively recent initiatives, like the one launched by Bloomsbury Publishing, which highlight lesser-known literatures or authors such as those from South-Eastern Europe (for instance, Romanian, Bulgarian, or Polish literature), reflect a type of literary protectionism which has been crucial since the early foundational stages of Comparative Literature as discipline. This is achieved by asserting a so-called *worldliness,* used to denote the global relevance of these historically overlooked and marginalized literatures.

During the pre-institutional phase of comparative literature*,* the exchange of literary texts—and the discipline's gradual emergence—was indirectly shaped by the regulation of literary and artistic trade, with copyright occupying the most significant role in negotiating the terms of literary exchange. Copyright functioned as a pivotal mechanism in negotiating terms of cultural exchange across empires and nation-states, as well as between public and private domains, and, undoubtedly, between both "major" and "minor" literatures. Apparently, copyright was framed as a neutral legislation, sought to organize a highly fluid cultural material and emphasized a possibility of "reconciliation"—as Hugo envisioned—in terms of dismantling the power dynamics between national literatures. Yet protection and domination are not mutually exclusive. Thus, the establishment of a universal copyright system serves as an uncomfortable and even threatening indicator of the fundamental principles and missions that comparative literature, as a work-in-progress discipline, has been compelled to confront.

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