Veronika Ruttkay

Robert Burns and the Beginnings of Comparative Literature

Sámuel Brassai's "After Reading Burns: An Open Letter to Pál Gyulai" (1871)[1]

In recent years, the afterlife of Robert Burns has received intense critical attention, with a focus not just, or even not primarily, on literary reception *per se*, but more broadly on what Joep Leerssen has called the "*pro-creativity of texts:* their capacity to procreate, to go forth and multiply, to spark off other creative moments in the course of their career."[2] In this paper I would like to call attention to such a creative moment in a theoretical key: it happens in an essay by Transylvanian polymath Sámuel Brassai (1798–1897) entitled "Burns olvasása után: Nyílt levél Gyulai Pálhoz" [After reading Burns: An Open Letter to Pál Gyulai].[3] Since its appearance in three instalments in a Hungarian magazine, this substantial piece has not been scrutinized. In this sense, it has had no afterlife to speak of, although it certainly constitutes an interesting chapter in Burns's Eastern European reception.[4] However, I believe that the speculations Brassai offers his readers have consequences beyond that: Burns's poems make him rethink what poetry is and how it might be studied in a theoretical framework that seems to consciously eschew concepts of national literature that were all but hegemonic in his age, thereby making way for a rather different approach—one that might be called, in hindsight, comparative.

Speaking in terms of British literary historiography, Brassai's long career spans late Romanticism and the Victorian age, and although we must note the asynchrony with Eastern or Central European periodization, such terms still have a certain relevance. Brassai was a writer who set his watch according to multiple (cul-

1. This paper was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

2. Joep Leerssen, "Literary history outside the Gutenberg Comfort Zone," Keynote lecture at the 21st ICLA conference *The Many Languages of Comparative Literature*, Vienna, 22 July 2016. Leerssen refers to the concept of the "afterlife" as articulated in Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

3. Sámuel Brassai, "Burns olvasása után (Nyílt level Gyulai Pálhoz)," *Fővárosi Lapok*, Vol 8, Issues 50, 51, 52, pp. 230–231, 234–235, 238–239.

4. The essay is briefly discussed in Veronika Ruttkay, "'His voice resonated for the longest time in our literature': Burns and 'popular poetry' in Nineteenth-century Hungary," in *The Reception of Robert Burns in Europe*, ed. Murray Pittock, London, etc.: Bloomsbury, 2014, 195–226.

tural) time zones—to cite one characteristic detail, at the age of 100 he worked on an ode celebrating Queen Victoria and, among other things, on a mathematical treatise discussing Euclid's XIth Axiom.[5] The year after his Burns essay was published he became Professor of Mathematics at the University of Kolozsvár (in Hungarian), Cluj (in Romanian) or Klausenburg (in German): a multi-ethnic town in 19th-century Transylvania, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy. Apart from Mathematics, he taught Sanskrit as well as Comparative Philology. Prior to his university career, he fought in the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence (1848–49) and worked at the Unitarian College, teaching, publishing, and corresponding in various fields including linguistics, mathematics, botany, economics, musicology, education, and others. The novelist Mór Jókai records (or invents) a brilliant anecdote according to which Brassai had not been appointed regular member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences because the Academy could not decide which branch of science to appoint him in.[6]

But even as a regular member of the Academy (from 1865), Brassai did not become fully part of the Hungarian scientific or even of the broader cultural establishment. The situation of his hometown might explain this to some extent: he worked from what could be perceived as the margins of a region that was itself peripheral.[7] In one of his Academy papers he cites a colleague complaining of his "god-forsaken Transylvanian dialect," as if it had disqualified him in any way from expressing a scientific opinion.[8] However, this was probably only part of the story, for Brassai was famous for his many clashes with the metropolitan elite. His polemical spirit made him engage in all kinds of

5. For a recent account of Brassai's life see Erzsébet Molnár, "Sámuel Brassai, the last Transylvanian polymath: His life and works," *Hungarian Cultural Studies: E-Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association* Vol 1 (2008), 18–35.

6. This is recounted in one of Jókai's sketches of famous authors published in 1865 under the pen-name Márton Kakas. Mór Jókai, *Írói arcképek*, ed. Ilona Egyed (Budapest: Unikornis, 1993), *Jókai Mór munkái 29*, pp. 217–8.

7. However, there is evidence suggesting that Brassai and his colleagues aimed to establish Kolozsvár as centre of a region in its own right, challenging the hegemony of the Hungarian capital. See Eszter Szabó-Reznek, "Meltzl Hugó és a kolozsvári Petőfi-ellenkánon: Kísérlet a 'nemzeti költő' regionális újraértelmezésére," *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 120 (2016) 215–224.

8. "It may seem intrusive for me to intervene in the recent debate between the conservative youth and the neologizing old. 'This Brassai is not even part of the Linguistic Department; what is more, he speaks—as our noble pasquil writer puts it—that god-forsaken Transylvanian dialect!' // I cannot answer the second objection, for I am unable to decide whether it was Transylvania or its dialect that was god-forsaken." ["Tolakodónak tarthatnának, hogy abba a pörbe, mely nem régiben támada a conservator ifjuság s az újító vénség között, ingerálok. […] 'Hiszen Brassai nem is tagja a nyelvészeti osztálynak, aztán azt a—mint jeles pasquilus írónk fejezi ki—azt az "istentelen erdélyi dialectust" beszéli!' // Az utóbbira nem tudok semmit felelni, mivel nem birom kitalálni, mi az 'istentelen', Erdély-e vagy a dialectusa?"] Sámuel Brassai, "A neo- és palaeologia ügyében" [On neo- and palaeology], *Értekezések a nyelv- és széptudományok köréből* 5:2 (1875) 1–48, p. 1.

debates with zest, and ridicule any logical blunder, inaccuracy, or blind reliance on authority that he thought was the main enemy of scientific progress. His findings had been generally met with incomprehension and often neglect; however, his achievement in theoretical linguistics was recognised in the 1990s, and there is a renewed interest in his work in translation studies.[9]

Another rediscovery is under way in the field of comparative literature, for in his active and capacious life Brassai made room for the periodical *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (*Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténeti Lapok*), which started to appear in 1877, and which he founded and partly co-edited with Hugo Meltzl (1846–1908), a young Professor of German Studies at his university. The Latin title of the journal was adopted only from 1879 and, it seems, mainly for practical purposes: the project was founded upon the principle of the full equality of languages, and therefore the title was printed on its volumes in eight, and later ten, official languages.[10] The editorial board had members from more than fifteen countries—it might have been peripheral, but certainly not parochial. Today the *ACLU* is widely recognized as the first journal of comparative literature in the world, especially since David Damrosch called attention to it in a number of works, proposing the revision of the history of the discipline.[11]

* * *

Brassai published his essay on Burns six years before the launch of the *ACLU*. Unlike some of the editorial statements in the journal, this piece does not openly engage with questions of cultural-political power. What it does offer, however, is the outline of a theory of poetry that, as I would argue, resonates with the vision of the later journal. In

9. For a more recent article on his innovations in linguistics see Katalin É. Kiss, "A Pioneering Theory of Information Structure," *Acta Linguistica Hungarica* 55:1–2 (2008) 23–40. Brassai on translation is discussed in Ildikó Józan, *Mű, fordítás, történet: Elmélkedések* (Budapest: Balassi, 2009), pp. 78–82. See also Kinga Klaudy, *Nyelv és fordítás: válogatott fordítástudományi tanulmányok* (Budapest: Tinta, 2007), pp. 19–26.

10. The journal's history and conflicts with the Hungarian literary establishment are discussed in depth in Levente T. Szabó, "Negotiating the Borders of Hungarian National Literature: The Beginnings of the Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum and the Rise of Hungarian Studies (Hungarologie)," *Transylvanian Review* 22, Suppl. 1 (2013), 47–61; Annamária Codău, "The *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (1877–1888) from the Perspective of its British Collaborators," *Hungarian Cultural Studies: E-Journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association* 10 (2017) 106–119. See also Levente T. Szabó, "Negotiating World Literature in the First International Journal of Comparative Literary Studies: The Albanian Case," *Studia UBB Philologia* 2 (2012), 33–51.

11. The pioneering work in this respect was David Damrosch, "Global Regionalism," *European Review* 15:1 (2007) 135–143. See also e.g. Damrosch, "Hugo Meltzl and the Principle of Polyglottism," in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, eds Theo D'haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 12–20.

this "open letter," Brassai defines criticism and aesthetics as two branches of the same science—and science should be understood here in a stricter sense than usual. Brassai wants criticism to become more like natural history, a consistent and reliable description of what we might call the morphology of the poem. This is not to say that he would deny the validity of concepts like inspiration or genius, but he wants to maintain a clear division between the interests of the critic and of the poet. He compares the poem to a spider-web or a beehive, the structure of which can only be described with the help of higher mathematics—but that should be of no concern for the spider or the bee. Criticism, in short, should cease to be prescriptive—an injunction that might have sounded especially provocative in an age when a relatively small number of Hungarian critics did all they could to mould a new national literature according to their vision of what it should look like.

The other branch of the science of literature is aesthetics and, for Brassai, this should be seen as corresponding to natural philosophy. In other words, this is the territory of speculation about the particular effects produced by literature, when the critic, with the help of an essentially inductive method, attempts to understand *why* certain forms of literary expression are effective in certain ways. Brassai's reliance on the concept of aesthetics connects his venture to developments in Germany, where the discipline was flourishing by that time. However, I think it also suggests a more distant affinity with the critical venture of the Scottish Enlightenment, especially the work of Henry Home, Lord Kames, who proposed to turn criticism into a "rational science" in his *Elements of Criticism* as early as 1762, and attempted to use the inductive method—modelled on the natural sciences—to achieve his aim. From the late 18th century, Kames was avidly read by German critics such as Johann Gottfried Herder, for whom aesthetics was nothing other than "the science of feeling."[12] In any case, just like Kames and his many followers, Brassai also relies on the principle of the association of ideas to explain how poetry works. This probably should not surprise us in the light of Cairns Craig's book *Associationism*, in which he argues that far from being a discarded theory by the age of Romanticism, this was in fact one of the dominant approaches to literature throughout the 19th century—and, it seems, not only in Britain or America.[13]

Why was it Robert Burns, of all poets, who made Brassai come up with his remarkable outline of a literary aesthetics? At the beginning of the essay, he admits that he had not read Burns until very recently, mentioning as one of his reasons a fear that maybe

12. Herder's interpretation of Kames is presented most completely in his *Critical Forests: Fourth Grove, on Riedel's* Theory of the Beaux Arts. See: Johann Gottfried Herder, *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*, trans. and ed. Gregory Moore (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 177–290. Cf. Leroy R. Shaw, "Henry Home of Kames: Precursor of Herder," *Germanic Review* 35:1 (1960) 16–27.

13. Cairns Craig, *Associationism and the Literary Imagination: From the Phantasmal Chaos* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

the poet would not live up to his own larger-than-life reputation. But, as it turns out, the opposite happened. Brassai found Burns "*nulli secundus*" (231)—second to no other lyricist, but closest perhaps to Goethe. On a personal note Brassai tells us that the impression these poems made on him were as vivid as anything in his youth—and this, coming from a man of 74 who had spent a large part of his life reading, should not be taken lightly. But there might be another, more strategic reason for his choice, which might be inferred from the subtitle: "An Open Letter to Pál Gyulai." By 1871, Burns had become a monument set on a pedestal not only in Britain, the colonies, or in America, but also in Hungarian letters. In fact, he became an important model for a literary movement that dominated the cultural scene from about the 1840s to the 1890s: the so-called popular-national mode of writing.

The greatest proponent of these ideas was the writer and critic Pál Gyulai (1826–1909), who became a powerful arbiter in literary matters. After Hungary's 1867 Compromise with Austria and the inauguration of the Dual Monarchy, Gyulai's critical views were allied to state politics: he believed in the promotion of culture as an expression of national identity. Today scholars in Hungary sometimes refer to this conception as "national classicism," but the other term, "popular-national literature" [*népnemzeti irodalom*] is better at calling attention to its internal complexity. The new kind of Hungarian literature was to achieve a synthesis of popular cultural expression (the oral tradition that was being busily collected and constructed as the national folklore) and of the "higher" literary mode of polished writing. For historical reasons, these two modes of cultural production were radically divided from each other from the 18th century onwards, and even in the 1840s, writers complained that "the people" they wished to address—a category that, by that point, also included the peasants and serfs who made up the majority of the population—could not be reached, for the very simple reason that most of them could not read.[14]

As literacy rates started to increase in the second half of the 19th century, and with the spread of more democratic views on the nation, members of the literary elite set the task for writers to bridge the gap between the "popular"—which was seen as the true source of national creativity—and the learned, and thus to create a literature that was truly "national." When the critic Gyulai searched for literary models for such a transformation, he repeatedly evoked Robert Burns, who relied on the language of popular songs and ballads and made it enjoyable for polite audiences as well, thereby creating a true sense of national unity. It might be noted here that Gyulai thought of the poet not

14. There is a rich discussion of these complex issues in recent works by János H. Korompay, Pál S. Varga and Róbert Milbacher, among others. An English-language interpretation is offered in Richard Aczel, *National Character and European Identity in Hungarian Literature 1772–1848* (Budapest: Nemzetközi Hungarológiai Központ, 1996). See also: Aczel, "Hungarian Romanticism: Reimagining (Literary) History," in *The Oxford Handbook of European Romanticism*, ed. Paul Hamilton (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 357–374.

in exclusively Scottish terms: he believed Burns brought about the renewal of what he called "English literature," while at the same time he pointed out—together with other contemporaries—the close affinity of Scotland with Transylvania: two secluded, mountainous regions with a turbulent past and vigorous folk traditions.[15]

In these circumstances it is quite surprising that Brassai could avoid reading Burns until the 1870s. By that time, there was a steady flow of translations, combined with a general critical interest, not so much in the poetry itself, as in the Burns phenomenon. The Scottish poet's reception was intimately connected to the posthumous canonization of the Hungarian Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849), who could be identified as the first truly national poet, and who became known internationally as "the Hungarian Burns." In light of all this, Brassai's decision to expound his aesthetic principles specifically through Burns can be seen as a response to contemporary interest, to some extent, but also as an attempt to interrogate some of the principles that informed Hungarian critical discourse at the time.

As opposed to Gyulai and other contemporaries, Brassai is not interested in the concept of the national poet in this essay, and he is far from reading Burns as a kind of transitional figure between the naive and the sentimental. Rather, he presents him as a fully accomplished artist, and although he refers to Burns sometimes as a "peasant" poet, he puts the adjective in quotation marks (231). As to the question of language, Brassai is convinced that reading poems in the original is superior to reading them in translation, and even describes the added excitement one may receive from reading poetry in a foreign tongue. As languages and individuals mature, Brassai suggests, associations around words and expressions accumulate and multiply, but their familiarity inevitably reduces the intensity of the primary effects. It is for this reason that reading poetry in a foreign language, or, in the case of Burns's English readers, reading poems in a different dialect, can have an almost euphoric effect: it removes the sense of familiarity and enables one to perceive the world in a new light.[16] This is close to what the Russian For-

15. Gyulai develops the comparison in his 1879 essay "Kriza János," reprinted in *Kriza János költeményei*, ed. János Kovács (Budapest: Franklin-Társulat, 1893), 3–19. Other examples are described in Emilia Szaffner, "The Hungarian Reception of Walter Scott in the Nineteenth Century," *The Reception of Sir Walter Scott in Europe*, ed. Murray Pittock (London & New York: Thoemmes Continuum, 2006), 138–156, p. 143.

16. "The same theory [about the subjective transformation of the force of words] explains the fact that a work read in a foreign, but otherwise well-understood, language feels more poetical than a work of the same rank written in one's own familiar, i.e. mother, tongue; also the fact that a translated poem, even in the most perfect rendering, can never reach the power of the original that is known to us. […] The stimulating power of Burns's great poetry is enhanced by his use of the dialect from across the Tweed for those who know it well and therefore do not need to use the glossary too often" (231, my translation) ["Szintúgy lelik magyarázatukat a szók érvényének alanyias változásában azok a tények, miszerint idegen, egyébiránt jól értett nyelven olvasott mű költőiebbnek tetszik, mint egy vele egyrangon álló hazai, t.i. anyai nyelven írott; hogy egy

malists will later theorize as the chief end of literature—defamiliarization or *ostranenie*—only, in Brassai's thought it is linked to the question of language and, implicitly, of identity. What he implies in a couple of brief remarks is that poetry, at its best, effects not the consolidation of identity under the sign of sameness, but the re-ordering of meaning through difference. It may be noted that Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the English critic who anticipated Formalist ideas most closely, also cited Burns to show how poetry might make one perceive the world in a different light.[17]

Brassai's principles would deserve sustained attention, but for now, let me highlight one more way in which he diverged from the mainstream of 19th-century critical opinion, in order to show that his views might be linked not only to Formalism, but to more reader-oriented approaches as well. This concerns the question of poetic description. Brassai points out that Burns uses very little of it, but considers this far from being a fault: he claims that such economy makes his poems all the more powerful, since selection is not only a necessity in poetry, but the main source of its strength. A poet activates the reader's mind not by saying things but by leaving things out, and Brassai is happy to point out that Burns's poetry abounds in powerful empty spaces or "blanks" (to borrow a concept from the 20th-century theorist Wolfgang Iser). Brassai's recognition of the reader's active contribution to poetic meaning is worth comparing to that of his contemporary, the poet János Arany (1817–1882), for whom, as Péter Dávidházi has shown, a similar insight was the source of theoretical speculations and also of some anxiety.[18] Dávidházi identified a complex network of thought in Arany's writings concerning the role of the imagination, which often appears together with references to the cloud scene in *Hamlet*. Arany returns to this scene again and again, stating in one of his more general remarks: "When the good old Polonius, for the sake of the Danish prince, imagines a piece of cloud as a camel, a weasel, or a whale, what he is doing is not as widely foolish as it may seem."

---

fordított költemény, a lehető legtökélyesebben adva, sem ér föl az előttünk ismert eredetivel. […] Burns különben is remek költeményének ingerét fokozza a Tweeden túli tájszólás azok előtt, kik meglehetősen ismeretesek levén vele, ritkán szorúlnak a glossariumra"].

17. "And therefore it is the prime merit of genius and its most unequivocal mode of manifestation, so to represent familiar objects as to awaken in the minds of others a kindred feeling concerning them and the freshness of sensation which is the constant accompaniment of mental, no less than of bodily, convalescence. Who has not a thousand times seen snow fall on water? Who has not watched it with a new feeling, from the time that he has read Burns' comparison of sensual pleasure // To snow that falls upon a river/ A moment white—then gone for ever!" S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2vols, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 1, p. 81. Connections between romantic theory and formalism are discussed by Richard Cronin in "Formalism," in Nicholas Roe, ed., *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide* (Oxford: OUP, 2005), 257–272.

18. Péter Dávidházi, "Camel, Weasel, Whale: The Cloud-Scene in *Hamlet* as a Hungarian Parable," in *Shifting the Scene: Shakespeare in European Culture*, eds. Ladina Bezzola Lambert and Balz Engler (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), 95–110.

In fact, Arany entertains the possibility that Polonius's response may reveal something universal about a certain kind of (aesthetic) experience: "Every single spectator has to add a piece of his own fantasy to the view, to fill the void, to round off the shape, and to capture the image for at least a moment before it returns to its original nothingness."[19]

The poet Arany's response to such indeterminacy seems to have been a strong wish to control the imagination through the economy of form.[20] In line with his associationist principles, the critic Brassai argues that the reader's mental activity is the chief source of aesthetic pleasure, and that all masterpieces provoke it.[21] However, he comes close to Arany's view when he states that such pleasurable activity can only be triggered through the precision or exactitude (*szabatosság*) with which a poet employs his words and images: "when the poet uses just the right amount of descriptive elements or pictorial traits, in presenting a story, scene, or object, in order to make the receiver—with the enormous help of Association, that spiritual Proteus—fill in the rest."[22]

* * *

We can only speculate about what might have happened if Brassai's initiative had been taken up to re-think what poetry is and how it works. However, the journal of comparative literature that he launched a few years later with his colleague may be seen as a continuation of some of this thinking. In a programmatic essay entitled "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature" (1877), Meltzl wrote about their overriding ambition to reform the writing of literary history, which had become "but an *ancilla historiae politicae*, or even an *ancilla nationis*" [a handmaid to political history and even to the nation]:

> By now, every nation considers itself, for one good reason or another, superior to all other nations […] Instead of giving free reign to polyglottism and reaping the fruits in the future (fruits that it would certainly bring), every nation today insists on the strictest monoglottism, by considering its own language superior or even destined to rule supreme. This is a childish competition whose result will finally be that all of them remain—inferior.[23]

19. Quoted and translated by Dávidházi in "Camel, Weasel, Whale," p. 99.

20. See Péter Dávidházi, *Hunyt mesterünk: Arany János kritikusi öröksége* (Budapest: Argumentum, 1994), especially pp. 96–103.

21. "[A] mesterművek élvezetebeli gyönyör általában véve az élvező szellemi tehetségének a mű által ébresztett működésében—ha úgy tetszik: 'tevellésében' vagy 'ténykedésében'—áll" (234).

22. "[H]a a költő történet, jelenet vagy tárgy előadásában a leírás elemei, a kép vonásai közül csak annyit vesz igénybe, a mennyi elég arra, hogy az élvező ama szellemi Proteusz, az eszmetársulat hatalmas segélyével a többieket hozzájuk pótolni bírja" (235).

23. Hugo Meltzl, "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature," trans. Hans-Joachim Schulz and Phillip H. Rhein, in *World Literature in Theory*, ed. David Damrosch (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 36–41, pp. 39–40.

I believe that Brassai's essay on Burns—its universalizing theoretical ambition, coupled with the embracing of polyglottism, and especially the way it remains unruffled by the myth of the national poet (whether it be Scottish, English, or Hungarian)—could also be read in this context. Indeed, it should be juxtaposed to Meltzl's own 1876 article on Sándor Petőfi—a critique of Gyulai's views—in which the young Germanist politely but firmly argues that the Hungarian poet should be read in a framework broader than that of cultural nationalism.[24] What these works clearly demonstrate is that the future editors of the *ACLU* had not only questioned the dominant mode of 19th-centuty Hungarian criticism, but also developed theoretical frameworks that could provide new starting points for later comparative investigation.

24. Hugó Meltzl, "Gyulai Pál, a Petőfi-irodalom megalapítója," in *Petőfi-tanulmányai*, eds Sándor Endrődi and Zoltán Ferenczi (Budapest: Kunossy, Szilágyi és Társa, 1909), 82–162. Cf. Dezső Kozma, "Meltzl Hugó és a magyar irodalom," *Korunk* 3:20:10 (Oct 2009).