

A Bridge to the East: Moses Gaster as a Romanian Folklorist

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As Chief Rabbi (Haham) of the Sephardic community in London, Moses Gaster marked a departure for the Folklore Society when he became its president in 1907 and 1908 (Gaster being the Folklore Society's only ordained rabbi as president). Gaster was a German-educated, Bucharest Jew, from an affluent family, who found refuge in England after being expelled from Romania in 1885. Gaster's scholarly output over the course of a career that spanned from the 1870s through the 1930s included many volumes on Jewish, Samaritan, and European folklore and philology. Perhaps first, foremost, and most passionately, Gaster was a Romanian folklorist. He completed his doctoral dissertation at the University of Leipzig in Romanian philology under the Romanist scholar Max Gröber, and after returning to Bucharest published the first anthology of popular Romanian literature. During his many years of involvement with the Folklore Society he was a participant in the lively theoretical debates on the origins and spread of European folklore, always arguing for a comparative method that treats folklore scientifically. The following essay attempts to match what we know of Gaster's biography with his theoretical writings to sketch a picture of his influences and influence in the study of European folklore.

The Making of a Romanian Folklorist

In his own telling, Moses Gaster grew up in a Jewish community where most people were observant but no one bothered those who were not. His grandfather dealt in textiles and headed a financially comfortable family that maintained good relations with the Greek and

Romanian Christian elite (the Greeks, like Jews, were similarly employed in trade in the area). In his unpublished memoirs Gaster described an uncle, who would go hunting with his Romanian aristocrat friends, and his father, who was educated in Romanian, French, and German, but never had a tutor for Hebrew, Bible, or Talmud [1]. His father had no interest in the family business (or the family) and instead entered the Dutch diplomatic service where he climbed the ranks of Holland's foreign office in Bucharest, eventually becoming Dutch Consul to Romania. His mother was from a wealthy family from Berdichev in the Russian Empire (and a relation to the Russian pianist Anton Rubinstein). Gaster describes German, Romanian, French, and Hebrew newspapers around the house, including those of the Jewish Literary Institute in Leipzig. He was educated in Jewish and Christian schools and received his Baccalaureat from the lycee in Bucharest [2].

Gaster received his postgraduate training in Germany, at the famed Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau, a major center for the scientific study of Judaism - *Wissenschaft des Judentums* – and at the University of Leipzig. When he returned to Bucharest he was invited to lecture on Romanian literature and comparative mythology at the University of Bucharest, and he joined the city's Jewish and Romanian intellectual circle. He also advised a growing group of students interested in Romanian philology and folklore [3]. Gaster was the product of what in another context has been called “selective integration” [4]. In a country where Jews faced considerable legal disabilities, he was part of the narrow band of the capital's educated Jewish elite who were as comfortable among Christian Romanians as their coreligionists. Having grown up in a family firmly in the country's wealthy establishment, yet at the same time aware of the restrictions facing most Jews, Gaster's politics were of the liberal royalist variety. During his time in Breslau Gaster became a vocal advocate for Jewish rights in Romania, involving himself even in negotiations intended to tie Romanian independence to Jewish emancipation at the Congress of Berlin in 1878. When he returned to Bucharest he became even more involved in opposing the discriminatory policies of the Romanian government – and its toleration for anti-Jewish violence – and was active in the proto-Zionist movement Hovevei Tsiyon. And yet, at the same time, he adored the Romanian royal family and exculpated them from any responsibility for the government's anti-Jewish policies. Gaster believed that restrictions on Jews and their lack of citizenship stemmed from the desire of some to create a Romanian bourgeoisie (by discouraging competition), and western antisemitism was something imported by Romanians from Transylvania, then under Hungary, who immigrated to Romania [5]. Even when he was expelled, Gaster claimed he crossed the border and immediately wired by telegraph a statement of loyalty to the king [6]. As another example, his 1915 English anthology *Roumanian Bird and Beast Stories* he dedicated to Queen Elisabeth of Rumania, “to whom the soul of the Rumanian people is an open book [7]”.

Moses Gaster's son Theodore attributed all of his father's life passions – from folklore to Zionism – as stemming from his innate romanticism [8]. The younger Gaster, who was himself an accomplished scholar of folklore and ancient near eastern texts, suggested that the elder's romanticism “came out in a passionate, even exaggerated, attachment to the past

and in a somewhat rose tinted view of the peculiar genius and creativity of the ‘common people’. It was the mainspring, in particular, of his lifelong devotion to folklore and of his *penchant* for exotic people, like the Samaritans and the gypsies [9]”. Theodore also pointed to a number of ironies in his father’s personality, for example the fact that despite his obsessive passion for folklore, he had no knowledge of, or interest in, the daily life, recreations, or culture of the common people in his own day. Theodore boiled the influence of his father’s formative years down to a single paradox : “He was at once the impulsive, exuberant, generous Rumanian and the authoritarian product of the German university [10].”

From *Wissenschaft des Judentums* to “Scientific Folklore”

From the perspective of his scholarship, one would think that indeed, like his son presumed, Moses Gaster’s formative influences would have been shaped by his time in Germany. Gaster never published an autobiographical work, but late in life he did dictate (he was totally blind) about 600 pages worth of fragmented reminiscences to two refugees of questionable English language abilities [11]. Portions of these typescripts were later edited and collated by Gaster’s daughter Bertha and remain at the UCL library. Gaster was not a modest man, and this unpublished memoir is immodest even by the standards of the genre. He focuses on his own importance and connection to important people, and is terribly unkind to those he perceived to be jealous or inadequately deferential. In the version we have, we learn about only three parts of his life : his childhood in Romania, the years he spent in Romania after returning from Germany, and his introduction to life in England. He tells us little about his time in Germany. This incomplete picture impedes a perfect understanding of Gaster’s intellectual development, but we can see the institutional influence of the Jewish Theological Seminary in Breslau on Gaster’s scholarship. The Science of Judaism – *Wissenschaft des Judentums* – sought a *scientific* approach to the totality of the Jewish experience, including Jewish history, folklore, customs, language, philosophy and so on, and Gaster was trained by the leading figures of so-called second generation of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* scholars, such as the founder of the Seminary Zacharias Frankel and especially the historian Heinrich Graetz, who also founded the journal *Monatsschrift Fuer Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Monthly for the History and Science of Judaism) [12]. *Wissenschaft des Judentums* emerged out of a German academic environment where Jewish scholars at the modern rabbinical seminaries in Central Europe (the only places they could teach) justified their study of Jewish sources as *scientific*. Yet at the same time, like their German counterparts, Jewish scholars could not help but be touched by currents of romanticism, especially when venturing into fields such as folklore or mysticism [13].

While perhaps being romantic by temperament and influenced by Romanticism, Gaster consistently argued for the scientific study of folklore and thereby cut against the grain of those who saw the purpose of folkloristics and philology as fulfilling a national purpose. In his literary circle in Bucharest – composed of Romanian intellectuals, journalists, philologists, and historian-politicians (as many politicians and historians at that time were

both) - Gaster was part of scholarly sub-group writing a new history of the Romanian language [14]. In this period of early Romanian independence, Romanian nationalist scholar-politicians did as almost all scholar-politicians did in Europe, and tried to craft a philological, historical, and folkloric history that would form the basis for their national narrative. Romanian nationalists sought to cast the Romanian people as the descendents of the Roman Legion that had conquered the area and remained after the Roman withdrawal. They also considered Transylvania as part of Romania's historical territory. Gaster took apart the claims of the nationalists – finding a host of philological problems with their scholarship – and in his recounting, even the king agreed with him [15]. In fact, while it is widely perceived that Gaster was expelled from Romania for his activism in Jewish causes and the embarrassment it caused the government, in Gaster's own telling his Jewish activism was merely a convenient excuse. The underlying reason he was expelled, according to Gaster, was because of a long-held academic grudge by Dimitrie A. Sturdza, a liberal politician and historian and president of the Roumanian Academy, for mocking his theories at a lecture to the Royal Geographical Society attended by the king ; and Gaster had the bad luck of Sturdza repeatedly becoming Prime Minister [16].

The continuity between Gaster's folkloristics in Romania and in England is to be found in his insistence on folklore being treated scientifically, rather than used to promote a particular national viewpoint. But England in general, and the Folklore Society in particular, was fertile ground for someone with a scientific approach to folklore, as creating a home in England for the "science of folklore" had precisely been George Laurence Gomme and Edwin Sidney Hartland's intention in founding the Folklore Society, and so Gaster could and did easily find a home among the "scientific folklorists" there [17]. Even so, the essence of the debate among folklorists in England – most of whom were not academically trained – at this time regarding the origins of European folklore was really about whether folklore in different parts of Europe was indigenous, and therefore reflective of each people's national or folk spirit, or whether it came from elsewhere and was later adapted. And as I have remarked elsewhere (with regards to the controversy over the origins of Cinderella between Joseph Jacobs and Alfred Nutt), even scientific folklore in England had certain sacred cows [18].

Gaster's Theories on the Origins of European Folklore

As he did in Romania, in England Gaster attacked with similar abandon any attempt to bend the academic study of folklore to national mythology. Within the context of early twentieth century debates on the origins of European folklore, one might consider Gaster a diffusionist, however one who developed his own unique theory on the process of diffusion. Gaster was introduced to German folkloristics while in Breslau, and after a very brief period of attraction to the theories of the Grimm brothers (as applied to Hebrew folklore), Gaster became sympathetic to the ideas behind Theodor Benfey and Max Müller's theory of migration [19]. Once in England, Gaster became highly critical of Benfey's efforts to source all of European folklore to Indian origins [20]. But the main target for his criticism was the

influential so-called anthropological approach championed by Andrew Lang that, borrowing from E. B. Tylor's theory of survivals, saw in European folklore the remnants of its pre-Christian past. Gaster, in opposition to the anthropologists, argued that Tylor's evolutionary arguments in *Primitive Culture* could not be universally applied to European folklore [21].

Romania's location on the southeastern fringe of Europe – a crossroads between east and west – made the study of its folklore particularly relevant to the key theoretical questions of the time. Gaster used his introduction to his English anthology *Roumanian Bird and Beast Stories*, published by the Folklore Society in 1915, as an opportunity to thoroughly eviscerate the anthropologists. In this essay Gaster attacked the notion that in any given place in Europe one might determine what, if anything, in said place is a local or indigenous survival. According to Gaster, such a notion required almost willful ignorance of the heterogeneity, mobility, and hybridity of the people who live in Europe. He took an approach that today might be familiar to modernist national theorists in claiming that the people of today's modern nations are often not the original inhabitants of where they live, all include people of mixed origins, and each fully developed their separate languages and customs comparatively late in historical terms [22]. The same therefore must be true for the folklore (and philology) of today's modern nations. Furthermore, the entire methodology of the anthropologists (and also the followers of Benfey) is incorrect, because if folklore indeed evolves then one cannot simply jump back to the ancient world in one's scholarship, but rather must move backwards one evolutionary step at a time, from influence to influence, and place to place, in order to reach the point of origin. In the case of Romanian tales Gaster suggested that by following the proper methodology it becomes clear that their folklore is not ancient, not indigenous, and not isolated. In place of the theory of survivals Gaster offered a general framework for understanding European folklore and offered a general theory, nicely illustrated by the Romanian case, about its earlier origins. Gaster's own theory is perhaps best articulated in his own words.

The only explanation feasible and satisfactory is, I believe, the theory of transmission from nation to nation ; those resembling one another closely in modern Europe are not of so early an age as has hitherto been assumed, but have come at a certain time from one definite centre, and were propagated among the nations, and disseminated by means of a great religious movement at a time when political and national consolidation of the peoples of Europe had already assumed a definite shape [23].

The great religious movement was of course Christianity, and Gaster saw a “popularly modified Christianity” as the link between all variations of European folklore. Yet when one moves back from influence to influence Gaster also sees a deeply heretical strain in Romanian and European folklore, and proposed the possibility that many of the key ingredients can be traced to the Christian heretical sects of Bogomils, before that Arians, and before that Manichaeans, and in that way these tales made their way from the Near East to the Balkans. Bogomilism was rife in the medieval Bulgaro-Vlachian Kingdom (of which Romania was a part) for several centuries, and the fact that the believers of this dualist

Christian heresy taught the biblical and uncanonical texts in the vernacular—the mixing of written and oral literary traditions—may explain the dualistic elements (such as sympathetic portrayals of the devil) in Romanian folklore [24].

Gaster first articulated this theory to an English audience in the Ilchester Lectures on Greeko-Slavonic Literature that he was invited by Max Müller to give at Oxford. Later, in *Roumanian Bird and Beast Stories* he further explained how the dualistic worldview and literary and oral legends adopted from biblical apocrypha shaped not just Romanian, but all European folklore. According to Gaster, the Bogomils had followers by different names – such as “Good People,” “Good Christians,” Paulicians, Patarenes, Cathars and Boulgres – who retained a relationship with their spiritual center in Bulgaria [25]. They attributed the world’s creation to be a product of the fallen angel *Satanael*, a Satan-God, and the universe in the grips of a struggle between God and Satan that will end in redemption (indeed, this hardly sounds unlike Christianity, but there is a significant difference in emphasis, as in Christianity Satan’s power is not on a par with God’s). Gaster claimed that the Bogomils adopted the apocryphal literature – extra-biblical legends that sought to fill in some of the explanatory gaps in the biblical texts – that they translated from Greek (Byzantine) texts and Hebrew aggadic (legendary or folkloric) literature. As these tales diffused through Europe, especially carried by the oral and written literature of members of dualistic sects, the familiar characters of European folklore were substituted for those of the Hebrew apocrypha. In such a way, one might see Hebrew folkloric literature, translated by Greeks and adapted by dualistic heretical Christian sects in southeast Europe, as the bridge between ancient eastern folklore and that which developed and spread through western Europe in the middle ages.

Conclusion

Gaster’s theories on the Bogomil origins of European folklore seem not to have taken off (at least outside of Romania). Perhaps they were too eccentric, and too difficult to prove, or perhaps Gaster’s scholarship’s drop into obscurity reflected the general scholarly trend moving away from the question folklore’s of origins. In general, his influence in the broader anthropological, folkloristic, and philological worlds was limited to his specific contributions in the discreet fields in which he worked, in particular in Romanian literary and folkloristic studies, where it seems he had the most students and was most widely read [26]. Some scholars of Jewish mysticism such as Gershom Scholem also later took an interest in his theories regarding the development of the *Zohar*, though his ideas about the Manichaeian and Cathar influences on Jewish mysticism were, until recently, largely ignored. His general approach, using comparative philology to trace the spread of folklore and his modernist view of the mutually reinforcing nature of literary and oral sources were, from a methodological perspective, ahead of their time. And in the past few years, one of the most prominent living scholars of Jewish mysticism, Moshe Idel, has argued that we should revisit and take seriously Gaster’s theories on the Bogomil origins of European folklore and the heretical

Christian influences on Jewish mysticism [27].

Nonetheless, as we can see in Gaster's Presidential addresses to the Folklore Society, he balanced his insistence on the scientific nature of folklore with a romanticized, though perhaps not romantic, view of the beauty of folklore and its importance to people's lives. In his 1909 address, for example, Gaster rigorously insisted that folklorists treat their field as a science, but he also suggested we understand folklore as a kind of science itself, if science is primarily about attempting to understand the world and universe we live in [28]. And yet, he also had an appreciation for the danger to folklore and the human imagination posed by the modern world and he could indeed playfully romanticize his subject matter in a manner fully at odds with the rationalist textual criticism of his *Wissenschaft des Judentums* training. As he wrote to Charlotte Burne, the first female president of the Folklore society (nominated so on Gaster's urging) upon the outbreak of World War I, "Of the terrible war I scarcely venture to write... Our poor Folklore will be trodden under foot of the marching legions and all the songs and whispering of the sprites and fairies will be silenced by the thunder of the cannon [29]". Gaster was only stating the obvious. All areas of culture were trodden under foot, and many fields that prospered before the war looked very different after it. Such, indeed, was the fate of Gaster's Bogomil hypothesis which had to wait until the twenty-first century before anyone took it seriously.

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[1] A typescript of Gaster's memoirs, edited and collated by his daughter Bertha Gaster, is located at the Mocatta Library at University College London. It is fragmentary and divided into the sections "Autobiography," "Things That Were," and "Reminiscences." It is also greatly abbreviated from the original typescript. Hereafter *Memoirs*. The Romanian scholar Victor Eskenasy prepared an anthology of Gaster's selected correspondence and selections from his memoirs, translated into Romanian. In the short English summary of the volume, Eskenasy states that Gaster relied for transcription on two typists with poor English. "The result is a transcript obviously only approximating what Gaster said, in a succession of typewritten pages which finally just exceeded 600. Riddled with spelling errors, linguistic conjectures, passages of unclear meaning and gaps in the text, the manuscript is in a state today which makes it virtually

impossible to prepare a conventional bi-lingual edition according to accepted standards of scholarship.” *Memorii (fragmente) corespondenta*, edited by Victor Eskenasy, Bucharest, Editura Hasefer, 1998, pp. 448.

[2] *Memoirs*, pp. 11, 15, 18, 27-28. Although a number of sources state that Gaster received a B.A. from the University of Bucharest, in his own telling he held a Baccalaureat equivalent to the English B.A. *Memoirs*, p. 32.

[3] For details about whom he supervised, and on what topics, see Virgiliu Florea, “Dr. M. Gaster: ‘I am a bit of a Romanian scholar’”, *Studia Judaica*, I, 1991, pp. 62-64.

[4] Benjamin Nathans coined the term selective integration to describe Russian Jews in the nineteenth century who through military service, education, special skills or commercial connections gained the right to live in the imperial capital. See Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002.

[5] *Memoirs*, pp. 36-37, and p. 64.

[6] *Memoirs*, p. 64.

[7] Moses Gaster, *Rumanian Bird and Beast Stories*, London, The Folk-Lore Society, 1915, v.

[8] On Gaster’s Zionism see Eugene C. Black, “A Typological Study of English Zionists,” *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 9, 3, 2003, pp. 20-55.

[9] Theodor Gaster, “Prologomenon,” in *Moses Gaster, Studies and Texts in Folklore, Magic, Mediaeval Romance, Hebrew Apocrypha and Samaritan Archaeology*, New York, Ktav, 1971, pp. xvii-xviii. Theodor Gaster was devoted to the theories of Sir James G. Frazer and abridged and updated Frazer’s most famous work, *The Golden Bough*.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.

[11] See above, footnote 1.

[12] On *Wissenschaft des Judentums* see the articles by the same name in *Encyclopedia Judaica* and the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (both on-line). In his own scholarship, especially regarding Jewish mysticism, Gaster was also critical of his teacher Graetz.

[13] See the excellent essay by David Myers, “Philosophy and Kabbalah in *Wissenschaft des Judentums*: Rethinking the Narrative of Neglect,” *Studia Judaica*, XVI, 2008, pp. 56-71.

[14] *Memoirs*, p. 52.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 61

[16] On Gaster and Sturdza’s rocky relationship see *Memoirs*, pp. 41-42, pp. 56-57, and p. 61. Gaster

extracted a strange sort of revenge by writing the entry in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* for Sturdza, as well as another Romanian scholar with whom he quarreled, Bogdan Hasdeu.

[17] Richard M. Dorson, "Folklore Studies in England", *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 74, 294, 1961, p. 308.

[18] Simon Rabinovitch, "Jews, Englishmen, and Folklorists: The Scholarship of Joseph Jacobs and Moses Gaster," in *'The Jew' in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Culture: Between the East End and East Africa*, edited by Eitan Bar-Yosef and Nadia Valman, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 116-118.

[19] While in Breslau Gaster also published an interpretation of a Romanian fairy tale based on Müller's solar myth theory. *Memoirs*, p. 41.

[20] Moses Gaster, "The Modern Origin of Fairy-Tales", *The Folk-Lore Journal*, vol. 5, 4, 1887, p. 342.

[21] Moses Gaster, "Introduction" to *Rumanian Bird and Beast Stories*, pp. 8-15.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 47 and p. 51; and Moses Gaster, *Ilchester Lectures on Greeko-Slavonic Literature and Its Relation to the Folk-Lore of Europe during the Middle Ages*, London, Trübner, 1887, p. 21.

[25] Gaster, *Ilchester Lectures*, p. 20.

[26] See Florea, "Dr. M. Gaster: 'I am a bit of a Romanian scholar,'" pp. 68-69.

[27] Moshe Idel calls Gaster's theory on the Bogomil origins of European folklore an "important hypothesis that has been largely ignored in modern scholarship..." *Old Worlds, New Mirrors: On Jewish Mysticism and Twentieth-Century Thought*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010, p. 6. Idel has also suggested that scholars of Jewish mysticism should rethink and revisit Gaster's theories. See idem., "Moshe Gaster, ha'mistika ha'Yehudit ve'Sefer ha'Zohar", *Te'uda*, 21/22, 2007, pp. 111-127. Not everyone shares Idel's view. See David N. Myers, "A Novel Look at Moshe Idel's East-West Problem", *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 102, 2, 2012, pp. 289-296.

[28] See Moses Gaster, "Presidential Address," *Folklore*, vol. 20, 1, 1909, pp. 12-31.

[29] Letter of August 10, 1914, quoted in Venetia Newall, "The English Folklore Society under the Presidency of Haham Dr. Moses Gaster," in *Folklore Research Center Studies*, vol. 5, *Studies in the Cultural Life of the Jews in England*, edited by Dov Noy and Issachar Ben-Ami, Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1975, p. 208.