

## ***Etymologicum Magnum Romaniae, an Unfulfilled Dream***

**Dr. Jenica Tabacu**

« B.P.Hasdeu » Memorial Museum

Municipal Council of Câmpina

e-mail: pihasdeu@yahoo.com

*Dr. Jenica Tabacu is director of “B.P.Hasdeu” Memorial Museum and expert recognized by the Minister of Culture and Cults in archaeological and historical- documentary heritage. She is preoccupied by the research of B.P.Hasdeu’s life and work. In her vision, the new technologies are supports for the knowledge. For this reason she implemented in the museum modern and attractive information systems: the infotouch solution and the audioguide.*

### **Abstract**

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of April 1884, as Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu was the only academician expert in linguistics, he committed himself to the Romanian Academy to write the etymologic dictionary that was to be financially supported by King Carol I. He conceived a „Linguistic Questionnaire” that he sent out to all the counties Romanians inhabited and the answers that he received constituted precious information included in the first three volumes of the Dictionary. After the death of his daughter in 1888, Hasdeu was overwhelmed with grief and he slowed down his scientific work. He felt the call of other horizons and was concerned with other things. The Romanian Academy discharged him of the responsibility of the dictionary in 1897. The fourth volume never came out of print but its ample introduction was issued as a separate book.

**Keywords:** *Hasdeu, Etymology, Dictionary, Linguistics, Questionnaire, Academy, Spiritism.*

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of April, 1884, Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu took the pledge to write a great dictionary, under the auspices of the Romanian Academy. The work was to be financially supported by King Carol the first himself, who was to grant an annual prize for it. The academic committee assigned to decide who would be the most appropriate person for such an ample work had three members: Titu Maiorescu, Vasile Alecsandri and B.P. Hasdeu himself. On behalf of the committee, Maiorescu voiced the following resolution: „The committee has resolved that out of the men who are authors

of well-known philosophical and linguistic works, such as Mr. Barițiu, Mr. Roman and Mr. Quintescu, the one who would be able to assume more energetically and successfully this enterprise would be Mr. Hasdeu, also well-known for his linguistic works and his philological knowledge” (1). B.P. Hasdeu was the best choice among the members of the Academy as he was the only expert in linguistics, which was a good enough reason to cast away any doubt of the people who voted in favour of his appointment (2).

After he was chosen for the task, the scholar was to receive an annual fee of 6,000 lei along the six years at the end of which he was due to finish the dictionary.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of June he read the questionnaire he had composed to the Academy members: it contained 206 questions which Hasdeu asked to be printed under the title „Donation Carol I. The programme for gathering data on the Romanian language” in ten thousand copies (five thousand in two stages). The questionnaire was to be sent out to all the counties inhabited by Romanians (Moldavia, Walachia, Dobrogea, Transylvania and Banat). By sending back their answers, „the village teachers, priests and other villagers” would become collaborators to the shaping of the great dictionary of the Romanian language. The action was enthusiastically welcome and most village personalities wished to play a part in the process of gathering data. B.P. Hasdeu himself, the giant of the Romanian culture and quite an untouchable person for the common people, wrote letters to the villagers to get supplementary data or necessary explanations referring to some answers (3). The operation of gathering information for the *Linguistic Questionnaire* also motivated the village intellectuals to collect precious folkloric reminiscences, following the scientific method traced by the scholar in Bucharest. The questionnaires created a scientific frame for the information collecting.

The dictionary Hasdeu projected was of too ample dimensions for a mortal to comprise. The romantic surge towards surpassing his own limits is apparent in the way Hasdeu envisaged the materialized book that he characterized as „a pleasant reading for all the sons of our nation (...) that could be read by the fireplace in the evening as a family pastime”. The pages of the dictionary were to pulsate with the whole life of the Romanian people, enclosing facts, ideas and customs. His will and maybe his pride urged him to declare that his dictionary would be better than the French one, written by Maximilien Paul Emile Littré or than that of the German language, signed by Jacob Grimm (4).

In the preface of the first volume of the dictionary, Hasdeu wrote that „The dictionary of a language should be an encyclopedia of the whole way of living of the people, in the past and in the present. The language reflects

the spirit of a nation as a long gallery of portraits painted in successive epochs” (5).

Hasdeu’s work at the dictionary is revealed not only by the periodical printing of the finished „fascicles” but also by his correspondence with the two „Julies” of his life, his wife and his daughter who were living in Paris at that time. The scholar was writing to his remote beloved ones about his efforts of completing the great work that he had assumed: „On behalf of the Academy, I work too much, especially at my Dictionary” (6), „You must have read in the newspapers about the launching of my great Dictionary. What a work!” (7), „All is well here but work and heat are doing me up. I’ve almost got a liver disease” (8), „I’m overwhelmed with work right now, to finish the second fascicle of the Dictionary until Christmas” (9), „I’m always busy with my Dictionary” (10), „I’ve started the fourth fascicle of the Dictionary and you know how much time such a colossal work takes” (11), „I’ve been working for two weeks day and night to finish the fourth brochure of the Dictionary” (12).

The examination of the first printed volume and of the two fascicles that were part of the second volume lead the academicians who had gathered in the solemn meeting on the 15<sup>th</sup> of April, 1888 to conclude that the whole work would require a huge effort and that it would be impossible to complete until the settled deadline.

B.P. Hasdeu scarcely expressed his opinion on the progress of the work, putting on instead an optimistic attitude, highly contrasting with his slow pace. That way he was reassuring his colleagues by „an artificial demonstration” (13) meant to convince them that he would be able to finish the *Dictionary* in due time.

He wrote in the 1887 (March 25) preface to the second volume: „If nothing encumbers our impetuous surge that gets stronger by the hour, the work at the *Etymologicum* is due to become easier and handier and ready before its deadline.”

Unfortunately, the scholar’s „impetuous surge” couldn’t hold after the tragic death of his daughter in September 1888. Overwhelmed by his pain to the point of losing sanity, B.P. Hasdeu gave up his long lasting work in order to devote himself to the editing of Iulia’s literature, consisting of poetry, prose, essays and dramatic sketches written in French. In parallel with copying and grouping the texts, B.P. Hasdeu wrote letters to his acquaintances in France to ask them to help printing Iulia’s work at Hachette & Co. Printing Press. He obtained an edition printed by Socec & Co. Printing Press with the seemingly honorary collaboration of Hachette & Co. The three volumes signed Julie B.P. Hasdeu were printed in the collection *Oeuvres Posthumes* in 1889.

It was also the year when Hasdeu got interested in spirits and the continuation of his dictionary was no longer a priority!

His fellow academicians and his close friends seemed to have noticed his state of mind and they advised him to resume the work at the *Dictionary* as a kind of after-shock therapy for his tormented soul. The idea of continuing to work at the *Etymologicum* became recurrent in the „notes” signed by the „spirit” of Alexander, the scholar’s father, as a sentimental manner of his well-intended friends to convince him to start working again. Nevertheless, as Paul Cornea judiciously remarked (14), as hard as he tried for a while to remain the same industrious Hasdeu, he lacked motivation. With Iulia’s death, „all had died for him” and he felt no longer responsible for the scientific enterprise that had prompted his career until then. I. Opreșan remarks that even the pleasant work at the *Etymologicum* became a burden for Hasdeu and the scholar couldn’t find inside himself the strength to finish it, although „he had been nourishing the ardent wish to create a unique dictionary for the Romanian culture” (15).

As time passed, the scholar attempted desperately to produce the next volumes. The last fascicle of the second volume came to print as late as the beginning of 1892, completing the words beginning with the Romanian characters *a* and *ă*. He could finish only the first fascicle of the second volume in 1893 and the next fascicle was ready in 1894. Then he announced the third fascicle in 1895 and the fourth last fascicle included in the finished second volume was printed in 1896. The last word before the *addenda* was „man”.

Having offered the annual prize of 6000 lei to support the *Etymologicum*, the king was right to express his dissatisfaction with the slow progress of the dictionary on the 18<sup>th</sup> of March, 1894: „Exactly ten years ago we established an annual prize for a book that was to contain the words of the richly endowed Romanian language. We have obtained a sample of scholarship. We would like to admire this important work before long and especially I, as my life has crossed the border of the half-century” (16).

The Academy decided to clarify the situation of the dictionary as late as 1897, probably under official pressure. Until then, not one of the academicians had objected to the slow progress of the volumes. They seemed to have understood the difficulties raised by the work of approaching each word starting from the most common form, going on with the different meanings of old and regional forms, quoting the sources, presenting the etymology and translating the word into Latin and French. The amplitude and erudition of the first part of the dictionary recommended it as a great work that was worth waiting the long time necessary to finish it. And then the author had gone through a family tragedy and he needed support.

*The Spiritist Archive* contains manuscripts of B.P. Hasdeu's mediums and the scholar's notes that reveal to researchers Hasdeu's feeling that he was not able to continue the *Etymologicum* and a kind of inner defense against his former work that was now considered an obstacle between him and his „apostle's work". When reading *Sic cogito!*, it is easy to notice the second rank that the dictionary occupied in his mind in that period. Hasdeu's spiritist manuscripts present data related to his concern for the dictionary and reveal his struggle to choose between the scholar's responsibility towards his uncompleted work and the father's wish to go beyond any barrier to find again his daughter. Her death had reminded him of the other two lost beloved persons in his life, his father and his brother and he was tormented by a vital necessity to contact them almost every day. It is sure that spiritism exhausted him but it provided hope to communicate with his dead ones and that was vital for him in that period.

Nicolae Kretzulescu, the president of the Academy, approached directly the issue of the *Etymologicum* in the academic session of the 27<sup>th</sup> of March, 1897. B.P. Hasdeu was surprised, although he might have suspected something as the general secretary, D. Sturdza, had refused to include his annual report on the editing of the dictionary into the programme of the session. Hasdeu didn't comment on the issue, asking for a two-day recess until he would respond. Kretzulescu presented the history of the *Etymologicum* until that date and then followed the interventions of the vice-president Ion Kalinderu and of the secretary general, Dimitrie Sturdza. The academicians admitted openly that it was an admirable work, only that the Academy and the king who provided the financial support were concerned with the completion of a work that was progressing so slowly.

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of March, the scholar presented his concise and focused answer to the Academy. He showed that he had observed the plan of the work to every detail and the Academy had accepted that plan when he had made his partial presentations and they had agreed to the fascicle-structure and implicitly, to the subjectivity of the first deadline for the dictionary. Hasdeu pointed out that he was strongly against the reduction of the plan of the dictionary which has already been appreciated and envied by remarkable European linguists (Hugo Schuchardt, G.I. Ascoli, Gaston Paris and others). He made the proposition to continue working in 1897 under the same terms as before and he suggested that two solutions could be analysed beginning with 1898: 1) to work for free, giving up the annual prize the king awarded, in case the Academy were interested only in money and 2) to continue the dictionary by national subscription and not in the name of the Academy, in case the highest scientific organization did not appreciate his manner of working. On that occasion, B.P. Hasdeu declared: „My only concern is with

the interest of the Romanian people and the honour of the Romanian Academy (17).”

The answer was confusing for the participants at the meeting and it created a tense atmosphere. Nevertheless, nobody advanced the opinion that they should give up either *Etymologicum Magnum Romaniae* in the manner Hasdeu had conceived or the scholar's contribution.

Titu Maiorescu suggested that B.P. Hasdeu should collaborate with a team and he should also cease writing the introductions which were „very interesting as separate articles” but were not directly related to the dictionary. As expected, Ioan Sbierea, Nicolae Ionescu and Petru Poni supported Maiorescu's opinion and in addition, they insisted that a new dictionary should be edited in parallel with the *Etymologicum*. Ion Kalinderu, the moderator of the debate, shared the same point of view.

Grigore Tocilescu, Hasdeu's close friend, proposed that the Academy should offer 500 lei monthly to Hasdeu in order for him to continue his work according to the former plan and that they should edit a separate dictionary to meet the king's expectations.

Professor Ion Caragiani, a member of „Junimea” cultural organization, did nothing but stirred the pride fight that seemed endless. He presented some calculations regarding the cost of the dictionary, concluding that the payment for the whole work would reach the sum of two million and a half lei. Under such embarrassing circumstances, B.P. Hasdeu asked the participants to stop the debates and to vote for or against the proposition formulated by Titu Maiorescu.

The academic committee, including Nicolae Kretzulescu, Ioan Kalinderu, D. Sturdza, Titu Maiorescu, Gr. Tocilescu, Nicolae Quintescu, Iosif Vulcan and Anton Naum, unanimously adopted the proposition. Accordingly, the decision was taken to change the former structure of the dictionary beginning with the 1st of January 1898 and to form a commission of five members (Hasdeu being one of them) to elaborate a plan for the new dictionary.

The members of the commission responsible with drafting the plan for the new dictionary were assigned on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April, 1897. They were B.P. Hasdeu, Ioan Kalinderu, Titu Maiorescu, Dimitrie Sturdza and Grigore Tocilescu. Noticing that to participate in the creation of a programme that was to replace his dictionary was paradoxical, Hasdeu declined his membership, declaring that he wanted to continue his own *Etymologicum Magnum Romaniae*. The Academy required officially the returning of the field materials that the scholar had obtained for his work but Hasdeu replied that he needed the materials to finish the dictionary, implying that he was determined to complete it. He managed to print the fourth volume in 1898.

It included the study *Negru Vodă. A Century and a Half at the Beginning of the State Walachia (1230-1380)*, which he had communicated the year before, in three academic conferences. The *Foreword*, dated „Câmpina, January the 1<sup>st</sup>, 1898, announced B.P. Hasdeu's separation from the dictionary that he had devoted himself to for over a decade: „I finish my work and I am proud of what I have done as I have done it the way I wanted. I say my great farewell to the *Etymologicum*, seeking comfort in the words of my master: „There are many dwellings ...”. Hasdeu dedicated the study *Negru-Vodă* to King Carol I, „the founder of the Romanian kingdom”. The first two chapters included Hasdeu's articles printed before the issuing of *The Critical History of Romanians* and after that book. The third chapter contained aspects referring to the early history of Walachia. In addition, the volume included *The Chronicle of the Basarab Dynasty in the period 1230-1380*, a diplomatic text, an epic one, an *Addenda et corrigenda* and a facsimile. All these were just an introduction to what should have been the fourth volume of the *Etymologicum* but that volume was never finished.

Researching the spiritist archive of the scholar and getting to understand his psychological and physical state after the death of his daughter, we can assert that to Hasdeu, giving up the dictionary was like breaking a chain that enclosed him and running free. We agree with the opinion of the expert in Hasdeu's work, I. Opreșan, who wrote that the scholar fought for the continuation of the dictionary only out of pride, while in fact „even if he regretted sincerely, up to a point, the cancellation of his assignment, he must have seen the turn of things as a welcome release because his passion and total dedication to the materializing of the 'lexicographic treasure of the Romanian language' had long diminished and he went quite inertially on with his work” (18).

As all Hasdeu's projects, the plan of his dictionary was too vast to be accomplished during a human life and the philologist himself was aware of that. His strive for perfection, which was the main quality of his overwhelming personality, defied human limits and so he could only achieve an unfinished work, an imperfect one. But it is exactly lack of perfection that characterizes the genius who opens „building sites” for future scholars, as Mircea Eliade writes referring to B.P. Hasdeu. The completed *Etymologicum Magnum Romaniae* has remained an unfulfilled dream but such as it is, it represents a huge contribution to the knowledge of the authentic Romanian spiritual values and a fascinating work with literary virtues that stimulates us to learn folklore, ethnography and history to go back to the roots of the nation.

Gustav Weigand wrote that the *Etymologicum Magnum Romaniae* would have been „a monumental work to reflect the vast knowledge of the

Romanian scholar. Even today, if one leafs through the dictionary and chooses a word at random, like *basm* (fairy tale) for example, one finds not only the significance and etymology of the word but also an erudite and speculative 56 column treaty on the fairy tale, with lots of explanations and references to many international works and authors” (19).

Al. I. Philippide took over the assignment of completing the new dictionary and because Hasdeu refused to give up to him his field materials, on the reason that he was continuing the *Etymologicum*, he had to spread new questionnaires but his efforts could not match the diversity of lexical aspects covered by his predecessor. As in Hasdeu’s case, the Academy decided to replace Philippide by two other scholars as he couldn’t complete the assignment. Later, Al. I. Philippide accused Sextil Pușcariu and Ovid Densusianu, who had taken over the dictionary, of having stolen his etymological work. The echoes of the disparagement campaign spread even abroad as Philippide considered Hugo Schuchardt and the other well-known foreign philologists as „simple reviewers”. Sextil Pușcariu answered to the accusations in a moderate manner, referring to two types of etymology: those with unknown authors as they had been long accepted in the Romanian scientific community and those that were present in foreign studies printed before Philippide’s studies (20).

When Simion Mehedinți invited Sextil Pușcariu to write an article on B.P. Hasdeu’s work for the 1907, September 20<sup>th</sup> issue of the review „Literary Conversations”, Pușcariu declined, as he had done in the case of other reviews („The Evening Star” and „Literary Youth”). He motivated his refusal by saying that it was difficult to write about a man whose genius he admired but whose elementary mistakes he knew too well. Pușcariu accused Hasdeu of „pseudo-erudition”, invoking his ability of transforming an „incomplete, scarce” material into the three volumes of the *Etymologicum* by working „miracles of philological juggling”. Nevertheless, he admitted that Hasdeu was „great even in his mistakes”. Sextil Pușcariu’s attitude was intransigent; especially his assertion that he had refrained from writing an article that would turn the philological work of his predecessor into a great name only (21).

A quarter of a century later, Pușcariu uttered the following words in the academic session on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December, 1932:

„The perspective we have acquired in time allows us to place that man of brilliant and many-sided talent and of such a rare originality where he belongs in the history of our culture, with all admiration but without exaggeration. It is certain that he deserved more the appraisal than the forgetfulness of his contemporaries” (22).



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- (8) *Ibidem*, page 203, dated: June 18/30, 1885.
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- (10) *Ibidem*, page 232, dated: December 8/20, 1885.
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