Herbert Augustus Strong, The 'Other' World Literature and Ethnographic 'Salvage'

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Abstract: This article focuses on a Melbourne-based member of the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* editorial board, the classicist and comparative philologist Herbert Augustus Strong (1841–1919). It explores Strong's contribution to a project first announced by the *Acta Comparationis* in 1879: the compilation of an "Encyclopaedia of the Poetry of the World." Challenging the predominant alignment of the term *Weltliteratur* with the notion of a transnational canon of prose masterpieces, the article argues that for the editors of the *Acta Comparationis*, *Weltliteratur* was also an ethnographic project aimed at assembling a record of the world's diverse cultures. This undertaking was shaped by a scientistic theory of literary expression, according to which oral literatures were seen to represent the earliest and allegedly most 'primitive' stage of literary evolution. Adopting one of the prominent discourses of colonial anthropology—namely, that of ethnographic 'salvage'—the *Acta Comparationis* embraced the view that it was essential to collect samples of the oral literatures of colonised populations before their anticipated extinction. The article reveals that an Indigenous Australian 'folksong' sent by Strong to Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg and published in the *Acta Comparationis* had been transcribed—likely with very questionable accuracy—by the colonial missionary John Bulmer (1833–1913). Viewed in this light, Strong's collaboration with the *Acta Comparationis* serves as a case study highlighting the colonial and evolutionist origins of comparative literature.

Keywords: Herbert Augustus Strong, John Bulmer, world literature, evolutionism, ethnographic 'salvage.'

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The 'Other' World Literature

The name "Strong, H. A., Melbourne (Australia, Victoria)" has its first appearance on the title page of the first issue of the new series (*Novae Seriei*) of the *Acta Comparationis*, dated 15 January 1879.[1] When placed alongside other names on this title page—for example that of "Mayet, P" from Tokyo, or "Chattopádhyáya Nisi Kánta," listed as based in both Paris and Calcutta—Strong's name underscores the performative global reach of the journal beyond Europe and North America. Yet in the case of "Strong, H.A." there is real substance behind the performance, since the archive shows that traffic between this Melbourne-based scholar and the *Acta Comparationis* went in both directions. As will be revealed below, Strong promoted the *Acta Comparationis* in a local Australian publication, as well as apparently responding to the journal's call to assemble an "Encyclopaedia of the Poetry of the World" based on collections of "characteristic specimens" of "popular songs" from "all European idioms," as well as from "all the languages of Asia, America, Africa, and Australia."[2]

The reason why a figure like Strong is worthy of examination today is because his contribution to the *Acta Comparationis* gives us a more differentiated view of what the term "world literature" meant in Europe during the 1880s. It decisively did not *just* mean one of the three senses of the term invoked by David Damrosch in his important book of 2003: namely "an established body of classics," an "evolving canon of masterpieces," or a series of "windows on the world" through which the reader could discover other cultures in translation.[3] The editors of the *Acta Comparationis* already express reservations about these high canonical senses of world literature in their early

1. All translations from the German are my own unless otherwise noted. I thank the organisers of the following workshop for inspiring this paper: "*Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*: Institutions and Practices of Early East-European Comparatism," Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai, Cluj Napoca, România, 31 October – 2 November 2024.

2. "Encyclopaedia of the Poetry of the World," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 6, no. 60 (1879): 177.

3. David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 15.

mission statement, the "Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur" (Preliminary Tasks of Comparative Literature). Here they suspect that "world literature" might be code for the cultural hegemony of certain European nations—especially the Germany of the literary historian Georg Gottfried Gervinus (1805–1871)—serving as a vehicle both to promote one's own national literature as well as for having foreign literatures translated into one's own language, since "today every nation demands its own 'world literature'."[4] Beginning with the first issue of the *Novae Seriei* of the journal in January 1879, the journal's editors use the formulation "sogenannte Weltliteratur" (so-called world literature) on the title page, presumably to express this scepticism.

This raises the possibility that the editors of the *Acta Comparationis* were in search of an alternative, perhaps more global and all-embracing conception of world literature: an 'other' world literature. Certainly, the origins of the term *Weltliteratur* were a subject of interest to this journal. In 1880, in the section of the journal known as "Petite Revue Polyglotte," the editors ask the question "from whom does the concept of WORLD LITERATURE originate?"[5] Contrary to Damrosch's claim that Goethe coined the phrase world literature in his conversations with Johann Peter Eckermann in 1827,[6] the editors of the *Acta Comparationis* correctly observe that the first known use of *Weltliteratur* in German was by the Göttingen-based world historian August Ludwig von Schlözer (1735–1809), a fact then repeated in their 1882 "Theses" on Goethe's notion of world literature.[7]

Already in 1773, over fifty years before the far more famous passages in Eckermann, Schlözer proposes in his study of Icelandic literature that the folk epic of Iceland (the Edda) belongs to "the totality of world literature."[8] Schlözer's aim to document all the literatures of the world stemmed from his view that "all humans create poetry, from Kamchatka up until the Greenlanders and the Iroquois: but only a few peoples have a true, that is a cultivated, art of poetry."[9] These lines suggest that while Schlözer's understanding of world literature was universalist and, in that sense, all-inclusive, it also presupposed an evolutionist continuum of development spanning from so-called 'primitive' to 'advanced' cultural productions. This evolutionist understanding of culture applied to other fields of expression, such as music, in relation to which Schlözer remarks: "the Chinese and the Turks have music, but when encountering these musical barbarians, who would think that this corresponds with what we call concerts?"[10] As we shall shortly see, not only was this Eurocentric evolutionism shared by the editors of the *Acta Comparationis*, it was also to some extent underpinned by the contributions to the journal made by colonial correspondents such as Strong.

In their 1880 remarks on the origin of the concept of world literature, the editors of the *Acta Comparationis* observe that "incidentally, until today a particular definition of world literature does not exist, and we also want to throw the possibility of such a definition into question."[11] If one looks at Goethe's various statements on world literature, this claim concerning the lack of a clear definition is clearly justified, and one could equally maintain that no single definition exists today.[12] When faced with the difficulty of defining world literature, one strategy apparently pursued by the editors of the *Acta Comparationis* seems to have been an additive solution: that of bringing other subjects into its proximity. Beginning in June 1881, the *Acta Comparationis* begins to change its self-description. In addition to "so-called world literature," the journal's title page now informs readers that its remit also extends to "folklore, the comparative study of folksongs and similar comparative anthropological-ethnological disciplines" ('folklore', vergleichende volksliederkunde und ähnliche vergl. anthropologisch-ethnologische disziplinen").[13] The association here between world literature on the one hand and folklore, comparative anthropology, and ethnology on the other is by no means an arbitrary one since, as we have seen, Schlözer's original use of the term involved a

4. "Heutzutage will nämlich jede Nation ihre eigene 'Weltliteratur' haben." Hugo Meltzl, "Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichen den Litteratur," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 1, no. 15 (1877): 312; Hugo Meltzl, "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature," trans. Hans-Joachim Schulz and Phillip H. Rhein, in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas and Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 46.

5. "von wem rührt der begriff WELTLITTERATUR her?" *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 7, no. 67–68 (1880): 115.

6. Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 1.

7. "Goethe's World Literature: Nine Theses on the Fiftieth Anniversary of Goethe's Death," trans. Angus Nicholls, *Comparative Literature* 76, no. 3 (2024): 291–293; "Goethes Weltliteratur: Neun Thesen zur Semisaecularfeier des Todes Goethes," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 11, no. 105 (1882): 67–69.

8. "Die gesammte Weltlitteratur." August Ludwig Schlözer, *Isländische Litteratur und Geschichte* (Göttingen: Christian Diederichs, 1773), 2.

9. "Alle Menschen dichten, von Kamczatka an bis zu den Grönländern und Iroken hin: aber nur wenige Völker haben eine eigentliche, d. i. cultivierte, Dichtkunst." Schlözer, *Isländische Litteratur*, 62.

10. "Sineser und Türken haben Musik, aber wer wird sich bei diesen Musik-Barbaren dasjenige denken, was wir Concerte nennen?" Schlözer, *Isländische Litteratur*, 62.

11. "Eine bestimmte definition der Weltlitteratur existiert übrigens bis heute nicht u. wir möchten auch ihre möglichkeit in frage stellen." "Von wem rührt der begriff WELTLITTERATUR her?" 115-116.

12. On these debates, see Angus Nicholls, "*Weltliteratur* (World Literature)" in *Goethe in Context*, ed. Charlotte Lee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 301–310.

13. Frontispiece, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum* Universarum 9, no. 91–92 (1881).

reference to the Old Norse collection of poems known as the Edda, within a framework that is explicitly evolutionist.

That the original context for *Weltliteratur* in German was one involving an evolutionist world history, folklore and ethnography is underlined by the fact that—as Han F. Vermeulen has recently demonstrated—it is Schlözer who offers not only the first known known usage of *Weltliteratur* but also of *Völkerkunde*, an early German equivalent of both folklore, ethnography and ethnology.[14] Indeed, as Ena Selimović has recently emphasized, Goethe himself used the term *Weltliteratur* in relation to a Serbian folksong collected and transcribed by the philologist Vuk Stefanović Karadžić and later translated into German, a case of what could be described as "intra-European orientalism."[15] This strong relation between world literature, folklore and ethnography/ethnology requires us to rethink the origins of the European discourse on world literature beyond the well-known Goethe-dominated category of global masterpieces confirming to Eurocentric genre expectations, a model championed by Damrosch. It is my claim that the *Acta Comparationis* was already engaged in this process of rethinking during the 1880s.

As Erhard Schüttpelz has shown in a series of important publications that are still little-known in the English-speaking world, the European discourse on world literature also emerged in a context that involved the study of so-called 'primitive' cultures within colonised societies, especially the transcription of oral traditions into written documents.[16] In other words: the origins of European ideas about world literature coincide with the rise of fieldwork ethnography and anthropology, much of which was carried out by semi-professional or lay researchers, especially missionaries. Schüttpelz locates the peak of this ethnographic-literary activity during what he calls the Imperial Period of European globalization, spanning roughly from 1880 until the end of the Great War, but it is arguably already apparent in the sources referred to by Schlözer in the late eighteenth century.[17] This notwithstanding, and as we shall see below, Strong's Australian submission to the *Acta Comparationis* falls squarely within Schüttpelz's Imperial Period, while also fitting perfectly within his proposed colonial-*cum*-ethnographic frame for the emergence of world literature.

Herbert Augustus Strong, John Bulmer and Ethnographic 'Salvage'

Herbert Augustus Strong was born near Exeter in Devon in 1841, the son of a clergyman. After studying for his BA at Corpus Christi College in Oxford, Strong was appointed as Professor of Classical and Comparative Philology at the University of Melbourne in 1871. There he helped to establish the study of Modern Languages and Literatures, while also publishing *A Guide to Classical Reading Intended for the Use of Australian Students* (1880), and an English translation of Juvenal's *Satires* (1882). An illness beginning in 1883 led Strong to return to Britain, where he was offered a Chair in Latin at the University of Liverpool in 1884. He died in Buckinghamshire in 1919.[18] Strong's career falls within the period in which literary studies in the British Empire was still in the process of emancipating itself from the more traditional academic discipline of Comparative Philology, with the first degree in English *literature* (as opposed to philology) being taught at Oxford as late as 1894.[19] For this reason, it is not surprising that Strong's main contribution to the *Acta Comparationis* seems to have been that of providing so-called 'primitive' philological sources from Australia that would contribute to the journal's planned "Encyclopaedia of the Poetry of the World."

As I have argued at length elsewhere, the context for the collection of such material was informed by what I have called *scientism*: the attempt to establish comparative literature as an inductive or empirical science that identifies would-be universal developmental laws through its deployment of the comparative method.[20] In an early programmatic essay from 1877, Hugo Meltzl quotes the important Germanist Wilhelm Scherer's demand that

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14. Han F. Vermeulen, *Before Boas: The Genesis of Ethnography and Ethnology in the German Enlightenment* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 269.

15. Selimović notes that the Serbian poem was "Женидба Влашића Радула" ("Ženidba Vlašića Radula"; "The Wedding of Radul Vlašić"), collected by the philologist Vuk Stefanović Karadžić in his *Српске Народне Пјесме* (*Srspke Narodne Pjesme*; *Serbian Folk Songs*) and included in German translation as "Die Kerkerschlüssel" in Wilhelm Gerhard's *Wila: Serbische Volkslieder und Heldenmährchen* (*Vila: Serbian Folk Songs and Heroic Tales*, 1828). See Ena Selimović, "*Weltliteratur* and its Others: The Serbian Poem in Eckermann's *Conversations with Goethe*," *PMLA* 136, no. 3 (2021): 356, 364.

16. Erhard Schüttpelz, *Die Moderne im Spiegel des Primitiven. Weltliteratur und Ethnologie, 1870–1960* (Munich: Wilhlem Fink, 2005); Erhard Schüttpelz, "Weltliteratur in der Perspektive einer Longue Durée I: Die Fünf Zeitschichten der Globalisierung," in *Wider den Kulturenzwang. Migration, Kulturalisierung und Weltliteratur*, ed. Özkan Ezli, Dorothee Kimmich and Annette Werberger (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), 339–360.

17. Schüttpelz, "Weltliteratur in der Perspektive einer Longue Durée I," 339–344.

18. G. R. Manton, "Strong, Herbert Augustus (1841–1918)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 6 (1976), online: URL: https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/strong-herbert-augustus-4659, accessed May 14, 2023.

19. Aladár Sarbu, "English as an Academic Discipline: Some History," *Neohelicon* 32, no. 2 (2005): 452.

20. 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, Kirsten Kramer, Rebecca Mertens, and Silke Schwandt (Bielefeld: Bielefeld University Press, 2024), 93–119; Angus Nicholls, "Aesthetics and Anthropology in the Early Years of Comparative Literature: The *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*," *Comparative Literature* 76, no. 3 (2024): 294–335.

"comparative poetics" must find its empirical basis in "ethnography," deriving its laws from observations of how literary expression evolves from the collective oral literatures of so-called "primitive peoples" (*Naturvölker*) into the single-authored masterpieces of written literature.[21] This evolutionist model can also be found in the third part of the *Acta's* "Preliminary Tasks of Comparative Literature" (1878), which deploys the cardinal distinction between "literatures of the folksong" (*Volksliederlitteraturen*) and "artistic literatures" (*Kunstlitteraturen*), seeing these categories as poles on an evolutionist continuum.[22] It is then further reinforced by the *Acta Comparationis*'s nine "Laws of Comparative Literary Research" of 1880, laws three and four of which declare oral poetry and folksongs to offer the most primordial and organic modes of literary expression, with written prose traditions being seen as secondary formations that are of lower scientific value.[23]

The twofold research programme that emerged from this ethnographic model of literary studies runs roughly as follows: first, the so-called 'primitive' sources are highly prized because of the insights that they promise to provide into the primordial origins of literary expression; second, it is urgent to collect, transcribe and preserve these so-called 'primitive' sources because they emerged from cultures that it was thought would inevitably expire when forced to compete with modern European 'civilisation.'

The second of these aims—that of transcribing and preserving oral literatures in advance of their anticipated disappearance—has been described as "ethnographic salvage" by Jacob Gruber in a landmark essay on the history of anthropology.[24] The deep ambivalence of this enterprise is underlined by Gruber's conclusion that although the European colonial project occasioned guilt in some of those who observed the damage that it wreaked upon the cultures of colonised peoples, one way of allegedly 'ameliorating' this guilt was to underline the moral urgency of preserving those cultures for posterity prior to their destruction. Gruber quotes an 1839 lecture delivered by the British ethnologist James Cowles Prichard (1786–1848) to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, in which Prichard remarks that

> "in the course of another century, the aboriginal nations of most parts of the world will have ceased to exist [...] if Christian nations think it not their duty to interpose and save the numerous tribes of their own species from utter extermination, it is of the greatest importance, in a philosophical point of view, to obtain much more extensive information than we now possess of their physical and moral characters [...] How can this be obtained, when so many tribes shall have become extinct, and their thoughts shall have perished with them?"[25]

The *Acta Comparationis* implicitly subscribed to this logic of ethnographic salvage, which runs roughly as follows: if one cannot save the peoples themselves—and Prichard urges in his concluding remarks that this should be done for 'Christian' reasons—then one should at least preserve their cultural artefacts for the sake of 'science.' In 1878, for example, the *Acta Comparationis* printed in English a circular of the South African Folklore Society, in which it is stated that because "European civilization is gaining ground among the natives," the opportunities for "collecting South African folklore" will become "far less frequent." Failing to undertake such a collection, it is argued, would be "a great loss to the 'science of man'," especially because "there is much that is exceptionally primitive in the languages and ideas of the South African races."[26]

Within a similar frame of colonial ethnographic salvage located in Australia, the primary role of Herbert Augustus Strong was that of an intermediary between the *Acta Comparationis* on the one hand and Europeans with direct contact to Indigenous communities on the other. But Strong also provided another service to the *Acta Comparationis*: that of both providing and soliciting new translations of poetry by Sándor Petöfi, for the journal's regular section entitled "Petöfi-Polyglotte." Strong undertook this task in the *Melbourne Review*, one of the many popular periodicals published in Australia during the second half of the nineteenth century in the city that was then arguably the centre of Australian literary life.[27] Published quarterly between the years of 1876 and 1885,

21. Hugo Meltzl, "Zur vergleichenden Aesthetik der Lyrik," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* I, no. II (1877): 39–41.

22. Hugo Meltzl, "Preliminary Tasks of Comparative Literature, Part III: Decaglotism," trans. Angus Nicholls, *Comparative Literature* 76, no. 3 (2024): 286; "Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur. III: Der Dekaglottismus," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 1, no. 24 (1878): 494.

23. "Laws of Comparative Literary Research," trans. Angus Nicholls, *Comparative Literature* 76, no. 3 (2024): 289-290; "Gesetze der vergleichenden Litteraturforschung," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 7, no. 70 (1880): 149–150.

24. Jacob Gruber, "Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology," *American Anthropologist* 72, no. 6 (1970): 1289–1299.

25. James Cowles Prichard, "On the Extinction of Human Races," *Edinburgh New Philosophical Journal* 28 (October 1839 – April 1840): 169–170.

26. "Circular Issued by the South African Folklore Society in 1878," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 10, no. 97–1000 (1881): 111–112.

27. See Lurline Stuart, "Colonial Periodicals: Patters of Failure," *Bulletin of the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand* 13, no. 1 (1990): 1–10; L. E. Fredman, "Melbourne Bohemia in the Nineteenth Century," *Southerly* 18, no. 2 (1957): 87; "The Melbourne Review," in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, ed. William H. Wilde, Joy Hooton and Barry Andrews (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), online, accessed May 24, 2025.

the *Melbourne Review* aimed to extend beyond "Poetry and Belles-lettres" by covering "subjects of a more solid character and of more permanent interest," including "Philosophy, Theology, Art, and Politics."[28] As we shall see, another of these subjects was local (Indigenous Australian) ethnography.

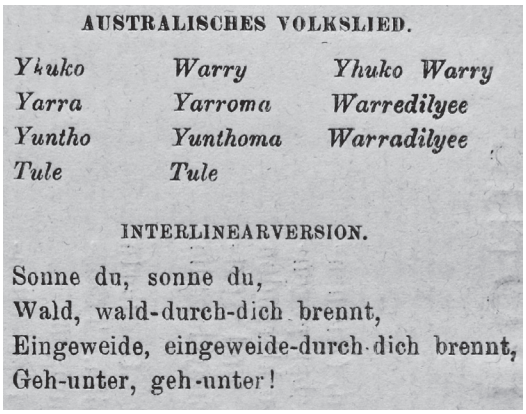
In 1877, the *Acta Comparationis* published three translations—into Romanian, Italian and German, the last of these by Hugo Meltzl—of a poem by Petöfi. These translations were accompanied by the following request, presumably written by Meltzl himself:

> "Our editorial team has for some years been preparing a polyglot version of the beautiful poems by Petöfi printed above. But up until now it has not been possible to procure any other translations these ones, apart from one in classical Greek and one in old Norse, along with some translations into different dialects of German [...] the undersigned [i.e. Meltzl, AN] now requests all friends of this cause to kindly inform our editorial team of any other translations of this poem."[29]

In 1878, Strong responded to this call in the pages of the *Melbourne Review*, stating that a "literary magazine, published at Clausenburg (Kolozsvár), in Hungary, is publishing translations of some pretty verses by the Hungarian poet, Petöfi." The *Melbourne Review* reprinted the existing Romanian, Italian and German translations of Petöfi's poem already published by the *Acta Comparationis*, while also adding two new translations penned by Strong himself: one into English and another into Latin. Strong also stated that he was "desirous of obtaining for the Hungarian magazine versions in the three main Keltic tongues represented in these colonies—viz., the Gaelic, the Irish and the Welsh."[30]

In the absence of any surviving correspondence between Strong and Meltzl, the spirit of collaboration between these men and the journals that they represented might speculatively be attributed to their respective peripheral positions: Strong in a far-flung outpost of the British Empire; Meltzl in Transylvania, on the eastern edge of Austria-Hungary. And when, in 1879, the *Acta Comparationis* announced a call—written in English—for materials contributing to an "Encyclopaedia of the Poetry of the World," Strong delivered again. As a scholar situated in Australia, Strong must have felt himself particularly addressed by the *Acta Comparationis's* plan for an anthology that would be "polyglot, or, as far as possible panglot," and which would include "all European idioms" along with "all the languages of Asia, America, Africa, and Australia." The *Acta Comparationis*'s call is quite explicitly ethnographic, in that it requests "characteristic specimens hitherto *inedited* if possible," with a predominant focus on folklore: "What we ask for, is in the first place, a popular song," which should be accompanied by details concerning the source, and by "a literal interlinear translation into one of the European languages."[31]

It took another five years for Strong's response to this call to be printed in the *Acta Comparationis*, under the title of "Australisches Volkslied" (Australian Folksong).



AUSTRALISCHES VOLKSLIED.

Yhuko	*Warry*	*Yhuko Warry*
Yarra	*Yarroma*	*Warredilyee*
Yuntho	*Yunthoma*	*Warradilyee*
Tule	*Tule*	

INTERLINEARVERSION.

Sonne du, sonne du,
Wald, wald-durch-dich brennt,
Eingeweide, eingeweide-durch-dich brennt,
Geh-unter, geh-unter!

Fig. 1: "Australisches Volkslied," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 15, no. 145–148 (1884): 86.

28. "To Our Readers," *The Melbourne Review* 1 (1876): 1–2.

29. "Von den voranstehenden schönen Petöfischen Gedichte bereitet unsere Redaction schon seit Jahren eine Polygotte vor. Doch ist ihr bislang nicht gelungen mehr Übersetzungen zu erhalten, als die voranstehenden, u. ausserdem eine classisch griechische u. eine altnordische, sowie einige Übersetzungen in verschiedenen deutschen Dialekten [...] Der Unterzeichnete ersucht nun alle Freunde diese Sache: dass sie andere Übersetzungen dieses Gedichts, das oben in sehr wortgetreuer Verdeutschung steht, gefälligst unserer Redaction mitteilen möchten." "Petöfi-Polyglotte," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 1, no. 12 (1877): 249–251.

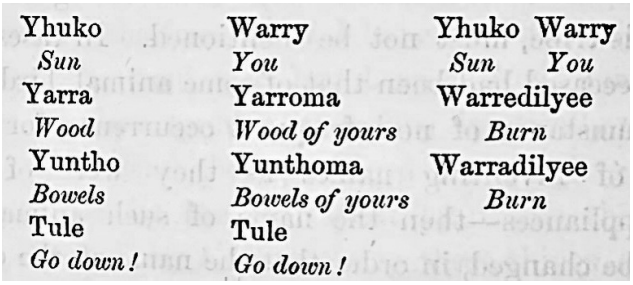
30. H. A. Strong, "A Polyglot Love-Song," *The Melbourne Review* 3 (1878): 108.

31. "Encyclopaedia of the Poetry of the World," 177 (emphasis in the original).

On the same page, the title of "Australisches Volkslied" is preceded by another and far more offensive title, in larger print and in capitals, which describes this text as a "Sonnenhymnus der Australneger" (Sun-Hymn of the Australian Negro). The editors then provide the following details concerning the source: "Mr H. Strong (Rector Magnificus of the University) in Melbourne was so friendly as to draw our attention to this sun-hymn, which the Reverend John Bulmer transcribed along the Murray and Edwards rivers from a local dialect (German: *aus dem volksmund*)."[32] Following this reference to Strong, the editors of the *Acta Comparationis* also include a German translation of an ethnographic note written by a certain David Macallister, which claims to describe the beliefs represented in the so-called "sun-hymn." The article by Macallister is taken from the same issue of the *Melbourne Review* in which Strong's translations of Petöfi are published, and the lines from it that appear in German in the *Acta Comparationis* read as follows in the original English version:

> "The natives along the Murray and Edwards rivers, and in many other localities, believed that the sun is simply a large fire, which is renewed every morning and extinguished every evening; but, from their traditions, it is evident that they believed that, at one time, the sun's fire burned constantly, both night and day [...] Since the uttering of these mystic words, the rising and the setting of the sun has been constant."[33]

Macallister also claims, in lines not included in the *Acta Comparationis*, that "the very words used when the change [of the position of the sun, AN] was still being preserved in some of their songs," are those "furnished" to him by the "Rev. Mr. Bulmer."[34] Macallister's article is shot through with the typical racism of colonial Australia, according to which First Nations Australians are described as "savages of the lowest stamp," a people with "no history of their own" who are "destined seemingly to sink in the struggle of races." The express purpose of Macallister's article is therefore that of ethnographic salvage, since "before they are altogether pressed out of existence, it is well that, for the information of future anthropologists, all that we know or can collect relating to the Aborigines should be placed on permanent record."[35]



Yhuko	Warry	Yhuko Warry
Sun	*You*	*Sun You*
Yarra	Yarroma	Warredilyee
Wood	*Wood of yours*	*Burn*
Yuntho	Yunthoma	Warradilyee
Bowels	*Bowels of yours*	*Burn*
Tule	Tule	
Go down!	*Go down!*	

Fig. 2. From David Macallister, "The Australian Aborigines," *The Melbourne Review*, vol. 3 (1878): 148.

Who provided this source material to Macallister and from which language was it transcribed? John Bulmer (1833–1913) was an Anglican missionary, initially at Yelta in the Murray River district of Victoria from 1855 until 1860, and subsequently at Lake Tyers in Gippsland (also in Victoria) from 1861 until 1908. Bulmer was well known for transcribing Indigenous languages and was an important correspondent for one of the most important evolutionist anthropologists in colonial Australia: Alfred William Howitt.[36] If the stated source location is correct—along the Murray and Edwards rivers—then its likely original language was Marawara, a language spoken by the mission community at Yelta, and the southernmost dialect of the Pakantji (also spelled Paakantji) language. The scholarly literature on Marawara attests that the last fluent speaker of this language is likely to have died in 1939.[37]

One of the most interesting papers on this language—and one which focuses upon Strong's ethnographic informant:

32. "Herr H. Strong (Rector magnif. der Universität) in Melbourne war so freundlich unsre aufmerksamkeit auf diesen sonnenhymnus zu lenken, welchen Rev. Mr. Bulmer längs des Murray und der Edward Rivers aus dem volksmund aufgezeichnet hat." *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 15, no. 145–148 (1884): 86.

33. David Macallister, "The Australian Aborigines," *The Melbourne Review* 3 (1878): 148.

34. Macallister, "The Australian Aborigines," 148.

35. Macallister, "The Australian Aborigines," 144, 137.

36. See the entry on John Bulmer, including Bulmer's correspondence with Howitt, in *Howitt and Fison Archive*, https://howittandfison.org/article/91440, accessed May 25, 2025. See also, W. E. H. Stanner, "Howitt, Alfred William (1830–1908)," in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 4, 1972, https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/howitt-alfred-william-510, accessed May 15, 2023.

37. Ian Clark and Edward Ryan, "Aboriginal Spatial Organization in Far Northwest Victoria – A Reconstruction," *South Australian Geographical Journal*, no. 107 (2008): 30, 26; Luise Hercus, "The *Marawara* Language of Yelta: Interpreting Linguistic Records of the Past," *Aboriginal History*, no. 1–2 (1984): 57.

Bulmer—is that written in 1984 by the eminent émigré linguist and specialist in Indigenous Australian languages, Luise Hercus (more on her below). With some pathos, Hercus begins by claiming that due to "the loss of the of the majority of the languages of the south east of Australia" we must "turn towards the information collected last century with gratitude." Yet this gratitude does not prevent Hercus from subjecting Bulmer's methods of ethnographic collection to a sharp and at times ironic critique. Bulmer, she writes, "clearly got his information from highly intelligent speakers who were doing their utmost to make their language understood to that relatively rare person, a white man who took a genuine interest in their culture."[38]

In Hercus's admittedly speculative reconstruction—yet one informed by years of work with First Nations' Australians, and by her knowledge of other Pakantji languages[39]—these efforts to make oneself comprehensible to Bulmer may have included several methods. One could have been using frequent repetitions when speaking, a method which seems to have led Bulmer to the incorrect conclusion that Marawara was a "double language" in which things are frequently said twice. Another was possibly the strategy of "talking slowly and splitting up words into syllables." In the view of Hercus, this strategy may have led Bulmer to create "false divisions" within words, leading to a distortion of the "whole verbal system" of Marawara. In this way, Hercus questions the accuracy of Bulmer's transcriptions of Marawara, arguing that such historical records are of extremely limited value. And here one might also add that Bulmer's missionary context may have involved distortions of what are represented as Aboriginal beliefs concerning the sun. With respect to languages such as Marawara, Hercus concludes that we "have to leave many linguistic questions unanswered and admit that we simply do not know, and never shall."[40] Needless to say, there is no sense in which—to use the expression of the editors of the *Acta Comparationis*—Bulmer was able directly to transcribe Marawara sources *aus dem Volksmund* (literally: from the mouths of the people; more colloquially: from the local dialect).

In a recent (2014) assessment of the extinction of Aboriginal languages in Australia, it is stated that "of approximately 330 known Aboriginal languages, today only 13 (4 percent) are spoken natively by children." The authors of this paper observe that alongside the destruction wreaked upon Indigenous communities in Australia by settler colonialism, "efforts were made to prevent Aboriginal people from continuing to speak their languages in order to 'civilize' them." This notoriously included removing some Aboriginal children from their biological parents and placing them with white families, the phenomenon known as the Stolen Generations. To some extent, the authors observed in 2014, these efforts to promote English and suppress Indigenous languages have persisted into contemporary Australian government policy.[41]

If—as the authors of this article on Indigenous languages in Australia suggest—one can understand the coercive marginalisation and extinction of these languages as but one chapter in the grander story of what is known as the "globalisation of dominant cultures," then one way of viewing this small Australian episode in the *Acta Comparationis* is by characterising it as an example of what I am calling the 'other' world literature. Such a view of world literature would need to be informed by the fact that approximately "96 per cent of the world's population speaks around 4 percent of the world's languages, leaving the vast majority of tongues vulnerable to extinction and disempowering their speakers."[42] In a *PMLA* editorial published a decade ago, Simon Gikandi quotes similarly disturbing figures from the *UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*: "at least forty-three percent of the estimated 6,000 languages spoken in the world after 1950 are endangered," while "in Australia, twenty-eight Aboriginal languages have only one speaker left," he reports. This leads Gikandi to ask: "Should literary scholars be invested in the cause of preserving languages, or is this business better left to linguists and ethnographers?"[43]

The editors of the *Acta Comparationis* already answered this question in the late nineteenth century: literary scholars, in their view, should be just as interested in these questions of salvage as ethnographers; indeed, as I have argued, at times they blur the very distinction between the study of literature and the discipline of ethnography. In the second part of their mission statement for the journal, the editors of the *Acta Comparationis* write that one of their aims is to protect so-called "peoples without literature" (*litteraturlose Völker*), whose "national individuality" (*Volksindividualität*) we should "not only refrain from touching with an unwarranted missionary zeal" but also "protect by all honest means" and "leave in as unadulterated a state as possible."[44]

38. Hercus, "The *Marawara* Language of Yelta," 56, 58.

39. See Peter Sutton, "Luise Hercus and Aboriginal History," *Aboriginal History*, no. 42 (2018): xxiii.

40. Hercus, "The *Marawara* Language of Yelta," 58–59, 62.

41. Ghil'ad Zuckermann, Shiori Shakuto-Neoh and Giovanni Matteo Quer, "Native Tongue Title: Compensation for the Loss of Aboriginal Languages," *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 1 (2014): 55–56, 61.

42. Zuckermann, Shatuko-Neoh and Quer, "Native Tongue Title," 56.

43. Simon Gikandi, "The Fragility of Languages," *PMLA* 130, no. 1 (2015): 9, 11, 13.

44. The full phrase in German reads as follows: "so verhält es sich auch mit dem geistigen Leben selbst der *litteraturlosen Völker* (wie wir sie nennen könnten,) deren Volksindividualität wir nicht nur nicht mit missionssüchtiger Unberufenheit antasten dürfen, sondern die wir verpflichtet sind mit allen ehrlichen Mitteln zu schützen u. in möglichst unverfälschtem Zustande zu belassen." "Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur. II: Das Prinzip des Polyglottismus," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 1, no. 15 (1877): 311.

Here the position (or positions) taken on these questions by the *Acta Comparationis* must be appreciated in all their ambivalence and complexity. On the one hand, in writing from their Transylvanian margins, the editors of the *Acta Comparationis* could arguably understand what it meant not to belong to the powerful centre of the global world system, giving them an appreciation of the precarity of smaller languages. Yet on the other hand, in their quest for a scientistic and ethnographic comparative literature to be based on supposedly pristine and unadulterated cultural specimens taken from all peoples of the globe, their proposed solution to this problem was a neo-colonial model of ethnographic salvage delivered by, among others, colonial correspondents such as Herbert Augustus Strong and his missionary informant John Bulmer. This is a model implicitly rejected by Gikandi, who wonders whether "the story of dying languages is best told through their diminishing speakers rather than through the mere documentation of their disappearance."[45] The issue, in other words, seems to be that of whether these languages and their speakers are regarded as mere 'objects' of science, or whether they are afforded genuine agency in processes of preservation and documentation.. Gikandi's short article reveals that the question of salvage is still on the agenda of literary studies today, since he reports on The World Oral Literature Project, an on-going "urgent global initiative to document and disseminate endangered oral literatures before they disappear without record."[46]

Epilogue: Luise Hercus Echoes Hugo Meltzl

The *Acta Comparationis* is such a fascinating primary source because, as this short paper has shown, examining even the most minute of episodes from its history opens up a whole series of complex and to some extent unanswerable questions that nonetheless demand answers and cannot be ignored. Is, for example, this so-called sun-hymn transcribed by Bulmer, sent from Melbourne to Cluj/Kolozsvár/Klausenburg by Strong, and translated—presumably from Bulmer's English—into German, anything like an accurate record of what Marawara speakers actually said to Bulmer on a Victorian mission in the 1850s? Under what asymmetrical colonial conditions were such utterances made? To what extent and in what combination is Bulmer to be lauded or condemned for his missionary interest in the languages of First Nations Australians? And is it a good thing that the *Acta Comparationis* even printed this most ambivalent of sources, especially under such a racist title? Such sources and the conditions of their collection demand—but also resist—definitive interpretations and moral reckonings. We must live with their ambivalence, which is part of the history of comparative literature, and of what I have been calling the 'other' (i.e. non-canonical, ethnographic, extractive) world literature.

Here I end with one final lasting resonance of the correspondence between the *Acta Comparationis* and Strong: the question of 'salvaging' disappearing languages and cultures. Shortly after the phonograph—the device that produces sound recordings or phonograms—appeared on the world stage in 1877, Hugo Meltzl celebrated its arrival as a breakthrough not only for the preservation of endangered languages but also for the "folk literature of all peoples on earth." The phonogram, in Meltzl's view, can deliver "the human voice itself in its primordiality," and captures "that which is essential to the spiritual human being." Meltzl enthused that a global market in phonograms would come to challenge the book market, and that "Goethean world literature" would see its effort to extend "not only from to north to south and from east to west, but also into the past and into the future" finally being realised by this new technology. Meltzl closes this short article by expressing confidence that phonograms will enable the collection of "a characteristic *specimen of the folk poetry of every people of the earth*," something that he calls a "phonographic encyclopaedia of world literature."[47]

In Australia, Meltzl's imagined model for undertaking not so much comparative and world literature, but definitely what he called their sister discipline, comparative linguistic research (*vergleichende Sprachforschung*), was realised by perhaps Bulmer's sharpest critic: Luise Hercus (1926–2018). Hercus, née Schwarzschild, born to a German-Jewish father in Munich, emigrated to Australia with her husband in 1955, after having studied Romance languages and Sanskrit at Oxford in the 1940s and 1950s. Her family had escaped from Germany to Britain in 1938.[48]

Australia's National Film and Sound Archive attests that Hercus "produced over 1,000 hours of unpublished

45. Gikandi, "The Fragility of Languages," 11.

46. Gikandi, "The Fragility of Languages," 13. See The World Oral Literature Project, which is affiliated to the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, at https://www.oralliterature.org/, accessed June 17, 2025.

47. "die menschliche stimme selbst in ihrer ursprünglichkeit"; "Des geistigen menschen wesentliches"; "die volkslitteratur jedes volkes der erde"; "die Goethe'sche weltlitteratur, welche ja nicht nur nord und süd, ost und west, sondern auch Vergangenheit und zukunft umfassen will"; "charakteristisches specimen der volkspoesie jedes volkes des erdballs"; "phonographische encyclopädie der weltlitteratur." Hugo Meltzl, "Das Phonogramm in seiner Bedeutung für die vergleichende Litteraturkunde und Sprachforschung," *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* 10, no. 45 (1879): 77–79).

48. Paul Kauffman, "Hercus, Luise Anna (1926–2018)," in *Obituaries Australia, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University*, https://oa.anu.edu.au/obituary/hercus-luise-anna-32619/text40483, accessed May 25, 2025; Harold Koch, "Luise Hercus, AM, FAHA 1926–2018," *Aboriginal History*, no. 42 (2018): xv–xviii.

recordings documenting Aboriginal languages from Victoria, New South Wales, South Australia, the Northern Territory and Queensland." The collection contains "recordings of more than 40 Aboriginal languages which are endangered or no longer spoken, including Arabana, Birladapa, Diyari, Kuyani, Madhi Madhi, Malyangapa, Ngarigu, Wangkangurru, Wergaia, Wirangu, Yardliyawarra, Yarluyandi and many others," and includes "the only known recordings of some of these languages."[49] Hercus's collaborative work with First Nations Australians, undertaken according to Boasian methods despite her Oxford training, assisted with various First Nations initiatives, including "family history projects, language revitalisation, heritage protection and native title research."[50] In a ground-breaking paper published during the 1970s, Hercus was also one of the first researchers collaboratively to tell the violent story of white colonisation and settlement through Aboriginal voices.[51]

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49. "The Luise Hercus Collection, AIATSIS Audiovisual Archive," *National Film and Sound Archive of Australia*, https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/asset/82353-luise-hercus-collection-aiatsis-audiovisual-archive-dr-luise-hercus, accessed May 25, 2025.

50. Sutton, "Luise Hercus and Aboriginal History," xix, xxv.

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