Stadial Change and the Emergence of Comparative Studies in German-Speaking Europe Around 1870–1900

Hugo von Meltzl Reads Wilhelm Scherer

Angus Nicholls[1]

Abstract *This paper examines how comparative models of stadial change taken from nineteenth-century ethnography and anthropology influenced the early history of comparative literary studies in German-speaking Europe between circa 1870 and 1900. Its focus is on the comparative methods developed by Wilhelm Scherer in his* Poetik *(1888), which were in turn adopted by the first European journal for comparative literature, the* Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum *(1877–1888).*

Introduction: Comparative Literature's Disciplinary Origins in the Late Nineteenth Century

Today it is often forgotten that models of stadial change, along with the colonial power structures that lay behind them, were central to the formation of comparative literature as an academic discipline in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. Especially in the anglophone world, these nineteenth-century origins are often obscured by a focus upon mid-twentieth-century émigré scholars from central Europe who fled Nazism and continued their careers in the United States: chief among them Erich Auerbach, René, Wellek, Leo Spitzer and Lilian R. Furst. There in the USA

1 All translations from the German are my own unless otherwise noted. I thank the *Österreichische Nationalbibliothek*, Vienna, for assistance in accessing the original copies of the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, photos of which are reproduced here. Part of the research conducted for this paper was funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung during a research stay at the University of Bielefeld in 2022. I thank my Bielefeld hosts Walter Erhart and Kirsten Kramer for their hospitality and for their collaboration on this work. All errors and omissions are my own. Some of the arguments in this essay appear in a more extended form in: Angus Nicholls, Aesthetics and Anthropology in the Early Years of Comparative Literature: *The Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, in: Comparative Literature 76 (3/2024), in press

they built—or, as I shall argue here, *revived*—a field that would come to have its core in mostly west-European literatures, with the dominant languages being English, French, and German. It is this origin story—one emphasizing postwar European cosmopolitanism—that probably led Franco Moretti to declare in 2000 that comparative literature has been a "modest intellectual enterprise, fundamentally limited to western Europe, and mostly revolving around the river Rhine (German philologists working on French literature). Not much more."[2] Although Moretti's take on comparative literature's history is a polemical one tinged with irony—having as its aim the installation of world literature as the primary discipline that compares literatures—it is difficult to contest the charge of western Eurocentrism that he levels. Why, then, did the focus of western comparative literature end up being so restricted and Eurocentric?

As I will argue below, part of the reason for this predominant focus on western Europe lies in the centrality of stadial theory to the early history of the discipline. Stadial theory proposes that that all cultures progress and change through purportedly universal stages of cultural evolution. As historians of anthropology such as George Stocking note, in was a central feature of what came to be known as the 'comparative method' of the nineteenth century.[3] According to this teleological model of change, only those cultures that are regarded as the 'most developed' according to Eurocentric criteria are admitted to the canon of literary studies proper. By contrast, those cultures viewed as 'backward' become the subjects of ethnographic collection, curation, and preservation, largely because it was presumed that prolonged contact with European 'civilization' would lead to their extinction. Models of stadial change, often based on colonial ethnography and claiming to be inductive, prejudice-free, and therefore 'scientific', were used in this way to study cultures on a purportedly universal axis of evolutionist temporal comparison.[4] In this way, so-called 'primitive' non-European cultures were thought to occupy a developmental stage long left behind by the cultures of Europe, thereby purportedly offering insights into European prehistory.

In recent literature on the history of comparative literature, there has admittedly been some, albeit limited, examination of these nineteenth-century origins. In *All the Difference in the World* (2007), Natalie Melas offers a brief overview of the role played by evolutionism in anglophone comparative literature of the late nineteenth century.[5] David Damrosch's more recent and rather US-centric history of the discipline—*Comparing the Literatures* (2020)—does also explore, albeit rather briefly

2 Franco Moretti, Conjectures on World Literature, in: *New Left Review* 1 (2000), 54–68, 54.

3 George S. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, New York 1987, 170.

4 On this temporality of comparison, see Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison*, Stanford 2007, 15–19.

5 Melas, *All the Difference*, 1–43.

and unsystematically, some of the nineteenth-century European origins of the field in well-known authors such as Johann Gottfried Herder and Madame de Staël, in lesser-known works such as the Irish scholar Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett's 1886 monograph entitled *Comparative Literature*, and in Hugo von Meltzl's and Samuel Brassai's journal, the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* (*ACLU*, 1877–1888) which is widely regarded as having been the first academic journal in the field (more on that journal below). Despite this, Damrosch's predominant focus remains the history of the discipline in the US, especially the contributions and legacies of its émigré central European founders and their later post-colonial critics such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak.[6] In her polemic of 2003, *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak already tells an earlier version of Damrosch's post-war origin story when she argues that comparative literature—by which she seems almost exclusively to mean US comparative literature—emerged as part of the "Euro-US cultural dominant" of the Cold War.[7] The discipline's concentration on literatures and cultures belonging to the NATO countries—that is, its west-Eurocentrism—is explained by Spivak as being the result of a neo-colonial distinction between 'civilized' western Europe and North America on the one hand and other purportedly less 'civilized' areas of the globe on the other. While, in Spivak's account, western Europe and anglophone North America were thus the core domains of literary studies and comparative literature, the rest of the world was consigned to area studies: regions to be understood not primarily in terms of their literatures but through other less aesthetically oriented disciplines such as anthropology and political science. In the words of Spivak: "Area Studies related to foreign 'areas.' Comparative Literature was made up of Western European Nations. This distinction, between 'areas' and 'nations,' infected Comparative Literature from the start."[8]

It all depends, though, on what one means by *the start*. Spivak's Cold War primal scene for comparative literature elides an earlier and less well-known disciplinary history belonging not to the nineteenth century in its entirety, but roughly to its final three decades: the period in which comparative literature first began to be a field of academic study at universities and in learned journals. To be sure, the terminus *comparative literature* was already in use in the first half of the nineteenth century. Abel-François Villemain—who had visited Goethe in Weimar—already refers to *littérature comparée* in a series of lectures delivered in 1828 and 1829. But as Ulrich Weisstein notes in what is probably still the most comprehensive account of the discipline's nineteenth-century institutional history in western Europe and the USA, comparative literature did not become a subject of systematic university study in France until

6 David Damrosch, *Comparing the Literatures: Literary Studies in a Global Age*, Princeton 2020, esp. 12–50, 66–83, 84–121.

7 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, New York 2003, 25.

8 Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 8.

after 1890, with the first chair being awarded to Joseph Texte in Lyon in 1897.[9] The first known European chair in the discipline was taken up by Francesco de Santis in Naples in 1871.[10] Other major western European nations took a long time to follow. Despite the efforts of Wilhelm Scherer in the late nineteenth century to found a subject that he thought of as comparative poetics (to be discussed further below), the first German chair in the discipline was not established until the mid-twentieth century in Mainz.[11] In terms of publications, however, German-speaking central Europe was a scene of innovation: the first journal in the field, the *ACLU*, was to some extent dominated by a theoretical perspective stemming from Weimar classicism, and was quickly followed by Max Koch's *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Litteraturgeschichte* (*Journal for Comparative Literary History*) in 1887.[12] In Britain, meanwhile, modern European languages and literatures (let alone comparative literature) only managed to establish themselves as independent disciplines around the end of the nineteenth century.[13] The United States was the real pioneer in the anglophone world, with the first courses in comparative literature being taught at Cornell in 1871, the first chair being established at Harvard in 1890 (held by Arthur Richmond Marsh), and the first department at Columbia University in 1899.[14]

This short overview thus suggests that comparative literature began as an academic field with chairs and journals—as opposed to a mere collection of theoretical ideas—in the final three decades of the nineteenth century. What was decisive about this period for the establishment of the discipline? One possible answer is provided by Erhard Schüttpelz's arguments concerning the benefits of revising our understanding of *Weltliteratur* by seeing it from a *longue durée* perspective informed by the work of Fernand Braudel.[15] The most lasting and significant meaning of *Weltliteratur*—and one that has enjoyed a renaissance in the anglophone world since around the time of Damrosch's 2003 monograph on the subject[16]—is one that invokes a canon of translated global masterpieces, usually novels written in the European mode. Notwithstanding the fact that Goethe made many more statements on *Weltliteratur* that had everything to do with the increased global circulation of

9 Ulrich Weissstein, *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory: Survey and Introduction*, Bloomington 1973, 171–172.

10 Weissstein, *Comparative Literature*, 234.

11 Weissstein, *Comparative Literature*, 187–188, 201.

12 Weissstein, *Comparative Literature*, 189.

13 Joep Leerssen, *Comparative Literature in Britain: National Identities, Transnational Dynamics 1800–2000*, Cambridge 2019, 87–89.

14 Weissstein, *Comparative Literature*, 208–211.

15 Erhard Schüttpelz, Weltliteratur in der Perspektive einer Longue Durée I: Die Fünf Zeitschichten der Globalisierung, in: Özkan Ezli/Dorothee Kimmich/Annette Werberger (eds.), *Wider den Kulturzwang. Migration, Kulturalisierung und Weltliteratur*, Bielefeld 2009, 339–360.

16 David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* Princeton 2003.

texts and far less to do with notions about canon formation,[17] his most well-known remarks on the subject do involve him comparing a translation of a Chinese verse novel to European literary texts, combined with his conviction that despite the merits of this Chinese novel, it was only the ancient Greeks who laid down timeless and universal criteria according to which we can make assessments about literary value.[18]

With Goethe's dominant legacy in mind, Schüttpelz makes the point that founding a field—namely world literature—based on texts that are already said to have qualified for admittance into its canon quickly ends up being a circular enterprise.[19] This is demonstrated by the fact that Goethe's would-be 'universal' aesthetic criteria are in fact particular to ancient Greek aesthetics and their later reception in classical Weimar. One would do better, Schüttpelz argues—and in this he is close to Moretti—to re-theorize world literature by bracketing out the question of literary value or principles of canon formation, and by seeing its emergence as being analogous to what Braudel referred to as *économie monde*: the globalized economy that emerged between 1500 and 1800 in conjunction with the European colonial project.[20] This notion of world literature resembles that already sketched by the Danish scholar Georg Brandes in 1899. Brandes regards the success of a text on the world literary stage as depending much more upon the language of power in which it is written—it should be in English, German, or French—than upon its literary quality, while also seeing advances in communication and translation as being crucial for the advent of world literature.[21]

In Schüttpelz's account, European globalization, which he sees as the precondition for a more descriptive and non-canonical idea of world literature as transnational literary commerce, reached its height in what he calls the period of imperialism, spanning from around 1880 until the end of the Great War.[22] The main writings of Brandes fall precisely within this period, during which, according to Schüttpelz, the international mobility of peoples and goods reached a decisive new intensity. It is arguably no coincidence that the main impetus behind comparative studies in the humanities significantly coincides with the century immediately preceding this imperial period (roughly 1780–1880). Despite Schüttpelz's quite restrictive definition of his imperial period to the years of 1880–1919, comparing things—climates, landscapes, animals, plants, languages, legal systems, peoples—had of course been

17 Cf. Angus Nicholls, Weltliteratur (World Literature), in: Charlotte Lee (ed.), *Goethe in Context*, Cambridge 2024, in press.

18 Goethe to Eckermann, 27 January 1831, in: Johann W. von Goethe *Sämtliche Werke. Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche* 2/12, Hendrik Birus et al. (eds.), Frankfurt am Main 1985–2003, 225.

19 Schüttpelz, Weltliteratur in der Perspektive einer Longue Durée I, 339.

20 Schüttpelz, Weltliteratur in der Perspektive einer Longue Durée I, 339–340.

21 Georg Brandes, Weltlitteratur, in: *Das literarische Echo* 2 (1899–1900), 1–4.

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

a longstanding colonial activity in the centuries prior to 1880. What distinguished the later nineteenth century was its progressive theorization and systematization of methods of comparison. As we shall see, within these processes of systematization, the task of theorizing both cultural difference and historical change was a key concern.

In a recent article, Devin Griffiths writes that "comparative anatomy and comparative philology deserve equal billing as the fields of enquiry that raised the comparative method to prominence in the nineteenth century."[23] And as Siraj Ahmed has recently argued at length, comparative philology was conceived as part of the project of mastering the local languages of colonized territories in order to administer them legally, the paradigm case being William Jones, the colonial judge and philologist in British Bengal, whose *Third Anniversary Discourse* of 1786 served as the model for later *Indo-Germanistik* from Friedrich Schlegel to Franz Bopp to Max Müller.[24] Joep Leerssen's recent study *Comparative Literature in Britain* (2019) also demonstrates how this tradition of scholarship, steeped in the colonial need to compare Europe with non-Europe, formed one of the main lines of influence upon the emergent discipline of comparative literature in the British Isles.[25] To use the language of Sheldon Pollock, these modes of comparison were *hegemonic* because they took European developmental criteria to be a universal standard. "We sometimes forget," argues Pollock,

> that nineteenth-century Europe is the high-water mark of historical-comparative studies across all disciplines—ethnology, history, law, literature, mythology, religion. It is not news, but it is also not inconsequential, that such projects were linked to the age of discovery and colonialism, and comparativism itself to the self-understanding of European supremacy […] It is not a far step from this way of thinking to a very concrete and serious kind of domination that has been and still is underwritten by this form of comparison, namely modernization theory. In its core this is clearly a form of comparativism, mixed with a stadial or evolutionary vision of history.[26]

In Pollock's terminology, comparison becomes comparativism when it is systematized into a theory, in this case one involving models of stadial change. His remarks demonstrate that the neo-colonial 'infection' diagnosed by Spivak as lying at

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23 Devin Griffiths, The Comparative Method and the History of the Humanities, in: *History of the Humanities* 2 (2/2017), 473–505, 477.

24 Siraj Ahmed, *Archaeology of Babel: The Colonial Foundation of the Humanities*, Stanford 2017.

25 Leerssen, *Comparative Literature in Britain*, 21–31.

26 Sheldon Pollock, Comparison without Hegemony, in: Hans Joas and Barbro Klein (eds.), *The Benefit of Broad Horizons: Intellectual and Institutional Preconditions for a Global Social Science*, Leiden 2010, 185–204, 195, 201.

the heart of comparative literature took hold much earlier than at the onset of the Cold War.

Yet as a discipline, comparative literature has largely failed to consider this aspect of its history in any detail. As Devin Griffith notes,

> unlike either anthropology or sociology, twentieth century comparative history and comparative literature have largely avoided extended consideration of the place of the comparative method in the previous century, generally seeking instead to frame comparativism in fresh terms suited to their objects of study […] While Hugo Meltzl and other early practitioners, […] understood the study of comparative philology and PIE [proto-Indo-European, A.N.] as foundational to their approach to literary comparison, World War II reset the table. In its aftermath, scholars like Erich Auerbach and René Wellek emphasized the transnational and cosmopolitan aims of comparative literature.[27]

Although the main achievements and publications of PIE scholars such as William Jones, Friedrich Schlegel, Franz Bopp, and Max Müller appeared prior to the onset of Schüttpelz's age of imperialism around 1880, the chief focus of this paper is on one of the early practitioners of comparative literature mentioned above by Griffiths, and a figure who falls squarely within Schüttpelz's imperial period: Hugo von Meltzl and his journal the *ACLU*, founded in 1877 and lasting until 1888.

In their three-part mission statement for the *ACLU* written in 1877–78, Meltzl and his co-editor Samuel Brassai describe comparative literature as a "science of the future" (*Zukunftswissenschaft*).[28] Part of this future-directedness had to do with an increased optimism concerning the benefits of communication technologies. Here the relevance of Schüttpelz's arguments about the intensification of global communication is underscored by the fact that the *ACLU's* editors wrote an article celebrating the tenth anniversary of the idea of a global postal service, which they see as having originated with the Treaty of Bern in 1874.

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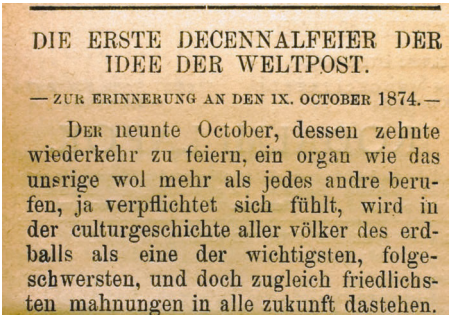
27 Griffiths, The Comparative Method, 490, 492. An exception here is Melas (see her *All the Difference in the World*).

28 Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur, in: *Acta Comparationis Litteraurum Universarum* (hereafter *ACLU*). This mission statement appeared across three separate issues of the journal: 9 (May 15, 1877); 15 (October 15, 1877) 24 (February 28, 1878), this quote: 9 (1877), 182. From 1879 onwards, the *ACLU* carried two numbering systems: *Novae Seriei*, on the top left, which related to the numbering of issues after the adoption of the new Latin title in that year, and *Totius Seriei*, on the top right, which represents the total number of volumes and issues dating back to the journal's inception in 1877. The numbers used here and throughout relate to *Totius Seriei*.

Fig. 1: Die erste Decennalfeier der Idee der Weltpost, ACLU 16 (155–158/1884), 67.[29]



DIE ERSTE DECENNALFEIER DER IDEE DER WELTPOST.

— ZUR ERINNERUNG AN DEN IX. OCTOBER 1874. —

Der neunte October, dessen zehnte wiederkehr zu feiern, ein organ wie das unsrige wol mehr als jedes andre berufen, ja verpflichtet sich fühlt, wird in der culturgeschichte aller völker des erdballs als eine der wichtigsten, folgeschwersten, und doch zugleich friedlichsten mahnungen in alle zukunft dastehen.

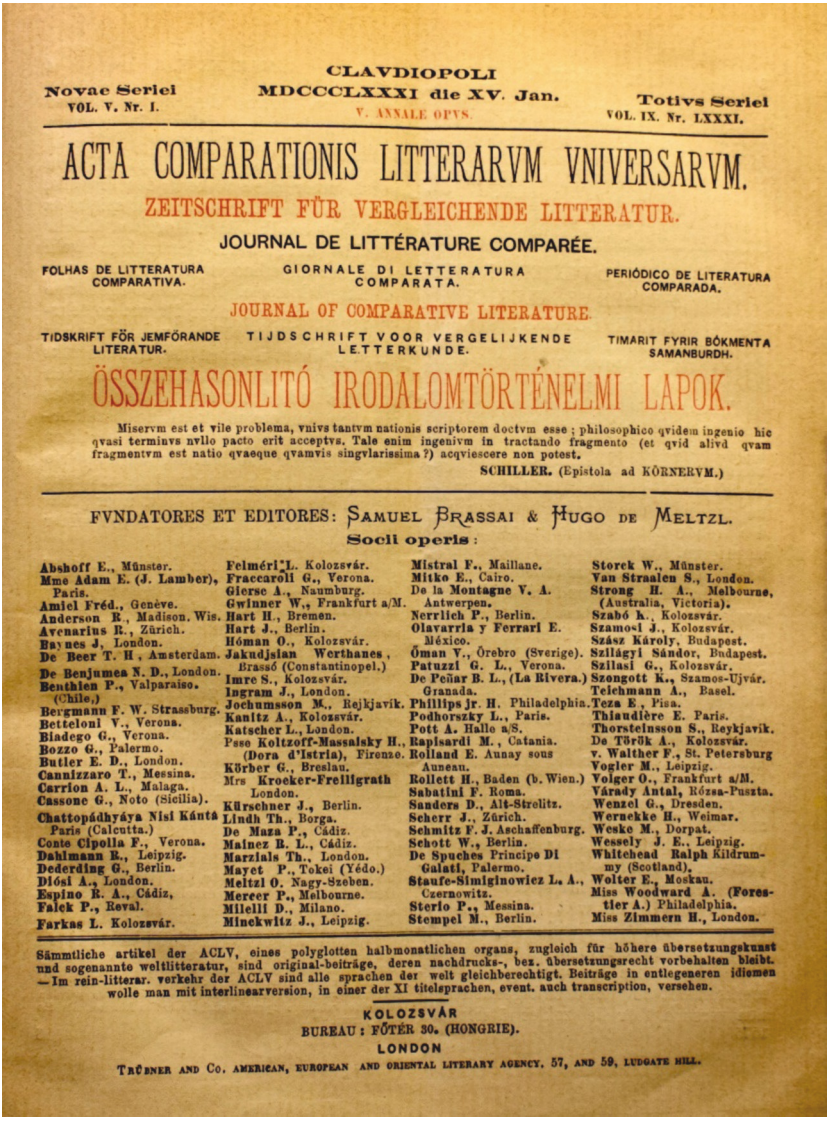
As will become clear below, the journal saw the global postal service as crucial to its purpose of gathering ethnographic reports from all over the world, including colonized territories as distant from Europe as Australia. In the interpretation of this global material, the comparative method belonging to nineteenth century ethnography—to be described in its main lineaments below—plays a central role. Another important protagonist in this chapter will accordingly be the theorist who informed the version of the comparative method elaborated in the early issues of the *ACLU*. In one of the key methodological statements of the journal, Meltzl invokes Wilhelm Scherer's call for the application of ethnographic comparative methods to the study of literature. An examination of the influence of ethnography on Scherer's posthumously published *Poetics* (*Poetik*, 1888), will reveal the extent to which Scherer himself relied on ethnographic sources derived from travel literature. The context of these sources was also, of course, colonial.

The *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*

The *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* was published out of Cluj (Hungarian: Kolozsvár; German: Klausenburg) in the then Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its editors were Hugo von Meltzl (1846–1908), a native speaker of German and Professor of German at Klausenburg University, and Samuel Brassai (1800–1897), a polymath whose first language was Hungarian. The journal was originally published under the Hungarian title of *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok*, before changing to its Latin title in 1879.

29 The excerpt depicted reads: "The ninth of October, the tenth anniversary of which a journal such as ours, more than any other journal, feels called upon and indeed obligated to celebrate, will for all times henceforth stand in the cultural history of all peoples on the earth as one of the most important and momentous but also the happiest of reminders."

Fig. 2: The cover of the Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum 81 (1881).



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ÖSSZEHASONLITÓ IRODALOMTÖRTÉNELMI LAPOK.

Miservm est et vile problema, vnivs tantvm nationis scriptorem doctvm esse; philosophico qvidem ingenio hic qvasi terminvs nvllo pacto erit acceptvs. Tale enim ingenivm in tractando fragmento (et qvid alivd qvam fragmentvm est natio qvaeque qvamvis singvlarissima?) acqviescere non potest.

SCHILLER. (Epistola ad KÖRNERVM.)

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As this cover image from 1881 demonstrates, the journal made an ostentatious commitment to polyglotism. The initial idea, at least in theory, was to publish in all languages of the world, with interlinear translations to be provided for so-called minor languages. The journal's goal of achieving universal linguistic coverage stemmed from the oft-quoted maxim that appeared on its cover page in some issues (see Fig.

2), and which held that within the journal's pages "all languages of the world have equal rights."[30] In recent years, this seemingly radical and progressive polyglotism has seen a revival of interest in this short-lived and relatively obscure journal, as some of the recent secondary literature on the *ACLU* demonstrates.[31] What is less emphasized in the secondary literature—albeit with some exceptions[32]—is the fact that this ambitious program soon revealed itself to be impossible in practice, leading to a revised policy of "decaglotism," which committed to publishing in at least ten languages, nearly all of which were west-European, and whose literatures were said to be of 'world' rank. These languages—Hungarian, German, French, English, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, Swedish, Dutch, and Icelandic—were later joined by Russian in 1884, and when one includes Latin, the total number of languages officially recognized by the journal amounts to twelve.

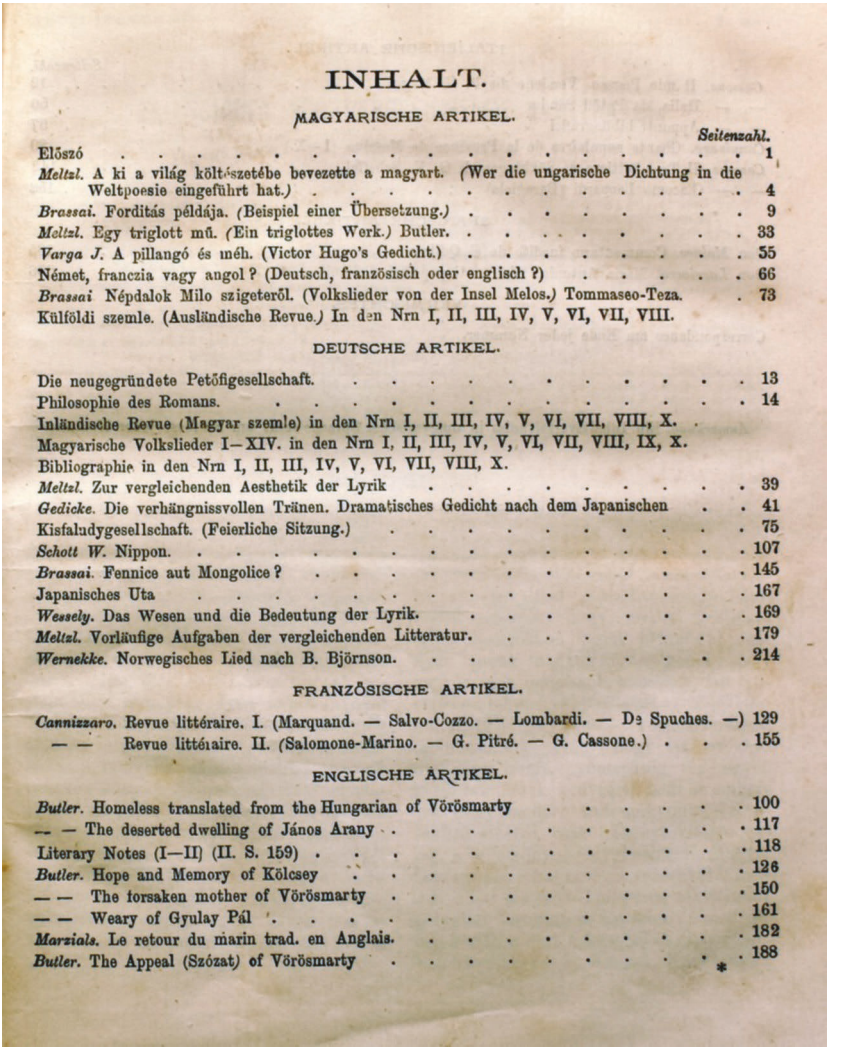
An overview of the first ten issues of the *ACLU* reveals that most of the articles published in the journal appeared in German and Hungarian, followed by other European languages such as French and English, occasionally Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch. The editors of the *ACLU* were keenly aware that the reduction of the journal's scope from a radical or (at least in principle) unrestricted polyglotism to the initial ten-language policy of "decaglotism" would require a theoretical justification. The arguments used by the journal's editors to justify this restriction reveal that early practitioners of comparative literature took recourse to ethnographic research methods during the formative stages of the discipline. Why did they do this?

30 The full German sentence is: "Im rein litterar. Verkehr der *ACLU* sind alle sprachen der welt gleichberechtigt."

31 A detailed list of secondary material on the *ACLU* cannot be supplied here, but can be found in Angus Nicholls, Aesthetics and Anthropology in the Early Years of Comparative Literature: *The Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, in: *Comparative Literature* 76 (3/2024), in press. A recent example of a largely positive evaluation of the journal's polyglotism can be found in Damrosch's *Comparing the Literatures*, 30–49.

32 Cf. Levente T. Szabó, The Subversive Politics of Multilingualism in the First Journal of Comparative Literary Studies, in: Britta Benert (ed.), *Paradoxes du plurilinguisme littérraire 1900. Réflexiones théoretiques et études de cas*, Brussels 2015, 229–250; Angus Nicholls, The Goethean Discourses on *Weltliteratur* and the Origins of Comparative Literature: The Cases of Hugo Meltzl and Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, in: *Seminar* 54 (2/2018), 167–194; Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă, *Creolizing the Modern: Transylvania Across Empires*, Ithaca 2022.

Fig. 3: Contents page for the first ten issues of the ACLU, organized by language.



INHALT.

MAGYARISCHE ARTIKEL.

DEUTSCHE ARTIKEL.

FRANZÖSISCHE ARTIKEL.

ENGLISCHE ARTIKEL.

One explanation can be found in the general tendency towards induction and positivism that dominated the European humanities during the 1870s and 1880s. In the emergent humanities, including in early comparative literature, this led to an increased invocation of empirical and would-be natural scientific methods. In literary studies, one of the main questions accordingly became that of literary *causation*: from what psychological processes did literature originally emerge and what were its functions? And how does literature change through processes of cultural evolu-

tion? Some of the most influential answers to these questions were provided by stadial models of cultural evolution. The basic explanatory model used in these stadial theories is that of change from simple to complex development, an idea that found its most canonical expression in Herbert Spencer's essay of 1857, "Progress: its Law and Cause."

Influenced by Goethe's ideas about morphology and by Karl Ernst von Baer's embryology, Spencer argued that the development of biological organisms could be used as a model to explain social and cultural development. In his words, the "law of organic progress is the law of all progress." The general tendency identified by Spencer was one involving change from simplicity to complexity of organization:

> In respect to that progress which individual organisms display in the course of their evolution, this question has been answered by the Germans. The investigations of Wolff, Goethe, and Von Baer, have established the truth that the series of changes gone through during the development of a seed into a tree, or an ovum into an animal, constitute an advance from homogeneity of structure to heterogeneity of structure […] Now, we propose in the first place to show, that this law of organic progress is the law of all progress. Whether it be in the development of the Earth, in the development of Life upon its surface, in the development of Society, of Government, of Manufactures, of Commerce, of Language, of Literature, Science, Art, this same evolution of the simple into the complex, through a process of continuous differentiation, holds throughout.[33]

When applied to societies and their belief systems, stadial models describe a transition from polytheistic animism, via monotheistic religion and metaphysics, to positivist science. Auguste Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–1842), to name one of the earlier examples, theorizes that culture evolves through theological, metaphysical, and scientific stages. In Edward Burnett Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1871), a similar tripartite system of cultural evolution is organized around animism or polytheistic religion, monotheism, and science. And under the influence of Tylor and other evolutionists, the second edition of James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* operates with stages referred to as magic (by which Frazer means totemism), religion, and science. Based on the theory of human monogenesis, stadial theory holds that all human cultures progress through the same stages of evolution, though at different speeds. So-called 'primitive' peoples in colonized territories were believed to occupy the lower or more 'backward' levels of this universal scale, thereby allegedly providing Europeans with an insight into their own prehistories, while also justifying the paternalistic and 'developmental' goals of colonialism.

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33 Herbert Spencer, Progress: Its Law and Cause, in: *Westminster Review* (January to April 1857), 445–485, 446.

In practice, however, what often occurred was that the stadial model was already in place before the fieldwork was carried out, so that evidence was selected to confirm a pre-existing theory. An example of this was Frazer's interest in Australian Aboriginal religion or totemism, which partly emerged from his correspondence with Baldwin Spencer, the British-Australian biologist-*cum*-anthropologist who studied the Arrernte Indigenous culture of central Australia in the late nineteenth century. As I have shown elsewhere,[34] Frazer suggested to Spencer that he should find a 'magical'—meaning pre-monotheistic—totemism for him in Australia. Spencer obliged, arguing in 1899 that

> The hypothesis which is now suggested, and which has been advanced independently also by Mr Frazer, is that in our Australian tribes the primary function of a totemic group is that of securing by magic means a supply of the object which gives its name to the totemic group.[35]

Spencer satisfied Frazer's need to find 'magical' thought-systems in Australia, not only because his own observations were shaped by Frazer's stadial model, but also because Spencer's career was dependent on Frazer's support, since Frazer recommended to his publisher (Macmillan in London) that they should publish Spencer's *Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899), which Spencer had co-written with his fieldwork companion Francis Gillen.[36] It was therefore no surprise when, in the first volume of the 1900 edition of the *Golden Bough*, Frazer claimed that while "magic is universally practiced" by Indigenous Australians, "religion in the sense of a propitiation or conciliation of the higher powers seems to be nearly unknown. Roughly speaking, all men in Australia are magicians but not one is a priest."[37] Stadial models were therefore not just 'pure' theory, but something like academic infrastructures that undergirded not only the gathering and interpretation of evidence but also pathways to publication and the formation of academic careers.

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34 Angus Nicholls, Anglo-German Mythologics: The Australian Aborigines and Modern Theories of Myth in the Work of Baldwin Spencer and Carl Strehlow, in: *History of the Human Sciences* 20 (1/2007), 83–114.

35 Baldwin Spencer/F. J. Gillen, Some Remarks on Totemism as Applied to Australian Tribes, in: *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 28 (3–4/1899), 275–280, 278.

36 For an overview of these events, cf. Nicholls, Anglo-German Mythologics; cf. also Baldwin Spencer/F. J. Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, London 1899.

37 James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, vol. 1, London 1900, 71.

For all these reasons, stadial models of development have, at least since their critique by Franz Boas,[38] been thoroughly discredited in anthropology and sociology, so why reexamine them now? My claim is that their influence has been overlooked in the history of comparative literature. How a discipline begins can also influence its later lines of development, sometimes in subterranean ways. The forgotten prehistory of comparative literature is therefore of importance, not least because it is so bound up with colonial history. Yet while stadial models were often used by Europeans with respect to non-European cultures to justify colonialism, they can also be found within strictly intra-European discussions of culture. As the final section of this paper will show, a case in point is the *ACLU*, which used stadial theory to justify its eventual restriction to ten (later twelve) European languages, but which did so in a global context that also incorporated the discourses of colonial ethnography.

The most celebrated and frequently anthologized text from the *ACLU* is its three-part mission statement, the "Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur" ("Preliminary Tasks of Comparative Literature"), which was published across three issues of the journal between the years of 1877 and 1878.[39] In 1973, the first two parts of this text were translated into English as "Present Tasks of Comparative Literature" and included in an anthology of essays on the early history of comparative literature.[40] This translation has subsequently been reprinted in a number of other anthologies,[41] again without the inclusion of its crucial third part, which will appear for the first time in English, along with an accompanying critical essay, in 2024.[42] The title of the 1973 translation already contains a crucial error: *vorläufig* cannot be translated as "present," because in that rendering, the temporary, preparatory, and provisional status of the field's tasks—all of which are expressed in the German prefix *vor*—are elided. It is not merely the case that the editors of the *ACLU* were undertaking an assessment of their new field at the present time; rather, they were

38 For one of Boas's earliest critiques of evolutionist stadial theory, cf. Franz Boas, The Limitations of the Comparative Method, in: *Science* 4 (103/1896), 901–908. On Boas, see also the contribution of Kirsten Kramer to this volume.

39 Cf.: Hugo Meltzl, Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur, in: *ACLU* 9 (1877), 179–182; Hugo Meltzl, Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur. II. Das Prinzip des Polyglottismus, in: *ACLU* 15 (1877), 307–315; Hugo Meltzl, Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur. III. Der Dekaglottismus, in: *ACLU* 24 (1878), 494–501.

40 Present Tasks of Comparative Literature, trans. Hans-Joachim Schulz and Phillip H. Rhein, in: *Comparative Literature: The Early Years*, Chapel Hill 1973, 53–62.

41 Cf. *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, ed. David Damrosch, Natalie Melas and Mbongiseni Buthelezi, Princeton, 2009, 41–49; Theo D'Haen/César Domínguez/Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (eds.), *World Literature: A Reader*, Abingdon 2013, 18–22.

42 Hugo Meltzl, Preliminary Tasks of Comparative Literature Part III: Decaglotism, trans. Angus Nicholls, in: *Comparative Literature* 76 (3/2024), in press.

keenly aware that any statement of principles could only ever be provisional, precisely because two of comparative literature's key tasks could only ever be realized in the long term, if at all. The first of these lay in assembling a global canon of texts; the second was creating an international network of scholars with the requisite linguistic expertise to interpret them in their original languages. The fulfillment of both aims was dependent on the global postal service that the journal's editors so prominently celebrated in 1884.

In the second part of the "Preliminary Tasks," which is subtitled as "Das Prinzip des Polyglottisimus" (the principle of polyglotism), the editors argue that "true comparison is only […] possible when the objects to be compared appear before us in their most unadulterated state."[43] Here unadulterated (in German: *unverfälscht*) means in the original language of composition. But within their overall conceptual organization of comparative literature, the *ACLU's* editors also recognize that translation is a necessity. They therefore provisionally position their nascent discipline between two principles that stand in antagonism with one another: on the one hand, the "Prinzip des Polyglottismus" represents the idealized telos of comparative literature; on the other, the "Übersetzungsprinzip" (principle of translation) recognizes that reading all sources in their original languages is an entirely utopian expectation not only for their journal, which belonged within a central European context dominated by the imperial languages of Hungarian and German, but also for literary comparison itself, which is always undertaken from a specific linguistic and geopolitical standpoint.[44] The tension between these two principles eventually forced the editors of the *ACLU* to formulate a stadial justification for their third principle of "decaglotism."

Before turning to the *ACLU's* theorization of "decaglotism," it is important to take one aspect of the journal's epistemology into account. In an important footnote appearing in part one of the "Preliminary Tasks," the editors claim that the "most natural point of departure for the writing of literary history" is something that they call "modern inductive philosophy." They then proceed to accuse earlier literary histories—most notably that of Georg Gottfried Gervinus in his *Neuere Geschichte der poetischen National-Literatur der Deutschen* (*Most Recent History of the Poetic National Literature of the Germans*, 1842)—of failing to live up to the most important requirement of the inductive method: a scientific, prejudice-free, and non-nationalistic approach to the primary sources. To achieve the required level of objectivity, one must therefore use a "philosophy resting upon a solid natural-scientific and ethnological foundation."[45]

The *ACLU's* ethnological inclinations can be found in one of its many subsidiary aims, that of compiling an "Encyclopedia of the Poetry of the World."

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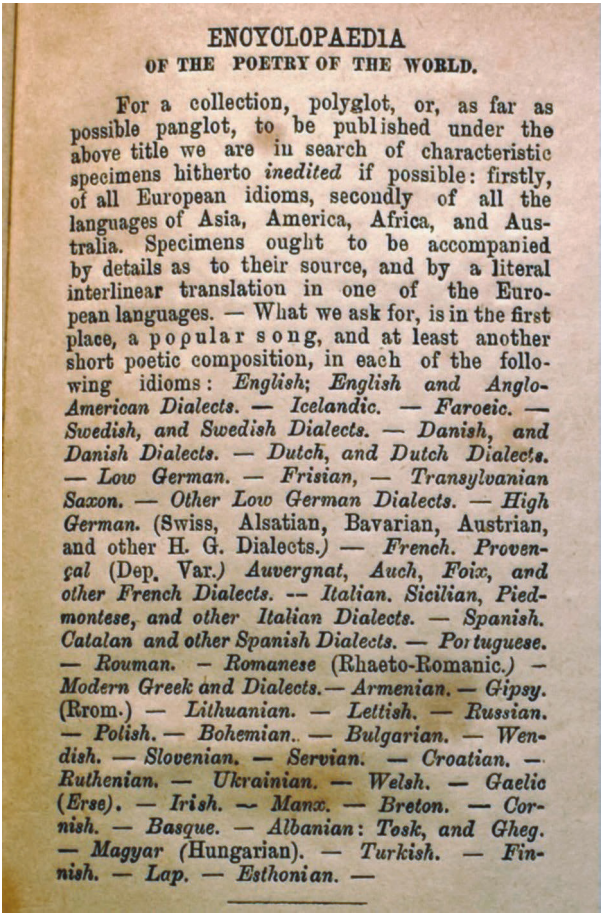
43 Hugo Meltzl, Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur. II., 308.

44 Hugo Meltzl, Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur. II., 307–310.

45 Hugo Meltzl, Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur, 179–180.

Fig. 4: Call for contributions to an "Encyclopaedia of the Poetry of the World," ACLU 60 (1879), 177.



ENCYCLOPAEDIA
OF THE POETRY OF THE WORLD.

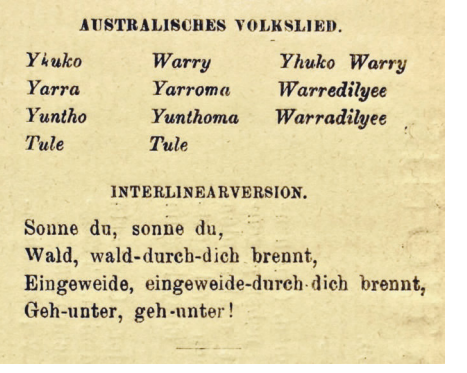
For a collection, polyglot, or, as far as possible panglot, to be published under the above title we are in search of characteristic specimens hitherto *inedited* if possible: firstly, of all European idioms, secondly of all the languages of Asia, America, Africa, and Australia. Specimens ought to be accompanied by details as to their source, and by a literal interlinear translation in one of the European languages. — What we ask for, is in the first place, a popular song, and at least another short poetic composition, in each of the following idioms: *English; English and Anglo-American Dialects.* — *Icelandic.* — *Faroeic.* — *Swedish, and Swedish Dialects.* — *Danish, and Danish Dialects.* — *Dutch, and Dutch Dialects.* — *Low German.* — *Frisian,* — *Transylvanian Saxon.* — *Other Low German Dialects.* — *High German.* (Swiss, Alsatian, Bavarian, Austrian, and other H. G. Dialects.) — *French. Provençal* (Dep. Var.) *Auvergnat, Auch, Foix, and other French Dialects.* — *Italian. Sicilian, Piedmontese, and other Italian Dialects.* — *Spanish. Catalan and other Spanish Dialects.* — *Portuguese.* — *Rouman.* — *Romanese* (Rhaeto-Romanic.) — *Modern Greek and Dialects.* — *Armenian.* — *Gipsy.* (Rrom.) — *Lithuanian.* — *Lettish.* — *Russian.* — *Polish.* — *Bohemian.* — *Bulgarian.* — *Wendish.* — *Slovenian.* — *Servian.* — *Croatian.* — *Ruthenian.* — *Ukrainian.* — *Welsh.* — *Gaelic (Erse).* — *Irish.* — *Manx.* — *Breton.* — *Cornish.* — *Basque.* — *Albanian: Tosk, and Gheg.* — *Magyar* (Hungarian). — *Turkish.* — *Finnish.* — *Lap.* — *Esthonian.* —

In this image, taken from an issue of the *ACLU* published in 1879, the editors announce their desire to launch a "polyglot, or, as far as possible panglot" collection, which would encompass "all European idioms" as well as "all the languages of Asia, America, Africa, and Australia." The literary "specimens" as they are called here in natural-scientific English, "ought to be accompanied by details as to their source, and by a literal interlinear translation in one of the European languages." The editors explicitly state that the emphasis of their collection will be "popular song," which they refer to elsewhere in the journal as *Volkslieder* (folksongs).

Here the close relation between early comparative literature and folklore studies becomes apparent. Two years after their announcement of the "Encyclopaedia of the

Poetry of the World," the *ACLU* published a call for ethnographic sources issued by the South African Folklore Society. Invoking the cause of a "science of Man," this call expresses a special interest in that which is seen as being "especially primitive in the languages and ideas of the South African aboriginal races." The call is given a particular urgency, due to the claim that "European civilization is gaining ground among the Natives," a situation that will lead to these sources being "if not altogether lost, at least far less frequent than they are now."[46] Here stadial theory is already implicitly present in the claim that so-called 'primitive' cultures will inevitably decline when they come into account with European modernity.

Fig. 5: Australisches Volkslied, ACLU 145–148 (1884), 86.



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!

The focus of the *ACLU* on so-called 'primitive' non-European sources can also be seen in the above submission from Herbert Augustus Strong (1841–1918), who was Professor of Comparative and Classical Philology at the University of Melbourne, and who had promoted the *ACLU* in Australia.[47] As the editors of the *ACLU* write: "Mr H. Strong […] was so friendly as to draw our attention to this sun-hymn, which the Reverend Mr. Bulmer transcribed along the Murray and Edwards rivers from a local dialect."[48] John Bulmer (1833–1913) ran Anglican missions, firstly at Yelta in the Murray River region of Victoria between 1855 and 1860, and later at Lake Tyers in

46 *ACLU* 99–100 (1881), 111–112.

47 G. R. Manton, Strong, Herbert Augustus (1841–1918), in: *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 6 (1976), URL: https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/strong-herbert-augustus-4659 [last accessed: May 14, 2023]. Strong wrote a positive account of the *ACLU*'s translations of Petőfi into other languages. Cf. Herbert A. Strong, A Polyglot Love-Song, in: *The Melbourne Review* 3 (January to October 1878), 108–112.

48 Australisches Volkslied, in: *ACLU* 145–148 (1884), 86.

Gippsland, from 1861 to 1908. He transcribed local Indigenous languages and songs as part of his missionary activities in both locations and was an important contact for the evolutionist anthropologist Alfred William Howitt (1830–1908).[49] Bulmer's reports on Indigenous cultures in Australia are referenced in the source to which Strong had directed the editors of the *ACLU*: an 1878 article entitled "The Australian Aborigines" written by a certain D. Macallister for the *Melbourne Review*. Macallister's article is thoroughly stadial, opining that Aboriginal Australians will soon "have ceased to exist, being destined seemingly to sink in the struggle of races." For this reason, he writes, "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." Like Spencer and Frazer, Macallister also concludes that Indigenous Australians are entirely without religion: "Religion, or worship, they had none; none, at least, in any sense in which those terms are used by us."[50]

In which Indigenous language was this so-called sun-hymn written? The fact that this source was transcribed by Bulmer near the Murray River suggests that its original language was *Marawara*, a dialect spoken by the mission community at Yelta, and the southernmost dialect of the *Pakantji* language. According to the scholarly literature, the last speaker of *Marawara* died in 1939.[51] The conditions under which sources such as these were acquired throws into question the *ACLU*'s methodological claims about prejudice-free induction. According to Luise Hercus, the eminent researcher of Indigenous Australian languages, Bulmer often misunderstood his Aboriginal informants, who resorted to frequent repetitions and slower, more simplified modes of speech to make themselves understood to him.[52] The information that Bulmer received was therefore likely to have already been a simplified version of *Marawara*, which he then further transformed by rendering it into English, before the editors of the *ACLU* translated it into German: a process involving three stages of radical mediation. Such processes of mediation and translation also involved asymmetries of power associated with the colonial and missionary contexts in which the source was transcribed, a context informed

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

50 David Macallister, The Australian Aborigines, in: *The Melbourne Review* 3, (January to October 1878), 137–161, 137, 149. The editors of the *ACLU* reference this article incorrectly as having appeared in volume 10 of the *Melbourne Review*.

51 Ian Clark/Edward Ryan, Aboriginal Spatial Organization in Far Northwest Victoria—A Reconstruction, in: *South Australian Geographical Journal* 107 (2008), 15–48, 30, 26.

52 Luise Hercus, The Marawara Language of Yelta: Interpreting Linguistic Records of the Past, in: *Aboriginal History* 8 (1–2/1984), 56–62, esp. 58–61.

by both evolutionist theories and religious assumptions. All of this demonstrates that early comparative literature, as manifested in the *ACLU*, began as a discipline reliant on colonial sources, assumptions, and misinterpretations.

The fact that the *ACLU* was interested in collecting and publishing these ethnographic materials demonstrates the close relations between early comparative literature, folklore studies, and the emerging discipline of anthropology. Here the would-be inductive and natural scientific focus of the *ACLU* is revealed in another of its programmatic statements, the "Gesetze der vergleichenden Literaturforschung" ("Laws of Comparative Literary Research"), which appeared in 1880. The first of three of these principles demonstrate that in terms of methodology, the interest of the *ACLU* was in the purportedly most 'primitive' and organic of materials:

1. Prose is to poetry as mechanism is to organism, as the *posterius* is to the *prius*.
2. Poetry is never to be understood as camouflaged prose, which, as merely studied artistic literature, can also only ever be mere mechanism.
3. The dominant tendency since Dunlop, Benfey and Max Müller, that of a predilection for following prose traditions, is an obsolete point of view. In the first instance one should compare only folksongs, not fairy tales.[53]

The fundamental opposition at work in these principles is that of organism versus mechanism, and we recall here Herbert Spencer's methodological principle that the "law of organic progress is the law of all progress." The would-be natural scientific foundation of comparative literature is thus to be found in its allegedly most primordial, elementary, and organic materials. Oral folksongs (*Volkslieder*) are therefore seen to predate the civilizational and mechanistic interventions of prose traditions, which are associated by the editors of the *ACLU* with the tradition of recording fairy tales (*Märchen*). Here writing is seen as a belated form of mere *Kunstpoesie* (literally: artificial poetry). For this reason, the *ACLU's* editors seek to supersede the earlier work of literary historians such as John Colin Dunlop and of Sanskrit scholars such as Theodor Benfey and Max Müller by propagating a more radical scientism. This scientism's chief distinction from the comparative philology of Benfey and Müller lay in its claim to be based on a wider range of allegedly more 'primitive' and organic materials, including sources from outside of the Indo-European language family.

As evidenced by the *ACLU*, early comparative literature has two main features. First, the editors emphasize an anti-nationalist and would be objective scientism, according to which all languages and cultures of the world should, at least in principle, be treated equally (as we shall see, this proved to be impossible in practice). Second, this scientism was inductive, ethnographic and colonialist in orientation,

53 Gesetze der vergleichenden Literaturforschung, in: *ACLU* 70 (1880), 149–150.

calling for fieldwork submissions from around the world to create a kind of museum of world literature. One of the roles of this literary museum would be that of ethnographic salvage: preserving so-called 'primitive' traditions that were thought to be in danger of extinction through exposure to European modernity, and which promised to reveal the most primordial and elementary aspects of literary composition.[54] These tendencies were by no means exclusive to the *ACLU*; indeed, they can also be found in the works of a leading theorist of literary comparison in this period of the German *Geisteswissenschaften*: Wilhelm Scherer.

Stadial Change in Scherer

In an article appearing in the *ACLU* in 1877 and entitled "Zur vergleichenden Ästhetik der Lyrik" ("On the Comparative Aesthetics of Lyric Poetry"), Hugo von Meltzl sees Wilhelm Scherer as pointing to the "foundational lines of a most promising subsidiary area of our enormous science of the future, comparative literature."[55] Meltzl then quotes the following passage from Scherer's review of Karl Lachmann's edition of the *Minnesang*:

> The project of a historical and comparative poetics must, sooner or later, be ventured. The development of ethnography is already pressing in this direction, though so far it has admittedly paid little attention to this problem […] If poetics does not want to repeatedly tread the same old worn-out paths, then it goes without saying that its propositions should be deduced from the collected materials that are available, and that it should ascend from simple to complicated formations.[56]

Here Scherer (1841–1886), who is often thought of as the main progenitor of literary positivism in Germany,[57] offers his own version of stadial theory. The notion that poetry might ascend in its development from "simple to complicated formations" suggests an evolutionism similar to that outlined by Spencer. Indeed, a closer examination of Scherer's works, and especially of his *Poetik* (*Poetics*), published after

54 On the idea of salvage in early anthropology, cf. Jacob Gruber, Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology, in: *American Anthropologist* 72 (6/1970), 1289–1299.

55 Hugo von Meltzl, Zur vergleichenden Ästhetik der Lyrik, in: *ACLU* 2 (1877), 39–41, 39.

56 Wilhelm Scherer, Des minnesangs frühling herausgegeben von Karl Lachmann und Moriz Haupt, in: *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 19 (1876), 197–205.

57 For this 'classical' view of Scherer, cf. Peter Salm, *Three Modes of Criticism: The Literary Theories of Scherer, Walzel and Staiger*, Cleveland 1968; Wolfgang Kaltenbrunner, Literary Positivism? Scientific Theories and Methods in the Work of Sainte-Beuve (1804–1869) and Wilhelm Scherer (1841–1886), in: *Studium* 3 (2010), 74–88.

his death in 1888 but written during the 1870s and 1880s, reveals an evolutionist differentiation between progressive stages of poetic evolution.

In the *Poetik*, Scherer links the origins of ancient Greek poetry to ritual and performance. The key differentiation that he makes is between "gebundende Rede" (bound speech), which means poetry or song, and "ungebundene Rede" (unbound speech), which means prose:

> The dance of the chorus […] relates to the visual, and the dance steps are the basis of rhythm. The words […] are bound to the steps of the dance. It is rhythm that first creates that which we call bound speech […] And in this way, the chorus is the origin of bound speech in general. The fairytale, by contrast, is unbound speech, or narrative in prose.[58]

According to this view, dance, song, and rhythm provide the original context for the emergence of poetry. In its most primordial form, poetry is bound to bodily movements. Prose is already a secondary formation, which occurs after poetry has been unbound or abstracted from the context of bodily performance.

Scherer initially links these developments to the example of the chorus in classical Greek tragedy. But because his *Poetik* makes claims that are meant to be based on contemporary empirical foundations, reconstructions of classical Greek culture do not suffice as scientific evidence. For this reason, and in a move that is typically stadial, Scherer then turns to contemporary so-called 'primitive' cultures to substantiate his claims concerning the relation between poetry and dance. For Scherer, the development of early literature unfolds across three stages: the chorus or bound speech is followed by traditional proverbs or sayings (*Sprichwörter*), which later become written fairytales (*Märchen*) recorded in prose or unbound speech. These are, he writes:

> the oldest of all [forms of poetry, AN] in existence: the traces of the beginnings of later, more highly developed literatures lead back to these earlier forms, and they can also be found today as they are used by *Naturvölker*.[59]

One of the so-called *Naturvölker* mentioned by Scherer are Aboriginal Australians, whom he sees as still operating at the most 'primitive' stage of poetic creation, that of the *Chorlied* or chorus accompanied by dance. He writes:

> The oldest reports concerning Germanic poetry, indeed Aryan poetry in general, lead back to this connection between celebratory dance and song. And there are also many unusual examples of these collective dances combined

58 Wilhelm Scherer, *Poetik*, Berlin 1888, 12–13.

59 Scherer, *Poetik*, 10.

> with song to be found among *Naturvölker*. I would like to refer to one here, the strangest one known to me, although it is obscene; but in these matters, one is permitted, as in the cases of anatomy and physiology, not to shy away from touching upon filth. It is an Australian dance, reported on by Friedrich Müller. There were similar songs, for example in Greece: the phallic songs *τὰ φαλλικὰ* (Arist. Poet. 1449a).

This example displays all the features of a stadial theory of literature. First, a Eurocentric and universal course of poetic development is theorized and applied to all cultures. Second, the allegedly most 'primitive' features of this developmental scale are found in European antiquity (in this case the reference is to Aristotle's *Poetics*) and, via the method of armchair anthropology, in contemporary so-called 'primitive' life. Here Scherer's reference is to Friedrich Müller (1834–1898), a Viennese Sanskrit scholar, comparative philologist, and ethnographer who wrote the ethnographic section of the *Reise der österreichischen Fregatte Novara* (*Journey of the Austrian Frigate Novara*, 1868), and who later wrote a standard work on ethnography.[60] In an account filled with the myriad prejudices of Eurocentrism, Müller reports on what he perceives to be a "highly obscene dance" allegedly performed by First Nations Australians.[61] Scherer has, with some plausibility, been referred to as the most influential Germanist of the nineteenth century.[62] It is therefore significant for the history of *Germanistik* that stadial theory, partly derived from colonial sources such as the prejudiced account of Müller, was a foundational aspect of Scherer's methodology.

Stadial Theory in the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*

Was stadial theory also a feature of the *ACLU*? While the answer to this question is yes, the stadial model introduced by the journal's editors seems to have emerged due to both local politics and practical necessity. Indeed, in many ways, the journal's recourse to stadial theory is completely at odds with one of its main theoretical aims: that of treating all literatures of the world equally. In this respect, a methodological problem that beset comparative literature at its origins arguably still characterizes many of the debates in the discipline today. How can we treat all literatures of the

60 Friedrich Müller, *Allgemeine Ethnographie*, Vienna 1873.

61 Friedrich Müller, *Reise der österreichischen Fregatte Novara um die Erde in den Jahren 1857, 1858, 1859. Anthropologischer Teil. Dritter Abtheilung, Ethnographie*, Vienna 1868, 7.

62 Hans-Harald Müller, Wilhelm Scherer (1841–1886), in: Christoph König/Hans-Harald Müller/Werner Röcke (eds.), *Wissenschaftsgeschichte der Germanistik in Porträts*, Berlin 2000, 80–94, 80.

world equally, while at the same conceding that one's capacity to learn foreign languages and understand other cultures is necessary limited? Choosing to specialize on some languages and cultures and not on others is a necessity for all comparatists. But such choices probably also imply either conscious or unconscious judgements concerning literary value.

In the nineteenth century, stadial theory was one of the models used to make such comparative judgements. The editors of the *ACLU* eventually came up with two stadial distinctions to justify their decision to reduce the scope of the journal to ten literatures of supposedly world rank. At the outset, they maintain that this restriction is simply a practical measure "in the interests of a prudent economy." Moreover, they also concede that "*from the comparative-literary standpoint, the importance of one literature at the expense of others ceases completely; – they are all equally important*."[63] Nevertheless, the practical necessities of running a journal made exclusionary selection processes unavoidable for the editors of the *ACLU*. They then make two distinctions concerning literary value, both of which can be found in the following passage, which addresses those literatures that did make it into the journal's canon of "decaglotism":

> The literatures of the Danes, the Norwegians, the Latvians, the Finns, the Estonians, the Basques, the Irish, the Bretons, the Poles, the Czechs, the Slavonic peoples of western central Europe [*Wenden*], the Serbs, the Russians, the Modern Greeks, the Albanians, the Romanians, the Turks, as well as of the remaining smaller tribes [*Volksstämme*] of Europe are either still only literatures of the folk song [*Volksliederlitt.*], or rather, if they are artistic literatures [*Kunstlitteraturen*], then mainly of recent emergence and of thoroughly naturalistic, in the best case *romantic*, coloring. The Hungarian is perhaps the only non-Germanic literary area among the smaller literatures to have fundamentally broken with romanticism and to have ascended towards a true classicism, admittedly through a slow process of around 500 years, but also only recently in its most modern publications, with Petöfi at its peak, who, alongside Goethe, is the greatest and most universal artistic poet [*Kunstlyriker*], at least of this century.[64]

What are the stadial distinctions at work here? First, all national literatures, the editors of the *ACLU* maintain, begin with an oral folktale tradition of collective authorship, referred to as *Volksliederlitteratur* (literatures of the folksong). Later, these folk traditions evolve into artistic literatures (*Kunstlitteraturen*), meaning texts written by individual authors. Second, even within this higher tradition of artistic literatures, there is an evolutionary refinement that involves the taming of romanticism into

63 Hugo Meltzl, Vorläufige Aufgaben der vergleichenden Litteratur. III, in: *ACLU* 24 (1878), 498, 496 (emphasis in the original).

64 Hugo Meltzl, Vorläufige Aufgaben III, 494–495 (emphasis in the original).

a more formally perfect classicism. Goethean classicism (Weimar classicism) is regarded as the model for this supposedly universal evolutionary process. In this passage, Hungarian literature—a literature of political power within the *ACLU's* local Austro-Hungarian context—is conveniently regarded as having recently ascended to this level classicism. By contrast, other local languages of Transylvania – most notably Romanian and Romani – are excluded from the *ACLU*'s canon of decaglotism, being seen as mere folk traditions. It is for this reason that Anca Parvulescu and Manuela Boatcă associate the *ACLU* not with a cosmopolitan polyglotism but rather with what they call *interglottism*, a descriptor that tracks the internal "linguistic hierarchies" of Transylvania's complex imperial history.[65]

Conclusion: The Specter of Literary Value

The case of the *ACLU* reveals how stadial models of comparison and change—derived initially from biology and later adopted by early ethnography and anthropology—were used to bolster the would-be scientific status of a new academic field: comparative literature. In their initial conception of comparative literature, the editors of the *ACLU* aimed for an objective and value-free scientism according to which all literatures of the world would be treated equally, independently of any nationalistic prejudices. Their vision of the field included building a global corpus of literary texts, including those from so-called 'primitive' cultures that were expected to disappear when confronted by European modernity. In this respect their vision of the discipline resembled, at times, a colonialist museum organized along the lines of what Jacob Gruber has called "ethnographic salvage."[66]

Yet as this paper reveals, a purportedly value-free scientism could not withstand the pressures of running the *ACLU*, which was forced—for reasons of space, linguistic expertise, and local politics — to make exclusionary judgements about what to include within its pages. Theories of stadial change thus served as a scientific cloak used to cover over the ideological judgements about literary value that were used to justify the *ACLU's* eventual canon of "decaglotism." It is thus no surprise—given the dominance of German and Hungarian in the journal's pages—that the values of Weimar classicism became the yardstick according to which national literatures were granted admission into the journal's canon, and that Hungarian literature was conveniently seen as having recently achieved this distinction of classicism.

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65 Parvulescu and Boatcă write that the *ACLU* "placed Romanian and Romani literatures […] strictly within the framework of folklore, mirroring colonial and imperial differences" (102). For their discussion of "interglottism," see 92–93.

66 Cf. Gruber, Ethnographic Salvage.

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