



Comparative Literature and the Politics of Universality: The Trans/National Ontology of Jean Hankiss

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Abstract: Despite occasional claims to the contrary, literary studies, including literary theory and comparative literature, has never been an “autonomous” field detached from politics. However, there have been historical moments when the two terrains overlapped to an alarming extent. One such period was the 1930s and the wartime years in Europe when the continent gradually and largely fell under authoritarian or dictatorial rule. This was certainly not an atmosphere or juridical context favorable to comparative research. Contact between colleagues from different countries was restricted, and many fled to Turkey or the New World. Still, several comparatists remained active during these years, publishing articles and books, attempting to correspond across borders, giving lectures, and teaching students. The aim of my research is to map the field of comparative literature in Europe under such unfavorable circumstances. In this paper, my purpose is to shed light on the activities of the Hungarian professor of literature, János (Jean) Hankiss (1893–1959), who, as a protégé of Fernand Baldensperger, played a crucial role in organizing comparative literature as an academic field in Europe in the 1930s and is remembered as one of the spiritual founding fathers of the ICLA. However, Hankiss’s legacy is not without controversy. While he was undoubtedly an advocate of intercultural dialogue, he compromised himself politically by accepting, in April 1943, a post with the rank of state secretary in the Ministry of Religion and Public Education. After the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944, he resigned this post and was elected rector of the University of Debrecen for 1944–45. Although much of the relevant archival material housed in the National Archives was destroyed in a fire, I will reexamine Hankiss’s political involvement within the broader context of his cultural philosophy as a literary scholar, drawing on his personal records and publications. In my paper, I will focus on how Hankiss mobilized the concept of European (and world) literature to advance Hungarian foreign policy.

Keywords: comparative literature, cultural diplomacy, interwar Europe, fascism, nationalism, universalism, Hungarian revisionism, Europeanness, literary politics.

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In the postwar decades, the leading voices of comparative literature often explicitly aligned themselves with a democratic agenda. Whether liberal-conservative or leftist liberal, they shared a commitment to distancing the field from authoritarian and “totalitarian” legacies. Comparative literature, especially in the United States, became so closely associated with liberalism that it effectively veiled the illiberal segments of its past. From the late 1980s, individual cases (most famously Paul de Man’s ties to far-right ideologies) prompted debate about the entanglement of literary scholars with right-wing politics, but these remained isolated controversies rather than structural critiques. The more sustained line of inquiry concerned something else: the discipline’s bias toward Euro-Atlantic literatures and the literatures of major languages.

The link between comparative literature and twentieth century nationalism is, certainly, not a novel discovery: in his classic essay “The Crisis of Comparative Literature” (1958), René Wellek identified “patriotic” impulses behind the work of such trailblazers of the discipline as Fernand Baldensperger, Ernst Robert Curtius, and Jean-Marie Carré.¹ During the Cold War, however, in a context where the Soviet Union was perceived as the principal threat, and where former supporters and allies of the extreme right often gained credit by committing themselves to Western mainstream politics and values, firm anticommunism was such a virtue that it overshadowed former nationalist stances. The fact that comparative literature was suppressed in the late Stalinist Soviet Union and the satellite states as a bourgeois endeavor detached from social and economic determinants was yet another reason to avoid research into potentially compromising episodes of the

1. René Wellek, “The Crisis of Comparative Literature,” in *Comparative Literature: Proceedings of the Second Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, ed. Werner P. Friederich, vol. 1 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 154.

discipline's past. Meanwhile the discipline was in the process of reinventing itself and distancing its methodology from historicist approaches. The "golden age" of comparative literature in the 1960s and 1970s, marked by the worldwide spread of structuralist literary theory, left such a deep mark on the disciplinary methodologies that the historicizing of universalist and (often related) liberal approaches was rarely considered, if at all. Consequently, the memory of the field was highly selective, and despite increasing efforts to embed the history of comparative literature and of the closely related field of literary theory into wider political and institutional contexts, still is.

The case of the internationally renowned Hungarian scholar János (Jean) Hankiss (1893–1959) is a particularly good entry point for revisiting the history of comparative literature. His story shows that early attempts to create and expand the discipline's network and infrastructure were intimately intertwined with politically ambivalent contexts, and even with some layers of interwar far-right ideologies, well beyond what could simply be called "patriotism." Instead of simply dismissing him as a politically compromised and, in the long run, methodologically outdated figure, or, conversely, celebrating him uncritically as a champion of a shared European legacy, we need to examine his work carefully in order to understand the extent to which interwar political culture and the reshaping of the international order after World War I influenced the development of comparative literature. Only through such analysis can we take a critically reflective position on the discipline's historical entanglements with political agendas and what these mean for its intellectual and institutional legitimacy today.

The disciplinary stature once held by Hankiss is well illustrated by the fact that when René Wellek and Austin Warren published *Theory of Literature* (1949), a book that became a foundational touchstone for the discipline of comparative literature, their bibliography named only two Hungarian literary scholars from the interwar period: György (Georg) Lukács and János (Jean) Hankiss.² Lukács's fame rested on his Marxist aesthetics, grounded in the classics of European literature, but he had serious reservations about comparisons lacking materialist foundations,³ and was anything but a promoter of the field. Hankiss, by contrast, was directly engaged in the institutional shaping of comparative literature as a discipline. Warren, who briefly served on the editorial board of Hankiss's journal *Helicon* (1938–1943), and Wellek each cited his work in their respective chapters.⁴ Henry H. H. Remak's frequently referenced essay "Comparative Literature: Its Definition and Function" (1961; rev. ed. 1971) ends in an annotated bibliography of the key publications in the field that includes Hankiss; in its summary of J. Craig La Drière's work, Hankiss's name is mentioned in the same breath as those of Fernand Baldensperger and Paul Van Tieghem among the protagonists of comparative literature in the period between the wars.⁵ Indeed, when comparative literary scholars organized themselves and established the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA), the legacy of Hankiss was remembered: an opening address at the Second Congress held in Chapel Hill (1958) described him as "an indefatigable pioneer in the pre-war meetings of the International Federation of Modern Languages and Literatures," and his paper was presented at the congress in his absence.⁶ While Hankiss may not today be ranked alongside the two French scholars just mentioned in the canon of disciplinary "classics," in the interwar era he was a highly visible and influential actor.

In the 1910s, Hankiss studied French and German at the University of Budapest as a member of the elite Eötvös College, and peregrinated to Paris, where Baldensperger, a new hire at the Sorbonne, had begun to run courses on comparative literature.⁷ He also spent time in Geneva, where Bernard Bouvier was directing the prototype *cours de vacances* at UNIGE,⁸ created above all for foreign students, and serving also cultural-diplomatic roles, with Bouvier himself a prominent

2. Karl Kerényi, who was added in the second edition (1956), belonged more to classical philology and cultural history. Hankiss often translated his first name when publishing abroad: János became Jean in French, Johann in German, and Giovanni in Italian. In English publications and contexts, however, he did not adopt John but kept Jean.

3. Cf. György Lukács, "A magyar irodalomtörténet revíziója" [The Revision of Hungarian Literary History], *Forum* 3, no. 11 (1948): 863. Also published as György Lukács, "Elnöki székfoglaló beszéd" [Presidential Inaugural Speech], *Irodalomtörténet* 37, no. 1 (1949): 7–8. In English translation: György Lukács, "The Revision of Hungarian Literary History: A Lecture on the Occasion of the Reassembly of the Hungarian Literary-Historical Society," in *The Culture of People's Democracy: Hungarian Essays on Literature, Art, and Democratic Transition, 1945–1948*, ed. and trans. Tyrus Miller (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 271.

4. In 1940, Warren wrote to Hankiss that he had arrived at the same conclusions about genre theory as Hankiss had in his "Les genres littéraires et leur base psychologique," *Helicon* 2, nos. 2–3 (1939): 117–29, the paper Warren later cited in *Theory of Literature*. See Austin Warren to János Hankiss, June 26, 1940, Debreceni Egyetemi és Nemzeti Könyvtár Kézirattára (DEENK Kt). Having lost touch with his collaborators in France by 1940, Hankiss became further isolated in 1941, when the American contributors, Warren among them, withdrew after June of that year. Tivadar Gorilovics, "Helicon—egy folyóirat a 'háborús dulakodás' fölött" [*Helicon*: A Journal Standing Above the 'War Squabbles'], in *Hankiss János redivivus*, ed. Tivadar Gorilovics (Debrecen: KLTE Francia Tanszék, 1995), 102.

5. Henry H. H. Remak, "Comparative Literature: Its Definition and Function," in *Comparative Literature: Method and Perspective*, rev. ed., ed. Newton P. Stallknecht and Horst Frenz (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 32, 37, 38.

6. Kurt Wais, opening address, in *Comparative Literature: Proceedings of the Second Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, ed. Werner P. Friederich, vol. 1 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), xx.

7. Francis Claudon, "Fernand Baldensperger (1871–1958): Retour sur une ambition," *Revue de littérature comparée*, no. 377 (2021): 34–50.

8. Henri Hauser, "Les cours de vacances à l'université de Genève," *Revue internationale de l'enseignement* 37 (1899): 108–13.



actor in Franco-German mediation.⁹ Bouvier, seeking to expand the impact of French culture in Central Europe, positively encouraged Hungarian students to join the summer course and, indeed, it was advocated in the Hungarian press.

Both foreign experiences left a lasting mark on Hankiss. After completing a dissertation on Diderot and publishing a substantial monograph on Destouches, he turned to a wide-ranging study of crime fiction, situating detective novels within the broader landscape of popular literature and pulp fiction.¹⁰ This was the first major work in which he treated Hungarian literature explicitly in a comparative framework: a feature that became his trademark and culminated in his *Európa és a magyar irodalom* (Europe and Hungarian Literature, 1942).¹¹ Baldensperger, whom Hankiss regarded as the international 'leader' of comparative literature and who remained the ultimate authority for him throughout his career, entered into a collaboration with him, most importantly within the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (ICIC), the League of Nations' advisory body on cultural and scholarly affairs, and the Commission internationale d'histoire littéraire moderne (CIHLM), aiming to coordinate international research in literary history. Hankiss was a member of the Hungarian Committee of the ICIC, but it was within the CIHLM, a commission founded in 1928 within the International Committee of Historical Sciences, that they and Paul Van Tieghem effectively worked together to strengthen the infrastructure of comparative literature. The First International Congress of Literary History (1931), which gathered scholars from many countries to discuss methods, chronologies, and international cooperation in literary history, was held in Budapest on May 21–23, 1931 under the auspices of the CIHLM and the International Committee of Historical Sciences; Hankiss organized it locally, Baldensperger presided, and Van Tieghem served as secretary. His ties to Paris were strengthened by numerous visits, joint publications, and visiting professorships at the Sorbonne. As a promoter of French-Hungarian relations, he was awarded the title of Chevalier of the Légion d'honneur in 1938.¹²

Like Baldensperger and Bouvier, Hankiss regarded literary scholarship as a vital branch of cultural diplomacy.¹³ This did not merely mean that he considered self-contained narratives of individual literatures inconceivable, but also that he, like Wellek and many others, saw comparative literature as the only viable approach.¹⁴ He considered a reform of secondary and university education in Hungary, together with a broadly internationalist program of popular education, a prerequisite for this. To this end, in 1927 he co-founded the Debrecen Summer University, modeled on the Geneva example and intended both to make Hungary known to foreign participants and to broaden the horizons of a Hungarian audience (not only students but also those eager to educate themselves). Under Hankiss's able direction, it grew to host several hundred foreign students, most of whom also began to study Hungarian. He continued to cultivate ties with the most gifted students, treating them as ambassadors of Hungarian literary culture.

Hankiss's ideas on cultural diplomacy were at the same time deeply intertwined with his cultural-geographical vision of Hungary's role in Central Europe and with the attempts of the Hungarian state, in the wake of the extensive border revisions after the First World War, to reposition itself in the international political arena. Hankiss identified with the revisionist claims against the Treaty of Trianon to the extent that even his *ex libris* conveyed a clear irredentist message. To understand how his political convictions converged with his literary scholarship, one must first trace the beginnings of his political engagement.

Having taken his doctorate in Budapest in 1915 and habilitated at the University of Debrecen in April 1919, Hankiss, fluent in several languages including near-native French, became closely acquainted with Hungarian diplomatic circles: he worked at the Peace Preparation Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, revising translations into French and ensuring that Hungary's counterarguments reached the desks of linguistically sensitive French officials with the necessary stylistic precision.¹⁵ At the Peace Preparation Office, which officially began its work in late

9. Bouvier's brother-in-law was Friedrich Schmidt-Ott, the future Prussian minister of culture (1917–18) and a friend of Kuno Klebelsberg, the future Hungarian minister of religion and public education and later a mentor of Hankiss.

10. János Hankiss, *Diderot mint realista elbeszélő* [Diderot as a Realist Prose Writer] (Budapest: Neuwald, 1915); János Hankiss, *Philippe Néricault Destouches: L'homme et l'œuvre* (Debrecen: Csáthy, 1918); János Hankiss, *A detektívregény* [The Detective Novel] (Debrecen: Csáthy, 1928).

11. I used a recent reprint: János Hankiss, *Európa és a magyar irodalom: A honfoglalástól a kiegyezésig* [Europe and Hungarian Literature: From the Conquest to the Compromise] (1942; repr., Pomáz: Kráter, 2005).

12. See his personal files at MTAK Kézirattár (MTAK Kt), Budapest. For some details about his life also see the rather hagiographic volume *Hankiss János redivivus*, ed. Tivadar Gorilovics (Debrecen: KLTE Francia Tanszék, 1995).

13. János Hankiss, *A kultúrdiplomácia alapvetése* [The Foundations of Cultural Diplomacy] (Budapest: Magyar Külügyi Társaság, 1937).

14. Cf. János Hankiss, "Az angol regény. Kundt Ernő: Az angol regény mesterei" [The English Novel. Ernő Kundt: Masters of the English Novel], *Debreceni Szemle* 2, no. 1 (1928): 64–65.

15. Among other things, he specifically worked on the French translation of *Critique des nouvelles frontières de la Hongrie* by Eugène de Cholnoky (in Hungarian: *Az új magyar határ bírálata*, Budapest, 1921), which was prepared for the Office to line up arguments against the new borders. Cholnoky led Section A of the Office, which was responsible for general issues, while the future prime minister István Bethlen led Section B, which focused on Transylvania. Cf. "Cholnoky Jenő életrajza" [Biography of Jenő Cholnoky], *Vár Ucca Tizenhét* 6, no. 2 (1998): 279–81. Cholnoky himself named Hankiss among his French translators; see Gyula Vadas, *Cholnoky Jenő élete képekben* (Pécs: Sétatér, 2020), 125.

August 1919,¹⁶ after the fall of the Hungarian Soviet Republic, Hankiss worked in the company of the highest-ranking representatives of interwar Hungarian diplomacy, under the general direction of future prime minister Pál Teleki. The historical outlook of Hankiss was profoundly shaped by the memoranda produced by the Office, which argued in favor of full territorial integrity.

After the signing of the peace treaty, the Hungarian government made diplomatic efforts to secure a revision of its terms, efforts in which cultural diplomacy was to play a central role.¹⁷ Although the Peace Preparation Office was dissolved in its original form after the conclusion of the treaties, its responsibilities were transferred to newly created structures of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, particularly a political intelligence division tasked with carrying forward Hungary's cultural diplomacy and 'scientific propaganda'.¹⁸ Judging from his lifelong activities, it is likely that Hankiss maintained close ties to this office.

At the beginning of the 1920s, Hungary was economically fragile, politically unsettled, and diplomatically isolated. To secure admission to the League of Nations and international loans, the government deliberately avoided overt challenges to the Treaty of Trianon. Official propaganda was shelved, while ministries discreetly funded associations that were formally independent.¹⁹ One such framework was the Társadalmi Egyesületek Szövetsége (TESZ, Alliance of Social Associations) and its central office, established in 1921 under Pál Teleki. TESZ tried to coordinate disparate irredentist groups, shifting from emotive appeals to arguments styled as historical or economic expertise.²⁰ It also extended support to Hungarian minorities in the successor states and fostered cultural and educational initiatives at home. For the government, TESZ offered the dual advantage of sustaining revisionist publicity while maintaining a façade of official disengagement. Hankiss, who had earlier worked with Teleki in the Peace Preparation Office, actively campaigned for this organization.²¹

Hungary's admission to the League of Nations in 1922 was an important step, but the country remained under Allied financial supervision and subject to close scrutiny. In these years, radical associations such as the Hungarian National Federation (Magyar Nemzeti Szövetség), heir to the dissolved League for the Protection of Territory (TEVÉL), continued to voice uncompromising demands for restoration, often damaging Hungary's diplomatic standing. Only in 1927 did the international climate begin to ease Hungary's isolation. The stabilization loan of 1924 had laid the groundwork for economic recovery, and the Allied Control Commission withdrew in 1927.²² Even more significant was Benito Mussolini's diplomatic initiative: on April 5, 1927, Italy and Hungary signed a Treaty of Friendship, Conciliation and Arbitration, which offered Hungary its first significant opening for an international partnership with a major power willing to question the postwar settlement.²³

This new environment emboldened Prime Minister István Bethlen to alter the government's public posture. Together with his minister of religion and public education, Kuno Klebelsberg, he maintained that Hungary had to return to the European community²⁴ and that the nation's international standing could be improved only through cultural and scholarly engagement. From 1927 onward, cultural diplomacy was no longer an auxiliary instrument but a central tool of statecraft.

Within this framework, the Hungarian Revisionist League (Magyar Revíziós Liga, MRL) was created in 1927 to gather more than thirty associations under one umbrella. Its first president, the writer Ferenc Herczeg, declared that Hungary would not settle for partial adjustments but demanded the restoration of its historical frontiers.²⁵ Yet even as the Revisionist League was founded, the government's rhetoric was already evolving. By the time of Bethlen's speech in Debrecen on March 4, 1928, the official line had settled on the doctrine of "peaceful revision": territorial changes were to be sought through international agreement, framed in terms of legality, history, and

16. Zoltán Hajdú, "A magyar földrajztudomány és a trianoni békeszerződés, 1918–1920" [Hungarian Geography and the Treaty of Trianon], *Kisebbségkutatás* 9, no. 2 (2000): 230.

17. Zsolt Nagy, *Great Expectations and Interwar Realities: Hungarian Cultural Diplomacy, 1918–1941* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2017), 3–6.

18. "Gerevich Zoltán javaslata a Külügyminisztérium békeelőkészítő irodájának átszervezésére és a minisztérium szervezetébe való bekapcsolására" [Zoltán Gerevich's Proposal for the Reorganization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Peace-Preparatory Office and Its Integration into the Structure of the Ministry], in *Iratok a magyar külügyi szolgálat történetéhez, 1918–1945* [Documents on the History of the Hungarian Foreign Service], ed. Pál Pritz (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1994), 79–81.

19. Nagy, *Great Expectations*, 49–51.

20. Gergely Romsics, *Összeomlás és útkeresés, 1917–1920: A magyar külpolitikai gondolkodás útjai* [Collapse and the Search for Direction, 1917–1920: Trajectories of Hungarian Foreign Policy Thought] (Budapest: HUN-REN Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont, Történettudományi Intézet, 2023), section "Kitekintés: Kudarctól a konszolidáció felé."

21. See the Hankiss Papers at MTA Kt.

22. Nagy, *Great Expectations*, 49–50.

23. Nagy, *Great Expectations*, 59–60.

24. Nagy, *Great Expectations*, 56.

25. Miklós Zeidler, "Herczeg Ferenc és a Magyar Revíziós Liga" [Ferenc Herczeg and the Hungarian Revisionist League], in *"Fenn és lent": Tanulmányok Herczeg Ferenc születésének 150. évfordulójára* ["Up and Down": Studies for the 150th Anniversary of the Birth of Ferenc Herczeg], ed. László Gazdag and Péter P. Müller (Pécs: Kronosz Kiadó and Magyar Történelmi Társulat, 2014), 32–33.



above all minority rights.²⁶ This marked a departure from earlier maximalist slogans of reconstructing the 'Hungary of Saint Stephen' and steered propaganda toward arguments grounded in ethnic composition. The Revisionist League, whose propaganda never sharply separated ethnic from integral revision, adapted accordingly, publishing studies and pamphlets, sponsoring lecture tours, and, from 1929, maintaining foreign secretariats in London, Paris, Berlin, and Milan as well as representatives in Geneva, Amsterdam, and New York.²⁷ Although formally non-governmental, it received steady backing from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Religion and Public Education. Hankiss assumed the presidency of its Debrecen branch, which gave him a formal role in this extensive propaganda network.

It was against this backdrop of moderated rhetoric that, in 1937, Hankiss submitted to the Revisionist League a manuscript on Franco-Hungarian cultural relations for use in its propaganda campaign. While his effort was warmly acknowledged, the League's executive director Endre Fall and executive president György Lukács raised several serious objections that revealed the distance between official policy and Hankiss's views. They argued that his claim that Hungarian was the 'most natural intermediary language' among the nationalities of the Danube Basin could easily be refuted with historical evidence and, more dangerously, might cast Hungarians as harboring imperial ambitions.²⁸ They also reminded him that, according to the League's program, the question of territorial belonging should not be settled through public debates over cultural or historical arguments but through plebiscites in ethnically mixed regions. For Hankiss, however, the stakes of revision were not negotiable: even in the late 1930s he continued to insist on the full recovery of the territories of Saint Stephen's Hungary. This insistence was not a matter of tactical disagreement but the expression of a worldview in which Hungary's cultural identity and historical mission were inseparable from the territorial integrity of the medieval kingdom. That conception of a culturally unified and territorially whole Hungary not only informed his political stance but also shaped the premises of his literary scholarship, which consistently projected Hungary as a mediating force in Central Europe.²⁹ It is to this intersection of politics and scholarship that we now turn: Hankiss's comparative literary studies were never detached exercises in philology but carried within them the imprint of the Saint Stephen conception, embedding his vision of Hungary's historical mission into the very structures of his academic work.

Hankiss's conception of literary history and theory could be read as consistently directed toward the ultimate aim of demonstrating the legitimacy of historical Hungary's existence. This imposed significant constraints on his literary-theoretical thinking, even though few of his contemporaries were as broadly informed. He kept abreast of French, German, and Italian literary scholarship and engaged with Polish and Romanian researchers active internationally. He even cited the Russian formalists at a time when they were barely known in Western Europe and Hungary. In his programmatic essays he also urged a revision of the vocabulary of literary theory, in line with international efforts to modernize the discipline. Within the Hungarian field he attached particular importance to Tivadar Thienemann's work, groundbreaking in its time and place, treating his *Irodalomtörténeti alapgfogalmak* [Fundamental Concepts of Literary History] (1931) as a touchstone.³⁰ In the 1920s and 1930s, Hankiss raised a series of questions that challenged the prevailing professional consensus in Hungarian literary scholarship. For instance, drawing on scholars ranging from Albert Thibaudet and Oskar Walzel to Roman Ingarden, he disputed the overly rigid separation between high and low literary registers; from an epistemological perspective he questioned the sharp distinction between reality and fiction in human memory; he was skeptical about separating content and form; he regarded the literary work as a continually changing entity, an open work that acquires its temporary form in the act of reading through the participation of the reader; and he approached the literary text as a palimpsest, one that can scarcely be disentangled from the complex web of literary influences. While these ideas urged literary scholarship to rethink established norms deeply embedded in nationalist positivism and undermined the organicist language of *Geistesgeschichte* and *Kulturmorphologie* in their most simplistic forms, it would be misleading to present Hankiss as an analytical mind. His attempts at systematic thinking often got lost in overloaded language and grand rhetorical schemes, and increasingly so as his career as a cultural politician advanced.

At the core of Hankiss's dilemmas was how to justify the existence of Hungarian literature as a single unit of comparison without giving ultimate priority to either ethnicity or language, while at the same time presenting it as an inherently heterodox culture smoothly integrating into a broader network of European literatures that permeate one another

26. Miklós Zeidler, *A revíziós gondolat* [The Idea of Revisionism] (Bratislava: Kalligram, 2009), 93; Nagy, *Great Expectations*, 61–62.

27. Nagy, *Great Expectations*, 141–42; Zeidler, "Herczeg Ferenc és a Magyar Revíziós Liga," 36.

28. Endre Fall and György Lukács to János Hankiss, September 15, 1937, MTAK Kt, Ms 5993/502. See also Ms 5993/503–504. The co-signatory György Lukács (1865–1950), a former minister of religion and public education, was of course only a namesake of the philosopher mentioned earlier.

29. On mediation see János Hankiss, "A magyar irodalom Európában" [Hungarian Literature in Europe], *Budapesti Szemle* 254, no. 741 (1939): 184–94.

30. For an introduction to Thienemann's early scholarship see András Kiséry, "Literacy, Culture, and History in the Work of Thienemann and Hajnal," in *Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies*, ed. Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Louise O. Vasvári (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2011), 34–46.

through a web of influences and historical entanglements. This dual orientation—at once nationalist and universalist—amounts to what I call a *trans/national ontology*. By this I mean a framework in which the nation is conceived not merely as a contingent historical formation but as an ontological category: the bearer of universal European values and the medium through which the destiny of Europe itself is articulated. Hankiss's comparatism, far from neutral description, thus operated within a worldview that fused the national and the transnational at their deepest level.

Heterodoxy was key. Not only because of his methodological conviction that one cannot handle the literary work of art as an isolated phenomenon, but rather as a layered entity part of a wider textual flow.³¹ Heterodoxy was also central because Hankiss aspired to integrate the widest possible range of the Hungarian literary tradition to demonstrate the significance of Hungarian literature's contribution to European culture. In contrast to László Németh and other contemporaries, who argued that Hungarian writers had become a "minority" in their own country under the dominance of authors of assimilated origins (mainly German and Jewish) and called for purging Hungarian literary history of "antinational" elements,³² Hankiss insisted that Hungarian literature was the product of multiple ethnic backgrounds.³³ Language might still have served as common ground, but this would have excluded works composed in Latin, which Hankiss—as has traditionally been the practice in literary historiography—also treated as part of the Hungarian literary tradition, works that were instrumental in constructing the Hungarian nation and at the same time demonstrated how deeply Hungarians were embedded in European developments.³⁴ For Hankiss, the medieval empire of Saint Stephen, with all its ethnic and linguistic diversity, lay at the heart of the Hungarian nation as a historical construct;³⁵ consequently, its territorial integrity was non-negotiable, and full revision of the Trianon Peace Treaty remained central to his worldview. It is important to note at this point, however, that for him, historical formation carried ontological weight, as the unfolding of a deeper transcendental plan rather than a mere product of circumstance.

The officers of the Hungarian Revisionist League were not wrong to worry about the imperial connotations of Hankiss's work: although he himself occasionally criticized imperialist impulses, imperial imagery did indeed occupy a prominent place in his writings. He frequently drew parallels between the Hungarian state and ancient Rome, emphasizing not military conquest but the integrative capacity to absorb and assimilate the cultures it encountered into a greater whole.³⁶ The similarity was underscored at key points in Hankiss's oeuvre by the claim that, like the Hungarians, the Romans also served as a bridge between the civilizations of East and West. Struck by this continuity, Hankiss created a Hungarian version of the *romanità* myth:³⁷ while he conceded that Rome was "the most rightful heir of the Roman spirit," he nonetheless insisted that "the Hungarian nation, by virtue of a perhaps even more sacred right of 'elective affinity,' fashions for itself a Roman ideal world"³⁸ and "sees in the 'Roman character' its own eternal ideals."³⁹ This character, activist in type, was shaped by a civic mission and the cult of the hero: "in a single formula individualism (the hero, tragic or otherwise, as the unique, inimitable human being) and collectivism (everything for the common good!) could unite. The one may don the full regalia of noble gestures and set ringing the entire carillon of moving words; the other may offer to an astonished posterity the unmatched lessons of order, discipline, and self-sacrifice. An aesthetic and ethical spectacle, the art of life and politics."⁴⁰ The resonance with Italian fascist discourse is unmistakable: by the mid-1930s, and especially at the outbreak of the war, Hankiss was adopting this ideological language almost without filtering, echoing its fusion of individual and collective ideals, its cult of heroism, discipline, and sacrifice, and its vision of politics as an aesthetic-ethical spectacle.⁴¹ In Hankiss's gendered language, the "masculine" beauty of this Roman-Hungarian

31. Cf. Hankiss, *Európa...*, 22; János Hankiss, *Irodalomszemlélet* [A Conception of Literature] (Debrecen: Nagy Károly és Társai, 1934); János Hankiss, "A hangulat" [Mood], *Debreceni Szemle* 15, no. 6 (157) (1941): 125–33; János Hankiss, "Stílusváltás az irodalomban" [Stylistic Change in Literature], *Debreceni Szemle* 15, no. 4 (155) (1941): 71–82.

32. For a detailed discussion of Németh's "conservative revolution" see Péter Csunderlik and Tamás Scheibner, "The Myth of a Judeo-Bolshevik Conspiracy in Hungary, Within and Beyond the Far Right," in *Conspiracy Theories in Eastern Europe: Tropes and Trends*, ed. Anastasiya Astapova, Onoriu Colăcel, Corneliu Pintilescu, and Tamás Scheibner (London: Routledge, 2021), 97–101.

33. János Hankiss, "Irodalom és nemzeti jelleg" [Literature and National Character], *Debreceni Szemle* 15, no. 8 (159) (1941): 181–94.

34. Hankiss, *Európa...*, 32.

35. János Hankiss, *Nemzetkép és irodalomkutatás* [National Image and Literary Studies] (Budapest: Minerva, 1932); Hankiss, "Irodalom és nemzeti jelleg," 188.

36. János Hankiss, *A magyar génusz* [The Hungarian Genius] (Budapest: Székesfőváros, 1941); János Hankiss, "Mit jelent nekünk a magyar irodalom?" [What Does Hungarian Literature Mean to Us?], *Magyar Lélek* 4, no. 8 (1942): 359–64.

37. Emilio Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 59.

38. János Hankiss, "Az olasz-magyar irodalmi kapcsolatok jellemképe" [A Characterization of Italian–Hungarian Literary Relations], *Olasz Szemle* 1, no. 5 (1942): 650.

39. János Hankiss, "Kelet és Nyugat közt" [Between East and West], pt. 1, *Debreceni Szemle* 17, no. 8 (183) (1943): 171.

40. Hankiss, "Az olasz-magyar..." 649.

41. Cf. Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity*; Ulrich Schmid, "Style versus Ideology: Towards a Conceptualisation of Fascist Aesthetics," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6, no. 1 (2005): 127–40.

character exerted an extraordinary attraction on the sons of other nations, who wished, without any compulsion, to become Hungarian, and through Hungarian culture to gain access to the intellectual treasures of the West.⁴² Yet the question remains: if the vision was so compelling, why did it fail to hold together?

He located both the disintegration of the Hungarian state and the chief obstacle to revision—consistent with what was virtually the official view in foreign policy circles of the post-Trianon Hungarian state—in the international perception of the Magyars, which he attributed to the wartime and prewar subversive propaganda of the empire's nationalities, above all the Czech émigré circles.⁴³ While he did not treat this perception as the sole cause of disintegration, he regarded it as a crucial contributing factor. From this followed one of the foremost tasks of comparative literature as he conceived it: to survey foreign impressions of Hungary, in methodological continuity with French imagology and inspired also by the Hungarian Romanist Sándor Eckhardt. Hankiss's premise was that a misleading image had taken root abroad, namely that the Magyars had oppressed their nationalities, whereas—in a judgment not without contradiction to his views on the irresistible attraction of Hungarian culture—he argued that the very dissolution of the Hungarian state proved that the Magyars had in fact left the nationalities “altogether too much” freedom to develop their own culture.⁴⁴

To see what significance literature had in Hankiss's vision, we need to address the type of national ontology he developed,⁴⁵ which lay, more or less hidden, at the root of his thinking as a comparatist. He also had a stake in the pan-European sport of rethinking the continent's past and future. Hankiss regarded the Hungarian people as living proof of the vitality of European (Christian/Western) civilization, since that civilization had managed to unfold “within the flourishing life of a people that came from the East.”⁴⁶ At the same time, this vitality rested on European culture's unparalleled adaptability, unfolding in a rainbow of diverse forms that Hankiss celebrated. In sharp opposition to Spengler's vision of a declining West, which he dismissed as misguided pessimism, Hankiss portrayed European culture as resilient, capable of continual revival and self-renewal.

For this reason, Hankiss's assessment of the avant-garde was complex: while his cultural conservatism recoiled from, for example, Dadaism,⁴⁷ and he welcomed the postwar return of literature to a less experimental course, at the same time he not only recognized—among the very first—the most daring Hungarian achievements of avant-garde prose (e.g., Miklós Szentkuthy's *Prae*),⁴⁸ but also explicitly integrated the avant-garde into the logic of his recurring reflections on European vitality. For Hankiss, virtually everything became proof that Europe, which seemed to have strayed from the path of development, was in fact “healing.” Even the rise of provocative (and, thus, for Hankiss unappealing) naturalism or of the psychological novel (which he also regarded with great suspicion) appeared to him as a symptom of this process: instruments of confrontation and self-examination for the “European soul,” necessary stations on the road to resurrection.⁴⁹

This idea of resurrection played a central role in Hankiss's worldview and drew nourishment from several sources. One of these was the post-Trianon perspective: amid the “national mourning” caused by the collapse of historic Hungary, Hankiss was seized by a voluntarist optimism. Rather than dwelling on the irreparable loss, he emphasized that, contrary to the darkest predictions, the Hungarian people had survived repeated historical cataclysms. From this fact he inferred that society's latent energies could once again be mobilized and revived. This conviction was not merely secular in tone but carried unmistakable religious overtones, which Hankiss himself made explicit: the very survival of the Magyars against all odds stood, in his eyes, as divine proof that God had a plan for this nation. In this way he revived a romantic topos, transfiguring the fear of national death into evidence of providential election. By this inversion, and by a logic parallel to the one through which he argued for the vitality of Europe as a whole, Hankiss was able to ascribe to the Hungarians a complex and multifaceted ‘mission,’ which was historical, cultural, and spiritual at once.⁵⁰

This mission contained both conservative and modern elements. Hankiss was deeply influenced by the then-widespread notion of the ‘complete man’ (*teljes ember*), which was ultimately of religious origin. While he accepted

42. Hankiss, “A magyar irodalom Európában,” 191–92.

43. Ibid., 193. See also János Hankiss, “Szellemi fegyverek” [Intellectual Weapons], *Debreceni Szemle* 3, no. 3 (1929): 127.

44. Hankiss, *A magyar géniusz*, 58.

45. Reviewing Tibor Joó's *A magyar nemzeteszme* [The Idea of the Hungarian Nation] (Budapest: Franklin-Társulat, 1939), Hankiss described Joó's account of the nation—defined not by land, blood, or language, but by spirit, lifestyle, inner disposition, and the acceptance of national vocation—as “the most elevated and the most appropriate conception, than which nothing could guide us more surely on the reef-sea of 1940.” H. V. [János Hankiss], “Egy olvasó jegyzeteiből” [From a Reader's Notes], *Magyar Lélek* 2, no. 1 (1940): 47.

46. Hankiss, *A magyar géniusz*, 19.

47. Hungarus Viator [János Hankiss], “Francia könyvszemle” [A Review of French Books], *Debreceni Szemle* 1, no. 5 (1927): 316–18.

48. Jean Hankiss, *Défense et illustration de la littérature* (Paris: Sagittaire, 1936), 184.

49. Hankiss, *Európa...*, 463.

50. E.g., Hankiss, *A magyar géniusz*, 60.

the common idea that the modern individual, shaped within the homogenizing environment of industrial civilization, was fragmented, he argued that the more archaic forms of aesthetic experience had nevertheless been preserved most strongly in Europe by the Hungarians (and, naturally for the Francophile Hankiss, by the French).⁵¹ This, he suggested, was evident in their realization of a distinctive lifestyle in which—contrary to the utilitarian spirit of the age—culture, the cultivation of individuality, and its performative enactment played a central role. Hankiss was repeatedly preoccupied with the exoticization of Hungarians in the eyes of Western nations, who tended to associate them with images of passion.⁵² While this trope had been echoed so persistently that it became inescapable, Hankiss sought to recast it in constructive terms: rather than mere passion, he stressed the ‘dynamism’ (*dinamizmus*) of the Hungarian lifestyle, a notion that, for him, became a central category in his understanding of culture and literature.

The notion received its fullest articulation in Hankiss’s 1939 essay “A dinamizmus” [Dynamism], in which he brought together dynamism, romanticism, and the Hungarian character as facets of a single underlying principle. For him, romanticism was not to be defined by themes, doctrines, or forms, but by an excess of force: an intensified sense of being alive, a surplus of vitality that constantly strains against established limits.⁵³ This dynamism, erupting like a volcano or flashing like electricity into lightning, constituted the true essence of romanticism. Crucially, Hankiss did not confine romanticism to the nineteenth century; it was, rather, a transhistorical mode that reappears whenever this dynamic impulse breaks through established forms, whether in Gothic, Baroque, or Expressionist art—an ‘eternal Romanticism.’ Hankiss saw this dynamism as finding its most natural home in Hungarian literature. The Hungarian spirit, he insisted, was ‘eternally romantic,’ shaped by historical experience, language, and literary habits that favored intensity and force. Even works designed to embody classical restraint acquired a romantic charge in Hungarian, their style swinging, uneven, yet explosive. Variety (*változatosság*) here was more than mere stylistic richness: for Hankiss it signaled vitality (*életetű*), a restless energy constantly seeking new expression.⁵⁴ This, he argued, explained why Hungarian prose and drama so often pulsed with inner tension and why their greatest achievements, from József Katona to Dezső Szabó, were marked by forceful directness and passion.

Read in this light, dynamism carried significant implications. It exemplified an ethos of resistance to the flattening tendencies of industrial modernity. Its value, so the theory goes, lay in its capacity to embody a distinctly European mode of life, one that preserved archaic intensities while simultaneously opening paths of cultural renewal. In redefining Hungarian ‘dynamism’ in these terms, Hankiss transformed the nation’s alleged marginality into a privileged vantage point from which to affirm, rather than to cast doubt upon, its full belonging to the West. This conception also prepared the ground for his reading of Imre Madách’s *Az ember tragédiája* (*The Tragedy of Man*, 1861), where Adam becomes the literary embodiment of restless striving, volatility, and refusal to abandon hope: the same qualities that defined Hungary’s ‘eternal dynamism.’⁵⁵ In Hankiss’s interpretation, Adam’s traits are at once deeply Hungarian and unmistakably European, so that the drama itself becomes the clearest demonstration of how the Hungarian and the European character were not opposed but essentially identical.

But Adam’s constructive dynamism did not stand alone. For Hankiss, its meaning emerged most sharply in contrast to the other protagonist of the play, Lucifer, whom Hankiss read as the destructive face of Romanticism. He associated this figure with the French strain of Romanticism, above all as articulated in Victor Hugo’s preface to *Cromwell* (1827), where the grotesque, joined to the sublime, was elevated as central to modern art. These are the features that Adam, in Hankiss’s interpretation, found intolerable in the *Tragedy*, since they clashed with his integrity and consistency. For Hankiss, this aesthetic orientation was inseparable from the legacy of the French Revolution, which he consistently condemned as the harbinger of Europe’s decline: it symbolized the dissolution of spiritual unity, unleashing excess and mockery. In this he diverged sharply from his ally in French comparativism, Paul Hazard, who in *La Crise de la conscience européenne* (1935) had treated the intellectual upheaval of 1680–1715, which paved the way for the Enlightenment, as a creative reconfiguration of Europe’s spirit. Where Hazard emphasized renewal through crisis, Hankiss insisted that the French Revolution marked disintegration and decline. Against it he contrasted the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–49, which he celebrated as a paradigmatic instance of dynamism turned toward national emancipation and moral renewal. In Hankiss’s argument, *The Tragedy of Man* was not merely a literary monument but the symbolic stage on which the Hungarian vocation to mediate between destructive and constructive forces was dramatized.⁵⁶ In aesthetic form, it rendered the same pattern of tension

51. Hankiss, *A magyar génusz*, 42–43.

52. Hankiss, *Nemzetkép és irodalomkutatás*, 16.

53. János Hankiss, “A dinamizmus” [Dynamism], *Debreceni Szemle* 13, no. 2 (1939): 63–93. For the vitality discourse see also János Hankiss, “A magyar preromantikából” [From Hungarian Pre-Romanticism], *Debreceni Szemle* 16, no. 8 (1942): 169–83.

54. Hankiss, “A dinamizmus,” 87.

55. Jean Hankiss, “La Tragédie de l’homme: L’Adam hongrois,” *Revue des études hongroises* 13, nos. 1–4 (1935): 262–68.

56. Cf. Hankiss, *Európa...*, 454, 461.

and synthesis that Hankiss elsewhere placed at the center of Hungary's European mission.

On this moralist distinction between the French and Hungarian revolutions, Hankiss followed the interpretive framework of Sándor Eckhardt's *A francia forradalom eszméi Magyarországon* (1924), which had argued that the French Revolution's slogans reached Hungary in a distorted form and, precisely because of the country's deep Christian embeddedness, were reshaped into a moral-national idiom rather than into secular radicalism.⁵⁷ Hankiss stretched this distinction: in France the Revolution gave rise to destructive romantic currents, while in Hungary the very constraints of religion transformed revolutionary dynamism into an edifying force uniting national renewal with moral seriousness. *The Tragedy of Man* thus staged not only this contrast but the deeper rhythm of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis that Hankiss saw as characteristic of the Hungarian spirit itself.⁵⁸ The destructive and the constructive were not mere opposites, like the swing of a pendulum; they formed the dialectical poles whose tension could drive toward synthesis. In this way Hungarians featured as the privileged medium of a process that was at once historical and transhistorical: rooted in national experience yet pointing toward a European destiny under the arc of a providential plan.⁵⁹

Hankiss's treatment of romanticism thus contains an inherent tension: he celebrates its dynamism when it fuels constructive national projects but grows wary when it manifests as a subversive or destabilizing force. Romanticism, as he defines it, is pure surplus energy. Yet whether this energy builds or undermines depends on its use. This selective embrace reveals a deeper ambiguity toward modernity itself: Hankiss welcomes revolutionary energies that empower the nation, but distrusts those that unsettle cultural unity or established values.

Undoubtedly, as previously noted, Hankiss's discourse resonates with interwar fascist idioms. This is especially true of fascist regenerationism, with its celebration of vitality, discipline, and cultural mission. Fascist modernity consistently framed itself as a project of spiritual and national renewal through the channeling of excess energy into order.⁶⁰ Avant-garde fascism in France deployed myth and aesthetic order to attract intellectuals with vitalist imagery,⁶¹ and, similarly, Florentine modernists embraced fascism as a way of channeling creative energies into organized collective projects.⁶² Hankiss's vocabulary of *dinamizmus* (dynamism) and *erőttöbblet* (surplus of force) clearly overlaps with this discourse.

This overlap turned into straight and enthusiastic expressions of admiration in his Hungarian literary history for the Italian public. He dedicated the *Storia della letteratura ungherese* (1936) to Mussolini "in whose words and deeds we Hungarians recognize a marvelous expression of ancient Roman spirit and of a life wholly modern and pioneering," and who is "the ideal man whom we would wish the Magyar of the new era—as foretold in the literature of our people—to emulate, with the hope that through him our two sister nations may be ever more united and may flourish."⁶³ Hankiss did not stop here. He even took the trouble to weave Mussolini's character into the body of the work, claiming that the basic principle of the nineteenth-century Hungarian national poet Sándor Petőfi's oeuvre had become a philosophical and practical "truth" through Mussolini's works, which pointed the way for entire nations.⁶⁴ Although Hankiss expressed the conviction that Hungarian cultural propaganda should take its audience into account and tailor its message accordingly,⁶⁵ such passages went beyond polite diplomacy. This is especially so because in this framework Mussolini practically became the medium through which the Hungarian nation extended its mission into a pan-European—or, who knows, maybe global?—project. These passages reveal Hankiss's genuine sympathy for what he took to be fascism's ability to hold society together: to keep social order,

57. Sándor Eckhardt, *A francia forradalom eszméi Magyarországon* [The Ideas of the French Revolution in Hungary] (Budapest: Franklin-Társulat, 1924), 45–47, 112.

58. Hankiss, "Irodalom és nemzeti jelleg," 191; Hankiss, *Európa...*, 479.

59. Hankiss's conception of national vitality as a cycle of despair and renewal, framed under the arc of a hidden providence, is perhaps even better understood not in generic Christian but in specifically Protestant (Lutheran) terms. His own Evangelical (Lutheran) background makes this resonance particularly striking, even though in print he generally cultivated an ecumenical idiom. Luther's theology of *Anfechtung* already emphasized the believer's oscillation between despair over sin and renewed trust in divine grace. See David P. Scaer, "The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther's Thought," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1983): 15–30; M. Vernon Begalke, "Luther's *Anfechtungen*: An Important Clue to His Pastoral Theology," *Consensus* 8, no. 3 (1982): 3–17. On Luther's insistence that even apparent chaos falls under divine providence, see Susan E. Schreiner, "Certainty and Security in Martin Luther's Theology," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford University Press, March 29, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.348>. For the national dimension, Hugh McLeod ("Christianity and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Europe," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 15, no. 1 [2015]: 7–22) shows how Protestant frameworks were frequently mobilized to give nations a providential vocation. Hankiss's attribution of Hungary's survival to a divine plan aligns closely with this Protestant logic of election and vocation, though reinterpreted in national terms. Further, it is difficult to avoid resonances with a Protestant tradition in Hungary that construed the Hungarian nation as part of God's elect, a divine vocation realized through historical suffering and revival.

60. Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, 8–12.

61. Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909–1939* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 45–49.

62. Walter L. Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 17–22.

63. Giovanni [János] Hankiss, *Storia della letteratura ungherese*, trans. Filippo Faber (Turin: Paravia, 1936), dedication.

64. Hankiss, *Storia della letteratura ungherese*, 172.

65. Hankiss, *A kultúrdiplomácia alapvetése*, 31–38.

to discipline individual excesses, and to give culture a mission through a commitment to popular education.⁶⁶

Yet to acknowledge this resonance is not to conflate Hankiss with fascist ideology. Benjamin Martin has shown how fascist Italy built “illiberal cultural networks” that sought to aestheticize politics and redefine the relationship between culture, community, and the state.⁶⁷ Hankiss’s admiration for order⁶⁸ and cultural mission belongs in this conceptual neighborhood, but his other commitments complicate any simple identification. He was an ecumenical Christian bourgeois intellectual, wary of materialism and rebellion after the experience of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919, convinced that Europe’s renewal had to be religious and cultural, not violent, and promoted the values of tolerance and freedom throughout his works—so much so that his students remembered him as an open-minded liberal or liberal conservative,⁶⁹ certainly very far from an exclusionist and militarist ethos. Unlike most fascist ideologues, he prized *változatosság* (variety) as the sign of *életetű* (vitality), a principle that does not sit well with totalitarian regimentation. What may look like fascist affinities in Hankiss’s vocabulary—his emphasis on *dinamizmus* and *erőttöbblet*—is best situated against the wider intellectual background of *Lebensphilosophie*. Thinkers such as Bergson framed human existence in terms of vitality, creativity, and surplus force, often casting crisis as the motor of cultural renewal.⁷⁰ Hankiss’s idiom resonates with this repertoire, especially in his frequent recourse to images of dynamic change and the instinct for new forms.

The German George Circle elaborated a similar idiom of vitality, discipline, and above all *Männlichkeit*. Its vision of heroic male community, sustained by order and aesthetic form,⁷¹ finds echoes in Hankiss’s language of Hungarian national character as essentially masculine. Yet the contrast with fascism, and the reason Hankiss cannot be collapsed into it, lies in the orientation of this vitality. The Circle remained elitist, cultivating closed hierarchies of disciples;⁷² fascism sought mass mobilization and political regimentation. Hankiss, unlike both, translated the idiom of vitality into a pedagogical project. Through cultural diplomacy, comparatist teaching, and his summer universities, he aimed to educate audiences, Hungarian and foreign alike, toward an international horizon, convinced that the transmission and reception of literature were as vital as its production.

Hankiss’s touchstones among interwar European essayists belonged to the discourse of what contemporaries often called the “crisis of Europe.” Paul Valéry, whom he often cited as a central authority, set the tone with his “Crisis of the Mind” (1919), diagnosing the exhaustion of Europe’s cultural forms and calling for lucidity, intellectual discipline, and exactitude as antidotes to dissolution.⁷³ In a different register, Lucien Romier emphasized order, civic discipline, and cultural consolidation as safeguards against chaos.⁷⁴ French Catholic revivalists, from Maritain to Bernanos and Mauriac, added a religious inflection to this discourse, insisting that Europe’s renewal required spiritual foundations and moral discipline.⁷⁵ In parallel, Max Scheler cast the crisis in phenomenological terms, arguing that only when surplus vital energies were integrated into higher-order communities could genuine cultural and moral renewal be achieved.⁷⁶

66. Cf. H. V. [Hankiss], “Egy olvasó jegyzeteiből,” 45–48.

67. Benjamin G. Martin, “Fascist Italy’s Illiberal Cultural Networks: Culture, Corporatism and International Relations,” in *Genealogie e geografie dell’anti-democrazia nella crisi europea degli anni Trenta: Fascismi, corporativismi, laburismi*, ed. Laura Cerasi (Venice: Edizioni Ca’ Foscari, 2019), 138, 156.

68. Cf., e.g., János Hankiss, “Az írásmű szerkezete” [The Structure of the Written Work], *Debreceni Szemle* 15, no. 2 (153) (1941): 28–41.

69. E.g., Miklós Vásárhelyi, oral history interview by Gábor Hanák, March 26, 1990, OSZK Történeti Interjúk Tára [Hungarian National Library, Collection of Historical Interviews], no. 114; Endre Bajomi Lázár, “Hankiss János,” in *Hankiss János (1893–1959)*, comp. Valéria Szénássyné Ludányi (Debrecen: Kossuth Lajos Tudományegyetem Könyvtára, 1987), 7–11.

70. Henri Bergson, *L’évolution créatrice* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1907); Frederick C. Beiser, *Philosophy of Life: German Lebensphilosophie 1870–1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

71. Robert E. Norton, *Secret Germany: Stefan George and His Circle* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 119–23; Ute Oelmann, “The George Circle: From Künstlergesellschaft to Lebensgemeinschaft,” in *A Poet’s Reich: Politics and Culture in the George Circle*, ed. Melissa S. Lane and Martin A. Ruehl (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2011), 28–29, 33–34; Michael M. Metzger, “In Zeiten der Wirren: Stefan George’s Later Works,” in *A Companion to the Works of Stefan George*, ed. Jens Rieckmann (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), 116; Norton, *Secret Germany*, 492, 498–500.

72. Kai Kauffmann, “Das Leben Stefan Georges. Biographische Skizze,” in *Stefan George und sein Kreis: Ein Handbuch*, ed. Achim Aurnhammer, Wolfgang Braungart, Stefan Breuer, and Ute Oelmann, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2016), 54; Norton, *Secret Germany*, 275.

73. Paul Valéry, “La crise de l’esprit,” *La Nouvelle Revue française* 13, no. 71 (August 1, 1919): 321–37. See also Mark Hewitson and Matthew D’Auria, eds., *Europe in Crisis: Intellectuals and the European Idea, 1917–1957* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012); Balázs Trencsényi, *Intellectuals and the Crisis of Politics in the Interwar Period and Beyond: A Transnational History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025).

74. Lucien Romier, *Nation et civilisation*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Simon Kra, 1926), 104–6, 163–69; Romier, *L’Homme nouveau: Esquisse des conséquences du progrès* (Paris: Hachette, 1929), 173–74.

75. For the postwar continuation of this Catholic diagnosis, see Mark Hewitson, “Inventing Europe and Reinventing the Nation-State in a New World Order,” in Hewitson and D’Auria, *Europe in Crisis*, 73–74; see also Jean-Luc Barré, *François Mauriac: Biographie intime*, vol. 1, 1885–1940 (Paris: Fayard, 2009).

76. Edward Baring, *Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 116–48, esp. 121–23, 135–36.



Taken together, these strands show that the language of crisis, discipline, and renewal, whether vitalist, religious, cultural, or all of these together as in Hankiss's idiosyncratic mind, was not monopolized by fascist movements but was part of a much broader European repertoire. Hankiss's idiom overlapped with this discourse, but it was in several ways closer to Valéry's ethic of self-limitation, Romier's concern for civic order, the Catholic search for spiritual foundations, or Scheler's phenomenological vitalism than to the authoritarian or biologized variants. That Hankiss could write in the same idiom of vitality and mission as Mussolini while also referencing and reusing Europe's trendsetting humanist intellectuals' phrases is not simply a contradiction to be explained away. It points to the porousness of the interwar intellectual field, where languages of renewal and cultural mission circulated across political divides. Hankiss's case shows how comparative literature's universalist claims could be articulated through idioms that resonated simultaneously with fascist regenerationism and with Christian-humanist or liberal Europeanist projects.

Hankiss, subscribing to Ortega y Gasset's fear of the masses, was never an unqualified supporter of democracy. His efforts, while open to broad sections of a society that he regarded as essentially classless,⁷⁷ were nonetheless directed toward nurturing and disciplining a new cultural elite that could embody Hungary's mediating mission in Europe. This outlook helps explain why he accepted a government position during the Second World War. Appointed in April 1943, he served in Prime Minister Miklós Kállay's government with the rank of state secretary in the Ministry of Religion and Public Education, supervising its departments for international cultural relations and for adult education, and remained in office until the German occupation of Hungary on March 19, 1944, after which he left the post. In May 1944 the University of Debrecen elected him rector for the 1944–45 academic year, an office he resigned in May 1945.

The Kállay government sought to distance Hungary from the Third Reich and, albeit covertly, to prepare an exit from the war.⁷⁸ Cultural diplomacy played a significant role in this strategy: on a symbolic level, emphasizing Hungary's historical ties to European humanism gained importance. Hankiss's international horizon, diplomatic skills, and contacts were considered valuable for presenting Hungary's case to Western audiences in literary and cultural terms. His earlier insistence that Hungarian literature had always carried a pro-European orientation could thus be reactivated in the service of a political agenda that aimed to dissociate Hungary from German cultural hegemony and re-anchor it in the Latin-Christian and humanist tradition of the West, while not alienating potential allies, above all Italy, which figured prominently in Kállay's delicate balancing strategy. This was not only a wartime maneuver, but also a preparation for the postwar settlement, when the revision of borders would inevitably return to the agenda. In this sense, Hankiss was preparing to stand at the diplomatic front line of the Second World War, much as he had done after the First.

The Nazi occupation prevented him from playing any role in the negotiations at the end of the war, just as it prevented Hungary from changing sides, if that ever was a real possibility. Nevertheless, this political episode serves as a reminder that, in Hankiss's world, comparative literature carried the highest stakes: securing for the Hungarians a leading role in the Danube region. In his writings, he advanced a bold linguistic argument that underpinned his broader cultural and political claims: Hungarian, he insisted, was the European language *par excellence*, in which the diverse streams of world literature could converge without obstruction, since it alone was capable of accommodating all three systems of versification: accentual, quantitative, and syllabic.⁷⁹ In a striking metaphor, he likened this advantage to living simultaneously among the architectural treasures of Athens, Rome, and Paris.⁸⁰ This was a modern variant of a rhetoric long familiar in European literary politics: Goethe and the German classicists had extolled German as the natural mediator of *Weltliteratur*; French writers insisted that France remained the civilizational center of Europe; and, later, the Soviets would claim Moscow as the rightful heir to the European literary tradition.⁸¹ On this basis, Hungarian literature possessed core European qualities that entitled it to stand on a par with the major literatures of Europe. The existential complement to this linguistic claim was that Hungarian literature posed Europe's common questions of destiny more sharply than any other, precisely because of Hungary's history of fracture and survival. In this way, Hankiss's international vision ultimately reinforced his nationalist framework: Hungary's claim to universal mediation itself became the mark of its unique historical mission.

After 1945, Hankiss's trajectory diverged sharply from his interwar prominence. The devastated intellectual landscape of Europe, and then the hardening of the Iron Curtain, drastically curtailed the transnational presence he had once cultivated. Removed from his university position, he spent the rest of his life working as a librarian,

77. Hankiss, *Európa...*, 72.

78. Nicholas Kállay, *Hungarian Premier: A Personal Account of a Nation's Struggle in the Second World War* (1954; repr., Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970), 174–202, 237–59; Gyula Juhász, *Hungarian Foreign Policy, 1919–1945* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1979), 208–84. See also Béla Bodó, "Caught between Independence and Irredentism: The 'Jewish Question' in the Foreign Policy of the Kállay Government, 1942–1944," *Hungarian Studies Review* 43, nos. 1–2 (2016): 83–126.

79. Hankiss, *Európa...*, 494.

80. Hankiss, *A magyar génusz*, 109.

81. See, e.g., Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

his opportunities for publication and travel reduced to a tiny fraction of what they had been. Though occasionally remembered abroad, he became increasingly isolated in Stalinist Hungary. His earlier role as organizer and mediator of comparative literature lingered as a reference, but he could participate only intermittently and under state restriction.

Comparative literature's formative internationalism was never ideologically pure. In Hankiss, the same comparatist drive that built journals, congresses, and curricula also naturalized a nationalist ontology, framed Hungary as a providential mediator, and borrowed freely from interwar regenerationist idioms. His *Tragedy of Man* hermeneutics and his linguistic exceptionalism both show how universalist claims could be harnessed to territorial and civilizational arguments. None of this is reducible to fascism, but neither is it separable from the political culture that made fascism plausible to many contemporaries. The lesson is not that the field was "really" authoritarian; it is that the discipline's universalist rhetoric functioned, often effectively, as a tool within nationalist projects that were themselves ethically ambivalent. The case of Hankiss makes visible how comparative literature's early universalism could be structured by a trans/national ontology: one in which the universal was not opposed to the national but articulated through it. Naming this pattern allows us to see more clearly how the discipline's historical entanglements shaped its conceptual foundations, and how present-day comparatism might critically inherit, or decisively refuse, that legacy.

Hankiss's trajectory exposes fault lines in the discipline's historical memory. Post-1945 comparatism, especially in the United States, recoded itself as liberal and anti-historicist, pruning its interwar lineages to fit a safer genealogy. Restoring figures like Hankiss forces us to see that institutional successes, methodological habits, and even cherished topoi such as mediation and Europeaness were co-produced with illiberal premises. A historically responsible comparative literature will not sanitize these entanglements; it will name them, analyze how they shaped objects and methods, and specify what we inherit and what we refuse. Only then can claims to universality be advanced without repeating the old confections of cultural authority with political destiny.

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