

## Foreword

*On the surface A Hungarian Romance, Ágnes Hankiss' first novel, is about a passionate love triangle of two men and a woman, their joy, anguish and treachery, played out against the backdrop of a violent seventeenth-century Transylvania.*

*However, this masterfully layered book has more ambitious goals. Hankiss is preoccupied with the invisible history of the "universal soul" and with the problem of the eternally returning archetype as it can be represented in literature. That is why she turned from her chosen profession, psychology - of the Jungian kind - to belles lettres, where the cognitive sciences impose no limitations on her creative talent.*

*Hankiss is fascinated by the process, as she puts it elsewhere, "how each link fits into the eternal chain of history"; by which she does not mean a spatial or temporal completeness. In her concept a random word or an abortive gesture may have more profound meaning or value as truth than entire biographies or precisely described sequences of action. Nothing is inconsequential, no matter how tiny; nothing that has ever existed can be anachronistic. In her novel Hankiss moves freely among people, places and periods because for her everything is connected. Just as public history invades the private sphere, so does the eternal break into the*

*temporal and into its soul space.*

*Hankiss' work is even more remarkable for being written in a country where until recently originality was suspect, and where women's role in life and letters has for centuries been relegated to backstage. A Hungarian Romance is bold and liberated in spirit, and entirely independent artistically. Hankiss draws on the best narrative traditions of Hungarian fiction, but she does so in order to subvert them for her own stylistic purposes. In the novel, baroque prose alternates with spare discourse, underscoring or restraining the tension created by the protagonists and by history.*

*Regarding the author's role in the text, Hankiss believes in "a state of grace" and in the unavoidable mirroring of a part of herself in each of her characters. Thus to the question of what is autobiographical in this novel, she can honestly answer, "Everything and nothing".*

*Above all Hankiss makes it clear for the reader that an artist has been here, and that the artist is more important than any subject. This is, I submit, the essence of modernity in the arts.*

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## Introduction

Ágnes Hankiss' novel consists of two discrete narratives, a "history" and a "herstory". The former is a fictionalised account of real events, wherein all the characters mentioned actually existed. The latter is a domestic drama, therefore invisible in the history books. Hankiss' powerful "herstory" speaks for itself; but it is necessary to give some background to the "History Lessons" in this book, for the benefit of those readers not familiar with Hungary's complex past.

During the historical period covered by the novel, Hungary was divided into three parts. The Battle of Mohács in 1526 - where King Louis of Hungary was defeated by Suleiman the Magnificent - resulted in nearly two centuries of partition for Hungary. The Turks occupied the heartland of the country, leaving the western fringes of the kingdom to be fought over by local magnates and Ferdinand of Hapsburg, who claimed the Hungarian throne after Louis had perished on the battlefield. Following two decades of fighting, in which the Turkish government of Hungary (the Porte) was also involved, Ferdinand concluded a truce with the Sultan which recognised the Hapsburg claim to the northern and western edges of Hungary in return for tribute paid annually to Constantinople.

Moreover, in 1566 the Sultan proclaimed Transylvania

to be an autonomous principality under his own suzerainty. This allowed the Transylvanians to elect their own ruler, subject to Turkish approval. The spirit of Hungarian national independence was thus kept alive in Transylvania, albeit precariously; for the region was subject to both Hapsburg manipulation and local struggles for power.

When *A Hungarian Romance* opens, in the last decade of the sixteenth century, the Turks occupy most of the old kingdom, the Hapsburg Emperor Rudolf controls its western periphery (to which most of the Hungarian nobility have fled), and Transylvania is ruled by Krisztof Báthory, who is hostile to the Hapsburgs because of their repeated interference in his territory.

The novel begins with a conversation about Mátyás Corvinus, ruler of Hungary from 1458-1490. He was a true Renaissance prince who married the daughter of the King of Naples and represented the old glory and culture of Hungary. The Forgách cousins compare the Mátyás of old with the present Hapsburg Archduke Mátyás and his brother, the eccentric and much distrusted Emperor Rudolf.

For his part Rudolf certainly had little regard for the glories of the Magyar past. He transferred his court from Vienna (where Hungarian affairs were dealt with by the chancellery set up by Ferdinand) to Prague, where Hungarian business could reach the court only at second hand. Moreover, the Emperor was at loggerheads with the Hungarians on religious grounds. After Mohács the spirit of the Reformation, and Protestantism in particular, made inroads into Hungarian society at all levels, especially as many important Catholics had died during the prolonged hostilities. Protestantism even came to embody a spirit of independence in the face of Hapsburg might. By contrast Rudolf's own cousins and uncles had initiated the Counter-Reformation in Inner Austria and

the Tyrol, and this surely would have increased his natural antipathy toward the new doctrine.

Ágnes Hankiss draws a vivid historical picture of Emperor Rudolf at his court in Prague, surrounded by astrologists and scientists (Kepler was one of his circle), searching for the Philosopher's Stone and probing the mysteries of the Cabbala. He was also an avid art collector, and readers of *Utz* will remember that the author Bruce Chatwin's initial desire to visit Prague was inspired by Rudolf's passion for exotica.

Rudolf's clique of military advisors viewed the Hungarians as a band of insolent rebels who should be neutralised at all costs, an attitude which was aggravated by the outbreak in 1591 of the Fifteen Years War. Essentially a conflict with the Turks, it was complicated by the emergence of Transylvania as a distinct political power. By this time Transylvania was controlled by Zsigmond Báthory (Krisztof's son), another unstable character like Rudolf who had allied himself with the Hapsburgs in return for the hand of Rudolf's cousin, Maria Christina.

The Emperor could thus avail himself of the resources of both Transylvania and Hapsburg Hungary, and he felt he could act with impunity in these regions. Many estates were confiscated, land pillaged and populations terrorised. Perhaps the most spectacular event of this type was the seizure of Illésházy's land and his branding as a traitor. Illésházy, Thurzó, Istvánffy and the others all take their proper places in Hankiss' vivid narrative.

The brutality of Rudolf's commanders in Transylvania led István Bocskay, once a devoted supporter of the Hapsburgs, to retaliate by raising an army (called the *Hajduks*) against the Emperor. He drove the Imperial army out of Transylvania and Upper Northern Hungary, everywhere garnering popular support. In 1606 he concluded the Peace of Vienna with Emperor Rudolf.

This left him prince during his lifetime of an enlarged Transylvania and guaranteed the rights of the Protestants in Hapsburg Hungary. Bocskay also mediated the Peace of Zsitvatorok at the end of that year, between the Porte and the Emperor. This unburdened the Hapsburgs of their tribute to the Sultan, but left the territorial partition unaltered. Bocskay died a few weeks later. Poison was rumoured, and the usual struggle for power followed.

Hankiss' "History Lessons" reveal a country that has been divided, overrun and subject to foreign tyranny through centuries, and which has produced factions and conspiracies of Byzantine complexity. The author allows, even emphasises, resonances across the centuries and at times reduces historical figures to type, for example by pointing up the similarity between the Renaissance Bishop Szuhay and later Archbishop Szelepcsényi, whose actions echoed each other though they served different masters and lived in different centuries. Thus Hankiss exposes the "romance" of Hungarian history as essentially a circle of deceit. This motif cuts across both narratives and highlights the "real" romance of Susanna and her personal triumphs and tragedies. Here the historical events are merely the subtext of the story of a woman's journey to eventual self-enlightenment.

Hankiss' intention is further signalled by her references in the novel to Elizabeth Báthory, a noblewoman of the Transylvanian ruling family who has been mythologised as the original vampire, because of her purported habit of bathing in the blood of young girls, and whose crimes were probably distorted during the numerous witch hunts pursued by the Catholics between 1610 and 1630. This should remind us that women have to write their own stories if they are to become truly visible.

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