A case study is usually presented cherishing the hope that it can serve as a starting point for generalizations. My original plan was to include “Eastern Europe” in the title. The reason for my decision to avoid this term is rather simple: it has often been used without paying attention to historical changes. It is a dangerous misconception to assume that the entire modern history of Europe can be presented in terms of an opposition between East and West. To take one example, the assumption that the iron curtain could be viewed as a logical consequence of an earlier division underlies the following declaration: “The optimism of the Enlightenment, its faith in human nature, had failed the test of Eastern Europe.”¹ Such a one-sided interpretation of the Enlightenment and its impact on the Eastern half of Europe is linked to a value judgment that has been discredited by such recent changes as the dissolution of the Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. “Their advocacy in the remaking of the map and the delineation of borders at Versailles,” the same historian writes about R. W. Seton-Watson (“Scotus Viator”) and Harold Nicolson, “marked a high point in the modern history of academic engagement with Eastern Europe.”²

In most imagined communities canonized texts and “great narratives” guarantee continuity. The self-image of Hungarians was at least partly created by Ferenc Kölcsey (1790–1838), the author of Nemzeti hagyományok (National Traditions, 1826), a work that has exerted a decisive influence on the interpretation of Hungarian identity.³ The starting hypothesis in this long essay is that poetry represents the highest form of culture, and the highest form of poetry is “deeply rooted in national traditions” and “stands close to the nation.”⁴ Kölcsey was well-versed in the philosophy of the French Enlightenment. His essay has to be read in the context of the ideas on cultural universalism and relativism formulated by such authors as Montesquieu, Vol-

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² Ibid., 367.
taire, Buffon, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Diderot, Condillac, Helvétius, and Condorcet. One of the possible readings of National Traditions was given by the literary historian János Horváth (1878–1961). According to the hypothesis underlying his early programmatic work Irodalmunk fejlődésének fő mozzanatai (The Main Features of the Evolution of Our Literature, 1908), Hungarian literature had passed through four stages in its history, represented by works written in Hungary, those composed in the Hungarian language, literature with Hungarian content, and works of artistic value. This periodization is inseparable from the idea that the identity of national literatures is the result of their liberation from the influence of the legacy of the Latin Middle Ages. On another level Horváth distinguished between two phases. The second is marked by a self-awareness that involves two factors: a) writers are aware of their predecessors, b) they are aware of their public. In the case of Hungarian culture the dividing line is 1772, the end of the Baroque and the beginning of the Enlightenment. In the first phase one cannot speak of the identity of a national literature, but the origins of a self-reflexive tradition can be traced back to the period prior to the rise of nationalism. In Horváth’s works foreign influences are often underestimated. Local traditions, provincialism, and folklore are regarded as the main sources of inspiration for the Romantics, who are characterized as the founding fathers of the culture of the second phase, proving that the emphasis on art goes together with the cult of originality.

Horváth was a member of the Reformed Church, which had been affected by Pietism in the seventeenth century. This may explain his somewhat ambivalent views on the relations between ethics and aesthetics: he associated the rise of artistic literature with the decline of didacticism but insisted that artistic greatness could never be in conflict with the readers’ moral sense. While Goethe associated Weltliteratur with the future, Horváth assumed that literature had broken free from internationalism before it reached the status of aesthetic autonomy. It is worth noting that in contrast to populist nationalists, he regarded national identity not as an awakening of some dormant ethnicity but as the consequence of institutionalised, education-dependent high culture.

Although interwar Hungary is often characterized by Western commentators as a nationalistic state, the definition of national identity that Antal Szerb (1901–1945) gave in Magyar irodalomtörténet (A History of Hungarian Literature, 1934) is quite different from Horváth’s conception.

Some background information may be necessary for a valid assessment of the historical significance of this work. Till the end of the World War I Transylvania was part of the Hungarian half of the Dual Monarchy. In 1920 the Peace Treaty of Trianon gave this region as well as some neighbouring territories to Romania. As a result, the status of Transylvanian Hungarians had changed: they became a minority. Numerous cultural institutions were set up in response to the new conditions. Among these was a monthly called Erdélyi Helikon (Transylvanian Helicon). In 1930 the editors and sponsors of this journal announced a competition. The goal was to commission a scholar to write a history of Hungarian literature that would emphasize the unity of Hungarian culture, its distinctness from other cultures, and the interrelations between Hungarian literature and the intellectual life of the rest of the world. Each of the eleven