



Introduction: The fifty-year history of *Neohelicon, Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, and beyond

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Our journal's subtitle, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, was the title of the world's first comparative literature periodical. Initially entitled *Összehasonlító Irodalomtörténelmi Lapok*, its cover bore translations of this Hungarian title in five other languages, namely German, French, Italian, English, and Spanish (Fig. 1). It was established by two professors at the University of Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca), founded in 1581 and, after interruptions, re-instated in 1872: the 80-year-old Sámuel Brassai, a scholar of Sanskrit and mathematics, and Hugó Meltzl of Lomnitz, a Germanist-Romanist, half a century younger than Brassai. The editors initially added five translations to the Hungarian title (1877–1878) and subsequently replaced it with Latin, along with ten translations (1879–1888) (Fig. 2). The adjectives added to literature (*vergleichende*, *comparée*, *comparata*, *comparative*, *comparative*, *comparada*, etc.) contributed to the development of an internationally consistent terminology. Transylvania and the Austro-Hungarian Empire provided an ideal environment for the emergence of the comparative approach to literary studies. In that state's territory, the population spoke almost twenty languages, eight or ten of which already had a significant literature of their own. Hungarian, Romanian and German were spoken in and around the town of Kolozsvár.

The faculty members at the university, which was named after Franz Joseph, commenced their work with a modern outlook. Theology, a dominant discipline of the traditional European university structure with four faculties, was replaced by the natural sciences. This adjustment was required due to the multi-religious context of Transylvania. Otherwise, a positional struggle would likely have taken place between the various denominations, notably between Catholics and Protestants. The ethno-linguistic diversity and peaceful coexistence of various nationalities during that era created a favourable environment for broad-spectrum development. Renowned pro-

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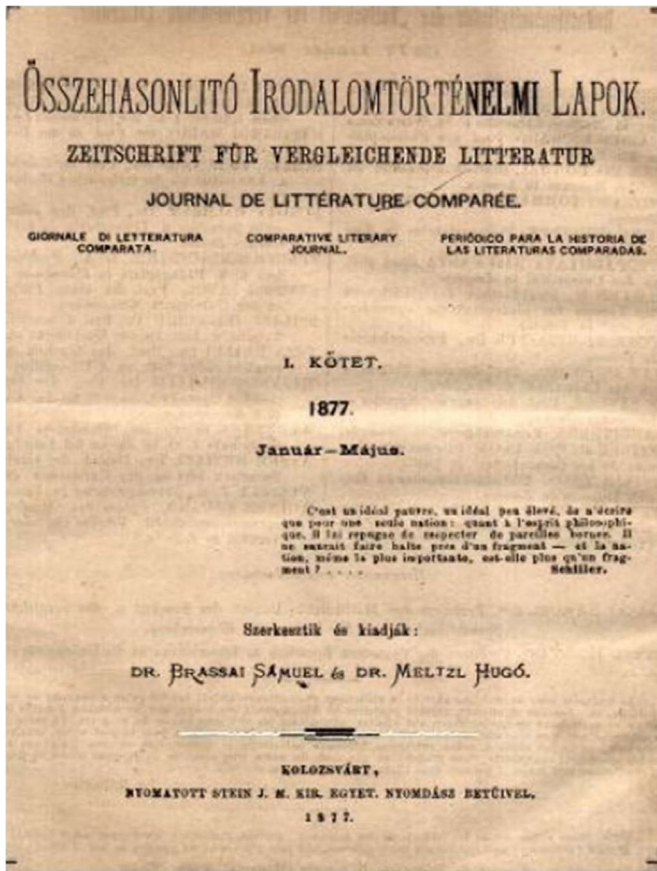
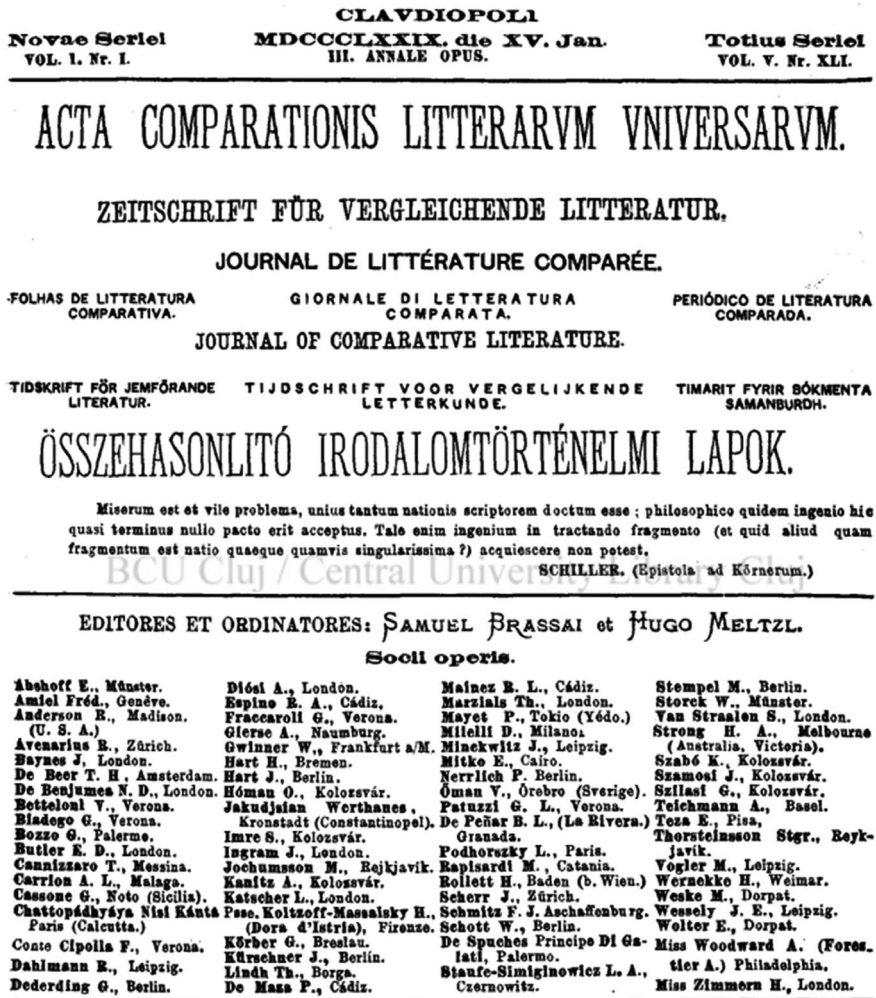


Fig. 1 *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, cover of the first issue

fessors in humanities, many of whom had studied abroad, sought new approaches in that significantly restructured institution.

Hugó Meltzl, a native German, was a colleague and university friend of Friedrich Nietzsche in Leipzig. Sámuel Brassai was a renowned polymath. The territorial distribution and professional esteem of the contributors listed on the journal's front page are proof of the editors' great prestige, and of the significant number of worldwide literary scholars who recognized the need for such a journal (Chevrel, 2021). The journal is often thought of as Meltzl's achievement, while Brassai is acknowledged for providing institutional and financial backing. This comparison presents the young and enthusiastic German returning from the centre, in contrast to the older, provincial Hungarian professor wise enough to comprehend the significance of the other's initiative. More thorough research into the journal's history has recently shown the inaccuracy of this description, and emphasized the pivotal role Brassai played as Meltzl's partner. These insights highlight the significance of the intellectual atmosphere of Kolozsvár at the inception of *Acta Comparationis* (T. Szabó, 2013).

Fig. 2 *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, a cover from 1879

The list of contributors for the first issue (15 January 1877) includes ten names from six different countries. Germany and Italy (Sicily) stood out with four and two contributors respectively, apart from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The polyglot journal mostly used Hungarian, German, French, English, Italian, and Spanish, although other languages were also deemed acceptable for publication. Texts in languages that did not use the Latin alphabet were transliterated. There were two permanent columns, Petőfiana and Schopenhaueriana; Meltzl probably owed his passionate interest in Schopenhauer to Nietzsche. Songs and small poems often appeared in translation in several languages, such as “Reszket a bokor, mert...” by Sándor Petőfi in Romanian, Italian and German (Petőfi, 1877a). The first lyric poem published in the first

issue of the journal is the Italian version of Sándor Petőfi's poem "Il mio pegaso" (My Pegasus) by Pier Giuseppe Maggi (Petőfi, 1877b).

Each study in the history of *Acta Comparationis*¹ (Berczik, 1961; Vajda, 1968; Damrosch, 2006; Fassel, 2005; Fried, 2008; T. Szabó, 2015) highlights its achievement of a synthetic approach (as frequently mentioned by György Mihály Vajda) to "minor" and "major" literatures around the world, emphasising their linguistic and thematic equality, as well as their right to universal interest. After their initial enthusiasm, the representatives of the *république des lettres*—a community that transcended nations and languages—subsequently lost interest in this truly global literary approach. The ideas of Goethe, Schiller, and Herder,² which ushered in a new era, failed to form a successful publishing programme at a young university in a remote Transylvanian town. In the end, the journal's distribution potential was reduced because of declining international and national interest, Brassai's retirement at the age of 86 (1883), and the public's indifference towards the society of comparative literary history Meltzl aimed to establish. The unlimited multilingualism was too challenging for most readers.³ Additionally, editing and writing the *Fontes Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* series, which was started concurrently with the journal, proved to be a daunting task.

The significance of Meltzl and Brassai's *Acta Comparationis* was not fully appreciated in their contemporary scene. *ACLU* was unfairly challenged by a journal launched in Berlin in 1887 with a title quite similar to the *ACLU*'s German name: *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Litteraturgeschichte*. This periodical, edited by Max Koch, had a much narrower scope both in theme and language. As David Damrosch noted, the disparity was considerable:

Koch's journal must have seemed to Meltzl to represent a real step backward, as well as a personal affront. Written entirely in German, its articles were contributed almost exclusively by German scholars, and their emphasis was heavily on German literary relations. (Damrosch, 2006, 110)

When *Neohelicon* was established 85 years later, founding editor György Mihály Vajda sought to revive the spirit of comparative literature as Meltzl and Brassai conceived it, and chose to use their journal's Latin title as a *Neohelicon*'s subtitle. He laid the emphasis on international cooperation, inclusiveness, and multilingualism. One of Vajda's reasons for emphasising the local, East-Central-European traditions of comparative literature was his belief that the Danube Monarchy was one of the natural locations for the inception of this discipline (Vajda, 1995).

The title *Neohelicon* includes Helicon, the Mountain of the Muses in Greek mythology. Not only does this refer to the Greco-Latin literary tradition (which func-

¹ The journal is available online: documente.bcucluj.ro/web/bibdigit/periodice/osszehasonlitoirodalom-tortenelmi.

² Schiller's sentence "*Es ist ein armseliges kleinliches Ideal, für eine Nation zu schreiben*" (Schiller, 2023) repeatedly appeared on the cover. Herder's enthusiasm about folk poetry might have influenced the intensive interest in folklore studies, characteristic of *Acta Comparationis*.

³ It published works or information in over forty languages, and one of the columns was called "Bulletin Polyglotte."

tioned as an eternal golden standard in Goethe's concept of world literature), but also to another Hungarian-based international journal of comparative literature as its predecessor. During the 1928 congress in Oslo held by the International Association of Historical Sciences, the attending literary historians decided to establish the *Commission Internationale d'Histoire Littéraire Moderne* within the association. This committee was the first international association dedicated to literary studies and managed to hold three congresses in the interwar period, in Budapest (1931), Amsterdam (1935), and Lyon (1939). The theoretical and methodological focus of these gatherings marked a milestone in the history of comparative literature, and thanks to the initiative of János/Jean Hankiss, a young and active Hungarian member of the *Commission* (Gorilovics, 1994, p. 132), this newly formed community soon undertook to launch the journal *Helicon*. As *Revue internationale des problèmes généraux de la littérature*, it adopted this new general and theoretical approach in comparative literature (Vajda, 1962, p. 359). It was edited in Debrecen, Hungary by Hankiss, who also served as the *Commission's* secretary. Unfortunately, WWII limited him to publishing only five volumes between 1938 and 1943, as editorial correspondence, including submissions, gradually became impossible.⁴

György Mihály Vajda saw several initiatives in the activity of the *Commission* and Hankiss' *Helicon* which were worth continuation. In 1935, the *Commission* began publishing, under the direction of Paul Van Tieghem, a *Répertoire chronologique des littératures modernes*, a list of the most important literary works published from 1455 to 1900, grouped by year (1937). At the ILCA Congress in Belgrade in 1967, Vajda suggested in his report (with the support of others) the addition of 20th century data to the Van Tieghem volume. Although he was unable to execute this idea under the auspices of the ICLA, he managed to publish the extension twenty-four years later at the University of Szeged (Vajda et al., 1991).

It is important to note that despite Vajda's contributions to Hungarian comparative literature, he was not an isolated figure in contemporary Hungary, but rather part of a motivated and well-prepared generational community. The most prominent representatives of comparative studies in Hungary were graduates and/or teachers of the József Eötvös Collegium in Budapest, founded in 1895 on the model of the École Normale Supérieure, which in the 1930s sought to counterbalance the growing German influence with some French intellectual convergence. The graduates of the Eötvös Collegium had an enormous influence on the literary studies in Hungary after WWII (Bezeczky, 2022, pp. 173-4), and the new generation of comparatists following Jean Hankiss (1893–1959) would already participate in the Utrecht (1961) and Fribourg (1964) congresses of the *Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée*/International Comparative Literature Association, established in the 1950s. Alumni of the Eötvös Collegium, such as István Sötér (1913–1988, who served as ILCA President from 1970 to 1973), György Mihály Vajda (1914–2001, ICLA President from 1982 to 1985), Béla Köpeczi (1921–2010), Tibor Klaniczay (1923–1992), and József Szili (1929–2021), played an increasingly important role in the work of the Association. The shared European culture and values that they acquired at their alma mater, along with their long-standing friendship, prominence and involvement

⁴ For the importance of the *Commission* and *Helicon* for *Neohelicon*, see Hajdu, 2008, pp. 48–49.

in public and political affairs—Béla Köpeczi having held the influential position of Secretary General of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and, later, Minister of Culture between 1982 and 1988—were instrumental in garnering support from both the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and its publisher, and the Hungarian government. This backing, in turn, enabled their routine collaboration with the Western academic community and Vajda's aspirations to establish an international journal.

At the 1964 congress, the idea of global-scope comparative literary history was raised, and Vajda was commissioned to prepare a draft for the next congress in Belgrade ([Vajda], 1969). Following extensive deliberation, the work's title and structure were eventually agreed upon. The volumes of the *Histoire comparée des littératures en langues européennes/ Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages* were prepared by a *Comité de Coordination* set up to carry out the theoretical, methodological and practical work and to make the necessary arrangements. Jacques Voisine chaired the committee, and Vajda served as its secretary. At the time, Vajda published several theoretical and methodological studies on comparative literature (Vajda, 1964, 1974, 1977).

The first volumes of CHLEL (Weisstein, 1973; Vajda, 1982 Balakian, 1984) were published by the publishing house of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Akadémiai Kiadó, in collaboration with John Benjamins. These volumes ranged from the Renaissance to the avant-garde movements, with an international group of contributors. Simultaneously, *Neohelicon* was established, and it published the following mission statement on its inside cover until issue XXVII/2 (2000) adhering to the original objective:

Elle a été crée par la Maison d'Édition de l'Académie des Sciences de Hongrie afin de promouvoir le projet d'une « Histoire Comparée des Littératures de Langues Européennes » élaboré par l'Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée.

The editorial office was hosted by the Institute of Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Founded in 1956, the Institute was headed until 1983 by István Sötér, and until 1992 by Tibor Klaniczay, both of whom were mentioned above among the alumni of the Eötvös Collegium. After 1967, Miklós Szabolcsi, co-editor-in-chief of *Neohelicon*, held the position of deputy director. The first issues of the journal published comments and reviews of (partly) completed volumes of the CHLEL, stimulated discussion on the papers to be included, and reported on various ICLA events.

Around the time of *Neohelicon's* establishment, György Mihály Vajda was appointed professor at the Attila József University of Szeged. Shortly after, he founded the Department of Comparative Literature. In this way, the new journal was institutionally linked to the University of Cluj's prominent literary research initiative, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, through the person of the editor-in-chief, who determined the character of the journal: University of Szeged, founded in 1921, was the legal successor of the University of Cluj (Pál, 2021). This was one of the reasons why the University of Szeged generously hosted a conference to celebrate the 50th anniversary of *Neohelicon* on 28–30 August, 2023.

Neohelicon's program was announced in the manifesto "Lectori salutem," which was the first publication of the inaugural issue. This document can be viewed as Vajda's creed for comparative literature research, as it serves not only as an invitation but also as a recommendation of research practices: "*La nouvelle revue [...] se propose d'être un organe de recherches concernant la littérature comparée et universelle. Elle désire réaliser cette intention avant tout par l'esprit de ses articles*" ("Lectori salutem" 1973, p. 9). The keywords are: *histoire et théorie littéraire, franchissement des frontières, contexte étendu, méthodologie, synthèse, la primauté à la littérature nationale, région, zones*. Only comparative literary research allows for the study of works initially tied to specific languages and national contexts to develop into Goethe's *Weltliteratur*: "*nous devons nous proposer de regarder tous les phénomènes littéraires sous l'aspect de cette suprême unité*" (p. 12). The primary challenge faced in achieving this is the inherent limitation of acquiring vast linguistic knowledge, which also impeded Meltzl's effort to succeed. In the absence of a "Pentecostal miracle" and whilst also rejecting monolingualism, Vajda suggested simplifying collaboration to two primary languages: the first was Joan of Arc's language, as he liked to call French, and the second was English. These are the official languages of the ICLA. German and Italian also became official languages of *Neohelicon*.⁵

The fifty issues published during the Vajda era covered significant theoretical issues of comparative literature, key intellectual movements, and literary epochs from Renaissance onwards. The journal also encompassed literature from related regions. The founders, György Mihály Vajda and Miklós Szabolcsi, helmed the journal until 1998, during which its editorial principles were established. Each issue concisely indicated a central theme in Latin on its cover. The editors created a system of columns, also with Latin names, such as *Ergasterium* (Workshop), *Speculum* (Mirror), and less frequently *Studia* (Studies) or *Diversa* (Diverse Topics); these columns remained stable for decades, while *Historia Litterarum Europaeorum* (History of Literatures in European Languages) disappeared as the journal loosened its ties to the ICLA and its prestigious project. The use of Latin aims to pay homage to the legacy of *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*.

In 1998, Mihály Szegedy-Maszák and József Pál were among the editors in addition to Vajda and Szabolcsi. József Pál and József Szili took over as editors-in-chief in 1999, and Péter Hajdu joined as managing editor in 2001. After József Szili's resignation (2013), Péter Hajdu took over his work, and Zoltán Z. Varga (2013–2018) and then Simon Estók (2019-) joined the editorial committee as managing editors. Over the years, Akadémiai Publishers has partnered with Maisons d'Édition Mouton, John Benjamins, Kluwer (1998–2004), and since 2005 Springer Publishers. The second 25 years have seen significant changes while maintaining continuity. The journal has successfully adapted to the new digital environment, which has changed the ways of submission, editing, copyediting, proofreading, subscribing, and reading. The range of topics discussed in the articles has broadened considerably. Although *Neohelicon* from the beginnings provided an important forum for the discussion of African literature, in its first 25 years, it seldom published articles on anything other

⁵ During Hungary's socialist era and for a short period thereafter due to usual inertia, Russian-language papers were also published in the journal.

than European and North-European literature. This situation has changed significantly, and a broader, almost global interest in the literatures of the world can be seen in the journal. This is evident not only in the topics discussed, but also in the fact that contributors are drawn from a much more diverse pool than in the past. This is a consequence of the general changes in the field of comparative literature, which has also become much more global. The growth of complit communities in Asia, for example, has been spectacular in recent decades. In this situation, *Neohelicon*, while maintaining its policy of publishing two issues per year, is publishing more articles than ever before, attracting many more submissions, while its acceptance rate has steadily and significantly declined.

The transformation of the Editorial Committee and the Advisory Board also testifies to a more geographically inclusive or open attitude. In the first twenty-five years, the editorial work was done in one building in Budapest, Hungary; today, the three editors work in three different countries (Hungary, China, and South Korea). For a long time, all members of the Advisory Board were recruited from Europe or North America, not as a result of a deliberate strategy of exclusivity, but rather because of the realities of the field. The current Advisory Board is both larger and also much more geographically diverse. It is also worth noting that while in the past the members of the Advisory Board were almost exclusively men, we have recently approached a gender balance.

Neohelicon is pleased to offer guest-edited thematic clusters and collections. Over the past decades, we have established a balanced structure that includes both a thematically focused cluster, which typically features solicited papers, and individual submissions. Literary comparison is essential to this journal, and therefore all submissions must have a comparative aspect, which may be provided by literary theory or translation studies concerning literary translation, as we consider both to be integral to comparative literature. When guest-editors are invited and topics for edited collections are chosen, our intention is to ensure that *Neohelicon* maintains its focus on the most stimulating issues and approaches in comparative literature studies. However, we will not permit the pursuit of novelty to undermine the traditions of the discipline. A comparison of the first and second 25 years in the history of the journal might suggest that the latter has a stronger theoretical focus or consciousness. All of these issues can be illustrated through our ecocritical analyses (“Beyond Thoreau: Literary Response to Nature,” 36(2), 2009, pp. 283–432;⁶ “Contexts and paradigms for ecological engagement,”⁷ 44(2), 2017, pp. 271–444; “The body and the Anthropocene,” 47(1), 2020, pp. 1–96). Ecocriticism is undoubtedly one of the central and most forward-thinking movements in contemporary literary criticism. Two of our special collections took resolutely theoretical positions within the context of ecocriticism.

In 2023, *Neohelicon* marked its 50th anniversary, a noteworthy accomplishment for a journal in the humanities. The journal takes pride in its contributions to the field of comparative literature and its rich history. To commemorate this milestone, we organized a lecture series and two academic conferences. We have also invited the

⁶ Guest-edited by Ning Wang.

⁷ Guest-edited by Robin Chen-Hsing Tsai.

distinguished members of our advisory board, and scholars who are well-acquainted with our periodical, to submit essays reflecting on the history of *Neohelicon* or revisiting and elaborating on topics previously discussed in one of the many thematic issues, clusters or mini-clusters, including particularly significant contributions to the journal. This process led to the development of the collection titled “*Neohelicon 50*.”

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