

Thesis Booklet for PhD Dissertation

Burdened Heritage

Generational Contexts of Hungarian Prose Literature

from the Second Half of the 1950s to the First Half of

the 1980s

Juhász Tibor

Thesis supervisor: Dr. Fodor Péter



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies

Debrecen, 2026

Objectives of the Dissertation and Delimitation of the Topic

In my dissertation, I examine the corpus of Hungarian prose literature from the mid-1950s to the 1980s, with particular attention to the problematics of generationality. My research is primarily oriented toward literary history; accordingly, I approach generationality as a tradition of historical thinking which, according to my initial thesis, was significantly shaped in the second half of the twentieth century by the literary-political strategies of totalitarian state systems. The literary-critical discourse articulated within a controlled public sphere, the thematic choices of literary works, their assigned position within the institutional system of literature, and the processes of canon formation all constitute central objects of reflection in this dissertation. Within this framework, my argument identifies the state party as the most dominant the primary force shaping generational formations, along with those top-down, politically coordinated initiatives that sought to regulate literary processes. At the same time, by placing generationality at the center of

my inquiry, I foreground a concept and interpretive tradition that, in light of shifts in scholarly discourse, now appears somewhat reductive, even slightly anachronistic. In recent decades, reception-historical considerations have proven more productive in questions of periodization and the historical positioning of individual works. While these do not render generational approaches obsolete, they tend to open lines of inquiry that lead away from explicitly generational conclusions. Moreover, alongside the unpredictability of literary socialization and the diversity of authorial careers, scholarly hesitation toward generational frameworks is likely also supported by the recognition that such formations imply a teleological conception of history - one that has become untenable from a postmodern perspective that rejects totalizing views of historical unity.

From the standpoint of literary historiography, this distance from generational categories appears particularly striking, given that generational segmentation has long been one of the most frequently

employed methods of organizing retrospective, systematizing accounts of the past. It appears even more remarkable when compared with the Kádár era, during which literary historiography - like all practices of literary criticism aligned with officially sanctioned, predominantly Marxist expectations - was structured by generational formations grounded primarily in relational and, above all, cultural-political considerations. Through these formations, power sought not only to organize literary discourse but also to define the representational framework of contemporary processes. Although my dissertation does not aim to reconstruct the processes that led to the transformation of scholarly approaches, it must nevertheless reflect on the reasons why literary-historical works sensitive to their own temporality tend to avoid generational categories. One likely explanation is that the evaluative oppositions embedded in such categories - predecessors and successors, old and new, fathers and sons - inevitably activate value judgments that cannot be disentangled from ideological influence and are often accompanied by implicit aesthetic ideologies. In this

light, the reluctance of literary historiography may be understood as rooted in the burdened memory of the framing operations characteristic of the Kádár period. This dynamic is perhaps best captured by the insights of Michel Foucault in *The Order of Discourse*: discourse is a form of power, and literary history - constantly subject to rewriting - becomes a privileged site of the struggles conducted both for and through it. From this perspective, the dissertation conceives of literary history as a construct shaped above all by the interplay of interpretive authorities.

Although the dissertation follows a chronological structure and thus aligns itself with traditions that view literary processes in their temporal continuity, it does not offer a generationally structured literary-historical overview. My aim is not to determine how particular generations turned toward the world within the controlled public sphere of a Soviet-type state - although I do engage with this question where necessary. Rather, my central concern is whether so-called generational experiences themselves became objects of cultural-

political discourse, or whether, conversely, generational formations produced by cultural policy were staged within literary works, creating the illusion of conveying authentic generational experience. In this sense, I do not operate within a generational narrative; instead, I examine an interpretive tradition, since, in my view, the concept of generation and the methods of its application can contribute to a deeper understanding of the literature of the Kádár era. These methods were shaped not least by the institutional structures and public sphere of literature in the period, both of which were fundamentally conditioned by their relationship to state power.

From these considerations it follows that, alongside concepts of generation, the notion of the canon is central to this dissertation. Here, the canon is understood not only as a set of texts privileged by interpretive authorities, but also as ideologically sanctioned modes of speaking about them. Under state-socialist conditions (from the late 1940s to the 1980s), literary canons were shaped not only by censorship but also by party-controlled diskursive practices. The writers

discussed developed their work within dictatorships that sought to regulate both literature and its history, leaving discernible traces on their writing and its reception. The dissertation focuses on authors and texts whose shifting visibility is tied to canon-restructuring processes (often described as the “prose turn”) and to changing interpretive attitudes. As a result, the possibility of aesthetic readerly experience - particularly in the case of István Szabó’s *Minden olyan, mint régen* - is no longer guaranteed today, since discussions of mid-20th-century Hungarian literature remain dominated by political contexts rather than close textual analysis. The study therefore also examines contemporary anthologies as archival sites preserving texts that have lost their canonical status. These developments reflect not only the dissolution of generational perspectives but also the inherent conservatism of the canon, which continues to shape the frameworks of literary interpretation.

The Structure of the Dissertation and the Methods Employed

The chapters are organized according to a dual structure. Literary-historical discussions focusing on the transitional periods between the 1950s and 1960s, the 1960s and 1970s, and the 1970s and 1980s are presented in subchapters of a case-study nature, concentrating on anthologies, symposia, and concepts and formations in literary criticism and historiography. These are followed by reception-historical analyses centered on selected texts that I consider particularly significant, complemented by close readings and concluding observations that also point toward future research directions. This structure, I believe, most effectively demonstrates that while literary works are inseparable from their histories of reception, it is equally important to account for the tensions they generated within the horizons of reception reconstructable at the time of their publication. I am convinced that the enduring relevance of the selected texts can be argued persuasively only if space is also given to those readings that they ultimately surpass. The literary works of István Szabó, Géza Bereményi, and András Pályi provide compelling

examples: while they may appear to confirm generational perspectives, they simultaneously disrupt the prevailing expectations of literary criticism by mediating experiences - significant even from a generational standpoint - through alternative aesthetic frameworks. Accordingly, the dissertation combines multiple methodological approaches: a Foucauldian critique of institutions, through which generational concepts can be understood as formations of power, and the perspectives developed by Dilthey, and especially Mannheim, which justify the applicability of generational categories through the existence of shared horizons of experience. What renders the analyzed works particularly intriguing, however, is precisely their capacity to speak the expected language while simultaneously opening up much broader interpretive horizons.

The selection of texts and phenomena discussed in the dissertation is thus shaped by the historically specific relationship between the concepts of generationality and canon. As I argue in several places, both the texts privileged within a generationally

structured canon and the interpretive procedures that secured their status played a decisive role in shaping not only the thematic and poetic characteristics of the works, but also their reception and the trajectories of individual authorial careers. The subchapters devoted to literary-historical questions therefore focus primarily on the interactions that shaped the horizons of reception for texts produced in the period. At the same time, my conclusions do not rely on static conceptualizations; rather, they seek to trace processes that vary in intensity and purpose over time - processes that cannot be regarded as stable, not least because of the fluctuating strategies of power, oscillating between restriction and concession.

In the subchapter focusing on the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s (I.1. *Bekövetkező csönd*), I examine the *Emberavatás* anthology and its relationship to the so-called Móricz tradition, seeking to demonstrate that the emergence of new texts was accompanied by critical tasks laden with cultural-political stakes. These tasks imposed a pressure to update existing conceptual

frameworks and burdened interpretation with forms of ideological alignment that affected even aesthetic judgments. As a result of these mechanisms of continual revision, reinforcement, and admonition, reception histories could emerge around relatively modest yet highly valorized oeuvres, such as that of István Szabó from Cserszegtomaj. He appeared in the literary public sphere of the 1950s and 1960s as an emblematic figure of the first post-liberation generation - one that had moved from rural backgrounds into urban intellectual life. The I.2 subchapter, titled *Vakablak*, which focuses on his work, builds on the methodological premise that the interpretation of literary texts is inseparable from the readings that have accumulated around them. As in later chapters, I interpret the texts within their historical context while employing close reading, and I seek to extend their interpretive histories by introducing new perspectives. This approach is grounded in a reception-aesthetic assumption: that the history of literature is the history of reading, in which the historicity of works and their interpretations is not limited to the reconstruction of

their conditions of emergence, but also entails the recognition that reception is always already mediated - conditioned by prior contexts and interpretive frameworks.

In the subchapter focusing on the transition from the 1960s to the 1970s (II.1. *Előre köszönni*), I address not only the anthologies of the period but also the phenomenon of cultural debates, which were highly prevalent in the literary public sphere. In particular, I engage with the three-part symposium published in the 1969 volume of *Új Írás*. I highlight this discussion because, in my view, its embeddedness within broader institutional contexts reveals much about the discursivity of the notion of “young literature” at the time. The symposium was coordinated with the 1969 writers’ meeting, in Lillafüred, many of its contributors participated in the event, and it was also connected to two anthologies whose reception kept the issue of generationality on the literary-critical agenda in the following years. The contexts of the 1969 *Naponta más* and the 1970, *Ahol a sziget kezdődik* anthologies thus

allow for a continuation and expansion of the arguments developed in the chapter *Bekövetkező csönd*, extending the temporal horizon of the dissertation. This is followed by subchapter II.2, “*Az induló tehetségek közé tartozott*”, in which I reconstruct the early career of Géza Bereményi, who emerged in *Naponta más*. Here I seek to refine existing conclusions by reconsidering not only the established readings of his 1970 short story collection *A svéd király*, but also by introducing new analytical perspectives, with the aim of contributing to a more nuanced understanding of his position within literary history. This is particularly necessary because Bereményi’s early works once appeared as a bridge between the metonymic literary experiments of the 1960s-1970s and the metaphorically oriented tendencies of the 1970s-1980s, whereas more recent editions tend to emphasize the autofictional dimension of his oeuvre, often overlooking its historical embeddedness.

The subsequent subchapter, III.1. *Apák és fiúk prózafordulatban*, examines the relationship between generationality and canon at the turn of the 1970s and

1980s, with particular attention to interpretive authorities such as István Gáll and Péter Balassa. I conceptualize the literary public sphere as a field of forces whose frontlines are shaped by the competition among interpretive authorities. In contrast to earlier sections, I shift the focus from anthologies and debates to Zsolt Csalog's *Rondó*, a collective project that can be read as a failed attempt to realize a form of generational co-authorship.

This is followed by subchapter III.2, *Felnőni: kiűzetni*, which examines the work of András Pályi. His first volume of short stories appeared in 1978, and the literary-critical activity of Péter Balassa played a crucial role in establishing the position his work maintained - albeit no longer centrally - in discourses surrounding the so-called prose turn well into the early 2000s.

Before the concluding section, I have included an additional chapter titled *Más horizonton*. Its subchapter IV.1, *Műgond*, analyzes a lesser-known novel by the recently deceased Ottó Tolnai, *rovarház*, which I approach from the perspectives of both neo-avant-garde and postmodern textual practices. The inclusion of this

work enriches the argument not only because of its significance within the Hungarian literary public sphere of Vojvodina (and, more broadly, Yugoslavia), but also because its reception history offers new insights into Hungarian literary contexts, highlighting the relevance of generational questions beyond national boundaries.

Summary of Results in the Form of Theses

The analysis of literary-historical phenomena associated with the turning points between decades, together with the texts linked to them, contributes - through its chronological framework - to a deeper understanding of the literary-political processes of the Kádár era and to a more nuanced insight into the development of prose literature. Within the expanded temporal horizon opened by this approach, broader processes connected to generationality also become traceable. From the perspective of these dynamics, it may be concluded that although the conditions for the formation of generations were in place - and although there was even a demand for such formations among the so-called “young” - cultural

policy regulated the circumstances with such force that it effectively eliminated the autonomy necessary for the emergence of genuinely self-organized generational formations. It remains conceivable, of course, that the authors concerned internalized this top-down constructed generationality and incorporated it into their self-understanding. Yet it is no longer possible to determine whether this occurred under the pressure of historical constraints, as a strategy of advancement, or because certain elements were indeed experienced as authentic. It is therefore not an exaggeration to suggest that the power of the regime dismantled the possibility of bottom-up generational formation precisely by exploiting the power inherent in generationality itself, thereby depriving it of the conditions necessary for autonomous configuration.

The final chapter, devoted to the generational aspects of Ottó Tolnai's position in literary history and to the novel *rovarház*, is significant primarily within this context. Proceeding from a differently conditioned, more open cultural disposition, it renders the Hungarian processes even more perceptible. It demonstrates how

productive reception strategies can emerge when practices associated with generational formation operate with a degree of autonomy unavailable within the constraints of the Kádár period. The chapters can thus be read as continuations of one another, further elaborating earlier insights and offering answers, among other things, to the question of how the status of the analyzed texts has changed within literary-historical memory.

At the same time, I have sought to ensure that the close readings do not merely serve to illustrate processes of canon reconfiguration or the functioning of generational formations. While treating reception as inseparable from the works themselves, I have aimed - through text-centered analysis - to avoid reducing them to mere examples of socio- or ideological-historical arguments. Instead, I have attempted to demonstrate the complexity of their internal operations, showing that the canon is shaped not exclusively by aesthetic achievement, but always already by the interplay of interpretive authorities. Literary history thus appears as a field of struggles over authority unfolding within an

institutionally structured environment, where the canon is bound not only to preserved works and their ideological and aesthetic determinations, but also to the conditions of their continued existence - their maintenance, erosion, or obsolescence, which follows in part from the inherent conservatism of canonical structures. The reception histories of the works analyzed - by István Szabó, Géza Bereményi, András Pályi, and Ottó Tolnai - demonstrate that attempts at revival tend to reproduce already established interpretive strategies, and precisely for this reason often fail to play a significant role in processes of rereading. (The exceptional status of *rovarház* is underscored by the fact that recent interpreters have continued to discover new and previously unexplored avenues of interpretation.)

It may be observed that, with the exception of Tolnai's work, the texts analyzed are all works of short prose. This may appear surprising in relation to traditions of generational representation, which have typically been associated with the novel form - often in conjunction with the family novel - and aimed at depicting broader

processes. The extension of generational formations into shorter prose forms may be explained by the cultural-political context following Sovietization: in a period when the novel was privileged as a vehicle for conveying the state party's vision of the future, interpretations centered on generationality proliferated, and cultural policy detached these formations from large-scale narrative forms in order to render them applicable across a wider range of contexts. If there is a comprehensive phenomenon to which my analyses are subordinated - by virtue of the dissertation's structure - it is the struggle of literature for autonomy vis-à-vis cultural policy. One shared feature of the works by István Szabó, András Pályi, and Ottó Tolnai is their engagement with biblical and Christian textual traditions, which cultural policy, in the period sought to render invisible, both in Hungary and beyond its borders. It is therefore plausible to assume that through their systems of reference and their handling of motifs, these works created and amplified dispositions that opened up pathways toward alternative modes of world-representation, even within the constraints of

narrowly defined ideological frameworks. Although the selected works of Géza Bereményi do not mobilize the religious dimensions that could have generated political confrontation, their engagement with the event-character of reading, the discursivity of history, and the world-constituting function of literature leads interpretive thought in similarly unexpected and bold directions. This is all the more significant because the term “report” (*jelentés*) in *A svéd király*, much like in *rovarház*, acquires additional meaning in relation to the surveillance networks of totalitarian systems, thereby embedding the political conditions of the period into the semantic structure of the works. Another point of connection among the texts of Szabó, Pályi, and Tolnai is their elaboration of the aesthetic potential inherent in the spatial formation of the garden, with its biblical connotations. In Szabó’s case, this is closely related to the politicized tradition of representing peasant culture, particularly in *Minden olyan, mint régen*, written at a time when the historical transformation of peasant life was a central concern of literary discourse. Yet in his

characterization and narrative construction, Szabó arrives at conclusions quite different from what might be expected on the basis of the work's historical context, offering instead a critical perspective on the horizons opened by increased social mobility, emphasizing the estranging effects of the pursuit of education within the family sphere. In Bereményi's works, too, the family - or more precisely the private sphere - becomes a site where processes of transformation manifest themselves. In *Irodalom*, the relationship between the protagonist Dobrovics and his grandmother initiates changes that not only facilitate the creation of a literary work but also reshape the grandmother's interpretive framework. Similarly, the narrative and conceptual structure of *A svéd király* culminates in processes of identification mediated through reading experiences. In Pályi's work, the garden is associated with motifs of expulsion and coming of age, but it can also be interpreted - within a generational framework - as part of the continuity of familial patterns. The protagonist, Misi, effectively reenacts a paternal model when, defying prohibitions, he

enters the garden and commits suicide in a pit that can also be read as a grave. His wandering around the garden, as well as the mode of perception underlying the narrative's associative logic, may be understood as an aesthetic strategy that foregrounds an alternative use of free time, diverging significantly from that of the family. Tolnai's text expands the semantic field of the insect house (*rovarház*), conceived in a part-whole relation with the zoo, transforming it into an interpretive metaphor for a world structured by lines of power. While establishing a network of references that would have been politically and culturally inconceivable within the Hungarian context of the time - and whose reconstruction remains challenging for contemporary readers due to the relative closure of generational archives - its reception history provides a distinct perspective on the generational processes that shaped the status of the works by Szabó, Bereményi, and Pályi. From the perspective of reception history, even in the case of *rovarház*, one cannot necessarily speak of a vibrant afterlife. It is nonetheless striking that in the works of Pályi, and even more so in

those of Szabó, affinities emerge with the writing of Géza Csát - a figure long rendered invisible in the early twentieth century, yet later recognized as a key point of reference for authors associated with the prose turn. The fact that such influence was already present in the early 1960s - prior to the publication of Csát's collected volumes - adds a further layer of complexity to the literary-historical picture.

Although the subchapters are invested in rereading with the aim of recovering value, the dissertation does not seek to effect re-canonization. As demonstrated in the discussions of reception history, canonization results from the convergence of multiple internal and external factors, and presupposes participation in the struggles among interpretive authorities. While the dissertation may signal an intention to participate in such processes, its genre does not allow it to fully meet the criteria of recognition. What it does assert, however, is that within the context of the Kádár era, generationality cannot be meaningfully discussed without reference to cultural-political conditions. This

insight leads to sobering conclusions about the functioning of dictatorships: generational formations shaped under cultural-political dominance continue to resurface in contemporary discourse about literary works and phenomena. This, in turn, suggests that the effects of dictatorship persist even after its fall, shaping interpretive attitudes and, consequently, literary-historical narratives themselves.



Registry number: DEENK/167/2026.PL
Subject: PhD Publication List

Candidate: Tibor Juhász
Doctoral School: Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies
MTMT ID: 10078236

List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (5)

1. **Juhász, T.**: Mintha létezne: interjú Balázs Attilával.
Irodalmi Szemle. 68 (5), 25-33, 2025. ISSN: 1336-5088.
2. **Juhász, T.**: Műgond. Közérzet, hatalom és metafikció Tolnai Ottó rovarház című regényében.
Alföld. 75 (9), 62-81, 2024. ISSN: 0401-3174.
3. **Juhász, T.**: A "fiatal" irodalom az 1960-as/1970-es évek fordulóján.
Új Forrás. 55 (4), 68-83, 2023. ISSN: 0133-5332.
4. **Juhász, T.**: Oilóval vagdosott történelem: Bereményi Gézával Juhász Tibor beszélget.
Alföld. 73, 34-40, 2022. ISSN: 0401-3174.
5. **Juhász, T.**: Azóta is él. A svéd király, a Legendárium és az Azóta is élek Bereményi Géza szépirodalmi pályáján.
Szkholon. 19, 72-85, 2021. ISSN: 1785-0479.

Other journal articles (5)

6. **Juhász, T.**: Kolozsvári Papp László: életrajz.
2025, 1-8, 2025.
7. **Juhász, T.**: Békés Pál: életrajz.
2024, 1-4, 2024.
8. **Juhász, T.**: Balázs József: életrajz.
2023, 1-7, 2023.
9. **Juhász, T.**: Szabó István: életrajz.
2023, 1-6, 2023.
10. **Juhász, T.**: Írónak lenni öngyilkosság: Zelei Miklós: Gyilkos idők című kötetéről.
Forrás. 53 (9), 119-121, 2021. ISSN: 0133-056X.





List of other publications

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (2)

11. **Juhász, T.**: Hivatáshatárok?: A Mandák Ház lelkésze.
Kulter.hu 2020. február 21., 1-5, 2020.
12. **Juhász, T.**: "Helyzetjelentés": Nemzedékiség és térpoétika Bereményi Géza és Cseh Tamás Frontátvonulás című monodráájában.
Literatura. 45 (2), 196-208, 2019. ISSN: 0133-2368.

Other journal articles (10)

13. **Juhász, T.**: "Függője vagyok a testnek": Beszélgetés Mellár Dáviddal.
Irod. szle online. 2020.10.17., 1-3, 2020. ISSN: 1336-5088.
14. **Juhász, T., Zsalán, T.**: (H)arcvonalak: Interjú Zsalán Tibor költő-író-drámaíróval.
Kulter.hu 2020. november 11., 1-8, 2020.
15. **Juhász, T.**: A Teleki tér illuzionistája.
Kulter.hu 2020. március 31., 1-7, 2020.
16. **Juhász, T.**: Az egyensúlyra nincs recept: Interjú Bíró Krisztiánnal és Lapis Józseffel.
Kortárs Online 2020.10.07., 1-11, 2020.
17. **Juhász, T.**: Interjú a fényműkással: Beszélgetés Jász Attila költővel.
Kortárs Online 2020.01.08., 1-6, 2020.
18. **Juhász, T.**: Lócitrom a fővárosban.
DUNSZT. 2020, 1-4, 2020. ISSN: 2585-8432.
19. **Juhász, T., Puskás, I.**: Megoldandó dolgok: Interjú Puskás Istvánnal, Debrecen kulturális alpolgármesterével.
Kulter.hu 2020. március 5., 1-10, 2020.
20. **Juhász, T.**: Nem biztos a happy end: Interjú Koncz Csillával.
Kortárs Online 2020.12.17., 1-5, 2020.
21. **Juhász, T.**: Stúdiomok, stádiumok: Interjú Péczely Dóra szerkesztővel.
Kortárs Online 2020.08.05., 1-6, 2020.
22. **Juhász, T., Vass, N.**: A csibészség mint népi játék.
DUNSZT. 2019. június 14., 1-7, 2019. ISSN: 2585-8432.

Informational/educational articles (2)

23. **Juhász, T.**: 2020 KULTkönyvtárgyai (TOP 10): Az év legszebb könyvei, amelyeket érdemes kézbe venni.
Kulter.hu 2021. január 12., 1-21, 2021.





UNIVERSITY of
DEBRECEN

UNIVERSITY AND NATIONAL LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

H-4002 Egyetem tér 1, Debrecen

Phone: +3652/410-443, email: publikaciok@lib.unideb.hu

24. **Juhász, T.:** Road movie a mi utcánkban.
Debreciner 2019. október 04., 1-6, 2019.

The Candidate's publication data submitted to the Tudóstér have been validated by DEENK on the basis of the Journal Citation Report (Impact Factor) database.

09 April, 2026

