

**Theses of the PhD Dissertation**

# **Body and Testimony**

**Phenomenological Approaches to the Poetry of Szilárd Borbély**

Balázs Katalin

Supervisor: Dr. Baranyai Norbert



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

Doctoral School of Literature and Cultural Studies

Debrecen, 2025

## a) Identifying the aims and the subject of the dissertation

The thesis explores and further develops the possibility of a dialogue between literature and phenomenology in the context of the poetry of Szilárd Borbély. It also aims to highlight thematic intersections where these two fields connect and mutually reflect each other. According to my thesis, a phenomenological approach to literary texts can serve as a legitimate theoretical framework for interpretation, and research based on literary texts could offer an opportunity to expand the dimensions of phenomenological inquiry.

It is clear that the phenomenological reading of a literary text may appear as an experimental or even regressive step compared to other literary theoretical approaches, as not every text can be examined within the mentioned interpretative framework. Many of the analyses in my dissertation argue that certain works of Szilárd Borbély can be read from this perspective, though this does not exclude the significance of other interpretive angles. The novelty of this research can be validated by pointing to an approach that, as part of a program, has not yet appeared in this rich reception history.

The selection of the works analyzed is shaped not only by phenomenological considerations but also by a thematic organization. The dissertation focuses on texts that approach the concept of *being-there* fundamentally from the experiential horizon and subjective bodily experiences, in which both the artistic representation of the Holocaust and the issue of testimony come to the fore. In this sense, the main focus of my dissertation is on the analysis of *A Testhez – Ódák és Legendák (To the Body – Odes and Legends)* (2010), while also recognizing the interpretative possibility and necessity of intertextual connections within the oeuvre.

The genre designation of „odes and legends” draws attention to premodern poetic traditions, referring to a previously published poetry collection by the author, *Halotti Pompa – Szekvenciák (Funeral pomp – Sequences)* (2006), which, thematically and symbolically can be read as a prehistory to *A Testhez*. Comparative analysis of these two relevant lyric volumes also draws attention to the fact that although *A Testhez* can be considered a continuation of *Halotti Pompa*, Borbély Szilárd’s work is closely connected to the grammaticizing, language-critical poetry of his books from the 1990s, which often reflect on the relationship between body and language.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the so-called „grammatical self-reflection” poetics, *Mint. minden*.

---

<sup>1</sup> KULCSÁR-SZABÓ Zoltán, *Traumatized grammar in Borbély Szilárd’s work = Between Signless Clouds: Chapters from the Evolutionary History of 20th-21st Century Poetry*, Budapest, Ráció, 2022, 303.

*alkalom*. (1995) could be mentioned in terms of the relationship between body and language, and *Hosszú nap el* (1993) could be cited as an example, with *Adatok* (1988) also showcasing certain poetic solutions and motifs that are reinterpreted within the world of *A Testhez*.

In my thesis, I extend the horizon of investigation to earlier phases of the lyrical oeuvre. During the analysis of the texts' poetic features, I pay particular attention to the motifs that define Borbély's poetry, especially the body and testimony, and their phenomenological reading. *Halotti Pompa*, considered a significant work of Borbély's poetry, is also included in the dissertation, but to a lesser extent than *A Testhez*. Although including this work in a more extensive way could provide a broader horizon for a more comprehensive analysis of Borbély's body poetics, it was necessary to define a boundary that preserves the balance between body and testimony while aligning with the dissertation's primarily experiential-affective approach. In order to ensure that the application of phenomenological terminology is clear and comprehensible in the analyses, I provide a brief overview of some basic terms at the beginning of the main chapters (I and II). In the introductory part of the first chapter, I briefly discuss traditional concepts of the body and significant philosophical, theological, and sociological theories relevant to the topic, to highlight the differences of the phenomenological approach. I also introduce the Leib and Körper duality known in the phenomenological tradition to make the references in the text analysis more understandable. In the second chapter, I mention aspects of the concept of experience.

My dissertation does not deal with the linguistic issues and etymology of the term Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> The terms I use (Holocaust, Shoah, Auschwitz) all refer to the historical event – encompassing the persecution of Jews, concentration camps, discrimination, humiliation, and annihilation.

## **b) An outline of the applied methods**

Establishing the mutual relationship between literature and phenomenology is not a new idea, but rather an explicit articulation of a tendency present in both classical and contemporary

---

<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben rejects the use of the word 'Holocaust'. „Finding a connection between the biblical 'olah' (an offering to God) and the gas chambers in the term 'Holocaust' is nothing but mockery: „come una beffa”, which is unacceptable” – writes Agamben. The spread of the word in its modern, historical sense owes much to Wiesel, who later regretted it and wished to retract it. Giorgio AGAMBEN, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz. L'archivio e il testimone*, 29. Although there is already a Hungarian translation of Agamben's work (*Ami Auschwitzból marad*, trans. DARIDA Veronika, Budapest, Kijárat, 2019.), in my paper, I will still base it on the original text.

phenomenology. It is important to recognize that phenomenology has virtually no single paradigm or is rather a „multi-paradigmatic” science. It is not only that Husserl constantly restarts and develops the phenomenological program, or that Heidegger distances himself from his master by revisiting the problem of Being, but for example, Merleau-Ponty, in the introduction to *The Phenomenology of Perception*, discovers the concealed origin of phenomenology in literature.

Without aiming for completeness, let me mention a few instances where philosophical approaches turn to literary examples or quotations in order to refine their theories. The contemporary phenomenological psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs often quotes from Proust in his studies. Bernhard Waldenfels, one of the most prominent figures of contemporary phenomenology, illuminates the phenomenon of the foreign(ness) through two literary works (Eduard Mörike: *Peregrina*, Albert Camus: *The Stranger*). The most significant existentialists (Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Buber) use expressions in their formal and system-building philosophical arguments that approach literary language.

Of course, we must not forget that phenomenologists primarily try to grasp the intentional structure of experience and the structure of the lifeworld, thus creating a variety of methods and directions. With a retrospective view, we can say that Kierkegaard became well known in the history of philosophy as both a philosopher and a theologian, yet his works (e.g., *Either/Or*, *Repetition*, *The Sickness Unto Death*) seem more like literary („novelistic”) works than philosophical systems. Merleau-Ponty defines Kierkegaard’s literary-philosophical works as „proto-phenomenological” descriptions. Following Merleau-Ponty, we can claim that the depiction of Kierkegaardian anxiety, despair, choice, melancholy, withdrawal, or misunderstanding blurs the boundaries between literature and phenomenological philosophy.

When literature as a medium appears in Kierkegaard or in Merleau-Ponty’s suggestive style, in these cases, there is a lack of a well-defined explicit rule system, as the focus is not on scientific endeavor. Examining this relationship, the above examples support a suggestion that literary texts can extend the dimension of phenomenological investigation and provide new insights into certain problems that had previously appeared in phenomenological discourses in a more schematic or cursory manner. I am particularly thinking of the phenomena emerging in contemporary poetry, which revolve around topics such as bodily experience, foreignness, memory, traumatization, affectivity, or testimony; these axes of exploration undeniably have phenomenological significance.

When pairing literature with phenomenology, it is difficult to find clear conceptual anchors to help express thoughts within the formal frameworks of literary studies. A potential

objection to the dissertation's objectives and methodology could be that philosophical-phenomenological or psychological approaches do not contribute meaningfully to the interpretation of literary texts, which might also result in the literature (especially poetry) remaining unread. There is no question that whether we read referentially, from the perspective of phenomenology, or from any other standpoint, we must reckon with the factors of linguistic-poetic construction. However, we must also recognize that not all texts can be read exclusively from the poetic construction perspective, and the dissertation does not intend to undertake this task – more precisely, it does not primarily wish to focus on this task. If the goal were solely the examination of a text's construction, it is likely that from the present-time perspective, it would predominantly synthesize interpretations already known from literary studies in the history of reception.

In this dissertation, I attempt to move away from traditional approaches and advocate for the view that the interpretation of literary works cannot be reduced solely to the study of the language's functioning or (poetical) activation. With this, I am not suggesting that we disregard linguistic complexity, but rather that, alongside the poetic approach (or as part of it), other types of readings are also necessary. By applying a phenomenological interpretative strategy, new and previously hidden perspectives may emerge during the reading process, which escaped the attention of reception but can significantly enrich the interpretation of Borbély's works. With this perspective, we gain the opportunity to interpret and understand more deeply those phenomena that transcend the conceptual boundaries of a strictly poetic analysis.

I regard Zsolt Bagi's *The Circumlocution* as a methodological precursor. In his writing, he analyzes Péter Nádas's *The Book of Memories* from a phenomenological perspective and treats the work as a kind of „phenomenological report.“ „This novel, for us, is in fact more than just a subject of the phenomenology of literary language; it also brings up all those problems that concern phenomenology.”<sup>3</sup> Bagi Zsolt's approach does not aim to reject structuralist, formalist, postmodern, etc. forms of literary analysis but rather puts them in parentheses, focusing primarily on capturing the novelty and foreignness inherent in the text, following Heidegger. The un-schematizable surplus that can be represented by the concepts of primordial impression, the Other, or foreignness in contemporary phenomenological discourse. Zsolt Bagi emphasizes the self-givenness of literary language: „By the self-givenness of the immanence of literary language, we mean that we always have the possibility to consider the meaning of the literary text in and of itself, that is, independently of its interpretation.”<sup>4</sup> In other words,

---

<sup>3</sup> BAGI Zsolt, *Paraphrase: Péter Nádas: The Book of Memoirs*, Pécs, Jelenkor, 2005, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 14.

instead of historical or psychological contexts, let us regard the text as having its own context. This context is not the „author’s intention”, a final reference. Bagi draws attention to the need for a greater distance between the interpretation and the interpreted than what is traditionally assumed by hermeneutics. This distinction corresponds to the phenomenological difference between intentional acts and intentional contents. According to Bagi, this „gap” between the interpretation and what is to be interpreted reveals the „pure possibilities” within the text; it emphasizes the „preontological possibilities” that have not yet been understood. In the analysis of *The Book of Memories*, due to the primacy of experientiality, the phenomenological reading becomes important, and the experience of reading the text turns almost into a bodily-perceptual one.

The living and physical body or the phenomenological foreignness is also a defining feature of Szilárd Borbély’s poetry. The poems in *The Body* and *Halotti Pompa* often evoke repulsive, visceral, and naturalistic impressions, encountering forms of alienated embodiment, where the abstraction of post-life existence mixes with the body’s repugnant and contemptible byproducts. We face experiences of foreignness and norm-violations that provocatively demonstrate the boundaries of the phenomenological approach.

### **c) The results of the dissertation**

In the first chapter of the thesis, I explore the question of how the body appears in Borbély Szilárd’s poetry – even in hidden forms – as a (phenomenological) fundamental issue. I aim to follow the changes in the body motif in his oeuvre only indirectly, placing more emphasis on the question of what role Borbély Szilárd’s poetics assigns to the ontology of the body in contemporary literature.

In the chapter entitled *The Role and Layers of Meaning of the Body Motif in Borbély Szilárd’s Early Poetry*, I put forward the hypothesis that the body plays a defining role in Borbély Szilárd’s poetry from the very beginning. In my analysis, I first examine how the reception history of the first poetic period – particularly focusing on the collections *Adatok* (1988) and *Hosszú nap el* (1993) – leads to the discovery of body (re)presentations. The analyses in this chapter offer a new interpretive possibility for understanding the relationship between poetic language and the body, while also contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the poetic career, traditionally divided into two periods. According to my thesis, the body motif in the early stage of Borbély Szilárd’s work represents deeper social issues and expands into an ontological dimension that pervades almost the entirety of his poetic world: *Adatok*

(*Details*) and *Hosszú nap el (Long Day Gone)* lay the foundation for a poetic direction that, pushing the boundaries of literature, seeks new ways to address worlds without language in the spirit of the „body-turned-poetry.”

In further analyses in this chapter, I focus on the distinction between *Leib* and *Körper*, the lived body and the organic body, from phenomenological philosophy, highlighting a perspective that has not yet appeared in critical observations.<sup>5</sup> In the verse analyses, I partly point out how the two German concepts of body perception, *Leib* and *Körper*, manifest in Hungarian literary works that do not recognize this distinction, and how they can provide new perspectives in interpretation. Within this framework, I emphasize the relevance of the phenomenological approach based on the Leib–Körper polarity and demonstrate how the oscillation of the body between culture and nature is expressed in fundamental textual emotional characteristics, which can be articulated through poetic language. In other words, I examine how Borbély Szilárd’s poems express the experience of the lived body, and how this experience articulates itself beneath the layers of the social body burdened with symbolic and cultural messages.

In the chapter titled *Affliction and Shame as Embodied Experiences in the Prose and Poetry of Szilárd Borbély*, I analyze a short story (*Notes on Literature*) from *The Shadow Draughtsman. Circumscriptions* (2008), as well as selected texts from his early poetic works, specifically from the volumes *Like. Every. Occasion.* (1995) and *The Place of What* (1999), which explore the experiences of shame and affliction. These texts provide an opportunity for a phenomenological examination of these affective states through the lens of bodily experience. In this chapter, I argue that the interpretation of shame cannot be complete without incorporating Simone Weil’s concept of affliction, as Borbély’s works do not merely depict the presence of shame but reveal the structure of *decreation* a self-destructive drive aimed at the radical dissolution of the self and the complete disappearance of personality. Subsequently, I examine the interrelations between shame and (Heideggerian) anxiety, demonstrating that Borbély, by integrating cultural and social factors, expands the experience of anxiety with a dimension that does not explicitly appear in Heidegger’s philosophy. Through my analysis, I explore how Borbély’s textual world reshapes the semantic layers of anxiety and interweaves

---

<sup>5</sup> To my knowledge, Gerda Széplaky is the only one to mention in the footnote of her study that phenomenology was the first to thematize the problem of the duality of the body in 20th-century philosophy, but in her analysis, she does not follow the tradition of distinguishing between these two concepts. SZÉPLAKY Gerda, *The Grammar of the Dead Body*, Helikon, 2011/1–2, 152.

it with the experience of shame, opening new interpretative perspectives in the study of existential experiences.

In the chapter *Self-Knowledge of the Lived Body*, I delve into a detailed analysis of the legends from *A Testhez*, continuing the examination of the role misfortune plays in female bodily experience. In this same chapter, I discuss how women and mothers become victims in the surrounding society, and what nuances of meaning the concept of victimhood takes on in the stories of *A Testhez*, how it rewrites the cultural or everyday meanings of the phenomenon of victimhood. In my conclusion, I argue that while adaptations of maternal and feminine ambivalences depict a unique and contradictory victim position, positioned at the intersection of the *sacrifice* and *victim* archetypes, the Holocaust narratives and the volume's sole text dealing with sexual violence, *A tízezer (The Ten Thousand)* can be paralleled with the figure of *homo sacer*, alongside the *victim* archetype.

In the last section of the first chapter (*The „Disembodiment” of the Odes*), by analyzing the odes of *A Testhez*, I highlight the tension between the body and language, and the dominant presence of the discursive power of language in the writing and rewriting of the body. Interpreting the odes' objectifying, scientific language as a voice of unexperienced bodily existence (that is, the physical body or *Körper*), I lay the groundwork for the main conclusion of the second chapter, which posits that the lived body plays a key role in the ethics of testimony, thus establishing a connection between the chapters on the body and testimony.

The second chapter of the thesis is dedicated to the question of how the Holocaust narrative appears in *A Testhez* and *Halotti Pompa*, with particular attention to the problem of testimony. While analyzing the fundamental themes and problems emerging in Holocaust literature in *A Testhez* (ranging from the failure of the representational language, the possibility/impossibility of testimony, to the affective [ethical] relationship of the receiver), I examine the poetic manifestations of „irreparable reparation” in *Halotti Pompa*, creating a common interpretive horizon by comparing the Otto Moll sequence with Pilinszky's poem *Nincs több (There is no more)*. The analyses in the second chapter – taking into account the basic principles of the responsive phenomenological tradition – aim to integrate the bodily-affective dimension into the hermeneutics of testimony as a constitutive element.

In the chapter titled „*What Cannot Be Endured or Spoken*”: *Staging the Impossibility of Testimony in Szilárd Borbély's Legends*, I focus on the possibilities and limitations of testimony, exploring how the *Legends* can account for lived suffering and what kind of relationship emerges between experience and its linguistic expression. By the end of this chapter, I conclude that while Borbély Szilárd seems to align with the view that identifies the

position of the true witness with that of the victim – thus rendering testimonial speech essentially impossible – he simultaneously constructs a structure of testimony that defines its conditions precisely within this impossibility. The texts of the *Legends* capture the paradox that the expression and testimony of trauma can never be complete, as there always remains a gap or rupture. However, rather than weakening testimony, this absence paradoxically reinforces it by affirming the presence of the unspoken. A form of speech that resists testimony – a testimony of the untestifiable – still implies the meaning that the most complete testimony of Auschwitz is, in a sense, precisely that which could not survive in spoken words, yet can be brought to life through writing – just as the testimonies of survivors must also be kept alive.

In the chapter *The Phenomenology of Testimony*, continuing the discussion of the poetic achievement of the legends, I emphasize the crucial role of the body in the hermeneutics of testimony, since the reception of the texts happens not only in a theoretical and reflective way but also in a bodily and affective manner. The processes taking place in the lived body await explanation and expression, meaning that they can be a legitimate part of the interpretation. Based on these principles, I formulate the central thesis of the dissertation, according to which the affective impact of encountering texts and the narratives of witnesses points towards an ethics that can genuinely make the reader an authentic witness. The ethics of testimony, in this sense, is not the result of learned, externally derived attitudes, but the foreign experience stemming from the lived body, which carries the traces of the witnesses' involvement.



Registry number: DEENK/20/2025.PL  
Subject: PhD Publication List

Candidate: Katalin Balázs

Doctoral School: Doctoral School of Literary and Cultural Studies

MTMT ID: 10052913

## List of publications related to the dissertation

### Hungarian book chapters (1)

1. **Balázs, K.:** A megélt test önismerete: A Leib-Körper viszony vizsgálata Borbély Szilárd A Testhez című kötetében.  
In: Test-történetek : Tanulmányok a Történeti Kollégium konferenciájának előadásaiából.  
Szerk.: Kovács Janka; Lászlófi Viola; Matolcsi Réka; Barát Bence, ELTE BTK Történeti Kollégium, Budapest, 109-123, 2018. ISBN: 9789634890034

### Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (5)

2. **Balázs, K.:** A testmotívum szerepe és jelentésrétegei Borbély Szilárd korai lírájában.  
*Magyar művészet.* 13 (1), 54-61, 2025. ISSN: 2064-3799.
3. **Balázs, K.:** A kötelező áldozat - A Testhez.  
*Parnasszus.* 2024 (3), 57-75, 2024. ISSN: 1219-3275.
4. **Balázs, K.:** A szegény a test börtöne: Szerencsétlenség és szegény mint testközeli tapasztalat Simone Veil és Borbély Szilárd írásaiban.  
*Vigilia.* 88 (10), 932-940, 2023. ISSN: 0042-6024.
5. **Balázs, K.:** A tanúsítás fenomenológiája.  
*Tiszatáj.* 75 (6), 80-87, 2021. ISSN: 0133-1167.
6. **Balázs, K.:** "Amit nem lehet se elviselni se kimondani": A tanúsítás problematikája Borbély Szilárd legendáiban.  
*Vigilia.* 83 (3), 193-199, 2018. ISSN: 0042-6024.

## List of other publications

### Hungarian book chapters (1)

7. **Balázs, K.:** Töredékek.  
In: Derengő sugarak : Alkotói antológia Monorról / vál. és szerk. Hajdú Zoltánné, Pillangó Kiadó, Monor, 10-16, 2017. ISBN: 9786158007658





Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (6)

8. **Balázs, K.:** A bűn jelentése A szorongás fogalmában és A halálos betegségben - Az egzisztencia válságának kierkegaardi fenoménjei: bűn, szorongás és kétségbeesés.  
*Nagyerdei Almanach.* 7 (14), 41-58, 2017. EISSN: 2062-3305.
9. **Balázs, K.:** Ismerős idegenség - idegen ismerősség.  
*Vörös Postakocsi.* 2016, 1-7, 2016. ISSN: 1789-4697.
10. **Balázs, K.:** Egy kapcsolat margójára és azon túl.  
*Vigilia.* 79 (11), 838-844, 2014. ISSN: 0042-6024.
11. Horváth, L., **Balázs, K.:** Szorongás és énhasadás: A kierkegaard-i bűn és szorongás modern lélektani interpretációi.  
*Magyar Filoz. Szle.* 57 (3), 106-126, 2013. ISSN: 0025-0090.
12. **Balázs, K.:** Transzcendencia és alteritas: Belső dialógus és a felelősség etikája.  
*Szkholon.* 11 (2), 118-126, 2013. ISSN: 1785-0479.
13. **Balázs, K.:** A Vagy-vagy narratopoétikai megközelítése.  
*Nagyerdei Almanach.* 1, 1-12, 2012. EISSN: 2062-3305.

Hungarian scientific articles in international journals (2)

14. **Balázs, K.:** Megérteni a tapasztalat felől, amit a megértés felől nem lehet.  
*Irod. szle.* 60 (10), 86-94, 2017. ISSN: 1336-5088.
15. **Balázs, K.:** In memoriam Glaukóma: Áfra János Glaukóma című művének fenomenológiai-pszichológiai interpretációja.  
*Híd.* 1, 32-37, 2014. ISSN: 0350-9079.

Other journal articles (3)

16. **Balázs, K.:** Áfra János: Rítus.  
*Vigilia.* 83 (10), 796-797, 2018. ISSN: 0042-6024.
17. **Balázs, K.:** Létlenyomat a Szelencében: Gondolatok Menyhért Anna költészete kapcsán.  
*Partium.* 1, 64-66, 2011. ISSN: 1216-7525.
18. **Balázs, K.:** Ontológiai késztetés: Czimer Györgyi: A nő titkai.  
*Kulter.hu* 7, [1-3], 2011.

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



22 January, 2025