

UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED, FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES,
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Concepts of History and Redemption in Géza Bereményi's
Novels *Legendárium* and *Vadnai Bébi*

doctoral thesis abstract

Author: András Gáspár Pikó

Supervisor: Dr. habil. Gábor Zsolt Szabó

Doctoral programme: Modern Hungarian Literature

Head of programme: Prof. Dr. Zsófia Szilágyi, DSc

Szeged

2024

After the publication of his first proper novel, 1978's *Legendárium*, Géza Bereményi took a long hiatus from literary work. In the mid-1980s, he published a cycle of short stories in the periodical *Jelenkor*, collaborated regularly with singer Tamás Cseh as a lyricist, and mentioned several unfinished literary projects in subsequent interviews, but his focus shifted to theatre and film work for more than three decades. It was not until 2013 that he resurfaced as a writer with his second novel, *Vadnai Bébi*, and according to him, even this was originally meant to be a film.

While most critics lauded the comeback, one point that kept turning up in reviews was the narration's „film-like” quality, often to its detriment. Although Bereményi published the openly autobiographical *Magyar Copperfield* in 2020 to universal acclaim and strong sales, so far no in-depth theoretical analysis has been written on this latter part of his literary oeuvre, let alone putting it in context with the earlier works. My doctoral thesis focuses primarily on the two novels that bridge the gap, *Legendárium* and *Vadnai Bébi*, and executes a theory-oriented close-reading analysis of these.

I read the novels as texts aimed at the reconstruction of memory, both individual and collective. The most consistently recurring theme in Bereményi's works is the relation between the individual, or small communities (mainly families) and the large-scale historical narratives, as the historical events, such as the Second World War, the Shoah or the 1956 revolution unfold. In a way, his prose is „oral history written down”, which, to quote Jan Assmann, does not rely on the historian's established written documents, but obtains memories through oral interviews, thus presenting a „history of everyday life”, an „under-view of history”. It focuses on the act of transmission, the path that leads to it, the information and narratives transmitted, their implications, the consequences of the acquisition of knowledge; it even risks the implication of the reader in this chain of transmission, showing the complex and often indecipherable relationship between individual and collective memory. This is often complimented by a possibility – or impossibility – of redemption, both in personal life and the history of a collective. I use these motifs as a backbone for my analysis, also taking into consideration several other aspects of the novels concerned. The elements of the theoretical palette used (including philosophy of history, cultural history, post-structuralistic text analysis, narrative psychology, philosophy of language, psycho-analytic reading and film theory) are aligned with these aspects, but there is no complete, one-to-one correspondence between the theories used for analysis and the textual phenomena under study: the former are merely present as indispensable reference points.

Works that deal with the historical past as well as autobiographical works have been a persistent and heavy presence in the recent Hungarian literary market: the role and place of Bereményi's oeuvre in relation to these must be redefined. To do this, however, it was necessary to sketch a broader theoretical background and to analyse the two novels that bookended his literally active periods, namely the one that closed the first and the one that launched the second. My doctoral thesis is an attempt at the latter endeavour.