The objective of the paper is to investigate the role of stereotypes in the interpretation of literary genres in general and in the interpretation of autobiographies in particular. It aims to do so, first, from a theoretical aspect, considering the various concepts available concerning the genre of autobiography and, second, with the help of the specific analyses of individual literary works, with special emphasis on Péter Esterházy’s Celestial Harmonies. According to the theoretical premise of the study, it is only in relation to stereotypes responsible for precursory anticipations in the readers that a new literary piece is able to debunk and re-create the concepts of text creation and reception. In this sense, stereotypy is one of the factors that guarantee the continuity of literature through its intermittent and cyclic quality.

Stereotyping (and stereotypy) appear to be an indispensable condition and an obstacle – at the same time – of interpreting literary works. Stereotypy, in this paper, is used to indicate the traditional preconceptions and operations within textual interpretation that are created as a result of repetition. We know that there are certain preconceptions attached to individual genres.1 Thus, starting out of these preconceptions, literary thinking has abstracted, or rather, established the poetic rules and regulations derived from the works that represent the classic examples of the given genres. Then, and as a result of repetition, these peculiar brands of the individual genres become more and more simplified and, with time, evolve into stereotypes, as a part of the readers’ anticipations. Unfortunately, these repetitive formulae of interpretation are responsible for developing partially unconscious and unreflected tendencies in the readers. This lack of contemplation or reflection is pre-eminently manifested during the shifts occurring in the given literary canons. What happens at such times is that it becomes more and more difficult to address classic works of art with the help of the old stereotypes that are inherent in the reading process. Yet, on the other hand, depending on the available sets of stereotypes in reading, it is also possible to alter the canon and to receive and

accept radically new works. It is only in relation to stereotypes responsible for precursory anticipations in the readers that a new literary piece is able to debunk and re-create the concepts of text creation and reception. And, it is in this context that my introductory statement about stereotypy being simultaneously an essential condition and an obstacle for the understanding and interpretation of literary works makes sense, which process, by the way, is one of the factors that guarantee the continuity of literature through its intermittent and cyclic quality.

In what sense am I going to use the term autobiography in this paper? Please allow me to start with an outline of the theoretical framework that I am going to apply in my approach to this issue. This theoretical framework is supposed to prepare the introduction of two pieces taken from Hungarian literature which, in my opinion, did re-write the fundamental stereotypes inherent in reading autobiographical works in 20th century Hungarian literature.

Autobiography can be defined as a narrative genre whose narrator gives an account of his or her own life story in the form of reminiscences. Autobiography is closely related to the genres of memoir, diary, and biography. What differentiates it from these other genres is that a memoir does not take one’s personal life for its subject matter, a diary is not necessarily characterised by a look back upon past events, while in the case of a biography, the author and the narrator is not the same person. However, a common feature shared by all these four genres is that they are not purely literary genres. The reason for this is that their authors are not automatically classified as belles-trists. In the canonization of autobiographies, the aspect of literary artistic creation frequently turns out to be of secondary importance only, especially when compared with the psychological, historical, or other aspects at work.

The genre presupposes at least three kinds of selves: the self of the author, the self of the autobiographical narrator, and the narrated autobiographical self. According to Philippe Leujeune, autobiography, as a genre, is based on a kind of a contract or agreement. The most important condition and guarantee for this agreement is that the author, the narrator, and the protagonist should be fully identical. In order to comply with the agreement, the reader is supposed to read the text as a reliable account of events that have actually happened, given by a real life, responsible person. On the one hand, the liberty of fictitiousness in autobiographies is restricted by the factual quality of the events related. On the other hand, there is yet a constant suspicion of fictitiousness present in the reading that adheres to the letter of the “autobiographical pact”. Namely, in the case of fiction, the text does not state that the author, the narrator, and the protagonist are indeed identical. In this case, the reader, in opposition to the author, tries to establish similarities among them. As regards autobiography, the sameness of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist is clearly stated. At the same time, the reader is inclined to find discrepancies (defects or distortions) among them.