

**A SHORT SKETCH ON THE SIGNIFICANCE
OF LÓRÁNT KABDEBÓ'S WORK
IN MODERN HUNGARIAN LITERARY SCHOLARSHIP**

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Lóránt Kabdebó left his mark on Hungarian literary scholarship as the monographer of the late-modernist poet, Lőrinc Szabó. The three volumes on the oeuvre of Lőrinc Szabó were completed in the 60's and 70's without any official support in Hungarian academia that was controlled by the totalitarian communist leadership. Next to the three oeuvres – Sándor Petőfi's, Endre Ady's and Attila József's – that were hand-picked by the party and the interpretation of which was tailored to suit the official political agenda, Szabó Lőrinc's works and the work of Kabdebó on them were canonically sidelined. With his meticulous readings and persistence, Kabdebó, however, managed to turn the tides; becoming a full professor and the founding dean of the Faculty of Humanities of the University of Miskolc, he succeeded in repositioning the oeuvre of Lőrinc Szabó into the center of Hungarian literary canon.

But Kabdebó's scholarly work provides much more than the interpretation of Lőrinc Szabó's poems. His books were imperative in explicating the so-called "late-modern threshold" in Hungarian poetry, i.e., in identifying the shift in poetic discourse that had been brought along by the realization that it is not the subject who has complete over language, rather the other way around: the lyrical subject and all its contexts are nothing more than verbal effects. Consequently, the main concept of the paradigm-changing collection of poems by Lőrinc Szabó, entitled "You and the World" (*Te meg a világ*, 1932), became a life-long theme in Kabdebó's work. On the hand, he approached the connection between the you and the world as apostrophic effects: e.g., in his posthumous volume, entitled "Something Happened: The Metamorphoses of Lőrinc Szabó" (*Valami történt: Szabó Lőrinc átváltozásai*, 2022), he discussed the "criminalization" of poetry in the earlier stages of Lőrinc Szabó's career with respect to the interrelation between the discourse of daily news and poems. On the other hand, focusing on the poetic relationship between the you and the world, Kabdebó managed to reveal new connections between the poetry of Lőrinc Szabó and Attila József. He interpreted the former's associating the brain with a machine and the latter's "lovely people-lessness" (at least that is how John Báltki translated the phrase "szép embertelenség"; another possible translation could be: "beautiful inhumanity") as two sides of the same late-modernist poetic discourse. Kabdebó nevertheless always carefully avoided positioning this discourse as something that had appeared out of the blue. A few years

ago, when I was travelling from Dresden to the Baltic sea, he enthusiastically called me about his findings; he drew my attention to Lőrinc Szabó's review of "Bonfires Sing" (*Máglyák énekelnek*, 1920) by Lajos Kassák, in which he pointed out a shift in Kassák's interest, from ideological power of language to its performative potential in accordance with literary tradition.

The abovementioned small episode shines light on why Kabdebó became one of the eminent scholars of modern Hungarian poetry: his interpretative practice synthesized close-reading and philological awareness. On the one hand, he believed in the unity of rhetorics and poetics when reading lyrical; on the other hand, beside comparing different versions of a poem, he also traced their interconnections with the author's work in translating poems, review-writing, etc. With the help of his interpretative method, Kabdebó also succeeded in discrediting clichés that were forcibly attached to Lőrinc Szabó's oeuvre over the communist decades. One such label was the inhumaneness of the poems due to the frequent use of such phrases as "horrid" or "atrocious" (*rettenetes, szörnyű*). Kabdebó, however, traced these back to Rilke's shock that had been triggered by World War I, and appropriated Lőrinc Szabó's discourse as a rewriting and rearticulation of Rilke's which could have served as the Hungarian poet's warning to the world on the brink of World War II. He also showed that claims about Lőrinc Szabó's enthusiasm about Nazism and the cult of the Führer were groundless since the poem "Leader" (*Vezér*, 1928) that is said to be the most incriminating in this case, was based on the author's unfinished translation of Shakespeare's "Macbeth", in which he translated the word "battle" to "vezér," instead of "harc."

And this was also Kabdebó's warning to us, who spend most of our time reading literary texts, that there is a great danger in labelling pieces of literature and reading with our ideological glasses on; these are the surest ways of muting the text and eliminating aesthetic experience. Fortunately, Kabdebó provided us with enough philological material and interpretative offers so that we would not repeat the mistakes of the past when reading the poems of Hungarian late-modernity.

I would like to finish this short sketch about Kabdebó's importance and legacy with two quotes. One of them can be read as his conclusion about what fundamentally constitutes Lőrinc Szabó's poetic discourse, and the other is a few lines from the poem he was reading when he reached that conclusion – both quotes are my translation.

"This infernal low is nothing else than daily life, which is coincidentally also the scene of poetic existence. Existing in it is life itself. The human comedy is nothing else then descending to the depths of Hell, that is, existing in everyday life. This is the conclusion towards which Lőrinc Szabó's earliest meta-poetical writings are moving. And I have no choice but to read the poem 'Materialism' as a stage in that movement: 'Life is the suicide of matter' – as he put it, and then came the ultimate question: 'why does the body still carry on for the sake of the soul?' This is how human consciousness and material world are simultaneously embodied in the poem, and, accordingly, how the duality of the 'you' and the 'world' makes

possible the aesthetical formalization of Dasein-presence as a whole, or in other words, encounter and event in the Heideggerean sense (*Ereignis*). No wonder that in Lőrinc Szabó's self-commentary, it is stated that 'the poem Materialism might as well bear the title Spiritualism.'

“My mother is matter, a caring miracle:
my teeth chattered in the terrible winter,
then the coal came, and wood from the mountains,
and threw her body on the bonfire for me without a word.”