

Lóránt Kabdebó

## Classicization as Intertextuality in the Second Phase of Modernity (1917-1921)<sup>1</sup>

Margináliába: Előadásként angol nyelven elhangzott a Janus Pannonius Egyetem és az MTA Irodalomtudományi Intézete által szervezett *Epochenschwelle – Stilwandel – Umbesetzung. Fragen der literarischen Moderne* című konferencián Pécsen, 1993. október 27–31. Megjelent a *Tiszatáj*, 1994. 8. számában, 47–52. Kötetben megjelent Kabdebó Lóránt: *Vers és próza a modernség második hullámában*, Argumentum, Budapest, 1996. 44--50. Angolul megjelent: *Classicization as Intertextuality in the Second Phase of Modernity (1917–1921)*. címmel a *Neohelicon*, 1999. 2. számában, 111–118.

Ezra Pound's *Canto I* (1917), and the Hungarian Lőrinc Szabó's first volume of poetry, *Föld, Erdő, Isten* (*Earth, Forest, God*, - poems published between 1920 and 1921), seem to represent the same kind of *discourse*. Both poets employed classicist filters to induce modern sensibility and anxiety. Their poems are *quasi* narratives or scenes from ancient literature. Between 1917 and 1921 their response was similar to the *same aspects of the past* and to its textually and philologically relatable remains so that one *particular* citation allows *manifold* interpretation. There appears a borderline, a *difference* between the intertextual techniques of classical modernity and those of the second phase of modernity. The poets of classical modernity (Browning, Verlaine or the Hungarian Mihály Babits) build up a fictive world to provide the scenery of the poem. The *construction*, the *composition*, the designable *whole* gained emphasis as an integral part of the work. The texts cited by Pound or Szabó are not integrated in the composition, they are left to appear as *alien elements* to demonstrate *unidentifiability*. They prove that no text can be a *definite part* of the composition because they all imply diverse and at times contradictory interpretations in different eras. This kind of intertextualization of classical materials differs not only from the method of classicization of the earlier, classical modernity, but also from the fashionable neo-classicism of the 1930s. In classical modernity and neo-classicism loan-texts

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<sup>1</sup> The text of the lecture delivered at the conference entitled *Epochenschwelle - Stilwandel - Umbesetzung. Fragen der literarischen Moderne* organized by Janus Pannonius University and the Institute of Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Pécs on 27-31 October, 1993.

emphasize the *shaped* character of classical culture. While classical modernity valued aspects of composition, neo-classicism aimed at mimicry of tone, rhetorical and poetic forms. In contrast, the second phase of modernity valued intertextuality in itself, free from all formal and logical restrictions.

As a point of departure, let me refer to a possible accidental coincidence: Ezra Pound's *Canto I* (published in 1917), and the Hungarian Lőrinc Szabó's first volume of poetry, entitled *Föld, Erdő, Isten* (*Earth, Forest, God*, - poems published between 1920 and 1921), seem to be characterized by the same kind of *discourse*. Both poets employed filters, taken from classicism, through which they introduced modern sensibility and anxiety into their works. Their poems are *quasi* narratives, appearing to be scenes from pieces of ancient literature. Philologically, the sources of both poets are easy to define; Pound himself pins them down in his works, Lőrinc Szabó reveals them in the commentaries written to his collected poems. Nevertheless, it is exactly the knowledge about the sources that may puzzle us: the certainty of what was borrowed unfolds the uncertainties of the borrowed texts. Even if the originals and the intertexts grammatically correspond to each other, they are found to display differences with regard to their *discourse*: neither does the latter fit in the discourse of any previous age of classicisation, nor can it be thought of having been isolated from any of those.

What kind of "*classical*" discourse are we talking about then?

Both Pound and Lőrinc Szabó were in favour of quoting Homeric texts in their poems, but these had come to them through several filters. The Homeric love of nature can be identified as a kind of "urban" escape to nature. Lőrinc Szabó himself revealed that the following was based on Homer:

Pedig már itt van az éj, csak mi nem vettük észre,  
hogy a kémény tetején kidugta borzas fejét a füst;

(But the night has come, though we did not take notice  
of the smoke pushing its tousled head out of the chimney;)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> He writes about the poem entitled *Erdei szerelem* (*Love in the Forest*): "I feel something Greek in it and the smoke pushing its tousled head out of the chimney directly reminds me of Homer". The referred line is: τον καπνον 'αποθω'σκοντα νοησαι ("he longs to see the smoke of his home puffing up"). See Lőrinc Szabó: *Vers és valóság* (*The Poem and Reality*) 1-2., Magvető, Bp., 1990. Vol. 1. 25.

The first 67 line unit of Pound's *Canto I* is known to be the free translation of the first 114 lines of Book XI of *The Odyssey*, "resetting" the original, as commentators emphasize. In the case of the Hungarian poet the Homeric intertext contributes to a stylized rococo effect, in the manner of the late Verlaine or Stefan George. With Pound, the steps of Aeneas are more likely to be heard in *Canto I* than those of Odysseus. For the poet the borrowing of the exact Homeric context is not of primary importance; he approaches Homer through the perspectives of various cultures. Pound used the Homeric text of a Renaissance Latin translation; he reinterpreted the already reinterpreted and reworded it<sup>3</sup>. None the less affectedly did Lőrinc Szabó quote Homer in the tone of Stefan George and the Latin poets of the Silver Age<sup>4</sup>.

According to philology, for Pound it was Ovid who represented the archetype of the ancient quoting technique, as a poet inserting into the classical world its very opposite. In order to leave no doubts as to the nature of his technique of quoting, Pound included in his *Canto II* the name of Sordello, who excelled as a medieval reinterpreter of the classical world. Sordello's name, at the same time, recalls that of Robert Browning, a master of the aestheticism of the earlier phase of modernity, who integrated various cultural positions into his work. It is an interesting parallel that Lőrinc Szabó looked upon George and Mihály Babits, the representative poets of the earlier phase of modernity as his masters. Much as Browning had done, Babits drew inspiration from the various cultural reinterpretations of the ancient classics.

They were poets living in two different parts of the world and totally unknown to each other, though developing similar features in their respective poetries - this is what can be said of Pound and Lőrinc Szabó in retrospect. As early as between 1917 and 1921, they responded similarly to the *same aspects of the past* - and to the textually and philologically relatable remnants of it so that one *particular* text becomes interpreted in their poetry in *manifold* ways.

At the same time there appears a borderline, a *difference* between intertextuality as used in classical modernity and as used in the second phase of modernity. Browning, Verlaine and the Hungarian Babits tend to adopt classical

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<sup>3</sup> He used the following edition: *Homeri Odyssea ad verbum translata*, Andrea Divo Justinopolitano interprete, *Eiusdem Hymni Deorum XXXII*, Georgio Dartona Cretense interprete, Parisiis, In officina Christiani Wecheli, 1538. (Homer's *Odyssey* translated word by word by Andreas Divus Justinopolitanus and his hymns about the gods translated by Georgius Dartona of Crete, in the workshop of Christianus Wechelus, in Paris, 1538.)

<sup>4</sup> E.g. he writes about the poem entitled *A vágy szégyene* (*The Shame of Lust*): "Graeco-Latin stylization of the Silver Age type." (Lőrinc Szabó: *Vers és valóság* (*The Poem and Reality*), Vol. 1. 33.)

*situations* and ornamentation through the use of certain intertexts. They build up a fictive world to provide the scenery of the poem. It is the *construction*, the *composition*, the designable *whole* that gains emphasis, as the indispensable part of the poetic work.

In the above poems of Pound and Lőrinc Szabó the quoted texts are not parts of the composition, they remain consciously *alien elements*, used to demonstrate *unidentifiability*. This way they prove that no text can be a *definite part* of some construction or composition, because all texts include the divergent interpretations of different eras as well, which often contradict each other. And this explains why philology links Pound with Ovid and not Homer from the ancient times, in spite of the fact that *Canto I* begins with a long extract borrowed from Homer. It is text rather than structure, and within text ambiguity rather than unequivocality that becomes more emphatic. No piece of text, be it quoted from the best of the classics, can have only one kind of "authentic" interpretation. The act of interpretation is the demonstration of the text having a multiplicity of meanings. With this, the unambiguous relatedness of grammar and logic becomes disrupted.

Hang it all, Robert Browning,  
there can be but the one "Sordello."  
But Sordello, and my Sordello?  
Lo Sordels si fo di Mantovana.

This "Sordello" is then included in the network created along with the composition of the *Cantos*, and thereby "Lo Sordels si fo di Mantovana" can become "my Sordello".

So-shu churned in the sea.  
Seal sports in the spray-whited circles of cliff-wash,  
Sleek head, daughter of Lir,  
    eyes of Picasso  
Under black fur-hood, lithe daughter of Ocean;  
And the wave runs in the beach-groove:  
"Eleanor, 'ελ'εναυς and 'ελ'επτολις!"  
    And poor old Homer blind, blind, as a bat,  
Ear, ear for the sea-surge, murmur of old men's voices:

Not only Pound's "Sordello" is defined, but also "Homer", the starting point of our present inquiry.

Besides, not only the *past* is revalued through various steps but the poem of 1920 itself in time as well. Lőrinc Szabó reads even his beloved's name into the classicising reference, thirty three years after the actual affairs. "Later I smiled a lot at one of the hints and was very glad to have it there." -- he writes in the note following the lines<sup>5</sup>:

a szûzi Hold szállt le benned az égről  
s a buja Flóra csókol csókjaidban.

(the virgin Moon descended in you from heaven  
and the lewd Flora is kissing with your kisses.)

Accordingly, the life of the artist may write itself into the finished poem, and this interpretation also has its place in the poet's work as well as in the literary history beginning with the 1920s.

One of the major representatives of the age, Eliot can also be mentioned in this context, as one who borrowed from the classics - for example - through Dante and Joseph Conrad. Another contemporary, Kavafis includes the adopted, multi-interpreted text into a markedly *other* context, without any specific hint<sup>6</sup>.

Looking ahead, this kind of intertextualization of classical materials differs not only from the presence of classicization in the earlier, so called aesthetic-modernity, but also from the fashionable neo-classicism of the 1930s. In the works of both the classical modernity and neo-classicism it is first of all the *shaped* characteristic of classical culture that is emphasized through the borrowing of texts. While classical modernity valued aspects of composition, neo-classicism aimed at mimicry with regard to tone, rhetorical and poetic forms. The former stressed composition, and the latter treated aspects of the one-time shaping as emphatically verse-constituting factors. In contrast, the second phase of modernity is a period in

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<sup>5</sup> „It is one of my favourites among my poems!” Lőrinc Szabó dictates in his memoirs probably to the woman with whose story the memories in the poem are currently reinterpreted. (Lőrinc Szabó: *Vers és valóság (The Poem and Reality)*, Vol. 1. 17.)

<sup>6</sup> See the essay by István Vas: *Kavafisz modernsége (The Modernity of Kavafisz)*, in: István Vas: *Vonzások és választások (Attractions and Selections)*, Szépirodalmi, Bp., 1978. 174-178.

literary history which values intertextuality in itself, separated from all formal and logical restrictions.

Consequently, there appears an essential paradigmatic change in poetry. So far the discovery of this has been hindered by the forced insertion of the avant-garde between classical modernity and the second phase of modernity. The monologically and teleologically conceived poetics of the avant-garde with its different movements was loud enough to divert attention from other simultaneously evolving significant events. As a matter of fact, it altered form and grammar, but never questioned the identity between the form and logic of the text. The poetics of the avant-garde is determined by formal and thematic aspects. In the second phase of modernity both become negligible, to the extent that poets like Pound and Lőrinc Szabó may return to highly shaped poetic figures, introducing a kind of classicization at the same time. The basis of the poetics of the second phase of modernity lies in the change taking place in textconstitution. Openness to interpretation becomes separated from grammar, from even the best-regulated one. Losing its unequivocality, grammar becomes formal and logic parts from it.

Poetry in the second phase of modernity, therefore, differs from the traditional verse as well as the poetry of classical modernity and even that of the avant-garde.

Why therefore this difference?

In classical modernity, from Baudelaire to George and the Hungarian poets Ady and Babits, poetic changes took place in the so called "rounded poem". The classical tradition became built in a more rigid composition like a mosaic. It can be philologically proved that the master of this poetic ideal was Dante. He became the respected and translated example of the master who could create a philosophically valid, *unified* work of art out of a chain of classical allusions. It carried the idea of the *reconstructable whole* against the experience of "things fall apart" (using Yeats's and the Hungarian Ady's well-known words).

The great masters of the second phase of modernity are influenced by Dante, but it is exactly with them that the borrowing of the composition becomes fictitious.

The following comments<sup>7</sup> can be read of Pound: "It is true that organicist criteria have the authority of Pound's own pronouncements on the *Cantos'* over-all design (as a 'fugue', an 'Odyssey', a 'Divine Comedy', a 'vortex', composed according to 'the ideogrammatic method' or made out of 'interlocking rhythm of recurrence'),

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Brooker: *A Student's Guide to THE SELECTED POEMS OF EZRA POUND*. Faber & Faber, London and Boston, 1979. 228-229.

and also of his late confessions of failure ('I cannot make it cohere', *Canto CXVI*, [...] or 'a mess', 'It's a botch', *EP*, ed. Sullivan<sup>8</sup>, 354, 375). Pound himself evidently subscribed to these criteria, but is more interesting than most of his commentators because he also explicitly and in practice contradicted them. Against, for example, Pound's remarks on the scheme of the *Cantos* as 'Rather like, or unlike subject and response and counter subject in fugue' *SL*<sup>9</sup>, 210) or the elaborate parallel he suggested to Yeats with the three-tiered Renaissance fresco by Cosimo Tura ('A Packet for Ezra Pound' in *A Vision*, 1956, 4-5), one can (and must) set his reminder of 'the number of very important chunks of world-literature in which form, major form, is remarkable mainly for absence' (*LE*<sup>10</sup>, 394). And against Pound's most categorical avowal of an analogy with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, that he had schooled himself 'to write an epic poem which begins »In the Dark Forest« crosses the Purgatory of human error, and ends in the light, and »fra i maestri di color che sanno«' (*SPr*<sup>11</sup>, 137), one is bound to set the caution of 'By no means an orderly Dantescan rising / but as the winds veer' (*Canto LXXIV* [...]) and his proviso 'I was not following the three divisions of the *Divine Comedy* exactly. One can't follow the Dantesque cosmos in an age of experiment' (*Writers at Work*, 52)."

Lőrinc Szabó composes his first volume of poetry from the poems written up to that time, independently complete in themselves in a similar way so he could also say: "it begins In the Dark Forest, crosses the Purgatory of human error, and ends in the light". Just as towards the end of his life he composes *Tücsökzene (The Chirping of Crickets)*, the volume of his reflections about life on the basis of his biography, after *Az elképzelt halál (The Imagined Death)* he adds another cycle to the composition entitled *Helyzetek és pillanatok (Situations and Moments)*. This is the coexistence of the accepted and neglected composition in his poetic work.

But why do the authors of the second phase of modernity also insist on the example of Dante?

The explanation is that they are different from their predecessors. For them Dante represents the master *in another way*. Dante does not only provide composition, but with him the narrated story loses its primary role. In his work the

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<sup>8</sup> *Ezra Pound*, ed. J.P. Sullivan, Penguin Book, Harmondsworth, 1970.

<sup>9</sup> *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound (1907-1941)*, New Directions, 1971.

<sup>10</sup> *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, Faber, 1960.

<sup>11</sup> *Selected Prose of Ezra Pound (1909-1965)*, Faber, 1973.

epic *grand récit* breaks into episodic mosaics on the one hand and into a ritualized frame on the other, into the reliving of salvation. At this moment the "borrowed text" loses its original narrative characteristic and becomes the illustration of a kind of ethical degree, of one step of the ritual. With this history undergoes devaluation as well, since it proves nothing but the constant repetition of parables. Thus the *story* becomes a means of mythical representation because of its archetypal character, and its *textuality* is the very basis for reinterpretation.

Pound studied the Dante-cult of the Pre-Raphaelites that emphasized decorative multiplicity. Lőrinc Szabó, on the other hand, studied that period of Babits during which the latter translated Dante. He became attracted to his master when he was working on *Purgatorio*, the part of Dante's masterpiece which displays a multiplicity of meanings opposed to the tragic and hymnic univocality of *Inferno* and *Paradiso* respectively.

Coming back to our starting point, with Pound and Lőrinc Szabó intertexts both marked and unmarked tend to appear at places, enhancing one particular kind of poetic thinking. At the same time the whole cultural background does not concern them as a parable of some salvation story or as a coloured detail of some decorative mosaic, in contrast with the Dante-interpretations of their predecessors. It interests them, however, as the storehouse of a multiplicity of the ways of how ideas can be rethought and reconsidered. Thereby they are likely to bring dialogicity into the text itself, creating the basis for the poetic discourse that we can call the *dialogical poetic paradigm*. This new type of poetic discourse strongly contrasts with the earlier, monologized one which relied on the unity of tone and the unquestionability of sentences being identifiable as statements or conclusions. Its novelty lay in self-interpretation realized by means similar to the Heideggerian "Über-sich-sprechen", that is, self-expression through dialogue with some other about something. The sentence is no longer identical with the statement; within the former an interpretational "atonality" is created.

The new poetic paradigm could not come into being as long as the poem (either traditional, classically modern or avante-garde) represented a kind of teleology according to the principle of usefulness. The work of art attempts to eternalize the working of the whole mental process by laying down the characteristics of a given moment. In contrast with teleological reflection, its essence is consciousness; it does not follow the unfolding of events in natural time but confronts mentally absorbed events by simultaneously registering all as flow, constant transformation and demonstrates their being shaped and unalterably fixed in the work of art. Poetry turns



any process into "pastness" by articulating the states of constant mental transformations in its discourse at the same time. It is a constant running ahead articulated by the eternal return, making it possible for the individual to define himself in the "impersonality" of the working of the mind. Thus the summary of life consisting of a series of now-points may remain in fragments, and at the exceptional moment fixed by the work the impersonality of authentic time becomes individualized.

According to Lőrinc Szabó's poem, "the image flashes, leaps, pushes,/ connects, calls its would-be fellows,/ the other stays far behind it / and from there remarks: every moment / -- in which he lives, as a thread of time -- / perceives the intricate whole together / and intends to speak to the whole."

The prelude to the great change in the poetic paradigm whose history is being discussed in the present paper, can perhaps be found in Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. In Pound's poem the change of viewpoints is made conscious in opposition to two kinds of contexts. On the one hand it is included in the traditional dialectics of history:

All things are a flowing,  
Sage Heracleitus says;

This voice changes without any evaluation, announcing merely a fact. At the same time the announcement is framed by explanatory and complementary statements which signal the uncertainty appearing in the value relations. First a grammatically expressed »atonality« makes the sentence-statement identification impossible: "Christ follows Dionysus, / Phallic and ambrosial / Made way for macerations;" - later describing the reduction in value to signify the uncertainty with regard to the present level of values:

Even the Christian beauty  
Defects - after Samothrace;  
We see το καλο'ν  
Decreed in the market place.

In *Mauberley*, the textual formation is marked by the parallel suggestion of value-levels and value-differences.

Both poets turn to the whole of human culture so as to tune the whole of thinking to another pitch. *Intertextuality* is markedly instrumental in bringing about the paradigmatical change in that it introduces a multiplicity of possible interpretations into the text of the whole work through the juxtaposed inclusion of various intertexts.

It is the above poetic event of the second phase of modernity that will be found by the postmodern age as one lasting value of modernism. In world literature Pound, in Hungarian poetry, Lőrinc Szabó, were its major representatives, which explains why both are becoming so popular nowadays.