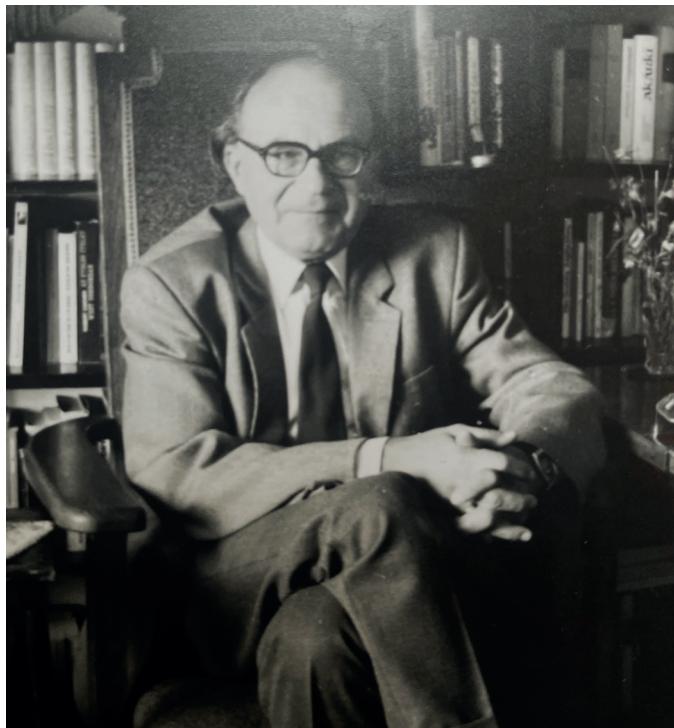


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Professor István Géher (1940–2012)

Harmony between Words and Actions

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Professor István Géher in his study
Family archives, by courtesy of Prof. Katalin G. Kállay

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stván Géher was a Hungarian poet¹ and translator, as well as a professor of English and American literature at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. As a Shakespeare-scholar and the one-time president of the Hungarian Shakespeare Society, he is perhaps best known for his thought provoking *Shakespeare Reader* (first published in 1991) in which (as the subtitle suggests) his aim is to show "a mirror held up to us in thirty-seven pieces" (and the word for "piece" and "play": "darab" is the same in the Hungarian language). The *Reader* is both systematic and experimental: it provides a reading for all of the plays in a basically conversational tone with a great academic background, but deliberately without footnotes. In the preface, "To the Reader," he says the following:

My Shakespeare reader, in which scholarly information atones for the lyrical motivations, is not so much a study in literary history as a work of literature; a narrative of my thoughts: followed in its unfurling, a novel of consciousness; the worth and interest of which depends on the extent to which one believes that man can enjoy and benefit from getting acquainted with the thoughts of another man. Thinking, as a matter of fact, has never been a harmless practice, and nowadays – in an age of false contingencies organized into forms of government and ways of life, an age of pseudo-truths forced on our fallibility – it is, one may say, an addiction. I say, in time, and from experience, that it is troublesome and dangerous to think *honestly*, even about Shakespeare. Or: especially when about Shakespeare. Shakespeare's common place (a stage of the world unique in its up-to-dateness) is held up to our thought in order to make common, on its mirror-faced surface, all our deep and private doubts. Whether it is possible to live a meaningful life [...] whether it is worth the trouble and danger of thinking [...]. Reader, look around in your world, and think! Are you really interested in my thoughts on Shakespeare?

If you are, then you find yourself in my spiritual company; what's more, in the company of spirits: while thinking about Shakespeare, the thinker is never alone; his thoughts are filled with the thoughts of great minds of the past, his sentences reverberate with the discourse of professionals and amateurs, writers and readers of four hundred years of literature. The history of scholarship names and classifies the souls errant, pinning them down to their allotted places, by the spell of quotations. The essay, rather, conjures them up: by way of providing them with a body in its own living text, thus reviving their immortality. This is my way of thinking, my way of working. I have lived for a good many years encased, metaphorically, in Shakespeare's work; my readings about him would, practically, fill a good-sized bookcase. But in my book, I deliberately avoid references. Naturally, I mean, as I practice my profession. In the practice of the essayist a literary opinion is not a patent, nor an invention. It is, like its origin and its outcome, an *experience*: a source of energy, an inspiring creative opportunity. We ought to feel free to take it. We exist – like in the infinity of time our transitory nature is heir to – in all that we know; our knowledge taken wherever it could be found, and given over to whomever it may concern. Back and forth: we learn from our students so that we can teach our masters. The spirit of our trade, having a basically social disposition, feels at ease in the atmosphere of collective thinking. Its element is the (mutually naturalizing and alienating) community of thought; the stream of opinions in which a stand taken – what you think and what I think – although it literally demands our whole personality, is also, poetically, impersonal, because what we passionately claim to be our own is not only ours [...]. To be my companion, Reader, you needn't remember my name; it's enough if you further my thoughts (Géher 1991: 10–11).

¹ See Géher 2019.

The most recent edition (2015) contains another outstanding scholar's, Géza Kállay's foreword in which Kállay (1959–2017)² emphasizes the uniquely performative aspect of Géher's teaching and writing, remembering how each of his classes was a celebration of some sort of mystery because of his ability to be present and make the reading as well as the readers present for this occasion. When trying to place this approach among different schools of interpretation, Kállay (who happened to be Géher's son-in law), mentions ethical criticism and deconstruction, using the term "family resemblance." But he immediately adds, that Géher followed no pre-given paradigm, it was rather the Bakhtinian "dialogic imagination" along which Géher's thoughts unfolded. Among Géher's sources of inspiration, Kállay names S. T. Coleridge, A.C. Bradley, George Wilson-Knight, William Empson and Stanley Cavell, – representatives, in Kállay's interpretation, of the "metaphysical" reading of Shakespeare, but beside these, as Kállay points out, Géher, having a social interest, was also influenced by New Historicism, Shakespeare scholars, such as Stephen Greenblatt or David Scott Kastan, who were also his personal acquaintances and friends. Still, and perhaps most of all, it was Jan Kott, author of *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* whose disposition and attitude proved to be thought provoking for Géher.



Professor Géza Kállay in conversation
Family archives, by courtesy of Prof. Katalin G. Kállay

Professor Géher's invocation of Montaigne and the genre of the essay is also vital: the original meaning of the word is "attempt," or "experiment" – and Kállay points out the importance of the personal responsibility of the essayist; a lot is at stake when the experiment is targeted at his own life.

² See Kállay 2013.

Kállay also adds that the scope of Géher's teaching (not only in his classes, special seminars, but also in the radio programmes and the innumerable forewords and afterwords to various editions) grew far beyond a concrete "university." He addresses universality and the universe –but only through the particular, one-time presence of a certain experience, a specific constellation of meanings – this is what makes his prose close to or tantamount to poetry.

In the fall of 2022, Károli Gáspár University and Eötvös Loránd University organized a conference in memory of both István Géher and Géza Kállay, entitled "Action Suited to the Word" (recalling Hamlet's instructions to the actors, indicating how close both of these eminent scholars were to the words of Shakespeare). In 2025, the outstanding papers given at the conference will be published by L'Harmattan Publishing House, in the Károli Books series.

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