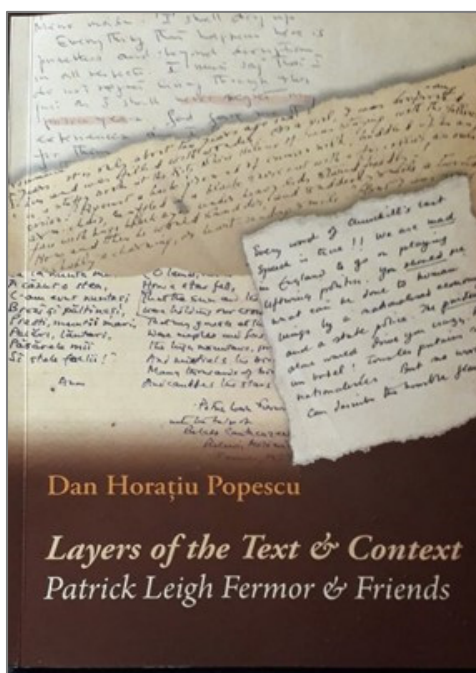


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Dan Horațiu Popescu, *Layers of the Text & Context: Patrick Leigh Fermor & Friends*, Oradea, Editura Universității din Oradea: Partium, 2020, 258 p.

In the autumn of 1933, Patrick Leigh Fermor was only eighteen years old when he set out on a journey to Europe after a complicated and rebellious adolescence: having disembarked from his homeland, England, in the Netherlands, he planned to cross the continent on foot until reaching Istanbul. Thus begins the account of a life-long travel adventure, where the icy plains of the Netherlands parade before our eyes, and



German taverns, excellent libraries, friendships born on the street, offer the most varied hospitality that one could get: rooms rented by boatmen, acquaintances of acquaintances who offer young Fermor a room, young Central Europeans who have fun with him, Transylvanian manor houses and Magyar nobles who spoil him. Moreover, we read the author's brilliant reflections on heraldry, demography, and linguistics. Then the Danube suddenly appears between gusts of wind, the choir of

Augusta, the vastness of Hungary crossed for a stretch on horseback, the Iron Gates between the Carpathians and the Balkans, the food shared with the peasants or the Gypsies, the Schloss, pristine forests, legends, and fairy tales, a stay in Austria, the Rhine crossed by barge, the paintings of Cranach and Altdorfer, and, of course, the cities: Cologne, Stuttgart, Vienna, Brno, Prague, Budapest, Cluj, Bucharest, Galatzi on

the way to Constantinople...

The book written by Dan Horațiu Popescu is more than a new biography of Patrick Leigh Fermor. It is an invitation to a new reading of Fermor's *Between the Woods and the Water* from the perspective of the Romanian scholar, who identifies different layers of meaning in the pages of the British traveler's memoirs. The author takes the reader on an incursion in the more or less distant past – from the golden years of European and Romanian

history between the two World Wars to the Iron Curtain and beyond. In the first section, "On Becoming a Writer," one chapter is devoted to Fermor's formation as a writer as it comes out from his correspondence with Laurence Durrell. The second section, "People & Places," deals with the relationship between Sacheverell Sitwell and Patrick Leigh Fermor, pointing out their close ties with Romania. The following section, "Writing the Woods and the Water," goes deeper into the inter-ethnic relations and analyses the condition of the Gypsy people in Hungary and Transylvania, the presence of the Jews and their social status, and the image of the Turk, "the perennial Other in Eastern Europe." The author discusses the travelogue as a narrative of displacement, stressing Hungary and Transylvania's historical and political contexts, as found in Patrick Leigh Fermor's correspondence with his Budapest friend Rudolf Fischer. In the last section, "The Quest resumed," the author highlights the close connection between the writers' artistic calling and the quest for spirituality, as seen in the lives and works of Edward Lear, Patrick Leigh Fermor, and Bruce Chatwin. One final aspect the author addresses are the relations between text and epitext in the three writers' works and letters.

Dan Horațiu Popescu likens "Paddy" Fermor's tours through Western and Eastern Europe in the early 1930s to the traditional Grand Tour recommended to young Englishmen as early as the 17th century. The author follows Fermor's self-taught writing apprenticeship in the Abbey of St. Wandrille, Solesmes Abbey, and La Grande Trappe – the silent universities and "towers of silent ivory," which the Englishman turned into a

writer's retreats and described in detail in *A Time to Keep Silence* (1953). It is an unexpected stage in the life of a man known for his adventurous and restless spirit who, despite all the difficulties, is convinced that "Byzantium will be saved." Ample space is devoted to the writer's friendship with Laurence Durrell, as seen in their letters that reveal their fascination for Greece. The details of Fermor's relationship with Balasha Cantacuzène, a member of the old Romanian aristocracy, give the reader a glimpse of the four years spent at the princess's estate at Băleni, in Romania, until 1939. Her letters to him after 1965 reveal the effervescent cultural milieu of Western Europe as seen from beyond the Iron Curtain. That was a world to which she no longer had any access.

However, Balasha is not the only Romanian aristocrat present in *Between the Woods and the Water* and in the writer's letters. There is also Princess Anne-Marie Callimachi, a great traveler for whom the Orient Express was her "mental home" and in whose house Fermor met Sacheverell "Sachie" Sitwell, the author of *Roumanian Journey* (1938), whom the princess had invited to write a book about Romania. Among other notable names mentioned in the two Englishmen's letters, we find Micaela Catargi, Princess Priscilla Bibesco, Matila Ghyka. An "inquisitive traveler" for whom Romania is "at the far end of Europe" (90), Sacheverell Sitwell records the ceremonial Orientalist character of the meals served not only in the monasteries and convents visited and the excellence of Romanian cuisine found in the restaurants of Sinaia or Bucharest. We also read a detailed account of Fermor's correspondence with Michel Alexis

“Bishi,” Catargi, a “sophisticated and refined person who was able to read behind & between & beyond the lines” (129). The keywords in this account are *memory* and *nostalgia* – nostalgia for the refined life of the Romanian aristocracy prior to WWII as seen after the fall of communism.

Otherness is seen in terms of *types* and *stereotypes*. The Gypsies and the Jews “provided an interesting opportunity to theorists for pairing the analysis of the discourses of orientalism and anti-Semitism” (159). Fermor’s first encounter with the ever-present Gypsy people “on the move in long, jolting wagons that made all their gear clatter” is preceded by a detailed account of their presence in English and European culture. According to the author, “one may believe that Patrick Leigh Fermor was mostly a writer of the picturesque, with too light a touch concerning people and landscapes” (154). We can see the Gypsies almost everywhere Fermor went, even in Balasha Cantacuzène’s house at Băleni, where a fiddler “played and sang when called upon, backed by half a dozen fellow Gypsies settled in the village” (157). The Jews are also there, whether in Hungary, Transylvania, or Moldavia. Visiting the monasteries in Northern Moldavia, Sachie Sitwell could not overview the presence of the Jews, stating that “The question of the Jews in Eastern Europe would seem to be insoluble” (167). Concerned with the Jews’ history and culture, Fermor underlines the gap between the two cultures and religions, and “expressed his unhappiness concerning some of the Central European realities of the 1930s that ended in the Holocaust” (173).

Then, who is the “perennial other” of Central Europe? Dan Horațiu Popescu points out the writer’s positioning in

Between the Woods and the Water: his picturesque approach towards the Gypsies and the Jews, the remarks on the elements attesting to the specter of the Ottoman Empire, the presence of the Serbians and the Swabians, and the Turkish settlement on the Ada-Kaleh island on the Danube. We underline Fermor’s remarks about the Vlach communities: the traveler refers to both the Hungarian and the Romanian justifications for their presence, convinced that “the speech of the Rumanians and the Vlachs of the Balkans must spring from the same source” (204). He understood that the migration of peoples due to several reasons, [...] was not to be confused with nomadism” (208). One element that attracts attention is Paddy Fermor’s appreciation of Romanian folklore and his translation of the ballad “Mioritza,” the Romanians’ “master narrative of displacement” (212), in cooperation with Balasha Cantacuzène, fragments of which were to be recited at his funeral.

Dan Horațiu Popescu devotes an entire chapter to the correspondence between Paddy Fermor and Rudolph Fischer, a Hungarian historian and linguist, mainly regarding the writing of *Between the Woods and the Water*. The writer uses Fischer’s expertise in the history of Hungary and Transylvania and acknowledges “his concern for retrieving all possible memories – i.e., words, languages, people, gestures, places, history, nature, including birds” (218). The letters also concern the writers’ search for meaning, the various aspects of style, and the accuracy of the information provided. The concluding chapter, “Walking to Byzantium,” highlights several aspects of the work of Edward Lear, Patrick Leigh

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Fermor, and Bruce Chatwin and the different approaches to their travels to Greece: the search for Victorian and imperialist values (Lear), the end of the youth journey (Fermor), and the moment of revelation (Chatwin).

It also means the end of the journey undertaken by Dan Horațiu Popescu at the epistolary universe of Patrick Leigh Fermor

and his friends. The book is an in-depth investigation of the historical, social, cultural, and inter-ethnic relations, and Romania's place and role in interwar Europe, as seen in the written testimonies of those who lived in those times. In the author's own words, it is an *opera aperta*, an open work inviting to further re-readings and re-writings.

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