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The Quixotic Quest of Transylvanism:

**The Work of Gelu Păteanu and His Impact on the Interaction between
Contemporary Romanian and Hungarian Literature**

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

PROSPECTUS

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Surveying the personal destiny and literary output of Gelu Păteanu provides a glimpse into the backdrop of prevailing debates about transylvaniam. Tracing his career for nearly six decades, we will gain insight into the fundamental realities of Romanian and Hungarian literature in Transylvania, and may undertake to answer the questions of why the web of Hungarian-Romanian literary connections never evolved into an organic network, what it was that doomed to failure the repeated attempts of both nations to reconcile their respective cultures, and where the lines of demarcation lie that continue to thwart access and permeability between the two bodies of literature. At the same time, we will consider the chances that a dissident poet was left with under communist dictatorship in Romania to unfold his talent, to build a career under the surveillance of totalitarian apparatus—particularly in the case of a creative mind who was supposed to be Romanian by national identity but widely regarded as a traitor owing to his empathy for Hungarians. Gelu Păteanu’s life serves as an example of being a genuine Transylvanian in the political and regional sense, and of the dead-end of certain trends within the discourse of transylvaniam, presented here in the context of cosmopolitan, pan-European thought—a novel if utopian vision of neighbor nations surviving side by side, particularly in respect of Romanian-Hungarian, indeed Transylvanian, relations.

From the perspective of transylvaniam, Gelu Păteanu carried on much of the pre-Trianon thought that had engendered the movement itself. What he prioritized in his work was not so much some kind of messianistic common destiny as the harnessing of regionalism in the specific regard of cultural interactions between nations separated by a border.

These, then, are the framework and criteria informing my examination of Gelu Păteanu’s artistic achievement, life, and contribution to the Hungarian and Romanian literary scenes, as I seek to trace the lessons to be learned from this maverick of a poet and his distinctive oeuvre. The age in which he lived straddles the entire era of communist rule in Romania and stretches some way into the transitional period after the democratic turn, until his death in 1995. His year of birth, 1925, happens to coincide with the year when Transylvanian-Hungarian literature in its own right emerged. In this way, Păteanu’s life and work form a part of three parallel literary histories: those of contemporary Hungarian literature in Romania, contemporary Romanian literature, and contemporary Hungarian literature in Hungary. As a poet, translator, and political thinker, Păteanu made a vital contribution to building avenues of access between national literatures that has not been charted in sufficient detail, and his importance as an author par excellence has been treated rather cursorily and superficially by literary history.

The geopolitical trends immediately preceding World War II confirmed Transylvanians in their premonition that the changes brought about earlier in the century would not last. This realization triggered often diametrically opposed movements in the tiny nations of East Central Europe, causing traumas unhealed to this day.

Yet a common reality and the sense of a shared destiny give rise to shared problems. The focus on these problems then creates a sort of convergence of attempts to solve them in all fields of life, including that of culture beyond the obvious areas of politics and society. Communication becomes indispensable as the sense of belonging together politically, legally, and simply in terms of cohabitation both naturally presuppose and necessitate interaction and thinking together.

A common reality also means shared experiences, the reflection upon which—the paramount task of art—quickly unleashes the first manifestations of an embraced minority identity along with its nascent institutions, the demand for an organized community. The key word for this early phase could be opposition, which is indeed the central concept underpinning the world-view of transylvanism.

In fact, the attitude of transylvanism leaves such a deep imprint on the literature of the era that the majority of works written during the period may come across as attempts at self-vindication, mainly in the sense outlined above.

Yet the issue of mutual cultural permeability between the two nations calls for investigation, despite what on the face of it is a clear answer implied by the rhetorical question: If an idea—in the case at hand, transylvanism—is articulated in opposition to something else, then how could it maintain intimate ties with that against which it was conceived in the first place? Nonetheless, the question holds a certain fascination due to the circumstances mentioned above, under which the historic determination, the unwitting cohabitation do define the majority–minority distinction as the only dichotomy along which the literary history of Transylvania in the past century can feasibly be construed, along with the oeuvres of individual authors.

In Gelu Păteanu's view, a special minority identity of Transylvania could have been consistently upheld and the relations between the two nations made organic only if the cohabitation had been based on mutual cultural awareness transcending sheer politics. Beyond arguably being the most sensitive and prolific translator of the era, equally well-versed in both cultures as a bilingual Transylvanian, Păteanu was also the foremost cultural mediator of his

day, both as a private citizen and through his political involvement, who never ceased from exploring the realistic chances of cooperation between the two nations, looking at all conceivable ways of their living together sensibly in an arrangement imposed from above that did not make sense.

The last great moment of Păteanu's lifetime achievement came in 1990 when he gave a speech in Fehéregyháza by the Petőfi memorial, triggering the chain reaction that ultimately forced him to leave Transylvania for good. Yet during his three quarters of a century on earth, he bequeathed on us a legacy that has not been fully explored to date—ideals worth thinking about and building upon, the example of taking a bold stand, clarity of political vision and, last but not least, a corpus of lyrical poetry complemented by a rich and superb oeuvre of translations, also to be discussed in my thesis.

Not neglecting Păteanu's output as a translator, I then propose to examine the evolution of his own poetry tracking episodes in his life, as a way of revealing the logic of Romanian communism, the relationships between literature and power, the conditions of creative life in the age, the infiltration of the art scene by the security services, and the retributions of the communist state against dissenting minds.

The conflict between the political system and individual artistic creation was very much in evidence during the totalitarian rule. I propose that this is true in a more general sense as well: Creative activity is always the natural enemy of any prevailing system of power, in that it defines itself from a perspective gainsaying official doctrine.

In the wake of World War II, the communist single-party state continued to decide the course of Romanian history for nearly five decades. The same period saw the burgeoning of Hungarian literature in Transylvania, followed in 1990 by a tangible lull in the unfolding of these literary processes.

The careers of Transylvanian artists intertwined closely, and often overtly, with their engagement in politics, and more than just along the premise that power always sees artistic pursuit as a political act in and of itself. Almost all artists of the period are on record for their political views and the degree to which they opposed or pandered to the system, as the case may be. In this sense, Gelu Păteanu's life is but one example of the dissident Transylvanian artist's destiny. He was one of those victimized from the start by the power they spoke out against, resisting the attempts of that power to silence them by means of persecution, intimidation, and prevention. Păteanu himself had become involved in politics some time before

his literary career took off. A few wrong words dropped at his place of work in 1952—including against the monetary reform, considered a capital offense by the status quo¹—earned him a sentence of forced labor of 10 months at the Danube Canal. It was after serving this sentence that he became a translator and poet by choice. As such, he was considered an enemy of the system from the outset. By the time he was released from the communist labor camp, he had amassed a copious file on the shelves of the Securitate, and had every step he made watched closely by informers to the end of his life.

With a career as an artist launched under such circumstances, Păteanu's political dissent and pursuits as a translator subjected him to constant surveillance by the communist state, which frowned especially on his blatant sympathy for Hungarians. However, he remained aware of being kept a tab on from the get-go and embraced the status of the persecuted, determined to walk his own way and to create the body of work he handed down to us. As a poet in his own right, he was never really allowed to speak.

One of the key findings of my research presented in this thesis is the surveillance files of the former Romanian security services, which discuss the unpublished manuscript of Păteanu's first volume of poetry, and make available the texts in both Romanian and Hungarian in an attachment. What is most striking from the point of view of literary history are the circumstances surrounding the survival of these documents. My investigation of more than 1,000 pages of the Păteanu folder unearthed a rich testimony speaking to the ways in which the communists in power cemented the surveillance of contemporary authors and interpreted their works.

¹ Cf. ACNSAS (Archiva Consiliului Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității, the National Archive of the National Council for Investigating the Securitate), folder No. P 0064292, (27/79):

Date of detention: February 28, 1952.

Outcome of search warrant: *Negative*.

Criminal record: *None*.

Form made out by [*illegible*]
(28/29)

From the deposition of the detainee:

Pleading no guilty to any of the charges.

From other testimonies:

He spoke out against the monetary reform, saying that the bank notes are unsigned, have no value, and will be replaced soon. Listens to Voice of America and spreads alarming rumors. [The rest of the testimonies is repetitious and/or difficult to read.]

Confrontation of witnesses:

None.

The ostensible, and possibly true, narratives about Gelu Păteanu as conceived by the security services could themselves provide the raw plot line for a thriller novel of sorts, not to mention the habits of the Securitate in reading and construing his texts (and those of his contemporaries), which would deserve an entire chapter devoted to them in a theoretically inclined but entertaining analysis. The gist of this hermeneutic strategy was to have the surveillance officer relay the stolen literary works to cooperating professionals for analysis, then file a report on their findings, augmented by his own comments. These reports lorded over life and death in respect of their subjects, who were often beaten, imprisoned, intimidated, vexed, and occasionally even co-opted into the fold of power. They were also instrumental in deciding whether continued surveillance of the subject was necessary.

The various techniques of assault, pestering, intimidation, surveillance, and physical torment should not be conducive to creative thought and work, but they did pay certain aesthetic dividends, in that the realities of the age were thematized and transmuted into literature by generations, pointing beyond their own constraints to provide the imprint of an era. The work of Păteanu as a poet clearly fits in this lineage, from the early phases on as discussed in depth of detail in my dissertation.

Păteanu's work as translator was in itself an act of rebellion, a manifestation of his sympathy with the oppressed and the disenfranchised, including of course the Hungarians of Transylvania. He was assigned this rather productive form of resisting power by his faith in cultural appeasement. His ambitions as an individual intersected with his political views and his undertaking as an artist, resulting in no fewer than 70 volumes of superb translation, introducing at least as many Hungarian authors to Romanian audiences. Among other seminal works, he is credited with the most authentic Romanian translation of Kelemen Mikes's *Letters from Turkey* and János Arany's verse epic *Toldi*. Symbolically, he embarked on translating the latter text in 1956, the year of Hungary's Revolution and War of Independence.

One of the key questions I ask in my dissertation pertains to how the Hungarian literature in Transylvania chose its points of intersection with the literature of the home country, and how an oeuvre like Păteanu's could be situated in this process.

Concurrently, I will examine the semantic changes of the notion of transylvanism through history from the vantage point of the literary scene in Transylvania in the early 1990s, with a focus on how the sense of a Transylvanian identity shifted from the old guard to the new generations in the context of the new-found freedom after 1989.

Individual narratives of identity not marked by an attitude of particularly committed transylvanisms are thematized across entire oeuvres and often survive relatively unscathed after the 1990s. By way of example I will trace this process in the work of Géza Szócs, which shows remarkable affinities with the Transylvanian awareness embraced by Gelu Păteanu.

The shared platforms of thinking about what it means to be a Transylvanian hint at a vitality and resilience in a dimension beyond sheer ethnicity, attesting to an ethos of broader historic horizons the underpinnings of which should not be sought in politics so much as in a regional spirit, always bearing in mind the ontological questions and challenges raised by the very concept itself.

I propose the term of radical transylvanism as being remarkably apt at grasping the lessons offered by the life and work of Gelu Păteanu. This personal life, Transylvanian to the bone in its trajectory and burdened by all the humiliations visited upon it by communist rule, remained to the end, and in a very distinctive way, devoted to the lofty cause of cultural dialog between nations. As such, it would have deserved a prominent place in both literary canons, if for nothing else, then for the sheer artistic achievement evidenced by the texts themselves. Yet Păteanu the man and the poet continues to be cloaked in diffident silence.

The most tangible proceeds of my research consist of a first ever comprehensive bibliography of Gelu Păteanu's works compiled by myself. Throughout this project have I made an effort to explore sources difficult to access, paying special attention to additional documents held by private collections, which will be added to the bibliography on an ongoing basis. The literary works I collected will be arranged in a volume I hope to publish in the near future.

In addition to tracking down and preparing for the press Gelu Păteanu's Romanian translation of János Arany's *Toldi*, in 2018 I published a book entitled *Gyalu*, a spíler ["Gyalu the Player"], as well as several articles and interviews. Below is a list of my most important publications associated with this research project.

Arany, János, *Toldi*, trans. Gelu Păteanu, ed. Endre Farkas Wellmann, Budapest–Gyergyóalfalu: Magyar PEN Club–Antropocentrum Egyesület, 2018.

Farkas Wellmann Endre, Gyalu, a spíler. Gelu Păteanu kortársai emlékezetében és néhány dokumentum tükrében [“Gyalu the Player: Gelu Păteanu as Remembered by Contemporaries and Discussed in Selected Documents”], Budapest–Gyergyóalfalu: Magyar PEN Club–Antropocentrum Egyesület, 2018.

Farkas Wellmann Endre, “Legendatöredékek Erdély irodalmából” [“Legend Fragments from the Literature of Transylvania”], Előretolt Helyőrség Vol. IV, No. 6 (2020): 1–3.

Farkas Wellmann Endre, “A kétszívű ember legendája : Gelu Păteanu: Úgy rázott össze a sors engem a magyarokkal”, [“The Lore of the Two-Hearted Man”] Előretolt Helyőrség Vol. 2, No. 21 (2018): 1–3.