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István Petelei's Writing Practices
(A Media and Social Historical Analysis)

PhD Theses

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1.

István Petelei was a short story writer and journalist at the end of the 19th century. He was born in 1852 in Marosvásárhely (Transylvania) in a merchant family. He went to school in Marosvásárhely, Kolozsvár and Székelyudvarhely. From 1871 to 1875 he studied history at the University of Budapest. From 1877 he published his short stories in different journals in Marosvásárhely, Kolozsvár and Budapest. Following his university years he returned to Transylvania but he never became a history teacher. From 1880 to 1891 he was an editor and journalist in Kolozsvár. After the years spent in Kolozsvár he returned to Marosvásárhely and worked as a writer and literary organizer. Although he decided to live and work in Transylvania, during these years he constantly published his short stories in different journals from Budapest. He died in 1910 in Kolozsvár.

2.

In literary history writing István Petelei is known among the 19th century short story writers as "the poet of the Transylvanian manor-houses" and the writer of "small people" and "nothingnesses". His oeuvre is often regarded a curiosity which comes into sight periodically.

His first biographer was Farkas Gyalui, one of his disciples from his editorial office in Kolozsvár. Gyalui's biography has been the most important starting point for most studies about Petelei till the present day. Among his contemporaries he was appreciated mostly by the young generation of writers after 1867 distinct from the "national classicism" trend. Adolf Ágai, Gyula Reviczky, Tamás Szana appreciated his work, but Jenő Péterfy also wrote critics about his work. Pál Gyulai, the most representative critic of the second half of the 19th century also published his short stories in his journal, the *Budapesti Szemle*. Among the critics of the journal *Nyugat*, Gyula Szini and Aladár Schöpflin appreciated his work, afterwards Béla Németh G., Judit Kiczenko, Ildikó Györke and István Dobos wrote about his work. Between 1940–1950 Gyula Bisztray paid attention to Petelei's work. He collected most of Petelei's manuscripts, published his literary correspondence and also wrote the history of the Petelei family. In 1969 Dezső Kozma wrote the first monography about Petelei and he also published a volume with his selected articles in 2002. Recently, Györgyi Pozsvai wrote many articles about Petelei and she also published a volume with his selected short stories in 2002. Still, István Petelei hasn't become a canonical figure of the Hungarian literary history writing. He has mostly been mentioned among the writers at the edge of the literary canon.

3.

I've started to be interested in István Petelei's work a few years earlier while writing a paper for a seminar in 19th century Hungarian literature. At the beginning I have chosen Petelei for a very subjective reason. I wanted to write a paper about a writer who had been born in the same town as myself: in Marosvásárhely. I think that the choice I finally made contained a very strong necessity for writing something which could also led to self understanding.

In lack of time I have finally written about the reception of Petelei's work. I started my preparations by reading a lot of his short stories and the whole criticism and reminiscences about Petelei. When I decided to continue my researches, the first aim I had in mind was a really deep insight into his life and work based on primary sources. I missed this "deeper insight" from the reception of his work.

4.

The present paper is based on two different perspectives. One of the perspectives is a media historical analysis and the other is a social historical one. The two perspectives arise from a dual interest. One of these is a specifically literary one concerning the production, appearance and the contexts of interpretation of the literary works. The other one is an interest towards the social phenomenon of writing as profession, which refers to the way in which a certain writer builds up his writing identity, gets in touch with his readers and plays a specific role in the social life.

In terms of the media history the work of István Petelei is remarkable in the context of the press culture of the 19th century. His writing skills had from the beginning been linked to the medium of the press literature. On the one hand I was curious to find out the ways in which the short story writer and journalist István Petelei acted upon the historical context of literature. On the other hand I was also curious to find out the role his socializing environment, the merchant family from Marosvásárhely played in his attitude towards literature.

The two different perspectives are interconnected with the notion of 'writing practices'. The notion is mainly used by French historians (Chartier, Lyons) for sources left behind by everyday people, such as diaries, autobiographies, intimate journals, love letters and family correspondences. They usually focus not on the contents of private documents but on documents as cultural artefacts. What is important in their inquiries is the existence of documents, and what that existence may tell us about the act of writing as a cultural practice, and what writing meant to those who practised it.

I could easily use the term 'writing practices' in the case of Petelei's notes and family correspondence, but I also extended it to the whole paper. I have founded it useable for two reasons. On the one hand because I didn't have a strictly esthetical interest in the interpretation of Petelei's work: in this way I used the notion in the sense of 'form of activity'. On the other hand because the paper also contains short story interpretations focused on text variants, the process of writing and the contexts of interpretations. Thus I considered the alterations in different text variants writing practices which also attract the attention to the work of art as process.

5.

The contextual analysis of different types of sources (short stories published in different journals and newspapers, Petelei's volumes and short story cycles, his historical novel, his notes, family correspondence and sketches) finally led to the following results: 1. István Petelei by writing exclusively short stories and sketches acted on the conditions the press offered him. He often adapted, rewrote his writings published in different journals and newspapers according to the demands of the real or putative readers of the periodicals. 2. Similar to other short story writers, István Petelei often collected his stories in volumes with specific structures. In some of his volumes he also separated some story cycles. Story cycles were also characteristic to his short stories published in different periodicals. The short story cycles inside his volumes were also based on the principle of sequel and continuity specific to periodicals. They played an important role in the process of maintaining the relationship with the readers. 3. In choosing the themes of his short stories, the immediate environment played the most important role. Petelei's first writings were also connected to the historical aspects of this environment. He was primarily interested in the consequences the provincial bourgeoisie's social and ethical problems had on the life of everyday people. In the process of theme collection through direct observation his travellings played an important part. He went

on regular journeys by himself or in companionship. He usually travelled to the Székelyföld. During his journeys he constantly made notes. Most of his notes functioned as tools for his profession as a writer and journalist. He usually made use of these notes during his short story or newspaper article writings. 4. The merchant spirit experienced in his family could influence István Petelei's attitude towards literature in the way he shaped his relationship with the readers. He could see and experience in his family that a good merchant always acted upon the principle of the gratification of the consumers' demands. By writing exclusively short stories Petelei also acted upon the above mentioned principle as there was a great demand for the genre in the second half of the 19th century. The most exciting social background of his profession as a writer is thus a symbolical continuation of the family occupation by a specific attitude towards literature. In this respect can be really understood the self interpretation of his literary carrier in a letter written to his disciple, Farkas Gyalui at the end of his life. The metaphor chosen from the merchant milieu, his oeuvre seen as a grocery store (grajzleráj) refers with modesty, irony and consciousness to his small craftsmanship as compared to the great writers of Hungarian literature. 5. The importance of István Petelei's work in the history of the 19th century short stories can really be recognized in the process of the formation of a wider readership among which female readers also played an important role. Alfabetization in the second half of the 19th century hasn't been so evident as it is today. After the Elementary School Law in 1868 wide masses managed to get into the possession of knowledge by acquiring the reading and writing skills. Apparently the history of their literature understanding and use was gradually shaped by multiple and complex processes. The cheap and easily obtainable newspapers played the most important role in this process. But acting upon the demands and expectations of the readership played the key role in the maintenance and formation of readership by intellectuals.