

Book Review. Fermor, Our Companion: Dan Horațiu Popescu's *Layers of the Text & Context*. *Patrick Leigh Fermor & Friends*

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What more can one say about Fermor's voyages than the very words he used, since they speak in such vivid images that they spring in time-bridging arches?!

Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor (1915–2011) is the writer who managed to turn travelogues into a genre deserving to be called an art form. The contrast between Fermor's travelogue and the new configurations and shapes undertaken by travel writing nowadays becomes comforting through the intrinsic qualities of his *écriture*: the transformative encounters with known and unknown people, the preference for the adventurous less travelled paths (even on foot) of Central and Eastern Europe before WWII (1933–1939), the assessment of historical events through his own feelings and personal history. Fermor raised the stakes by making his real and reflective voyages grow into the very matter of literature (rather than be a mere setting or an annex of it) because of his erudition and because of his genuine capacity to create authentic connections between himself and the people he met, between past and present, between inter-war years and the post-WWII world, between Western and Eastern cultures in the cold-war era.

Dan Horațiu Popescu's book on Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor had the challenge to deal with a target in perpetual movement, since travel literature captures us also through placing the unknown, the unexpected, as the absolute stake. Overcoming the pressure of such high stakes, the book unravels as a fascinating journey into all the glares and opening passages to other invisible contexts and understandings of Fermor's books and written legacy. *Layers of the Text and Context: Patrick Leigh Fermor and Friends*, published in 2020/2021, benefits, on the back cover, from the appreciation of Alec Russell, the reputed journalist and editor of *Financial Times Weekend*, and of Adam Sisman,

the reputed biographer and editor of the two volumes from Fermor's correspondence. The book amplifies what has been known about Fermor with new documents recently retrieved from the writer's correspondence. But the focus, as the title suggests, is to fetch the palimpsest of meanings. A symbolical fountain is at the centre of this palimpsest, as this book of metacriticism cannot follow voyages, but their recollection, filtered through decades of time lapse between the moment of travel and its preservation in words for posterity. Each layer of the palimpsest is receiving thorough attention and understanding. It is not erased to make room for the previous layer, on the contrary, it is revealed. The book contains notes, pictures, facsimiles en première and epitext samples. The vicinity of all these text layers is astonishing. By reading more about Fermor's *people and places*, we get a pensive journey into the interaction of layers of meaning and their perfect place in a web of contexts. This web of contexts suits the dynamism of travel literature and, at the same time, keeps all the interactions open. The free interaction of contexts enriches the volume, whilst its openness prevents the dangers of excessive interpretation.

Dan Horațiu Popescu masters the art of raising the right questions. They are always surprising. As a palimpsest, his book is not only the carrier of multilayered strata of meaning, but also the depositary of emotions and this makes it unique. It draws and unravels a palimpsest carefully retrieving the emotional world of the erudite traveller. It is through *Layers of the Text and Context* that we are connected to Fermor himself, as we feel his emotions intact. They can be captured through the written traces he left, through understanding his reactions, his humbleness in front of life with all its mysteries. Fermor was a genuine hero in his fight against Nazi on Greek realms, where he accomplished successfully his mission of abducting a German general. The challenges brought by his century did not cancel out Fermor's zest for beauty. But through the act of our reading, of following his traces, we witness him not only as *our contemporary*, to paraphrase Jan Kott's famous title on Shakespeare, but as our companion as well. He is our fountain of erudition but also our fellow traveller conscience. We, the nowadays readers, need a writer of his calibre because travel literature in our marketable globalized age in the travelogue virtual sphere tends to be indistinguishable from non-literary purposes.

The author resorts to a formula invented by him in the process of touching all layers of palimpsest and grasping, through interpretation, even the seemingly evanescent ones. The sub-chapter "When Larry met Paddy" develops the encounters with the famous writer Lawrence Durrell and their friendship in and out Greek lands. With the writer Sacheverell Sitwell, Fermor shared not only a reliable friendship with some darker moments, but also the

love for travel literature. The Budapestan Rudolf Fischer and the exiled Matila Ghyka, along with Chatwin Bruce are dear friends present in this book. Paddy (Patrick) had, for instance, letters exchanged with Michel Alexis Bishi Catargi, a correspondence traced for the very first time. We see Paddy also in his ultimate underground being. This intimate being of the writer as a man who falls in love is revealed not only in the pages dedicated to his life chapters that include princess Balasha Cantacuzène, but also, surprisingly, in the chapter about monastic spaces as 'silent university' (Fermor), and in the very last one, where it is discussed the overarching Byzantium influences and attractions (*Walking to Byzantium* was one of the projected titles for the third volume of Paddy's intended trilogy). This last chapter catches a glimpse of 'the beyond' approximated in the contingency of the religious spaces visited, which had begun in the first chapter with St. Wandrille Abbey in France, this time within the monastic environment in Mount Athos.

The visual imagery accompanying the text of criticism has the role of keeping the emotions alive. We can be in the traces of the traveller Fermor by sharing his feelings, even if we are not his contemporary. Dan Horațiu Popescu has succeeded in highlighting this unbeaten path and in turning the writer into our companion. Even the first picture is startling, as it is the facsimile of Fermor's signature on Homer's *Odyssey* dated Băleni, 1939, and retrieved from the Galați County library. The journey continues, after the introductory part, with Fermor's inner struggle to become a writer. The author imagines this chapter as Fermor's surprising connection with Huysmans's writings, as underlined by the aspiring writer's necessity to escape from the world:

At. St. Wandrille I was inhabiting at last a tower of solid ivory, and I, not the monks, was the escapist. For my hosts, the Abbey was a springboard into eternity; for me a retiring place to write a book and spring more effectively back into the maelstrom. (Fermor 2007, quoted by Popescu, 2020, p. 20)

The most spectacular layer *Layers of the Text and Context* is the section dedicated to Fermor's "Writing the Woods and the Water." Here the author surprises us through finding solutions to the definition of problematic stereotypes of otherness. He creates an *aporia* approach, analysing *displacement*, bringing in the awareness of a postcolonial world rich in theories, and also by analysing postmodern theories and identity tropes. Together with Dan Horațiu Popescu, we can even witness how Fermor himself came to shatter some prejudices. Our act of re-discovery, provided by the author, is the hermeneutic circle. We understand that Central and Eastern Europe, as compared to Great Britain, was more invaded by stereotypical representations of the nomads, of the Jews, of the Turks. The author follows some of the Hungarians and Romanians heated debates about their

apprehensions of the same topics, brought into discussion by Fermor. We understand how Fermor held in higher regard people, not prejudices. The aliveness of a genuine interaction between people can always dispel artificially-pumped myths.

The question lingering after the reading of this book is how and why people and places constitute our very tangible interaction with history. Why particularly these people, our contemporaries, and not others? On Fermor's literary footsteps, Dan Horațiu Popescu retrieves what matters most in the itinerant destiny of a unique personality: the emotions of genuine human interactions.

References

Popescu, D. H. (2020/2021). *Layers of the text & context. Patrick Leigh Fermor & friends*. Universitatea din Oradea Publishing House; Partium Kiadó.