WORK, STATE, AND THE LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF "SELF" IN ROMANIA OF THE 1950s AND 1960s. (A CASE STUDY)

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ABSTRACT The paper proposes an analysis of a linguistic construction of "self" as it was constructed in a series of petitions written by one of communist Romania's "disenfranchised", a former factory owner whose belongings were nationalized by the communist state. Employing a microhistorical perspective and insights from linguistic anthropology, I show how this writer attempted not only to ask for his rights to his lost possessions but also to "re-make" himself as a socially and morally legitimate individual, as a coherent "self", through the very act of remembrance and narration.

Introduction

This paper analyzes the ways in which one of those "disenfranchised", who were stripped of all their social and economic rights by the communist regime in Romania of the 1950s, attempted to reclaim his past and thus his "self" by invoking "work" as a liaison between a pre-nationalization "past" and a socialist "present".[1] I suggest he did so through the series of petitions he wrote in the 1950s and 1960s to different political actors and institutions of communist Romania, in which he tried to re-construct linguistically his social legitimacy by subverting authoritarian canons. The writer of those petitions was the builder and former owner of a fur factory in Romania, Ioan Secheli. Before the 1948 nationalization, Secheli owned the fur factory, as well as a house and a plot of land. In his petitions, Secheli claimed that the house and

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the garden had not been nationalized in 1948, together with the factory.[2] However, he said, one of the leaders of the local council "stole" the garden from him so as to build his own house, this happening <u>after</u> the nationalization had ended. In the letters, Secheli does not (cannot) object to the nationalization of his factory, but he insists on getting back his house and garden, because they are the only things with which he was left. As he puts it, they represent the products of his own labor and should, therefore, belong to him and no one else.

I organize my analysis as it follows: I offer first a detailed presentation of the petitions, which I set against the political and social aspects of Romania of the 1950s and 1960s. I review then other studies done on petitions and their social and political dimensions. Drawing upon this literature and bringing in other analytical devices offered by the field of linguistic anthropology, I proceeded to an in-depth analysis of one of Secheli's petitions. Here I work with the concepts of "voice", "intertextuality" and "genre" to show how various stylistic and grammatical shifts index Secheli's attempts to break through the frozen form of an official document in order to transform it into a dialogical space— into a peculiar conversation between him and the state. By doing that, I suggest, Secheli tries to do much more than regain his house and garden: he asks for recognition of his labor, materialized in this house and garden, and thereby of himself as a full person, a social subjectivity that he has acquired through his hard labor. The complex relationship between work and the social formation of a person runs throughout all of the petitions as a red thread, connecting them and making them part of an intertextual matrix. The letters cease to be just disparate documents, becoming instead Secheli's own life palimpsest, a

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[2] I use his real name for two reasons: (1) Secheli and his wife are dead and there are no close relatives left (they had no children); and (2) Secheli, as the builder of the fur factory and an expert in fur coats making, is still very much present in the collective memory of the people of Orăştie and the nearby villages, especially among the furriers (*blănarii*) who have been working in the region. (In fact, the fur local industry has expanded in the 1990s, when more and more craftsmen opened their own workshops, where they process mainly sheep skins to make fur coats (*cojoace*).)

space continuously changing while staying one. I suggest that it is through this relative continuity that Secheli, while he tries to "talk back" to the state through different "voices" and other shifts he employs, also attempts to extract himself from a social landscape fully controlled by the state and reconnect to the one (the active "I", in a Benvenestian formulation) that he used to be before nationalization.

I suggest that Secheli sets out in his petitions a dichotomous social landscape in which persons, as owners of their labor and the results of such labor, cannot be part of the state domain. By implementing and orchestrating the nationalization, the socialist state has lost its social legitimacy and has thus become a non-person, one that, in order to exist, grabs and takes away instead of working and giving. Thus, Secheli's letters indirectly become a subtle critique of the socialist state through one of the few forms of communication that the state itself allows him to use: the authoritarian format of a petition.

The letters' story(ies)

These petitions came to me serendipitously. In the summer of 2003, I spent two months in Orăştie, a small town in southern Transylvania, to do a research on the social meaning of commodities in socialism, especially luxury commodities, such as fur coats, and the ways in which such commodities shaped social relations on and outside the factory shop-floor. I interviewed former and current employees of the fur factory, Favior-Vidra, as well as talked to many of the locals. Secheli's name—as the founder of the factory and the first furrier of the town— came up often in these conversations, especially those that I had with older people. A few had been Secheli's apprentices in the factory before the nationalization or learned the craft from such apprentices. From these conversations, I realized that Secheli was still very much

present in the local collective memory of the region, as a symbol of former craftsmanship and work ethic that had dwindled under socialism. At one point, I met one of his last apprentices, Ilisie Iacob. It was Mr. Iacob who told me more about Secheli, his life and character, giving me a detailed story of the day when the fur factory was nationalized— as he put it, "[Secheli] left only with his coat on him", leaving behind everything he had built from scratch.

In addition to his stories, he also showed me a collection of petitions written by Secheli and later his widow, as well as other documents, including court decisions, real estate contracts, the nationalization "contract", and photos, all concerning Secheli's request to be given back his house and garden. The grounds for his request was that they were not nationalized in 1948, but taken away from him only later in 1955.[3] These petitions and memorandums narrate mainly the same story, told and retold in different forms and using stylistic devices varying from one letter to another, in which Secheli describes the process of losing the garden to Oprea Nicolae. The file, which Mr. Iacob showed me, contains, aside from other documents, drafts and copies of seven petitions signed by Secheli and other three signed by his wife.[4]

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[3] To the obvious question why did Mr. Iacob keep Secheli's petitions, I will answer with Mr. Iacob's own words: "I was the keeper of Secheli's archive." Moreover, Secheli left Mr. Iacob as his legal heir, as the Sechelis had no children or other close relatives. The file, which Mr. Ilisie showed me, contained various documents, including drafts as well as hand written and typed letters. It is very likely that Secheli, as a well organized business man (factory owner and manager) in the past, had kept copies of all of the important documents that he signed. I have not tried to search in the National Archives for the letters which Secheli mailed to various institutions of the 1950s and 1960s Romania. I have though searched for other documents on Secheli in the Deva regional office of the National Archives, but I found nothing about the factory or Secheli. I was not allowed to access documents kept in the archive of the Favior-Vidra company.
I have obtained Mr. Iacob's permission to use Secheli's petitions and his name for academic purposes only (such as to write and publish this paper).
[4] Secheli entitled many of his petitions "*memorium*". Among them, three are hand written (one addressed to "Tov. Gheorghe Gheorgiu-Dej, Secretar general al P.R.M", not dated; one to a not specified minister, dated 1964, very likely the last petition written by Secheli, who died in 1967(?); and another to "Ministerul Justiției, Cabinetul d-lui Ministru", not dated). The other petitions are typed, being addressed to "Procuratura Republicii Populare Române, Tov. Procuror General", dated "Hațeg 4.V.1957"; another incomplete, "Orăștie, 7 aprilie 1958"; another addressed to "Tov. Președinte al Prezidiului Marei Adunări Naționale", not dated; and another, entitled "memoriu", not addressee specified, dated "Orăștie, 20 Oct. 1961". All of these petitions, except the 1964 one, end with "Luptăm pentru pace!" The three petitions signed by Elisabeta Secheli are all typed, first being addressed to "Comisia de Control a Comitetului Central P.C.R.", dated Orăștie, 4. nov. 1967, and the other two to "Consiliul de Stat al R.S.R. Tov. Nicolae Ceaușescu", dated March 10 and July 28, 1971. There was another petition sent by Secheli's wife,

According to Mr. Ilisie and to the letters, Secheli did not come from a well-to-do family. Born in 1887 in a village nearby Orăştie, he left his homeland[5] in 1904 to start his work journey (his *Wanderschaft*, as he described it in one of his letters), during which he traveled to learn the craft of fur coats making from various furriers in European cities.[6] In 1919, he returned to Orăştie and opened a workshop for making fur coats, which he later developed into a factory.[7] He could therefore be included in the first generation of self-made-men, which contributed to an initial industrial development in a predominantly agrarian country (even though the proportion industry-agriculture was more even in Transylvania than in other regions of Great Romania, the industrial manufacturing production in the region was still in an incipient phase.) Being thrown out of his factory represented the first shock for Secheli and his wife; in 1952, they are forced to leave their town and move to Haţeg (*domiciliu forţat*) until 1958, when they were allowed to return to Orăştie.

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whose copy does not exist in the file, but we learn about it from the November 1967 petition. She mentions there an earlier petition, which was very likely the first one sent by her after Secheli's death to "Comitetul Executiv of P.C.R.", and to which she received a letter from "Sfatul popular Orăştie", dated September 4, 1967, stating that "the house could not be returned to her, being nationalized under Law 119".

The other documents offer a partially complementary perspective on the case: two court decisions, one which endorses Secheli's claims and then a later one which invalidates the first decision; the nationalization deed, signed by Secheli on June 11, mentions the transfer of the Vidra factory, as well as of the terrain on which it was built (no. c.f.[i.e., *carte funciară*] 1961, 1962), without mentioning other real estate and terrains; another record, dated September 19, 1955, signed by the factory management and the president of Sfatul Popular, Oprea Nicolae, states the transfer of another terrain (no. c.f 1968 and 1969), which is not mentioned in the 1948 nationalization record, from the property of the factory to that of Sfatul Popular; two letters, one addressed to Secheli Ioan from the Ministry of Justice, date January 15(?), 1965, suggesting that he "should address his claims to an appropriate office", and the other sent by Sfatul Popular to Elisabeta Secheli, stating that "the estates could not be returned, as they had been nationalized together with the factory according to the law 119"; one letter sent by Secheli to Oprea, dated Haţeg, September 21, 1956, warning the latter that only the court would decide on "[Oprea's] obvious misdeed of transgressing the real estate law".

[5] At that time, Transylvania was Hungarian territory.

[6] According to Mr. Ilisie, Secheli took the road to Vienna on foot, having only onion and bread in his pockets. Even though this might seem a romanticized description of Secheli, I mention it here because it offers an image on a young Secheli's social status.

[7] Mr. Iacob told me that Secheli traveled often in the countryside to find boys who would be interested to become his apprentices and then workers in his factory. According to Mr. Ilisie, Secheli had two generations of apprentices, who learn the craft directly from him and who later became well known in the region for the fur coats they made. Some of them stayed in the factory after the nationalization, some others—like Ilisie—left to other production units (such as the cooperatives).

It is during this time away from Orăştie that Secheli started writing his petitions. In his letters, he offered a detailed account of the loss of his property after nationalization. He wrote that, despite their forced move to Haţeg, they maintained contacts with friends in Orăştie, whom they had asked to look after their house and plot of land until they would return. Through these friends, they learned in 1955 that the president of the local council (*Sfatul popular*), Oprea Nicolae, started building a house on the terrain which legally belonged to Elisabeta Secheli. Secheli argued that Oprea managed to acquire the plot only because he was able, as president, to pretend that a mistake had been done during the nationalization of Secheli's property. Specifically, the terrain and the house, which were not situated on the premises of the factory, had not been included in the nationalization report. Oprea took the initiative to "correct this error", as Secheli put it, and did a new report, in which the factory transferred these two items to the local council, as terrain to build new houses. Here, argues Secheli, was the "wicked maneuver" employed by Oprea. He took then the terrain considered now the council property only to build there his own house.

Secheli sued *Sfatul popular* and won with a decision of the Supreme Court in 1956, only to have it revised and then rejected in 1957 by a final decision of the regional Court. This decision, dated January 29, 1957, stated that Sfatul popular was entitled to the building and the terrain. Still in Haţeg, not yet being allowed to come back to Orăştie and trying to challenge this court decision, Secheli started writing his petitions in May 1957 and continued to do so upon his return to Orăştie soon thereafter.[8] He wrote first a petition to the Procuratura R.P.R., then to key actors in the state institutions, such as Gheorghiu-Dej, who was then (in 1964) Romania's prime minister, the Minister of Justice, and the president of M.A.N. Mainly, he claimed that he had

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[8] Secheli and his wife returned to Orăştie somewhere between summer 1957 and the beginning of 1958, as the first petition, dated May 1957, mentions him with the domicile in Haţeg and then another one, is dated Orăştie, April 1958.

been wronged and asked for the house and the terrain to be returned to him. The petitions show

Secheli's attempts to craft his story and claims as good as he could, attempts signaled by the

sentences cut or rephrased, additions, new turns of phrase, and other changes in the text. It is

likely that he asked for help and advice from others, perhaps advocates or other people who

knew the system better: sending a petition to the president of *Marea Adunare Naţională*, who

then the leader of the state, signals that Secheli tried to understand the organization of the

political institutions of socialist Romanian state.[9] In order to break through the bureaucratic maze

of the Romanian state and reach those offices which were supposed to resolve his claims, he

invested not only a lot of time and energy in writing these letters, but material resources as well.

His wife continued to rely on this kind of external help for drafting, typing, as well as learning

about the specific offices which she was to address her petitions to. This is shown by the fact that

she sent one of her first petitions to Comisia de Control a Comitetului Central al P.C.R.,

commission whose specific task, after Ceauşescu had succeeded to gain the leadership of the

P.C.R., was to monitor the work and possible power abuse of the party activists.[10]

Secheli was not crazy: he did not ask back for the factory that he had built, as he was

fully aware he would never get that back. Besides, if he had been so unaware of the

consequences, he would have started writing his petitions much earlier, right after the

nationalization of the factory in June 1948.[11] His petitions start though in 1957, only after he had

realized that the court would no longer give him credit in the position of a former "bourgeois".[12]

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[9] I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing this out to me.
[10] I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this clarification.
[11] Often, even if they were not sent to prison, the former owners of the nationalized buildings underwent severe physical and psychological persecutions. I thank Annemarie Weber for reminding me of this dimension of the nationalization process.
[12] 1957 is marked though by a relative political opening, which was signaled at the level of law by the amendments brought to decree 81/1954, which had stated the rights of the former owners of the nationalized houses. I thank Annemarie Weber for providing me with this information. As at the time of writing this essay I did not have much access to the legal documents of that time, I could not though verify it.

He did not want though to give up so easily. He dared to challenge a final court decision by petitioning the party and state leaders to recognize the power abuse of a party activist and to return "his house and garden", the last signs of his life work.

We also need to situate Secheli's actions in the political and social context of the end of the 1950s in Romania. Even though historians would characterize this time as the beginning of the destalinization, other analysts approach it more critically. To the latter, the years immediately following the 1956 Hungarian revolution represented in Romania a return of Stalinist maneuvers of preserving power.[13] Gheorghiu Dej, afraid of the echoes of the Hungarian events in Romania, and especially among Romanian intellectuals and younger party members, ordered the Party's Control Commission to start anew checking on party members. These new purges encouraged a new wave of denunciation. Secheli thought perhaps that those political circumstances offered him an opportunity to turn in Oprea as a power abusing party member (perhaps this is why he addressed one of his first petitions directly to Gheorghiu-Dej).[14]

To a certain extent, these petitions, intertextually linked but with varying stylistic and rhetorical elements from one to another, appear as a peculiar reflection of the political changes occurring at a larger scale in communist Romania between 1957 and 1971. For instance, Secheli adopted a clearly denunciatory tone in his petition addressed to Gheorghiu-Dej: Secheli described Oprea as a "profiteer" who "despotically relied on falsifying legal documents and perjury in order to be the only one benefiting from those illegal actions". Moreover, he mentions

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[13] As Tismăneanu put it, "Those who believed in 1956 that Stalinism had ended found themselves confronting it again in the years following the Hungarian revolution… [In Romania] in 1958-1959, thousands of party members underwent the same terror they had already been through under Stalin." Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Stalinism Pentru Eternitate: O Istorie Politică a Comunismului Românesc*. Translated by Cristina Petrescu and Dragos Petrescu, (Iasi: Polirom, 2005[2003]), 191.

[14] In this petition, Secheli is using a language and tone much harsher than in others, which could be that he is still very angry and was yet not advised to keep a more "objective" tone. Also, at the end of the letter, he mentions his age: *72* years, which was afterwards "corrected" with another pen, of a different color, as *77*. It could be then that the petition was written in 1959, when Secheli was 72, and then he used it as a draft for another one later, when he was 77.

that Oprea "was not long ago criticized in the party meeting as a profiteer (*afacerist*), who abused of his job as the president of the local council to obtain various favors." Describing someone as an "*afacerist*" was a very strong accusation at that time, being used for a person living off illegal trading. According to the communist law, this was a crime.[15] In contrast, in what probably was his last petition, written in 1964, Secheli adopts a more "neutral" tone, leaving aside too strong characterizations and choosing to present the situation as a sequence of events. (I discuss this petition at length in the second part of the paper). By that time, the new wave of denunciations, initiated in 1957 by Gheorghiu Dej in order to consolidate his position and distance himself and his team from the soviets, had ended. Romania of the 1960s was undergoing a relative liberalization, emerging as an effect, and not an aim, of a persistently pursued desovietization and an economic policy targeting a self-sustainable modernization.[16]

After Secheli's death, his widow continued the petitions, of which two were addressed directly to Ceauşescu. As in the case of Secheli's petitions, her tone and phrasing of her letters reflected the changes on the political scene: Ceauşescu, who came to power in 1965, was working hard on acquiring legitimacy in and outside Romania (he managed to do so mainly through his criticizing the U.S.S.R.'s bloody intervention in the 1968 Prague revolt as well as by distancing himself from and then politically prosecuting the former communist "guard", led by Dej).[17] In 1957, Secheli had vainly hoped that "someone" who would read his letters would

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[15] I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out and clarifying this aspect to me.

[16] Adrian Cioroianu, *Pe Umerii Lui Marx: O Introducere în Istoria Comunismului Românesc*. (Bucureşti: Curtea Veche, 2005), 217-223.

[17] For a discussion of Ceauşescu's successful maneuvers to acquire social and then historical legitimacy as Romania's leader, see Dimitar Grigorov, „'For Fatherland and Leader!' Letters Expressing Popular Support in Romania under Russian Threat, 1968", *Arhivele Totalitarismului*, XIII, nr. 46-47 (1-2/2005). Using letters which Romanians sent to Ceauşecu after the 1968, Grigorov shows how Ceauşescu's response to the Prague revolt determined a sudden rise of Romanians' trust in their new leader, which further led to his singular glorification as the main symbol of independence and the fatherland. The Party was no longer the main symbol, but Ceauşescu. Grigorov also argues that such a model of glorifying the leader became stronger as it was not distributed from the top down, but was directly coming out of the overt support of ordinary Romanians, an attitude reflected by the

consider Oprea one of those party iconoclasts that Gheorghiu Dej wanted to get rid of and consequently punish him. In 1971, Elisabeta Secheli as vainly hoped that the temporary political and cultural opening initiated by Ceauşescu (which was to end very soon, with the July Theses) would allow her to finally live her last days in her own house. As she put it, in her March 1971 letter to Ceauşescu, since "in the last years, justice leads", "the time has also come for [her] case to be revised and put into agreement with the principles of law and justice." Moreover, to support her case, she used the example of a former merchant (*comerciant*) "whose wealth had also been nationalized, but to whom the house was restituted this year [1971]".[18] As history would very soon show, the time of justice was very much an illusion, craftily orchestrated by Ceauşescu in his trajectory to absolute power. Elisabeta Secheli never obtained her house back; like Secheli, she died in a rented room, nearby the Ilisie family, who took care of them during the last years of their lives.[19]

As a former factory owner, Secheli belonged to the category of those "disfranchised" who, under nationalization and collectivization, were disposed not only of their property, but, through this lost property, of all their former life standards, habits, ideologies of self and of the social world they used to live in. As I have not done supplementary research in the archives to

letters analyzed by Grigorov. (I thank Dimitar Grigorov for proving me with a copy of the presentation on which his article is based, as well as a copy of the letters.)

[18] She also mentioned his name: Kualles Ervin. It is very likely that he might have been a German or a Jew, that is, he belonged to social categories who, by 1971, had a special status in communist Romania. After the wave of harsh prosecutions in the 1950s, with many of the Romania's Germans deported to Russia and anti-Semitic campaigns strategically organized, Ceauşescu and to a certain extent Dej offered to some of them a few of their properties back (especially houses) in an attempt to regain the trust of some of the ethnic and religious minorities and thus persuade them not to leave the country. Of course, external institutional pressures (such as of F.R.G, the state of Israel, and U.S.A) played a huge role in this shift of attitude of the Romania national-communist state towards Romania's Germans and Jews who survived the war and post-war deportations.

[19] I have this information only from Mr. Ilisie Iacob and I could not verify it by confronting it with other sources. Many of the people who had known Secheli talked to me a lot about his active years in the factory, but did not know so much about his last years. Mr. Iacob told me that "[Secheli] was deported to Haţeg, where he stayed 4-5 years, after which they allowed him to come back to Orăştie. But they did not allow him to move back. The factory completely abandoned him." There were still some older people who were coming to Secheli for technical advice. Upon their return to Orăştie, he and his wife rented a room in an acquaintance's house, where they stayed till they died. Mr. Ilisie buried them.

find more of the petitions written by the "disenfranchised", I do not aim to advance more general arguments about this social category. Instead, inspired by Gingzburg's analysis of the life of Menocchio, a miller of the XVI century judged by the Inquisition, I approach Secheli's story as a singular, an "exceptional normal" case.[20] It is very likely that some of those who became "disenfranchised" through the 1948 nationalization in Romania might not have written so many petitions, as they could have been too afraid of what could happen to them and their families. But Secheli chose to write. He had nothing to loose anymore: he was old, his wife as well and they had no children or other relatives. Everything he had ever had was gone. So he kept writing. Ginzburg said that even if Menocchio was an atypical character of the village life and of the popular culture in the time of Inquisition, he existed. This makes him perfectly suitable for a historical analysis, which presupposes the historicity of *any* person and approaches history as an intersection field of multiple, even though differently socially situated, microhistories.

Like Menocchio, Secheli existed as well. What is remarkable about his petitions is his insistence on work as a major aspect of his life. Throughout his petitions, he keeps invoking his working life to justify his right to own and use the house and garden: they are materialized signs of his own work. His wife also points this out in her petitions, when she says that "all that [she] had accomplished came out of her working with a needle." At a time when self-criticism was the golden rule for social discipline and many of those disenfranchised were forced to disvalue their former lives and values altogether, Secheli did not reject his former life and his own accomplishments.[21] By stressing his work until the nationalization as a "honest", socially

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[20] I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for the suggestion of drawing on Gingzburg's book *Cheese and the Worms* for my analysis of Secheli's petitions. I used the Romanian translation, Carlo Gingzburg, *Brânza şi Viermii: Universul unui Morar din Secolul al XVI-lea*, (Bucureşti: Nemira and CEU Press, 1997[1976]).

[21] I base my claim on what I see as a major theme in Secheli's petitions as well as those written by his wife after he died: the theme of his work as a work not only for himself, but for the country, as well. He stressed his contribution to the country's modernization, by writing about his establishing a craft school, modernizing the techniques, establishing the first modern fur factory in Romania, and especially returning to Romania when he could have very

valuable asset and contrasting it to the party activist's dishonest maneuvers to gain something which he did not work for, Secheli dared to claim his past working life as a socially valid way of living.[22] At the same time, there is a sense of futility that comes out of his letters, as if he had already known that his request is fully utopian. Like Menocchio, Secheli tried to struggle even though he knew it was in vain. This is why I dare to suggest that he did not necessarily want to obtain his house and garden back from the state, which he sensed it to be in vain, but actually his sense of self, as a social recognition of the person who he was and who fulfilled his social duty through a life of work.

Critical approaches to petitions in their social and political dimensions

Scholars have pointed out the relationship between literacy, governmentality, and the formation of modern state as a key triad underlying the mechanisms through which a western European "modernity" as both a social imaginary and a social, economic and political arrangement of power has been projected and developed.[23] However, such a new social imagery was not necessarily non-hierarchical. It became a blurrier and therefore omnipresent form of authority, in which the relationship between such form of authority and the individual citizens has been increasingly monitored by bureaucratic apparatuses and mediated through

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well remained in western Europe after 16 years of *Wanderschaft*. His wife also talked about their work as efforts to "make something for the country" when she compared their situation to others': she said that "if he did not want to do something for the poor people to learn a craft and make a living, he could have lived as an ordinary craftman and [thus] what he would have gained out of his craft, would have remained our property. Through the law 119/1948, the people took what it considered it deserved, leaving us what we needed to live on (the house and the garden)." Petition, addressed to the State Council of R.S.R, March 10, 1971.

[22] By claiming that this work done before nationalization, was also "work for the country", he indirectly recalled all those individuals who "had done something for their country" before the sovietization of Romania and whom the communist regime wanted to delete out of history and collective memory. As we know now, it aimed to do so through a social, historical and physical silencing, by erasing their names from history books, streets and buildings' names, while systematically torturing and killing them in the crowded political prisons of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s Romania.

[23] I use Taylor's approach to modernity as a social imaginary, outlined in Charles Taylor, "Modern Social Imaginaries," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002).

"bureaucratic" genres, such as petitions.[24] Petitions, largely defined as proposals individually or collectively addressed to "the state", represented therefore not only plain means of communication with various institutions that were to represent "the state", but also technologies (in a Foucauldian understanding) of shaping up political subjectivities, of regimenting cultural, linguistic, and social diversity, and especially of imagining and relating to "the state".

At the same time, petitions as technologies of (trans)forming subjectivities never functioned in a political, cultural and discursive vacuum. Historical studies have pointed out that, in different milieus, the developments of petitions had widely different, even contrasting, effects. For example, David Zaret argues (*pace* Habermas and others) that the printed petitions during the English revolution led to the formation of the "public opinion", by presuming a larger "public" that felt entitled to a normative authority and therefore capable to communicate politically. As Zaret put it,

> The public sphere is an extension of traditional communicative privileges and immunities for petitioners, propelled by economic and technical aspects of printing. These economic and technical properties of printing transformed the traditional petition into a device that simultaneously constitutes and involves public opinion.[25]

Zaret talks here about petitions which contributed to the formation of a "modern" public opinion, by politically "naturalizing" democratic tenets such as the importance of consent, debate and reason. That is, now the widely circulating printed petitions were no longer linked to a central authority, but mediated the relation between such authority and a larger "public" (audience), which thus could be informed about various political views and also take critical positions to such views.

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[24] See for example, David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early-Modern England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), David Zaret, "Petitions and the 'Invention' of Public Opinion in the English Revolution," *The American Journal of Sociology* 101, no. 6 (1996).
[25] Zaret, "Petitions and the "Invention" of Public Opinion in the English Revolution," 1541.

If Zaret points to printed petitions as mechanisms of forging a democratic modernity, historians of Soviet Russia approach petitions as a main mechanism of regimenting and legitimizing the Soviet totalitarian regime. David Ruffley points out that in this respect the Soviet apparatus heavily relied on petitions as patterns of communications that had already been established and developed in tsarist Russia. He argues that the proposals that soviet specialists sent to Party and press "continued the ancient tradition of petitioning", which the regime both "accepted and encouraged".[26] Of course, such petitions were published in press only after having been perused of any "problematic" tropes or themes. As such, Ruffley argues, censorship and petitioning formed a key social and symbolic nexus, which set the tone for a certain type of public "Soviet" persona (the new Soviet citizen) and for the social dynamics that would characterize the Soviet society as a whole.

For these petitions were not written and sent only by "the children of victory" as Ruffley calls them, the post-1945 Soviet intelligentsia that forms Ruffley's research topic. As Sheila Fitzpatrick and others have pointed out, petitions represented a key device through which people in the Soviet Union tried to interact with the state institutions and (hoped that they would) have their voices heard. Moreover, in a political environment that encouraged daily surveillance of the "other", especially when this "other" was continuously redefined according to various political whims and twists, the boundary between a petition and a letter of denunciation was very blurry.[27] As very often a petition took the form of a proposal for a change, be this a social change, a change of a leader, or a technological change, it automatically contained *in nuce* an accusation of

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[26] David L. Ruffley, *Children of Victory: Young Specialists and the Evolution of Soviet Society* (Greenwood: Praeger, 2003), 48.
[27] See Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Signals from Below: Soviet Letters of Denunciation of the 1930s," *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 4, Practices of Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789-1989 (1996): 833-34. She outlines the various categories of "other" emerging in the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Russia, ranging from "class enemies", "bad" Communists among "good" Communists, which became the "enemies of the people", or various kinds of specialists and bureaucrats who failed to do their "self-criticism" properly.

the present situation. The distinction stayed therefore in the eyes of the reader. The boundary became even more fluid in the Soviet system that supported petitioning as a key means of communication with the authorities, while also encouraging denunciation as both a right and obligation of the Soviet citizens.[28] In the Soviet Union of the 1930s, and later in the post-war USSR as well as across the communist bloc, petitions and letters of denunciations formed two sets of documents that often merged one into another.

Fitzpatrick takes the Soviet Union of the 1930s as a study case in order to understand what kind of forms denunciation took there and what specific social and political functions it accomplished.[29] This period is critical to understand how denunciation became institutionalized as a social practice, through the regime's enforcement on the citizens to constantly watch for and denounce the official abuses, the "class enemies", i.e., the former rich peasants and small entrepreneurs, the communists who had fallen later in the regime's disgrace, and other types of "enemies".[30] Fitzpatrick analyzes a series of letters of denunciation, written between 1929 and 1945 and sent to various institutions—the addressees ranging from the secret police, the Party organs, or Politburo members, to newspapers. She groups these letters into three major categories: (1) loyalty denunciations, in which communists monitor other communists on the "purity" of their political views and loyalty towards the Party; (2) "abuse of power", letters denouncing the wrongdoings of the officials; (3) "social class", in which people were denounced for having been members of the former bourgeoisie, nobility, kulaks, and clergy. Fitzpatrick also identifies denunciations written against relatives, apartment co-tenants, colleagues, neighbors,

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[28] See again Fitzpatrick 1996 for a discussion of denunciation in the history of Soviet Union.

[29] Fitzpatrick and Gellately suggest that denunciation be approached as a kind of social practice, a more general social phenomenon whose analysis should not be exclusively linked to totalitarian regimes. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, "Introduction to the Practices of Denunciation in Modern European History," *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 4 (1996).

[30] Note here that the definition of enemy was constantly redefined according to the political circumstances. See note 9.

etc. Of course, many of these letters fall in more than one category. Approaching denunciation as a social practice, Fitzpatrick argues, helps us understand in what ways the relationship between the regime and the citizens not only was formed and institutionalized, but also became imagined and manipulated. As such, denunciation accomplished more than the function of constant surveillance and thereby disciplining of citizens. It also offered an avenue for an individual to work out some private, specific benefits via the state, in other ways, to "work the system".[31] Fitzpatrick suggests that this manipulative dimension of denunciation should be understood as complementary to the justice function, in a regime where writing such letters could have represented "one of the few available forms of agency, a way that the little man could hope to impose himself on his environment".[32]

Fitzpatrick writes here about the functions of denunciation, but she does not focus on its effects. Golfo Alexopolous complements her analysis by examining a specific category of petitions—the ones written by the "disenfranchised" in the 1930s—and their role in the legitimization and reproduction of a dichotomous social landscape, divided into "enemies" and "innocents". The disenfranchised represented the category of people who, due to their social origins (as former kulaks, nobles, clergy, or entrepreneurs), were stripped of all their political and economic rights during the Stalinist purges in the 1920s and 1930s.[33] Alexopolous points out

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[31] As Fitzpatrick puts it, "[i]n the Soviet case, "manipulative" denunciations should be considered part of a complex of informal mechanisms of citizen agency, including client-patron relations and 'pull'(*blat*)". Fitzpatrick, "Signals from Below: Soviet Letters of Denunciation of the 1930s," 863.
[32] Ibid., 866.
[33] Alexopolous describes the situation of the "disenfranchised" in a succinct but vivid manner:
"In the years 1927-31, the majority of those who were stripped of rights were punished for economic transgressions—hiring labor, living off unearned income, trading….at this time, the disenfranchised were denied not simply voting rights but a broad range of political and economic rights, such as the right to employment and a pension, and they were also vulnerable to severe criminal sanction and deportation. In the urban areas, they were purged from state industrial and educational institutions, evicted from their apartments, denied rations, and forced to rely on a very small nonstate sector or black market. They were denied access to the resources of a near-ubiquitous sector, and they were the first to be persecuted whenever there was a purge or a political campaign of any kind. They always carried the stigma of someone who was an enemy to the state." Golfo Alexopoulos, "Victim Talk: Defense Testimony and Denunciation under Stalin," *Law & Social Inquiry* 24, no. 3 (1999): 641-42.

that these people, in many petitions they sent to the Soviet authorities in an attempt to regain their lost rights, often enhanced their self-presentation as innocent by denouncing others in turn as the "real" enemies. As such, they became from victims, victimizers, thus accepting and reproducing a system of repression. [34]

The petitions for the reinstatement of rights took the form of an autobiography, in which the disenfranchised presented themselves as victims, "as persons wrongly classified, who engaged in trade but are in no way exploiters or capitalists". Alexopolous suggests that such "victim talk", a manner of presenting one's self as weak and exploited by a guilty "other" made sense in a context in which the regime itself attempted to construct its legitimacy by playing "the victim", always in danger to be overthrown by the "enemies of the people". This is why the disenfranchised attempted to fit their requests and presentation of their selves into this genre, which an official audience "recognized" and reacted to. Therefore, "victim talk" could have represented the only means through which the disenfranchised could again become socially visible and thus potentially have their pleas solved. At the same time, as Alexopolous suggests, "[t]hey may have contributed to their own oppression and reinforced the idea of political enemies by living this reality, by making victimhood and helplessness a key component of their identity and presenting themselves as powerless and defeated before the enemy exploiter."[35]

Alexopolous's analysis stands therefore as a study of identity construction in specific political circumstances. He suggests that by denying their former identities, by claiming that a mistake was made in their specific case, thus claiming an exceptional status, the "disenfranchised" accepted "the political vilification" of their past and their former identities. In

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[34] As Alexopolous put it, "the disenfranchised supported and legitimized Bolshevik policy by invoking it in their own defense, that is, by drawing a sharp distinction between themselves and the kinds of people whom the state properly identified as enemies." Ibid., 643.
[35] Ibid., 652.

other words, in order to regain some form of political and social recognition, they tried to extract themselves from their past and negate all the links that might have point to such a past. In a way, therefore, we could say that they tried to reenter a Soviet social world by adopting a form of "negative" identity, one attained through negation of what they used to be during the pre-Soviet times.

Writing one's self out: intertextuality, voice, and the linguistic construction of self

Fitpatrick and Alexopolous write about a political context very familiar to Romanian readers or those with interests in Romania's history. The phenomenon of the "disenfranchising" during the Stalinist purges of the 1930s in Soviet Union repeated itself with various degrees of violence and prosecution, in almost all of the Central and Eastern European countries which became Soviet satellites in the communist bloc after 1945. In Romania, as well as across the other countries of the communist bloc (with the exception of the GDR and Poland), nationalization and collectivization represented two of the main means through which the socialist states not only acquired and centralized economic capital, but also broke and drastically rearranged social hierarchies, systems of moral values, and ways of constructing social identities.[36] For instance, concepts of "labor" as an individual or a family act were forcefully changed to "labor" as a means to establish one's (necessary) connection to the state. That is, one was socially acknowledged and accepted only if s/he worked for the state, and no longer for her/himself.

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[36] Poland represents an exception only for the agricultural sector. Almost 70% of Poland's agriculture remained private during the communism. See Anders Åslund, *Building Capitalism: The Transformation of the Former Soviet Bloc* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 25.

Therefore, such analyses of the social role of petitions offer a solid conceptual and historical background to situate and better understand Secheli's letters. At the same time, a linguistic anthropological approach to these letters could also put these works and their arguments in a different light. More specifically, I suggest an in-depth examination Secheli's letters that goes beyond their representational dimension and could therefore point to forms of identity construction, which an exclusively referential reading would ignore. To do so, I draw on insights from the field of linguistic anthropology to go, more specifically on the politics and ideology of "genre", the concept of "voice", and the relationship between the written narrative and the formation of a "self".

Returning to Alexopolous's analysis, I deduct that he constructed his arguments by mainly relying on a referential reading of the disfranchised's petitions. What about then the rhetorical devices the writers employed, various shifts of genre within genre, or other linguistic innovations employed in the ways they crafted their autobiographies? I think that an analysis of such elements in the letters of the "disenfranchised" could point to a different understanding of the social formation of identity in the Stalinist times. Specifically, it could reveal how "state" was linguistically understood and how writing functioned not only as a device of regimenting languages and social categories, but also as a means of remembering and existing outside the realm of the state.[37] Even though Secheli represented a singular case, I suggest that an analysis of his letters pursued through the theoretical lenses of linguistic anthropology could complement Alexopolous's argument.

This also because Secheli's letters represent an interesting combination of two of the categories outlined by Fitzpatrick. They are both accusations of the party officials' wrongdoings

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[37] My analysis of Secheli's letters is much indebted to Susan Gal's insights about the political dimension of grammatical categories and pragmatics, as outlined in Susan Gal, "Language and the "Arts of Resistance"," *Cultural Anthropology* 10, no. 3 (1995).

and letters of a "disenfranchised". The enemy/the accused (in Secheli's case, Oprea Nicolae, then the president of the local party council) is a representative of the state, and the dichotomy described by Alexopolous becomes a vicious circle, in which the victimizer is by extrapolation the state itself. Secheli presents his request—for the restoration of his house and garden—by arguing that these represent the results of his life's work, for he had worked for everything he had before the socialist nationalization. Therefore, he contrasts an identity made through work ("Secheli the worker") with a questionable social status, obtained through smuggling and cheating, represented by Oprea, the state representative. Through such contrasts, Oprea, and not Secheli, reveals himself as a "bourgeois" opportunist and oppressor.[38] Therefore, Secheli's letters subtly raise a question about the socialist state and its social validity: was the socialist state a state of workers, or a state of technocrats who obtain social and economic capital not through work, but only grace to the position they detain in the party hierarchy?

Before pursuing a closer analysis of Secheli's texts, I need to briefly point to "genre" as a signifier of specific social and political arrangements as well as particular ways of identity construction and self-presentation. Linguistic anthropologists have pointed to the social and political implications of the choice (or constrain) that a text or utterance be arranged in a linguistic form— that is, a genre.[39] As Richard Baumman put it,

> genres are far more than isolated and self-contained bundles of formal features. A shift of genre evokes contrastive communicative functions, participation structures, and modes of interpretation.

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[38] Michael Silverstein, "Comments on Michicagoan Linguistic Anthropology Conference, 2005 Panel, "Metapragmatics of Citizenship"" (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2005). I thank Prof. Michael Silverstein for his comments on an earlier version of this paper, especially for pointing out to me the reversed contrast which Secheli sets in his letters: Secheli the worker versus Oprea the exploiter, the "bourgeois."

[39] Baumann describes a genre as "a speech style oriented to the production and reception of a particular kind of text. When an utterance is assimilated to a given genre, the process by which it is produced and interpreted is mediated through its intertextual relationship with prior texts." Richard Baumann, "Genre," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 9, no. 1-2 (2000): 84. Whereas Baumman talks about the intrinsic textual dimension of genre, I wonder though if other, not necessarily written, forms—such as oral laments, or oral poetry—could not also be considered specific genres.

In a later article, Baumman talks extensively about genre as being constructed at the intersection between linguistic and political regimentations and intertextual gaps, which continuously question and challenge such constrains. He writes:

> Within any speech community or historical period, genres will vary with regard to the relative tightness or looseness of generic regimentation, but certain genres may become the object of special ideological focus. Prescriptive insistence on strict generic regimentation works conservatively in the service of established authority and order, while the impulse toward the widening of intertextual gaps and generic innovation is more conducive to the exercise of creativity, resistance to hegemonic order, and openness to change.[40]

Baumman points to intertextual gaps as challenges to the generic regimentations and as loci of creativity. But intertextual continuities could also represent such loci, especially when we consider the intertextual features of petitions in the form of autobiographic narratives. That is, intertextuality could enhance the quality of a written narrative of presenting and constructing a coherent self. Scholars have pointed out the "self"-centering characteristic of the written narrative (as Vincent Crapanzano put it), that is, the relationship between narrative and the formation of a social self.[41] Looking at autobiographical stories as a means by which self is constituted and re/shaped, Crapanzano argues that the constitution of 'self' is directly related to (emerging from?) the conventions of written narrative. He calls such process a "genre submergence" during which the author, in order to comply to the genre, forgets about other 'dialogical engagements' with the reader, characters, or other kinds of 'others' and thereby produces an idea of self as an illusionary consistent and bounded social unit.[42]

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[40]Ibid.: 87.

[41] Vincent Crapanzano, ""'Self'-Centering Narratives," in *Natural Histories*, ed. Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (Chicago: Chicago U Press, 1996).

[42] Echoing other views on text as a more fluid and less bounded linguistic category (see, for instance, Kristeva), Caprazano suggests that one should look instead at text as being formed through different kinds of dialogues, such

Secheli started writing his letters in late 1950s and kept doing so for a period of almost 10 years, even though he received only one short reply from the Ministry of Justice, asking him to redirect his claims to an appropriate institution. Why did he then keep writing them? I think that, besides tenacity (or stubbornness), a strong desire for "justice to be made" and have his rights reestablished, we could read here also an attempt to remembering and thus self-preserving. Perhaps Secheli wrote so many petitions because he also wanted to keep remembering who had he been, what has he done with his life and what kind of social, moral and political values he has believed in. In the process of writing his letters and especially the autobiographic introduction of these petitions, which remains almost the same across all of his petitions which I could read, he seems to have attempted to rescue the past as *his* past and bridge it with the (socialist) present by pointing to the continuity of specific values (such as, the trope of "work" and "work ethic"). Writing not only to ask for his rights but also to "make" himself through the very act of remembrance and narration, Secheli constructed through his letters an intertextual web, which merged into and very much became his social world as well. Anthropologist William Hanks points out that "[t]he presence of intertextual features in the discourse tends to break down the boundary between text-internal and text-external planes. Interpretation of the discourse cannot treat it as an isolate, but rather as a part of a series of texts situated within a larger network."[43] The intertextuality of Secheli's letters helped him preserve this textually remembered and re-made self over time, between the writing of a letter and another.

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as the one between the narrated and the narrating I, or between the reader and the characters. Only this way self will appear as being continuously and creatively produced in the dialogue with many 'others', for, as Crapanzano points out that a "dialogue is never dyadic" for it will always presume the presence of the third, be this an institution, a god, a state, or a law. Ibid., 111-12, 22-25.

[43] William Hanks, "Authenticity and Ambivalence in the Text: A Colonial Maya Case," *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 4 (1986): 727.

The autobiographical introduction stands as one of the major intertextual elements which, by linking as a form (narrative) and more or less content all of Secheli's petitions, marks Secheli's stress on "work" as a way of constructing one's social identity, as an valid social practice *in itself*, no matter the political and historical circumstances in which it is performed. Secheli started all of his letters with his autobiography, the story of his life presented as a life of work. He described his working life history, beginning with his early travels throughout Europe working as an apprentice for famous furriers, to his determination to build up the first fur factory in Romania and the hard labor he invested in this factory. He stressed the modern working techniques he brought to the factory, which drastically modernized a profession that had been done up only with rudimentary means. He insisted therefore on his contribution to the still scarce manufacturing industry, and implicitly to the industrial development in Romania. He also mentioned him having established a professional school for apprentices who would specialize in the fur industry.

This presentation is important in the light of the wider communist discourse at the time. The year 1957, when Secheli starts writing his petitions, marks the beginning of a Romanian-style desovietization. Gheorghiu Dej, as the prime minister, already started subtly distancing himself from U.S.S.R. He had already envisioned and started pursuing a national(ist) communist modernization, which was to develop much father from the U.S.S.R's supportive wing than Hruschciov would have like it.[44] This agenda of a national self-sufficiency for Romania's modernization—understood as an economic development through industrialization—was reflected by discourses stressing the "retribution through work", the idea of a social legitimacy

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[44] As Cioroianu puts it, "the process of de-russification started by Gheorghiu Dej meant only a bogus liberalism, imposed by circumstances in which economic reasons and national pride intersected."(My translation). Adrian Cioroianu, *Pe Umerii Lui Marx*, 218.

which any citizen of could acquire through work.[45] This theme functioned in parallel to the complementary perspective on work as both a goal and means of social reeducation, applicable especially to all kinds of "improper" social actors.[46] "Working for your country" was therefore among the most (over)used slogans of the political discourses to be read and heard in communist Romania (and which, according to some historians, was believed and pursued by the majority of Romanians until the mid of the 1970s).[47]

Secheli tried to stress this principle in his letters, but he indirectly gave it a subversive twist. By presenting the results of his life work as accomplishments that he had done for his country through hard and honest individual effort, he implicitly presents the time of those accomplishments—his "bourgeois" past—as a socially beneficial time as well. This was going against the communist discourse, which presented the socialist period as an *Ur*-time of collective work, of national dedication and modernization. Moreover, throughout the letters, he stressed the contrast between him, an honest worker for his country, and Oprea, a dishonest representative of the political system.

I focus on the 1964 petition, which was addressed to the minister of Justice (possibly the last petition written by Secheli) and approach it as a text formed of three distinctive parts: the autobiography outlined at the beginning, then the story, where Secheli outlines the events that led to the confiscation of his house and garden, and the third part in which Secheli makes his request to have the house and terrain returned to him. As I mentioned earlier, the introduction remains mainly the same both as a format and content. In contrast, the second part of the letters, reflecting the way in which Secheli chose to present the events, differs from one petition to

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[45] See Cioroianu, *Pe Umerii lui Marx*, 88-89.
[46] This went to extreme in the case of work done by the political prisoners sent to work colonies in Romania, such as *Canalul*, or to those deported to Bărăgan or Siberia.
[47] See note 39.

another. I approach these changes as intertextual gaps, which show how Secheli's accusations of Oprea, and by extrapolation, of the state institutions, became more subtle, but still very present and powerful. The third (and the last) part of the petitions retains, like the introduction. the strong intertextual connection. Not surprisingly, this third part is reiteration, in a different stylistic register, of the story of his life as a story of continuous work.

The 1964 petition starts with Secheli's life story, as usual, but its structure changes when Secheli moves to talk about the intricate strategies that Oprea, the local party leader, has used in order to get Secheli's garden. In this petition, in contrast to the others, Secheli presents the events as a sequence of episodes. Whereas in the previous petitions, he has commented at length on Oprea's actions and his questionable morality, here Secheli adopts a more detached tone, trying to offer a neutral description of the events. He develops this part of the petition as a script, outlining a series of episodes in a strict chronological order, over a period of nine days, between September 13 and September 22, 1955.

The change is accompanied by pronoun and tense shifts. In the first part, Secheli is very present in the story, as an active "I" who traveled, worked, built a factory, owned and lived in a house, all in the past tense. In the second part, where he presents Oprea's strategic plan to take his garden, he no longer talks about himself. Instead, he gives a detailed outline of Oprea's steps, this time in the present tense. He starts by introducing Oprea and his special position: "…In 1955, the president of the local council, Oprea Nicolae, taking advantage of his position and looking for a centrally located lot to build a house, finds as the best place my wife's garden[48]…" Now Secheli begins to describe the development of events, as successive episodes.

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[48] Even though this is just a supposition, it is possible that the terrain—the « garden »--had not been nationalized in 1948 because it was registered on Elisabeta Secheli's name, and not Secheli's himself.

The sequence of episodes follows a gradual progression of the plot tension. To construct this tension, Secheli employs various techniques. Besides action verbs in the present tense, he also uses very short sentences. The peak occurs in the last episode, in which Secheli shows how Oprea marked the garden as officially his own by laying the foundation of a new house. Then, in the next paragraph, Secheli brings himself back into the text, while shifting back to past tense: "I sued …Oprea Nicolae…The court declined our claim". But then he quickly shifts back to Oprea and no longer uses the active "I". Instead, he uses the third person to talk about himself and his wife:

Prin ducerea în eroare a Justiţiei
Numitul Oprea Nicolae ne-a lipsit de unica existenţă pe doi oameni bătrîni de peste 75 ani, fără pensie şi fără posibilităţi de existenţă.

By misleading the Justice, the said Oprea Nicolae deprived of the only existence, two old people, over 75 years old, who have no pension or other possibilities of existence.

I read these shifts as Secheli's attempt to construct a narrative within a narrative, and thus stress the separation between Oprea's moral world and his own. As I will show, Secheli produces this separation temporally and spatially by using tense shifts (from past to present, and then to past again, and then again to present tense) and pronoun shifts, marked by the presence or absence of the active "I". I argue that these shifts index the dialogical quality of Secheli's petition, which thus transgresses its authoritarian format and becomes a heteroglossic textual production, formed as a struggle and permeated by, as Bakhtin put it, "the conflicting ideological horizons out of which [the words] rise".

While reading the petitions for the first time, I found them heartbreaking and I asked myself why. Upon a second reading, I have noticed that Secheli appears in his letters under multiple identities, with multiple voices. These voices, which I suggest, index his shattered (or

lost) sense of self, represent one of the elements that make his letters stylistically powerful and make them "speak" to us. To identify Secheli's voices, I will draw on Jane Hill's discussion of "the voices of Don Gabriel".[49] A linguistic anthropologist, Hill uses Bakhtin's notion of heteroglossia and Goffman's discussion of voice lamination to analyze a story told her by a Mexicano speaker, the old peasant Don Gabriel. She points out that Don Gabriel uses various voices, indexed by different kinds of shifts, in order to create a dichotomous social landscape, in which two opposing moralities are indexed by two languages, Mexicano and Spanish. Therefore, Don Gabriel creates through his story a whole world, of a very dichotomous kind, where two moralities oppose each other. Hill examines the interaction between voices at various levels, paying attention to lexical and conversational interactions, changes in intonation, which index moral evaluations, and code-switching, from Mexicano to Spanish, when it comes to talk about "business". She suggests that, besides the frequent usage of reported speech and indirect discourse, used for the personages included in the story, Don Gabriel maintains a narrative balance by using two different "languages", which mark two opposing ideologies. As Hill notices, Don Gabriel can talk fluently and "in voices" about the death of his son, but ceases to employ this linguistic regime when he comments on "business". Here his fluency disappears, for, argues Hill, he cannot appropriate linguistically what he cannot accept morally: the capitalist ideology of business. Even though Secheli cannot use reported speech or different intonational techniques, being confined by the petition format, I would argue that he also employs a system of voices to construct his petitions as heteroglossic text struggles.

The first voice is the voice of Secheli who is writing in 1964, dispossessed of his house and garden and petitioning the state to get them back.

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[49] Jane H. Hill, "The Voices of Don Gabriel," in *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture*, ed. Dennis Tedlock and Bruce Mannheim (Urbana: U. Illinois Press, 1995).

Subsemnatul Secheli Ioan, maestru blănar şi soţia Secheli Elisabeta, născută Iuga…

The undersigned Secheli Ioan, furrier, and the wife Secheli Elisabeta, born Iuga…

Interestingly, the sentence has no predicate; Secheli does not explicitly state his request. Instead he moves directly to the second paragraph where he brings in a different voice, which I call the voice of the active 'I' of the past (voice 2). Here he describes his life as a story of hard work and of the legitimate wealth he acquired through his work, presenting himself as an active 'I'--and therefore as a person--by using a lot of action verbs in an active mode. When he shifts to construct the chronological sequence of episodes in the second part, he adopts the voice of the objective narrator (voice 3), trying to present the events without any other commentaries. However, at the end of the sequence, he intersperses the voice of the critical evaluator (voice 4) when he ironically remarks that "[t]he rush of these operations shows the legality of the strategies by which [Oprea] acquired the lot."

The voice of the "involved narrator", to use one of Hill's formulations, (voice 5), comes up when Secheli mentions him suing Oprea and the factory. This is the voice of Secheli fighting for his rights, and it is therefore different than voice 1. For voice 1 is the voice of Secheli "the undersigned", a muted voice that is very unlikely to be heard (remember the absence of the verb). But then he shifts back to voice 3, the voice of the neutral narrator: "I sued Oprea [voice 5]...but the court declined our claim [voice 3]."
He then shifts, again abruptly, back to the voice of the critical evaluator (voice 4), pointing out his silencing by the state by talking about himself as a third person (see before, By misleading Justice…).

Here the voice of the critical evaluator (voice 4) is laminated with voice 1, the voice of the silenced, de-personalized political subject. This linguistic silencing marks a social silencing: Secheli accuses Oprea of not only having taken "two old people"'s possessions, but also erasing their existence in the social realm, their legitimacy as persons. This erasure of personhood is enhanced by the way in which Secheli chooses to refer to himself and his wife by using the third person: not 'my wife and I', but 'two old people'. The absence of agency is striking here, illustrating Benveniste's point that subjectivity is constituted through the grammatical category of 'person'.[50] For Benveniste, the third person stands for an absence, for a non-person. It represents the one who could no longer define him/herself through the act of speaking, and therefore does not exist as an active "I"(Benveniste).

Secheli grieves over his loss of the active "I" by using voice 1, the voice muted by the state. But he does not fully give up. In the next paragraph, he brings back the second voice, the voice of the active 'I' of the past, by offering again in a nutshell the story of his life as a story of work.

> *Am început să muncesc la vîrsta de 8 ani, apoi am muncit ziua în atelier şi seara în şcoli technice prin diferite state pentru a mă specializa în meseria mea.*
> *Am înfiinţat la Orăştie o fabrică unică în felul ei, fiind premiat pentru technica culorile blănurilor, la expoziţia din Leipzig 1936*
> *Am muncit de mic copil, am muncit şi în atelierele mele alături de muncitorii mei, cărora le-am asigurat o existenţă bună, niciodată nu am căutat să-i exploatez.*
> *Am luat parte de tînăr în mişcările socialiste, simţindu-mă alături de cei ce muncesc.*
> *Astezi la vîrsta de 72 [77?] ani mă vad deposedat de toate bunurile mele, care ne aparţin legal atît mie cît si soţiei mele.*

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[50] Benveniste points out the connection between the linguistic status of "person" and the constituency of subjectivity. For him, the "I", as grammatical form as well as its own subjectivity, is being formed in the moment of speaking: " 'Ego' is he who *says* 'ego'." Emile Benveniste, "Subjectivity in Language," in *Problems in General Linguistics*, ed. Emile Benveniste (Coral Gables: U. of Miami Press, 1971(1958)). At the same time, because "I" is formed by the act of speaking, the third person (he/she) will be the absent one, not being able/offered the chance to subjectively constitute him/herself as "I" and "you". Therefore, for Benveniste, "the 'third person' is not a 'person'; it is really the verbal form whose function is to express *non-person*".[50] (Emile Benveniste, "Relationships of Person in the Verb," in *Problems in General Linguistics*, Coral Gables: U. of Miami Press, 1971(1946)):197-198).

I have started working when I was 8, then I worked during the day in the workshop and

in the evening in technical schools in various states in order to obtain a specialization in my

profession.

I have founded in Orastie a unique factory, [and I was] awarded for the technique of
dying furs at the Leipzig exhibition in 1936
I have worked since I was a child, I have worked in my workshops next to my workers,
whom I treated well and never exploited.
In my youth I have participated in the socialist movement, feeling myself close to those
who are working.
Today, being 72 years old, I found myself dispossessed of all my belongings, which
legally belong to myself and my wife.

Again, Secheli wants to restate his claims: that he worked all his life and therefore has the

right to own something, and thereby to stand as a viable and active social subject—that is, as a

person. The very stylistic organization of this fragment gives more strength to his claims. Each

sentence starts with a verb. In Romanian *am* indexes the verb in past tense for the first person

singular, and therefore here it reveals Secheli as the active subject. *Am*, by being repeated and

situated in the text on similar position in each of the lines, gives the paragraph a visual coherence

and thereby a thematic unity. The unity is also kept poetically through the presence of the

consonant *t* at the end of each past participle (*Am muncit, am clădit, am participat*)

Then he again shifts from voice 2, the voice of the active 'I' in the past, to the voice of

critical evaluator (voice 4) by stating that: "Oprea Nicolae has started his life in the reform

school, and then he sought to become mighty by any means. Not [being interested] to do

something for the country, by working, but only for himself and without work". Secheli restates

here his world view, in which work is a way of making persons. He uses this view to question

alternative means of economic creation —such as appropriating ("stealing") in the name of the

state—and their social legitimacy. He believes he is entitled to get back his house and garden

because they are products and signs of his labor. This labor entitles further entitles him to present himself as a social person. Oprea Nicolae did not invest his work in the garden and he never worked for his country. Therefore he stands as a non-person, an empty category artificially produced by the state, as part of the bureaucratic socialist apparatus. By writing about his own labor for "the country", Secheli constructs a moral geography in which he separates not only himself from Oprea, but also Romania the country from Romania as a socialist state. Like Don Gabriel, Secheli constructs two opposite moral worlds: the country, for which he himself worked throughout his life, and the socialist state, represented by Oprea, who "never worked for the country".

I do not think that Secheli intended to create such a dichotomy in his letters; on the contrary, by claiming that he took part in early socialist movement and that his work was "for the country", he tried to construct himself as "a worker" as well, who thereby should be recognized as such by the socialist system. By pointing to his former life as a life of work, he tried to link the two dramatically different parts of his life—the pre-nationalization and post-nationalization times--and thus claim recognition in this new social world, a world of "workers". However, the futility of such an attempt was already embedded in the letters, being linguistically marked by the contrast between the active "I" of the past and the "passive" self of the present, indexed by third person pronouns and verbs. In a way, we could say that this contrast already present in the letters indexes Secheli's great doubts that his request would ever be solved. Nonetheless, he kept writing. He appears thus as one of Kafka's characters, who tries to work his way out of a bureaucratic or existential maze while knowing all this time that he is actually sinking in it.[51]

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[51] I thank Annemarie Weber for suggesting me to note the duplicity of Secheli's self presentation, as it comes out of the last part of the 1964 letter. She pointed out to me that Secheli had tried to portray himself as an "old socialist worker", by calling upon the tropes used by the communist rhetoric. Her reading made me rethink my understanding of Secheli's petitions. The comparison of Secheli to Kakfa's characters belongs to her.

Secheli ends his petition by asking "not to be taken out of the laws of my country, for which I worked a lot, and not be left to end my days by begging for my existence". I suggest that he brings in here a new voice, the voice of the active 'I' of the present (voice 6). I read this voice as being not only of a "responsible" self, to use another of Hill's formulations, but also one that carries, embedded in it, the voice of the involved narrator, as well as many of his other voices. In fact, I see reflected in this final statement Secheli's attempt to laminate all of his voices into one and thereby reconstitute himself as a person, as a unitary social being in which Secheli of the past, before nationalization, and Secheli of the present come together as one, who talks back to the state through the authoritarian textuality of a petition. I question thus Hill's conclusion that what emerges out of Don Gabriel's story in the end is a "responsible self", which controls all the voices and thereby asserts moral statements. I suggest that we do not draw a line between the "responsible voice" and the "emotional" one, because, in fact, they continuously construct each other and sometimes merge into each other. Secheli's petition illustrates this process of continuous lamination, as it stands as both a critique of the political system and an emotional statement, reflecting his uncertainty about his economic and social position as well as his shattered sense of identity.

Conclusion

Adopting a double theoretical perspective, informed by the fields of history and linguistic anthropology, I intended to go beyond an exclusively referential dimension, which often characterizes a historiographical approach to "primary sources". I therefore approached Secheli's petitions as "genres within genres", part of a single intertextual web, in which the usage of multiple voices rhetorically supports a presentation of self, which appears coherent and multiple at the same time. I suggested that those letters represented for their author(s) not only means of

reclaiming a social recognition for all his life's work from the state, but also a way of self-remembering and acquiring a self-legitimacy through the very process of writing.

Secheli was just one of the millions of individuals stripped of their social and economic rights by a system which praised itself to construct a world of social equality, while it actually promoted and then rigidified a mutant social structure working on principles of exclusiveness, nepotism, opportunism, terror and duplicity. His petitions represent just an infinitesimal part in the files of the process of communism in Romania. Nevertheless, they represent historical documents because they show how some individuals tried then, even though vainly, to "communicate" with the system. As such, they point to situated ideologies of the state in socialist Romania—how the state was imagined, understood, and addressed by some people. An in-depth analysis of those petitions, I suggest, could reveal how at least a few of those people walked the difficult line between adapting their language, tropes and individual stories to fit the communications genres imposed by the state, while trying to keep their past as a legitimate part of their lives. Secheli's petitions represent such an individual attempt to ask for a legitimate social identity from the socialist state by reclaiming a space of remembering a pre-1948 past and the social values connected to such a past.

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