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## THE SUBGENRES OF THE ROMANIAN NOVEL: IMPORTS, BACKDROP, HYBRIDIZATIONS

As Margaret Cohen broadly argues in her volume *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, it has been common for modern literary theorists and historians to “doubt” the analytic relevance and the conceptual functionality of the literary genre. Cohen relies on seminal studies like Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*<sup>3</sup> and Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s *Qu’est-ce qu’un genre littéraire?*<sup>4</sup>, in order to point out that the literary genre was given a “coup de grâce” by “the deconstructive strain of poststructuralism, with its negative notion of textuality”<sup>5</sup>. Cohen highlights through the whole range of criticism the persistence of essentialist assumptions about “internal forms” or “deep structures” which were presumed to naturally emerge among groups of literary texts.

This state of matters should explain, at least to some extent, the strong reluctance of Romanian critics, or even their manifest refusal to address the (sub)genre systems/categories of the novel. Most often than not, they preferred instead to assign a given novel with canonical value at the extent that it transgressed the confines of one or several subgenres. To this day, Romanian criticism still lacks a conceptual “encyclopedia” of the novel, be it original or translated. Moreover, local lexicographical projects dedicated to literary concepts and ideas usually avoid to define subgenres, and debates concerning the formal structures of the novel are usually led in vague, speculative terms, with little concern for theoretical definition. While interwar critical debates had been shaped by watchword pairs such as “subjective” – “objective” or “creation” – “analysis” (see, in this respect, Magda Wächter’s article from the current issue), postwar criticism drew upon the ideals of the “total novel”<sup>6</sup> or the “monumental novel”<sup>7</sup>,

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<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Qu’est-ce qu’un genre littéraire?*, Paris, Seuil, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Eugen Simion, “Romanul total” [“The Total Novel”], *România literară*, 1980, 13, pp. 10, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Ion Ianoși, *Romanul monumental și secolul XX* [*The Monumental Novel and the Twentieth Century*], București, Editura pentru Literatură, 1963.

added to which was Nicolae Manolescu's highly influential metaphorical triad of "Doric – Ionic – Corinthian"<sup>8</sup>. It is no wonder then that even the best-known Romanian monograph of a subgenre, Al. Protopopescu's *Romanul psihologic românesc* [*The Romanian Psychological Novel*], had to extensively cover the history of paradoxes, contradictions and hesitations that marked the attempts made by Romanian critics and writers, but didn't forge a stable understanding of the psychological novel. Protopopescu could therefore only conclude that "the so-called Romanian psychological novel is, in fact, an *anti-psychological* or, in any case, a *post-psychological* novel"<sup>9</sup>. One thing to take into account in order to explain the long-lasting suspicion towards genre theories or taxonomies is the obvious preference shown by Romanian critics for the essay and for aestheticized writing (equally biased against ideological or sociological arguments), a critical discourse whose deeply ingrained tradition surpasses a simple rejection of structuralism or a typically poststructuralist stance.

Such approaches tend indeed to ignore what Margaret Cohen brilliantly analyzed in *The Sentimental Education of the Novel*, namely the genre's ability to provide the most substantial reflection of the ways in which literature assimilates and confronts social tensions, contradictions and changes throughout time:

The concept may reveal nothing about textuality, but it reveals much about literature as a social practice, for genre is a social relation, or, as Jameson puts it, a social contract. The poetic record of the writer's and reader's expectations shaping a text, generic conventions convey crucial information about a text's position within the literary exchanges of its time and illuminate how it engages its audience. Attention to genre thus counteracts a vulgar sociology of literature that identifies a text's social dimension on the level of content as well as complicating the Foucauldian equation of a text's social significance with its participation in nonliterary discourses<sup>10</sup>.

That is why, a reassessment of the genre that takes into account the hybridizations, the dislocations, the ramifications or the transformations of subgenres in close relation to both national and transnational cultural, historical, social, and political fields is far from bringing forth the danger of a "new formalism". Instead, during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this emerges as one of the most salient tendencies whereby literary studies managed to regain some form of social relevance.

Not coincidentally, in *The Atlas of the European Novel (1800–1900)*, Franco Moretti, the leading contemporary theorist of the novel, claims that this genre is the "ideal analytical unit" for studying "narrative markets: sociology of literature, as it

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<sup>8</sup> Nicolae Manolescu, *Arca lui Noe. Eseu despre romanul românesc* [*Noah's Ark. Essay on the Romanian Novel*], I–III, București, Minerva, 1980–1983.

<sup>9</sup> Al. Protopopescu, *Romanul psihologic românesc* [*The Romanian Psychological Novel*], București, Eminescu, 1978, p. 289.

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Cohen, *The Sentimental Education*, p. 17.

used to be called; history of the book, history of reading, as we call it nowadays”<sup>11</sup>. The almost 2000 pages of the Moretti-edited collective volumes gathered under the title *The Novel*, include tens of case studies that prove that the novel, as “the first truly planetary form”<sup>12</sup>, and its subgenres are one of the most productive means to forge a transnational cultural history of modernity. At least during the last two centuries, that history has seen societies and mentalities undergo transformations across similar, but also divergent paths.

The novel remains indeed one of the most common currencies in transactions between national cultures, but is also the genre with the greatest variation across time and space. While classic accounts of the novel emphasized the homogeneity of its (sub)species, recent works, like Margaret Cohen’s analysis of the sentimental novel, Franco Moretti’s study of the *Bildungsroman*<sup>13</sup>, Fredric Jameson’s account of the *romance*<sup>14</sup>, or Nancy Armstrong’s overview of the domestic novel<sup>15</sup> highlight precisely the historicity of the genre’s forms. How do certain species of the novel take shape and change while traveling from one culture to another? How do they evolve from one century to another? Which are the historical circumstances or formal determinants that make one species run its course, or help another outlast its competing forms?

Relying on such revised approaches and methodological inquiries as mentioned above (already with a substantial impact in recent Romanian research<sup>16</sup>), the 7th issue of the journal *Dacoromania litteraria*, called “The Subgenres of the Romanian Novel: Imports, Backdrop, Hybridizations”, develops a reflection on the novelistic (sub)genres in Romanian literary history while focusing on establishing a series of their possible taxonomies, definitions, internal histories, influential models, local variants etc. All the articles in this thematic issue are engaged in the debate on the multitude of novelistic forms within the Romanian literary space, on the cultural codes thereby set in motion, as well as on the historical forces that give them a voice and transform them into a reflection of society.

Every contribution to this thematic issue is meant to illustrate how novelistic forms emerge within complex negotiations among various cultural contexts that

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<sup>11</sup> Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel: 1800–1900*, New York – London, Verso, 1998, pp. 145, 143.

<sup>12</sup> Franco Moretti (ed.), *The Novel*, I–II, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2006, p. ix.

<sup>13</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, New York – London, Verso, 1987.

<sup>14</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987.

<sup>16</sup> See Andrei Terian, Daiana Gărdan, Cosmin Borza, David Morariu, Dragoș Varga, “Genurile romanului românesc în secolul al XIX-lea. O analiză cantitativă” [“The Genres of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Romanian Novel. A Quantitative Analysis”], *Transilvania*, 2019, 10, pp. 17-28, and Andrei Terian, Daiana Gărdan, Emanuel Modoc, Cosmin Borza, Dragoș Varga, Ovio Olaru, David Morariu, “Genurile romanului românesc (1901–1932). O analiză cantitativă” [“Genres of the Romanian Novel (1901–1932). A Quantitative Analysis”], *Transilvania*, 2020, 10, pp. 53-64.

determine the way in which subgenres are defined at some point. The notion of the novel itself acquires specific meaning in any particular culture, in accordance with the tradition of the local literature, as Magda Wächter argues in her paper. The following articles expand upon this premise by analyzing the development of subgenres in the Romanian or Eastern-European context. The Romanian forms of the haiduk novel (Constantina Raveca Buleu) or the ghetto novel (Liliana Burlacu), for instance, are very similar to their counterparts from abroad. At the same time, the dynamic of the genre also makes manifest cases of cultural resistance, defined as “the presence in the recipient cultures of material and systems which are, or are felt to be, irreconcilable with the invading traits or system”<sup>17</sup>. This mechanism could explain Romanian literature’s reluctance towards the political novel, which was compromised by its association with Soviet propaganda (Ștefan Firică), or towards the detective novel, whose development was hindered by the elitist, hierarchical assumptions of the local culture (Ovio Olaru). Mihai Iovănel’s essay dismantles some of these assumptions, by recovering the evolution stages, often neglected by traditional literary histories, of mass subgenres like the science-fiction novel, the detective novel, the fantasy or the thriller.

Adding to these explorations of the local circumstances of the novel are the studies that approach subgenres as “world genres”. In line with recent attempts to study the forms of the novel in their global diffusion<sup>18</sup>, the articles from this special issue also consider the international circulation of locally evolving subgenres. Daiana Gârdan’s essay correlates the meaning acquired by the social novel in the Romanian literature with its meanings from other national contexts. Angelo Mitchievici’s contribution revolves around the argument that the French decadent novel found fertile soil in the Romania during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the same vein, Elena Crașovan’s essay enriches the world map of magical realism with the Romanian “periphery”.

Romanian literature also serves as a privileged site of observation in order to redefine socialist realism as a world subgenre, whose concrete manifestations cannot be reduced to the homogeneity of form that was claimed by traditional criticism (Ștefan Baghiu). Moreover, Mihaela Mudure eloquently demonstrates that the postcommunist Romania hosts important subsidiaries of the campus novel, seen as world subgenre. Equally challenging is the emergence of new global typologies triggered by similar political contexts, such as the memory novel that was shaped by 20<sup>th</sup> century European totalitarianisms (Andreea Mironescu and Doris Mironescu). On the other hand, very different social-cultural contexts can also produce similar formal structures, as exemplified in Adriana Stan’s article about

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<sup>17</sup> A.L. Kroeber, “Diffusionism”, in Amitai Etzioni and Eva Etzioni-Halevy (eds.), *Social Change: Sources, Patterns, and Consequences*, New York, Basic Books, 1964, p. 143.

<sup>18</sup> Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, Theo D’haen, *Crime Fiction as World Literature*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

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two subgenres of the new literary realism emerged around the year 2000 across the two sides of the Atlantic, in North America and Romania.

In a more or less overt manner, all essays from the current issue argue that the subgenres of the novel should be seen as complex combinations of patterns that are impossible to reduce to static configurations. Since the novel's international diffusion makes it epitomize the circulatory system of world literature, no future account of the genre can ignore a conceptual approach of the various subgenres whereby complex formal and ideological transactions were overtaken.