

MAGDA WÄCHTER

**THE POETICS OF SUBTITLES IN *THE
CHRONOLOGICAL DICTIONARY OF THE
ROMANIAN NOVEL***

A poetics of the Romanian novels read through their subtitles may appear to be a hazardous or relatively modest undertaking. Are subtitles important enough to warrant an analysis in themselves, or are they able to shape our understanding of the novel as it evolves through time?

As regards titles, the legitimacy of an analytical interpretation is attested by the so-called “titology”¹, which is predicated on a semiotic, syntactical, and pragmatic interpretation of subtitles, and sometimes also involves more complex historical and cultural components. Because of its dual and somewhat ambiguous nature, the subtitle belongs to a grey area, difficult to separate either from the title or from the text itself. This is ultimately also what makes subtitles intriguing.

While a comprehensive definition of titles is yet to be provided², it is very difficult to envision a rigorously defined category of subtitles, particularly considering that their autonomy from the so-called “main titles” is under dispute. Also known as secondary, optional, auxiliary titles, subtitles are, much like titles, in fact, texts, micro-discourses that enjoy a peculiar status, that have their own features as well as a contextual and textual relevance, and that can play the most diverse roles. Functioning as an element of authority and supremacy that orients the act of reading, the title represents “the civil status of the text”: it indicates its name, profession, domicile, date of birth etc.³ and has easily identifiable functions. Leo H. Hoek lists, among these, the informative, appellative, differential, justificatory, contractual, anticipative, structuring, dramatic, challenging, valorising, advertising functions, and so on⁴.

The subtitle, however, is optional and secondary in relation to the title, yet not to the content. It indicates not the official, but the personal, intimate identity of the book, which it can therefore represent even more accurately than the title sometimes. Its tendency is to suggest, rather than to assert, and to promise an

¹ “Titology”, from the French *titrologie*, is the name Claude Duchet assigns to this subdiscipline in “La Fille abandonnée et la Bête humaine, éléments du titrologie romanesque”, *Littérature*, 1973, 12, pp. 49-73. One of the founders of modern “titology” is Leo H. Hoek.

² Leo H. Hoek reaches this conclusion in the history of “titology” he undertakes in the volume entitled *La Marque du Titre. Dispositifs sémiotiques d’une pratique textuelle*, Hague-Paris-New York, Mouton Publishers, 2011.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 274-278.

emancipation from the conventional, compulsory nature of the title. By its very auxiliary status, it has higher freedom of expression and a potential to be directly entangled with the text. The main role of the title is to speak about the book. As a supplement, the subtitle can speak about the book, about the title (sometimes at odds with it), about the author, the epoch, and especially about their unseen parts, providing a surplus of essentialization. As Gérard Genette puts it, “more broadly and flexibly, the subtitle often provides nowadays a more literal indication of the theme than the title, which evokes it symbolically or cryptically”⁵.

While the title is rational, denotative, compulsory, and delimiting, the subtitle is intuitive, allusive, free and broadly open to interpretation. Its roles in relation to the title and the content of the book are twofold: the subtitle confirms or negates the main title, explaining or obliterating its meaning, enhancing or diminishing its value, condensing or augmenting it, steering or confusing the reader, granting univocal or equivocal meaning, adding verisimilitude or fictionality and so on. This duality is, generally speaking, peculiar to paratexts as “thresholds of interpretation”, as G. Genette calls them, where “thresholds” are understood as “the literary and printerly conventions that mediate between the world of publishing and the world of the text”⁶. For Genette, titles, subtitles, intertitles, pseudonyms, prefaces, dedications, epigraphs, notes, epilogues and afterwords represent the paratextual field, an indefinite area situated at the frontier between the interior and the exterior of the text.

In fact, as seen by G. Genette, the object of poetics is not the text in its singularity, but its textual transcendence, its relations to other texts, as literature is inevitably always in the second degree⁷. As a specific type of transtextual relations, the paratext is therefore of utmost importance for poetics, given its capacity to act as a mediator in a frontier space, with all the characteristic attributes of this status. Analysing the prefix “para”, J. Hillis Miller subtly suggests that

“Para” is a double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something inside a domestic economy and at the same time outside it, something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold, or margin, and also beyond it, equivalent in status and also secondary or subsidiary, submissive, as a guest to host, slave to master. A thing in “para”, moreover, is not only simultaneously on both sides of the boundary line

⁵ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, foreword by Richard Macksey, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 85.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. XVII.

⁷ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree*. Translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, foreword by Gerald Prince, Lincoln & London, University of Nebraska Press, 1997, p. IX.

between inside and out. It is also the boundary itself, the screen which is a permeable membrane connecting inside and outside⁸.

This paradoxical nature (“paradoxical” is an example of a word formed with the prefix “para”) is perhaps most faithfully reflected in the subtitle as a paratext that can have its own poetics, at the limit between work and interpretation, between author and reader, in an exteriority of the text that para-aesthetically reveals its hidden interiority. Whereas the most social aspects of literary practice can be read in the paratextual field, subtitles reveal also the most intimate aspects of the text and, sometimes, the author’s unfiltered portrait as well⁹.

A secondary literary history or a literary history that runs parallel to the discourse inside the discourse can be seen in between these “thresholds of interpretation”, which play the role of a screen between the phrase itself and the alternative ways to express it. What is more significant is the fact that this situation, both inside and outside the text, represents the optimal position for critical judgment, since the frontier is, after all, the very locus of interpretation.

The evolution of subtitles throughout the history of the Romanian novel confirms, especially in the beginnings, the information that is usually well-known, reinforcing the authorial intention in alignment with the cultural ideology of the times¹⁰. The first subtitles, up until 1900, tend to be self-referential. They are highly informative, justificatory and valorising. The novel or the romance tends to be “original” or “national”, in the sense that it promotes the local literature, in which the novel plays a central role. The reader, far from being “implied” yet, must be guided, forewarned, sometimes through ample explanations where the subtitle plays almost the part of a prologue (e.g. Ioan Slavici, *The Revolution of Pârlești. A Tragodic Novel in Five Parts, extracted from some manuscripts in Ispania and compiled after the latest fashion, dedicated to the honour and praise of all those equal unto themselves*, 1873). At other times, it distinguishes between truth and fiction (“true history”, “fabricated history” etc.), or provides additional explanations through hybrid, non-canonical formulas (“an original, political-tragic-humoristic novel”, 1889, or a “political-geographical-humoristic novel”, 1889). This is the time when emphatic subtitles appear. After 1900, they proliferate: “an original, highly sensational novel” (Panait Macri, *The Most Beautiful Girl in*

⁸ J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host”, in Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey H. Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, *Deconstruction and Criticism*, London & Henley, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 219.

⁹ See John Barth, *The Friday Book or, Book-Titles Should Be Straightforward and Subtitles Avoided. Essays and Other Nonfiction*, London, The John’s Hopkins University Press, 1997.

¹⁰ See Adrian Tudurachi (ed.), *Dicționarul cronologic al romanului românesc de la origini până în 2000 [Chronological Dictionary of the Romanian Novel from Its Origins to 2000]*, vol. I–II, revised and expanded edition, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2023. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper.

Bucharest, 1889); “the great epic” (Al. Macedonski, *Thalassa*, 1893), “a great novel of sensational topicality” (Const. Fulger, *A Throne for Love*, 1910) etc. The appeal of the hyperbole, a symptom of the novel’s infancy, indicates a complex, rather than a well-defined, self-consciousness. The “great” or “sensational” novels, with few exceptions, have marginal value, while renowned authors, like Ion Agârbiceanu, subtitle their books “short novels” (*Dolor*, 1928). Once the first signs that the novel is coming of age appear, long subtitles are abandoned, with a few exceptions such as, for instance, the comic or the parabolic novel. So are grandiose attributes (perhaps less so in the case of sensation or adventure novels) and the didactic formula of the subtitle. After 1920, when the great novels are published, the augmentative, opulently enticing function of subtitles is suppressed, oftentimes minimizing the content with ironic potential, especially through a poetics of authenticity that encourages an openness towards frontier areas. The novel becomes the simple “schema of a novel” (Vasile Popa-Botoșani, 1933), a journal fragment (G. Ibrăileanu, *Adela. A Fragment from the Journal of Emil Codrescu*, 1933), a collection of notes, a confession, reportage, story, memoir, “true fairy tale” (Felix Aderca, *The First Journey around the World. A True Fairy Tale*, 1939). With heightened self-awareness, it no longer takes on bombastic attributes, but detracts its importance and value, albeit not without an air of elitism and, at times, whimsical modernism. Its declaration of existence becomes a declaration of independence or, rather, a declaration of nonconformism.

By the second half of the 20th century subtitles appear to have exhausted all their functions: self-referential, generic, ideological, moral, spatial, temporal, commercial, educational, suggestive and so on. The novel also followed a similar path: shortly after it appeared, it tapped into all the western models in vogue at the time.

Things change after the establishment of communism, when subtitles suffer radical transformations. Forced to leave the old frontier between the author and the text or between the text and the public, they migrate towards the invisible limit between the overt authorial intention and the covert meanings of the work. Its locus becomes ethereal and can be deciphered only at the level of the subtext. It is relevant that in the case of ideologically committed literature written in the 1950s, subtitles tend to disappear. Those that survive are, like titles, short and crisp. Allusive duality, paratextual suggestion, nuance, the plurality of interpretation deriving from the free, optative nature of the subtitle are features that are incompatible with the rigors of ideologized literature. Only the historical novel of great writers like M. Sadoveanu, or the anti-West or anti-capitalist satirical novel (Sergiu Fărcășan, *J. B. C. Crosses the Curtain. The novel of the fantastic affairs and adventures and nightmares of the dauntless James B. Clawhead, the great master of Objectivity, the man who crossed the curtain*, 1954) could still afford the “luxury” of subtitles. Subtitles are also sporadically used in SF novels, which make no reference to “current topics”. In the context of the leveling of creation,

subjected to strict ideological norms, subtitles could seem to be too abundant, a mark of untimely originality, a luxury or a whim, so writers no longer dare to assume this risk. The world of “para”, situated simultaneously on both sides of the frontier, with all the dangers inherent in the unforeseen, is incongruous with politically instrumented literature, where no secondary voice can accompany the official identity of the text.

It was only in the late 1960s that the novel re-entered the sphere of the literary and that subtitles reappeared. Significantly, they served not so much to convey meaning as to suggest a refusal, a negation of form which conceals an unsayable protest encapsulated in the content. Apparently, the novel was no longer a novel but the “chronicle of a day” (Constantin Țoiu, *Death in the Forest. The Chronicle of a Day*, 1965), “a suite of interludes” (Al. I. Ștefănescu, *In Pursuit of Isolde. A Suite of Interludes*, 1967), journal or memoir fragments (Henriette Yvonne Stahl, *Don't Step onto my Shadow. Fragments from the memoirs of Onofrei, written by himself, albeit through someone else, out of demureness, in the third person*, 1969), etc.

This formal nonconformism gradually extended to titles, which were sometimes unexpected and confusing, and permeated the structure of discourse when the first experimental, oneiric or metafictional novels were published. The revolt of the novel that denied itself to deny reality, in fact, could be deciphered from the negative or somewhat mocking connotation of some subtitles: “futile novel” (Mircea Cojocaru, *Ramayana*, 1970), “aleatory and detective antinovel in pursuit of the idea” (Toma George Maiorescu, *The Killer and the Flower*, 1970), “pseudo-novel” (Vasile Băran, *The Inquiry*, 1972), “pseudo-notes from the battlefield” (Alexandru Struțeanu, *Leaves Are Falling in the Steppe*, 1973), “false treatise on love” (Fănuș Neagu, *The Beautiful Madmen of the Grand Cities*, 1976), “somewhat fantastical fragments from a much vaster realistic NOVEL” (Nicolae Prelipceanu, *The Norwegian Tunnel*, 1978). By contrast, the subtitle that transposed the aesthetics of authenticity into the language of topical themes bore the difficult, indigestible burden of ideologically committed literature: a “commemorative foray” (Damian Ionescu, *Seals of Dark Gold*, 1980). More than ever before, subtitles in the 1980s revealed an agenda of protest against social contextual norms through the subversion of textual norms. Novels seemed to be anything but novels if read through the filter of their subtitles: a journal, “almost a story” (Oana Cătina, *Child's Play*, 1981), “a novel in prose-verse” (Gabriela Negreanu, *The Adventures of Mototol-Rostogol*, 1981), “a zoonovel” (Pop Simion, *Bestiary*, 1981), “variations on a theme against the light” (Gheorghe Crăciun, *Original Documents / Authenticated Copies*, 1982), a journal, a report, a romance, a dictionary, a discourse, notes, “an epic poem” (Nicolae Breban, *The Road to the Wall*, 1984), “a concert for happiness and suffering” (Dan David, *The Snake Whose Rattles Were Stolen*, 1984), a film, a radiography, a document, a collage, letters, an inquiry, a ballad etc. In their expansive drive, they stepped not just

beyond the limits of the genre and species but they also entered the sphere of other arts (concert, film) or cultural undertakings. On one side of the frontier were the totalitarian world and realist-socialist writings, while on the other lay the world of the author and that of literature that was open to post-modernist renewals. The initially subtle, barely noticeable space of the paratext broadened considerably and became a bridge between inside and outside, while also paradoxically becoming interiorized to the point of turning invisible.

The subtext behind this type of paratext naturally disappeared in the 1990s and the frontier shifted again, while preserving the entire memory of its metamorphoses. Extremely eclectic, the novel now achieved a synthesis of every previous trend, reflected in subtitles that once again went hand in hand with the novel. New subtitles of the most imaginative kind were added to this impure genre (“novel/poems”, “an essay-novel”, “a theatre novel”, “the novel of short fiction”): “a retro(version) novel” (Mircea Nedelciu, Adriana Babeți, Mircea Mihăieș, *The Woman in Red*, 1990), “a cinéroman”, “a test-novel”, “an editorial novel with four living characters” (Nicolae Cristache, *The Journalists*, 1996), “a forest novel” (Gellu Păltineanu, *The Bear’s Agony*, 1996), “a self-mythologic novel” (George Anca, *The Indian Apocalypse*, 1998), “a cinematographic novel”, an “underground novel” (Daniel Vighi, *The Summer Island*, 1999), “a minimalist postmodernist novel”, “an exotic epic”, “a romanced pseudo-biography”, “a treatise on mouse psychology” (Alex Freiberg, *The Master and the Mouse*, 1995), “an addenda to a novella by Kafka” (Gabriel Chifu, *The Marathon of the Vanquished*, 1997), “a rock-and-roll fable” (George Cușnarencu, *The Evening Star’s Journey*, 1997), “a Monsieurist dialogue” (Grid Modorcea, *The Descendants of the Morometes or, on Self-Praise*, 1998), “a fragment of a snake skin” (Vasile Constantinescu, *The Eighth Day since Genesis*, 1997) etc. The tendency to relativize the species, sometimes at odds with the content (“a pseudo-novel”, “a different kind of novel”, “a story that is not a novel, a novel that is a story”) alternates, at the level of subtitles, with direct negation (“a non-novel”, “an impossible novel”, “a historical antinovel”), but the protest is now leveled not just against the writing, but also against its topic. The “historical antinovel”, for instance, revolves around an antihero from the communist world: Elena Ceaușescu (Vasile Băran, *From the Queen of Work to the Dead Queen*, 1994).

Even though the older, “original romance” is visibly transformed, the commercial appeal of subtitles remains substantial. Bombastic attributes continue their career, sometimes subtly pastiching classical titles, at other times displaying blatant ironical connotations. “A masterpiece novel” is, for instance, the subtitle of a rather tedious rural novel (Alexandru V. Sadovan, *The Olteni with Shoulder Yoke*, 1994). The “short” novel is still produced, with the same somewhat confusing self-referentiality. The astounding, ambiguous or contradictory nature of the title suggests not just the writers’ attunement to the postmodernist spirit but also the positioning of the paratextual frontier between the authorial intention and

the text itself rather than between the writer and the public. The frontier appears to shift into a more interiorized space, less open to a dialogue with the exterior, and becomes a world engaged in a dialogue with itself.

Beyond the impression of eclecticism and extreme libertinism, the subtitles of the post 1989 novel outline a poetics of freedom that faithfully reflects the permissiveness of novelistic discourse. In terms of their value, they could be situated between a “masterpiece novel” and “the wrecks and shards of some remaining fragments of the traces left by a novel dreamed of for a long time” (Gheorghe Iova, *How Many People Are Needed for the End of the World*, 1999). In terms of their types – between the traditional novel (rural, social, political, sentimental etc.) and the “impossible novel”, the “pseudonovel”, the “non-novel”, the “antinovel”, the “rock-and-roll novel” or the “underground novel”. Generically, there is almost no genre or species that refuses them. Stylistically, all options are open to them. As markers of intimacy and micro-professions of faith, subtitles state that novels can be and truly are whatever they wish to be, that there is no repression possible, that they can afford to make confessions that are exclusively contextual, and that they can also take stock of their right to their own private space.

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(Abstract)

Starting from Gérard Genette's claim that the object of poetics is not the text in its singularity, but its textual transcendence, this study aims to overview the subtitles of Romanian novels, reading them through lens that are as much contextual as they are textual. The contextual approach focuses on the evolution of subtitles throughout the history of the Romanian novel, highlighting their characteristic features in different historical periods, in relation to literary-artistic genres and larger socio-cultural contexts, with a view to shedding light on a possible secondary history of the novel filtered through the history of subtitles. In its turn, the textual approach sees subtitles as "paratexts" that represent, in Genette's terms, "thresholds of interpretation" situated both inside and outside discourse, in a frontier area, with everything that such a position implies. Occupying this middling position, subtitles are revealed to have specific functions and impacts, which are sometimes more significant for the process of interpretation than those of titles themselves, being part of the so-called domain of "titology".

Keywords: subtitles, paratextuality, Romanian novel, poetics, textual transcendence.

O POETICĂ A SUBTITLURILOR DIN *DICȚIONARUL CRONOLOGIC AL
ROMANULUI ROMÂNESC*

(Rezumat)

Pornind de la observația lui Gérard Genette că obiectul poeziei nu este textul literar în singularitatea lui, ci transcendența sa textuală, articolul își propune să schițeze un portret al subtitlurilor romanilor românești, printr-o lectură deopotrivă contextuală și textuală a acestora. Cea dintâi urmărește evoluția subtitlurilor, parcursul lor în timp de-a lungul istoriei romanului românesc, trăsăturile lor în raport cu diferitele epoci, genuri literare și artistice și contexte socio-culturale mai ample, relevând o posibilă istorie secundară a romanului pornind de la cea a subtitlurilor. La rândul său, lectura textuală are în vedere calitatea subtitlurilor de „paratexte” ce reprezintă, după expresia lui Genette, „praguri ale interpretării” aflate atât în interiorul, cât și în exteriorul discursului, într-o zonă de frontieră, cu toate implicațiile acestei localizări. În acest rol intermediar, subtitlurile își deconspiră funcții și resorturi interioare specifice, uneori mai semnificative în ansamblul interpretării decât acelea ale titlurilor propriu-zise.

Cuvinte-cheie: subtitluri, paratextualitate, roman românesc, poetică, transcendență textuală.