

Adriana Babeți (ed.), *The Dictionary of Central and Eastern European Novel in the 20th Century* [*Dicționarul romanului central-european din secolul XX*], Polirom, 2022, ISBN 978-973-46-8293-5, 756 pages.

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‘Tell me your Central Europe and I will tell you who you are!’ – writes historian Timothy Garton Ash (Garton Ash 1999), pointing out the first difficulty of classifying novels as Central European for a dictionary. The question arises before the corpus is even selected: defining Central Europe has its own problematic issues. This review article investigates how the recent *Dictionary of the 20th-Century Central European Novel* offers an operationalized understanding of the concept, and how the structure and methodology of the volume circumscribe its functions.

The dictionary, as it becomes clear from the editor’s preface, has its own history of selecting and processing information, a history of over two decades. The delimitation of the corpus of texts to be included in the volume, the selection (or even the omission) of authors writing in different languages and belonging to different literary traditions, the transnational treatment of certain themes, all became feasible having in mind the hypothesis of being related to the same concept of Central Europe, which was based on preliminary research.

The academic background for the dictionary was created by the research activity of comparative literature initiated by professors Adriana Babeți and Cornel Ungureanu, who taught at the West University of Timisoara in the 1990s, and who turned the idea of a “third Europe” from a concept used in the humanities into a brand name, the label of a series of books published by the renowned Romanian publishing house Polirom. One of the first products of this complex activity in the fields of literary history and comparative literature (based on strong Polish, Hungarian, Serbian, French, etc. cooperations) was the journal *A Treia Europă* (Third Europe), which appeared between 1998 and 2001, having five issues. The

anthology-size issues created the intellectual background and summarized the possible definitions of the concept of Central Europe as used in the dictionary later on, while the last two issues, now moving from the large-scale investigation to close-up, focused on two major literary traditions of Central Europe, Polish and Hungarian culture. While the focus on Polish literature and culture was justified, according to the editors, primarily because it was paradigmatic for understanding the political and cultural dynamics of the entire zone, the last issue of *Third Europe*, 5/2001, discussed Hungarian literature because the editors perceived the dynamism of Hungarian literature in the period, translated into many European languages, as exceptional at that time.

In order to adopt a perspective that seems rather new in Romanian culture, it was important at first to represent the ideological space of Central Europeanness in a country that defines itself besides belonging to this cultural space, also in the context of a negotiation between Eastern Orthodoxy, Balkan fanariotic traditions and Western cultural heritage. In addition to fiction, which offers the corpus of texts for the dictionary, the concept itself can be clarified from various social, historical, geopolitical points of view. The anthologies *Europa Centrală. Neuroze, dileme, utopii* (Central Europe. Neuroses, dilemmas, utopias) (Babeți-Ungureanu 1997) and *Europa Centrală. Memorie, paradis, apocalipsă* (Central Europe. Memory, paradise, apocalypse) (Babeți-Ungureanu 1998) explored in the late nineties the theoretical, historical and personal background of the issue, grouped around the themes highlighted in the title(s). While the first anthology published translations of articles with an interdisciplinary approach, including authors such as Timothy Garton Ash, Tony Judt, Jacques le Rider, Daniel Beauvois and Endre Bojtár, transferring their views into the Romanian cultural space, the 1998 volume highlighted the personal dimensions of Central European experience, testing the validity of the term in different historical periods, through the use of autobiographical texts (diaries, memoirs, letters, autobiographical novels, etc.) and showing the impact of the idea of Central Europe on individual lives. The anthology of autobiographical texts thus showed Central European patterns from a non-academic perspective, closer to a micro-historical approach. Zweig, Kafka, Milosz, Márai, Koestler, Cioran, Danilo Kiš are just a few representative names among the authors who are in this case also witnesses. In addition to the anthologies and periodical issues, the group Third Europe also provided an insight into the fictional works of authors such as Bohumil

Hrabal, Olga Tokarczuk, Péter Esterházy and Péter Nádas through a book series at Polirom.

At the beginnings of the research group activity, in 1997/1998, the idea to create a dictionary of 20th century Central European novels was already formulated by the group members. If the approach of the two above mentioned anthologies was framed by a theoretical and historical grounding in the first case, then by personal experience and micro-historicity, we can conclude that the analytical dictionary is able to combine these two approaches. The selected novels themselves do not offer academic analysis, in this sense they rather resemble to the autobiographical texts, that document lived experiences when constructing Central European spaces. At the same time, the authors of the dictionary entries can pay attention to the identification and analytical approach of the Central European imaginary. Moreover, compared to the anthology of autobiographical texts, the image outlined in the dictionary is clearly based on a more canonical corpus, on novels that have had a great impact in their own Central European cultures.

As all such attempts, the *Dictionary of the 20th century Central European Novel* is primarily defined by the delimitation of the corpus that represents Central Europeanism and its novel. This monumental work completed in about 25 years, presents 250 novels by 197 Central European writers, written in 14 different languages, presented by more than 50 authors of the dictionary entries. The chronology is relatively simple: from Stefan Żeromski's *Doktor Judym* (published in 1900) to W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (published in 2001), which is a kind of summary of the 20th century, at least one novel is selected from each year. (The pattern adopted by the Dictionary is by no means mechanical, the year 1977 proves to be the most prolific with nine novels published in that year, while no novel initially published in 2000 was selected.) The spatial delimitation of the Central European region proved to be a more difficult task, and the space somewhat determined also the languages in which the Central European novel can be written. Among several possible geopolitical and geocultural aspects described in the foreword to the *Dictionary* by Adriana Babeți, the book finally adopts a broader, more inclusive framework. It is quite inclusive first of all towards Romanian culture: in fact it sees Central Europe as a region defined by the cultural interferences that can be experienced in novels on the one hand, and by the movements of 20th century history on the other. The geocultural framework is seen as dominant over the geopolitical approach.

The preface points out the differences between the definitions of Central Europe in different cultures, focusing also on the fact that some important post-1989 handbooks (especially the work of Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, 2004) are based on the concept of East-Central Europe instead of Central Europe. In the Romanian context, this approach, having a stronger geopolitical component and Eastern European focus, seemed to be more widespread during the 2000s. (Modoc 2020) Indirectly, however, there is an additional argument for the dictionary's and the research team's commitment to the concept of Central Europe. When outlining the historical chronology of the use of the term, Adriana Babeți's foreword refers to the approach of the anti-communist dissidents in the 1970s and 1980s, that gave at that time a kind of anti-Soviet, subversive flavour to the identification with the concept of Central Europeanness. It is obvious that the activities of the Timișoara research group in the 1990s referred also to the reconstruction of this history, and the publication of the dictionary more than twenty years after the work began, may create the possibility of a new confrontation, now with the experience of the decades after the regime change.

The cultural region presented by the dictionary is undoubtedly characterised by a strong Viennese influence in the first half of the period, but it does not necessarily and not entirely coincide with geopolitical structures, and for the entirety of the twentieth century it is clearly a broader framework that interferes with experiencing the Soviet power structures in Eastern Europe, and Romania clearly shares these experiences with Czechoslovakia, Poland and the other countries of the region. The fact that the scope of the dictionary also includes, for example, the Italian literature of Trieste and Gorizia, a significant part of Serbian literature, and German literature written in the Banat, Bukovina and Transylvania, is a sign of the broadness of the approach. Central European literature is thus written in 14 languages, but mainly in Polish (25 dictionary entries), German (32), Hungarian (34) and Romanian (39). These figures can of course be interpreted in terms of the circumstances of publication, the cultural context and the professional background of the authors, rather than as a kind of canonical statement about Central European literature. In this sense, therefore, the proposed pattern itself is more emphasised in the handbook than the need for representativeness in terms of list canons.

After a brief overview of the context, including an interpretation of the concept of Central Europe used in this handbook, we turn our attention to examining the characteristics of the volume from a functional point of view.

The recurring self-definition of the work is based on functionality in the approach of the editor-in-chief Adriana Babeți: the dictionary is a handbook (*instrument de lucru*), connected to the genre characteristics of manuals. Given the circumstances in which the work was created, it implies an explicitly educational purpose – the book's stated aim is to summarise the practical results of comparative research in Central Europe, to provide a reference work that can be taken into account when designing a university curriculum or research project. It is an encyclopaedia presenting novels, in which the entries referring to each work summarise the plot, context, stylistic and thematic features of the novels in 6000-8000 characters. In this sense, the texts are written in accordance with the rules deriving from the educational context, with the aim of making the novels more comprehensible to the general audience, without losing the professional approach.

In this context, we cannot ignore Franco Moretti's paradigm of *distant reading* (Moretti 2000), because the *Dictionary of the Central-European Novel* also functions as a repository of data that can be used to reveal the characteristics of a wider, geo-culturally circumscribed region, where quantitative arguments, as represented by the thematic index of the volume, underline the common characteristics of the works created in different languages. An important result of the book in this respect is that it introduces us to texts which are otherwise difficult to access as a whole from the framework of national cultures, due to the lack of translations and interpretations. The totality of the discussed works carries an additional meaning, which, as discussed above, can be labelled as 'Central Europeanness'. This feature became a real possibility only as a result of international, multi-institutional cooperation. At the same time, however, in order to produce a textual material that could be interpreted by the *distant reading* approach, certain aspects had to be taken into account in the writing process itself – these will be discussed below. The dictionary's emphasis on interference, cross-cultural interactions and analogies, which in many cases also meant relying on translations, connects the volume to the paradigm of contemporary *world literature studies*.

Furthermore, the work may be ground-breaking in another respect, testing indirectly the relevance and topical nature of the concept of Central Europe itself. In

the context of the conceptual framework, we have discussed the way in which autobiographical texts have reframed the question within the dimension of microhistory in one of the early anthologies of the research group. The novels themselves carry certain thematic or even discursive components that can concretise meanings of Central Europeanness that have been forgotten or never brought to the fore in recent decades. In this sense, novels and their interpretations carried out in dictionary entries, both provide a view of Central Europe from below, and reveal densities and thematic nodes that are important for *distant reading* approaches, from a top-down perspective.

One more aspect is important to mention: the editor-in-chief of the volume, Adriana Babeți, as a translator of the works of Roland Barthes or the Tel Quel group before 1989, is most at home in the French branches of comparative studies, an approach with a long tradition of myth theories or archetypal methodologies. Central Europe in this approach can be seen as a vast catalogue of traveling themes, a juxtaposition of motifs. The dictionary entries tend to take account of such general topics, beyond the local, the singular or even the national, and this approach produced within the entirety of the book a Central European web of motifs and themes.

In this thematic network, there are obviously elements that allow explicitly transnational, historical and social connections. Some examples are: the First World War, the collapse of the Monarchy, the Second World War, the Holocaust, communism, the 1956 revolution, etc. At the same time, it is also possible to examine in the index of the volume the specific content of certain motifs (which are included in the catalogue of themes in terms of their meaningful role in specific novels): artist, theatre, rurality, bourgeois, brothel, school, etc. Even attitudes favoured in certain periods or in certain cultures are worthy of examination: in addition to the more general categories of nostalgia or alienation, marginality, the issues of suicide, alcoholism, illness may also become relevant. Furthermore, certain literary themes, such as the doppelgänger or the dystopian societies, may also reveal a possible pattern of particular relevance in Central Europe.

The above examples are highlighted on the basis of specific dictionary entries – obviously larger thematic-motivical units to which the comparatist can associate a number of works from a cultural space beyond Central Europe. The possibility of

fruitful approaches lies in noticing some kind of predisposition, some recurrent interpretative angles in the occurrences of some of these themes.

Although in a review article it is not possible to describe the entire corpus of texts, it is important nevertheless to provide a complete list of the fourteen languages of Central European fiction in order to illustrate the breadth of the selection criteria: works in Hebrew, French, English, Yiddish, Slovene, Slovak, Italian, Croatian, Serbian, Czech, Polish, German, Hungarian and Romanian novels are included. The list of languages also shows that the concept is open to transcultural phenomena and multilingual authors, since 20th-century Central European fiction was seriously affected by the phenomenon of emigration and exile, which often led to language shifts and the publication of works that expressed the Central European experience in languages that were not traditionally present in the Central European space.

It is also important to note that, as in all such handbooks, the availability of works in translation – this time in Romanian – has obviously influenced the selection itself: there is a certain functionality in the fact that, after reading an interpretation, the reader has the opportunity to discover the work itself in Romanian translation.

It has already been mentioned that the works analysed in the dictionary entries form a kind of thematic-motivic network as a result of the interpretative focus. A further possibility for this network-building is to include the intertextual-architextual layer in the interpretations. In many cases, it is possible to relate authors' names and biographies to one another following certain interpretative strategies. Babits' *The Stork Caliph*, with its focus on anxieties, interpretations of sin and attempts at 'transformation', may remind the reader of Franz Kafka. Further connections between authors can be constructed on the basis of historical periods, situations and certain genre traits in the case of Škvorecky and Kundera, or the Mészöly/Hajnóczy/Esterházy group. Similarly, certain analogies in biographies (such as emigration and the reflection on it) may evoke parallels: it is a great opportunity for such a handbook to draw attention on similarities beyond the national scope. *Exile* and *migration* become important themes of the novels and a recurrent element in the biographies of the authors.

In conclusion, the novelty of the enterprise in the Romanian cultural context can be highlighted from various angles. The most consistent presentation of the concept of Central Europe in Romanian language is undoubtedly connected to the work of the Third Europe research group in Timișoara, and the Dictionary itself is

another major step in this direction. Although the interpretative framework they propose is not consensual in the Romanian context, it is important to note the strategies by which the dictionary seeks to make conceptual frameworks that are partially in contact with each other, communicate in a flexible, open manner. By involving an international network of experts, the volume also broadened its reach, as it was able to represent more than solely the Romanian interpretative horizon. Nevertheless, the problem of the translatability and adaptability of the dictionary to other languages arises. We are convinced that in this respect it is not so much the nature of the dictionary entries, but rather the selection of the works that would make it necessary to rethink a version created in another language. The selection clearly reflects the dominant orientation and research profile of the institution that created the work. In spite of this, or precisely because of the proportions adopted in the work, the specificity of the undertaking can be clearly identified, and makes it recognizable for everyone that this particular project of a *Dictionary of Central European novels from the 20th century*, was launched precisely from Timișoara, making it unique among such other future international projects.