SWEDISH JOURNAL OF ROMANIAN STUDIES
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# AN OVERVIEW ON THE 20TH-CENTURY CENTRAL-EUROPEAN NOVEL

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**Abstract**

*Over the past century, the history of Romanian literature has been dominated by nationalist approaches, necessary for the consolidation of a stable cultural identity. However, the concept of cultural identity involves changing and migratory components as well, many related to its links with other cultural identities, each of them with its own literature. This book review provides insights into the scholarly significance of Dicționarul Romanului Central-European din Secolul XX [The dictionary of Central European novel in the 20th century] coordinated by Adriana Babeți and edited by Oana Fotache, understood as a project that maps a transnational literary phenomenon. The study is examined for its uniqueness, specific linguistic diversity and multicultural scope: 250 entries about works initially published in one of the fourteen languages spoken in the region, including French and English as international languages, either part of the canon or more marginal and less known. Other reasons include its adequate combination of analysis and synthesis; the extensive team research carried out over three decades; and its socio-political relevance nowadays. The review highlights the historical, cultural, and academic contexts in which the dictionary was published, the avatars of the concept of Central Europe, several characteristics of the Central-European novel, and details about its structure, sections and features. The presentation mentions a few limitations about the availability of the titles in the languages of the region and the admitted gender imbalance and indicates several research audiences possibly interested in alternative ways of approaching novels in the context of globalization.*

*Keywords:* literary history; Central Europe; novel studies; cultural geography; transnational studies.

In the 1990s, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, a group of scholars from Timișoara, Romania, launched a research project titled *The Third Europe*, an alternative perspective to the East-versus-West dichotomy, aimed at exploring the literature, culture and history of Central Europe. Initiated in the multicultural region of Banat and emerged before the accession of Romania to the European Union, the project has generated a series of international conferences, publications of original work, translations of renowned titles and, more recently, an international literary festival. Although appreciated among specialists from the country and from abroad, its real avant-guard influence has become more visible in 2022 when Polirom decided to publish *Dicționarul Romanului Central-European din Secolul XX* [The dictionary of Central European novel in the 20th century], an international effort of building a post-1989 regional intercultural identity and a comparative literary history that transcends frontiers, showing many of the similarities and differences between the national literatures of the area. Just as the Danube River gathers waters from nineteen countries, this dictionary gathers narrative threads from Central European countries to weave an engaging literary tapestry of the 20th century. It aims to reflect the profound impact of transnational



Vol. 7 No 1 (2024)
**ISSN: 2003-0924**

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phenomena such as war, totalitarianism, and mass migration on both personal subjectivity and collective memory.

Initiated as an individual undertaking in the spring of 1992, during an international conference held at the Rutgers University, Newark, USA, and transformed into a collaborative venture over the next three decades, the dictionary coordinated by Adriana Babeți, professor of comparative literature at the West University of Timișoara, and edited by Oana Fotache, professor of literary theory at the University of Bucharest, begins with an extensive introduction outlining the background and the stages of the project, the characteristics of the Central European novel and its possible audiences. This introduction is followed by over 250 entries about novels and 197 biographical entries about novelists, along with a chronology, a list of 70 contributors, a general bibliography, an index of authors and works, an index of names and a thematic index. In 2023, the editorial project received the Special Prize of the Writers' Union of Romania and the Titu Maiorescu Award offered by the National Museum of Romanian Literature.

In the introduction, Adriana Babeți explains some of the historical and geographical meanings of the concept named *Central Europe*, the theoretical contexts in which it has developed as well as the research methods and the selection criteria of the novels. Rather than presenting an essentialist definition, the author explores the various manifestations and hybrid nature of the concept, incorporating perspectives from numerous writers, historians, and researchers that delve into its relevance as a flexible organizing principle within the field of literary studies: Mitteleuropa, Zentraleuropa, Zwischeneuropa, New Europe, Eastern Europe, Median Europe, Middle Europe, the Other Europe, Central East Europe, East Central Europe, Central and South-Eastern Europe, even Kakania or the New Babylon. In essence, Central Europe, much like the region of Banat, is renowned for its multiethnic history and paradoxical identity rooted in linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. It is characterized by the fragility of its borders, the shifting of political power centers, tensions between cosmopolitan impulses and national traditions, the politicization of literature and the arts etc. At times, in contrast to other areas of Central Europe, the region of Banat, where the dictionary originated, boasts distinct positive attributes. These include less pronounced clashes between diverse identities, a broader and more varied range of interculturality, hybridity and cultural transfer. Additionally, it possesses a cultural landscape conducive to experimentation, suitable for economic, social and technological policies, and a notable interest for innovation.

Unlike territories, however, novels transcend geographical boundaries and ethnic limitations, many of them illustrate how frontiers have been internalized, processed and transformed, contributing to the formation of new identities. Besides being part of a certain national heritage, they have become or may very well become part of regional and world literature through the regular practice of translation. It must be mentioned that the chosen novels are not only works privileged by the national or international canon, but also niche, atypical and marginalized works, censored or drawer novels, novels published abroad, postponed, unfinished or posthumous novels, with distinct themes and aesthetics typologies, relevant to the project.

From a linguistic point of view, the works were initially published in one of the following languages, which reflects the connections between the local and the global literary arenas: Czech, Croatian, English, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, Serbian, Slovakian, Slovenian and Yiddish. In addition, the dictionary takes the limitations of the linguistic criterion into account, highlighting, for example, the changing relationship of Croatian, Serbian and Serbo-Croatian over the last decades, the nature of Yiddish as a fusion between Hebrew and German, the statute of the bilingual and trilingual


**ISSN: 2003-0924**

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writers of the region and the condition of the minority writers, with all the linguistic shifts that may have been involved in the process of producing literary works.

Almost all the selected novels have been translated into languages of international circulation and a third have been adapted for the screen at least once, which demonstrates strong ties with world literature and the larger domain of cinematography. Among the 197 authors, 12 have been honored with the Nobel Prize for Literature and 25 are included in the list of canonical authors compiled by the American critic Harold Bloom. From a local point of view, almost two thirds of the novels are available in Romanian, ready to be compared and contrasted, an aspect that needs further research and translation when considering their availability in the other languages of the region. From a different angle, translating the dictionary into another language would likely involve certain adaptations regarding the selection of the novels and the translations available through interregional exchanges. Moreover, when considering the criterion of gender, only about 10% of the novelists are women, which may be the result of women's poorer representation in the intellectual and literary spheres of society during the 20th century, but also the consequence of the current selection.

One of the most notable features of the dictionary is the thematic index, which facilitates the identification of novels dealing with certain historical topics like imperial influences, revolutions, the First or the Second World War, the Holocaust or the Communism. Additionally, the index aids in pinpointing novels set in particular cities, provinces or rural areas, those focused on childhood or school years, those depicting a journey (such as uprooting, deportation or exile), those staging crises, scapegoating, suicides, murders, love affairs or family relationships. Moreover, it highlights novels addressing themes of sexuality and prostitution, specific ethnic groups or certain professions (such as clerks, doctors, engineers, informers, journalists, officers, priests, servants, teachers, traders, workers, writers etc.). The index also distinguishes between diaries, autobiographies, utopias, dystopias, parodies, parables, and fantasies, and categorizes novels as romantic, realist, grotesque, modern or postmodern, among other classifications.

When readers first open the dictionary, one of the first questions they may have is: What are some defining characteristics of the Central European novel? Without attempting to provide an exhaustive answer, Adriana Babeți argues that it involves a particular manner of individual and collective engagement with temporality, encompassing experiences of disasters and periodic reconfigurations of identity. From a historical viewpoint, it has emerged as a result of a power mechanism: the absence of political independence in the smaller countries of the region was offset by the mobilizing force of cultural imagination. At the same time, the overemphasis on literature has also been the consequence of the irrepressible desire to stay connected with Western values. Furthermore, akin to other regions, the novel as a genre has functioned as support for political emancipation, a pedagogical instrument and a way to metabolize the ideologies of modernity while articulating historical consciousness.

The concept of "the past that has not passed" suggests a tense relationship between memory and history, characterized by a blend of apprehension and nostalgia regarding the individual and the collective past. Given these circumstances, the critic proposes six therapeutic solutions apparent in one form or another within these novels: to face the terrible past; to glorify the past; to parody the mythologies of the past; to be indifferent about the past; to miniaturize the past; to be circumspect about the future when linking it with the past. From a psycho-social perspective, Babeți emphasizes that the identity crises often represented in the Central European novel are rooted not only in the abyss of the self (to echo the developments of psychoanalysis), but also in the social, cultural and historical context (to


**ISSN: 2003-0924**

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echo the economic and political ideologies of the century), with a focus on masculinity and Jewishness, on the one hand, and a marked interest in the transformation of institutions like the monarchy, the state, the army, on the one hand, and the school and the family, on the other hand.

Half a century of cultural exchange and research regarding literary topography and comparative studies at the West University of Timișoara, with prominent figures in the field such as Cornel Ungureanu, the author of *The Mitteleuropa of the Peripheries* (2002) and *Central Europe: The Geography of an Illusion* (2004), and Marcel Cornis-Pope, who, together with John Neubauer, edited the four-volume *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and the 20th Centuries* (2004-2010), have left their mark on the framework and the content of this dictionary. Although the majority of contributors are Romanian, with some residing abroad as academics, diplomats, researchers, translators or journalists, there is also representation from minority groups such as Hungarian, Polish, Czech, German, Serbian, French and others. What is evident is their generous hermeneutic approach, open to cultural otherness and the linguistically diverse literatures of the region.

It has probably become obvious so far that the dictionary is addressed to those interested in fields such as literary history, comparative studies, literary sociology, reception theory, cultural studies, geocriticism, multiculturalism, world literature, political history, spatial narratology, psychogeography, distant reading and other connected domains.

The overall impression is that of an immense multilingual literary beehive, meant to stimulate analytical and exploratory re-readings of the 20th-century novel from Central Europe. The dictionary is part of the contemporary trend in literary history that cultivates transnational perspectives, diminishing the importance of national frontiers and historical moments, while favoring intercultural relationships and temporal spans. It represents a shift in paradigm, focused on multinodal networks and rhizomatic outlooks, which, as the coordinator contends, does not necessarily imply a superior approach, but remains pertinent in the context of glocalization, the advance of the internet, the need for recontextualizations and for pinpointing resemblances and differences, interferences and interactions, evolutions and discontinuities, often prone to modification and open to innovation.

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**ISSN: 2003-0924**