

Dana Nicoleta Popescu

ORCID: 0000-0001-8554-037X

“Titu Maiorescu” Institute of Banat Studies, The Romanian Academy,

Timișoara Branch, Romania

E-mail: dinnyggg@gmail.com

DOI: 10.55159/tri.2023.0104.12



A Library-Like Volume

Babeți A., Fotache O. (eds.) (2022). *The Dictionary of the 20th Century Central-European Novel*. Iași: Polirom.

Abstract

The present review aims to present a volume published in 2022, the completion of a project launched nearly three decades earlier: *The Dictionary of the 20th Century Central-European Novel* (Iasi, Polirom Publishing, 755p.), compiled from 255 novel reading notes, coordinated by Adriana Bebeti, who is also the author of the extensive introductory study, which could have formed a book in itself. The members of the ‘Third Europe’ foundation (name which refers to an intermediary space between the East and the West, based on intersections and the recognition of constancies), literary researchers in Timisoara, as well as prominent figures of the national and international academic world participated in creating the dictionary. Central Europe appears as a cultural space with a chequered history, an unsettled world ruled by instability and devoid of security, but enriched by multiculturalism and multilingualism. *The Dictionary of the 20th Century Central-European Novel* may be regarded as a natural sequel to the anthology volumes in the ‘Third Europe’ series, coordinated by Adriana Babeți and Cornel Ungureanu: *Central*

Europe. Neuroses, Dilemmas, Utopias (1997) and *Central Europe. Memory, Paradise, Apocalypse* (1998). By its scientific rigour and compelling style, the dictionary proves to be not only a useful working tool for academics, researchers and students, but also a possible handbook for any student of literature.

Looking back and retracing the genesis of the project, *The Dictionary of the 20th Century Central-European Novel* has its roots in two anthology volumes published in the late '90s and coordinated by Adriana Babeți and Cornel Ungureanu: *Central Europe. Neuroses, Dilemmas, Utopias* (1997) and *Central Europe. Memory, Paradise, Apocalypse* (1998); both anthologies begin with a Foreword authored by Babeți and conclude with an Afterword by Ungureanu.

Central Europe. Neuroses, Dilemmas, Utopias inaugurated in 1997 the 'Third Europe' series, giving Romanian readers with an interest in history, philosophy of culture and political science access to texts previously unpublished. The volume, made up of sections *A Concept with Variable Geometry*, *Between Cultural Identity and Political Illusion* and *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, brings together articles by writers such as Tony Judt, Jacques Rupnik, Timothy Garton Ash, Jacques Le Rider, Claudio Magris, Vladimir Tismăneanu, Michel Foucher, Mircea Muthu, André Reszler, Radu Enescu, Endre Bojtár, Jaroslav Pelikan, Virgil Nemoianu, Andrei Corbea, Mircea Anghelescu, John Willett, Milan Kundera, Mircea Eliade, Eugène Ionesco, Czesław Miłosz, György Konrád, Danilo Kiš, E. M. Cioran, Michael Heim, H. C. Artmann, Péter Eszterházy, Claudio Magris, Miklós Mészöly, Adam Michnik. This is not a juxtaposition, but a dialogue (implicit or explicit).

A year later, *Central Europe. Memory, Paradise, Apocalypse* returned to the topics addressed in the earlier anthology, this time as reflected in autobiographies, journals, memoirs, correspondence and revolving around the notions of centre, province, harmony, neurosis, agony, identity, vulnerability. Confessional writing revealed new facets of some of the authors present in the previous volume, other leading writers being added (including Stefan Zweig, Elias Canetti, Miloš Crnjanski, Lucian Blaga, Illyés Gyula, I. D. Sîrbu, Andrzej Kuśniewicz,

Arthur Koestler, Witold Gombrowicz, Dominic Tatarka, Franyó Zoltán, Italo Svevo, Joseph Roth, Miroslav Krleža, Livius Ciocârlie, Robert Musil, Arthur Schnitzler, Franz Kafka, Ioan Slavici, Karel Čapek, Bohumil Hrabal, Cora Irineu, Lou Andreas-Salomé, Alma Mahler-Werfel, Ivan Klima).

The idea of a dictionary of the Central-European novel, which originated as early as 1992, took shape through the activity of the ‘Third Europe’ foundation, which was founded in 1997 and gave its name to the above-mentioned series. The foundation brought together literary researchers from the West University of Timisoara: professors Adriana Babeți, Mircea Mihăieș, Cornel Ungureanu and doctoral students Daciana Banciu-Branea, Dorian Branea, Gabriel Kohn, Marius Lazurca, Tinu Pârvulescu, Sorin Tomuța. In 1999, an NGO institutional structure was established, which paved the way for national and international collaborations; the scale of the latter may be inferred from the records of the prominent literary figures on the scientific committee: Sorin Antohi, Timothy Garton Ash, Daniel Chirot, Livius Ciocârlie, Andrei Corbea, Paul Cornea, Slavenka Drakulić, Irena Grudzińska, Miklós Haraszti, Pierre Hassner, Ken Jowitt, Tony Judt, Gail Kligman, Konrád György, Jacques Le Rider, Mircea Martin, Adam Michnik, Vladimir Tismăneanu, Ivan Vejvoda, Catherine Verdery.

This history, necessary for understanding the evolution and objectives of the project, is presented in great detail by Adriana Babeți, the DCEN coordinator, at the beginning of an extensive introductory study, which could have formed a volume in itself: nearly 100 pages – and the number would have been considerably higher, had it not been for the small type used in printing.

To start with, the critic decodes the significance of the foundation’s name: an intermediary space between the East and the West, based on intersections and the recognition of constancies. Secondly, the variable geometry of the notion of Central Europe, which eludes precise demarcations by its very paradox-generating ambivalence, occasions a review of the terms *Mitteleuropa*, *Zentraleuropa*, *Zwischeneuropa*, *the New Europe*, *Eastern Europe*, *Median/Middle Europe*, *East-Central Europe*, *Central and Eastern Europe*, *Central and South-Eastern Europe*, not forgetting Robert Musil’s *Kakania*.

Central Europe appears as a cultural space with a chequered history, an unsettled world ruled by instability and devoid of security, but enriched by multiethnicity, multiculturalism, multilingualism and confessional plurality. The complex relations include clashes and intersections, the contrast between urban and rural ways of life, cosmopolitanism and national tradition. If geographical boundaries were repeatedly redrawn and revised, the individual was under the pressure of internal frontiers, which conceal or reveal the identity crisis.

The dictionary's authors avoided a rigid framework in the selection of texts, proceeding instead in two directions, as Babeți points out:

On the one hand, starting from literature (through the comparative reading of dozens of Central-European novels, as well as of the most important literary histories in the region); on the other hand, from the notion of Central Europe and the tumultuous history of the countries therein (by the selective use of an extensive bibliography). Two areas stand out from the convergence and overlap between the two histories (a mainstream, geocultural one and another muted, geopolitical), from their mutually shaping influence: one area of the general concept as it was reworked and adapted to our project, and another one represented by Central-European novel, viewed both in its unity and equally, in the plurality of its facets. Consequently, when we favoured a certain understanding of Central Europe we proceeded according to the spirit of the place, as if the Central-European model, characterized inter alia by ambiguity and ambivalence, had left an indelible imprint on us (p. 27).

The answer to the question – a rhetorical one, undoubtedly – whether there is a Central-European novel, supports the presence of *a pattern, an ethos or a thinking and behavioural soft* peculiar to individuals and communities

which the novel – as a specific literary form, through its proteism, assimilates most visibly. Even while stereotyping, they develop a set of distinctive characteristics of Central-Europeanness determined by a largely common past, which generated a unique sensitivity to the

challenges of history and a specific attitude towards the major creative paradigms of modernity (p. 51).

Apart from the *Introduction*, *DCEN* includes *Tabula gratulatoria*, the list of novels, novel reading notes, author notes, the chronology (the ordering of novels according the date of publication), the introduction of contributors (the authors of the reading notes, as well as theoreticians and translators), the general bibliography, an index of authors and works, an index of names, a table of contents.

256 novels correspond to the 251 reading notes, a difference which derives from the inclusion in four notes of two volumes, which were deemed possible sequels published under different titles and in different years. The novel notes and the author notes have a structure proposed by the dictionary coordinator and devised in consultation with experts in the field. The list of novels (whose authors are mentioned between square brackets) is accompanied by succinct accounts of the contributors' activities: Adriana Babeți, Balázs Imre József, Olga Bartosiewicz, Grațiela Benga, Alexandru Bodog, Ioana Bot, Corin Braga, Daciana Branea, Dorian Branea, Alexandru Budac, Ruxandra Cesereanu, Laura Cheie, Cristina Chevereșan, Mateusz Chmurski, Alexandra Ciocârlie, Livius Ciocârlie, Afrodita Cionchin, Ștefana Oana Ciorțea-Neamțiu, Cosmin Ciotloș, Simona Constantino-vici, Ioana Copil-Popovici, Andrei Corbea, Adina Costin Szőnyi, Sorin Radu Cucu, Sabra Daici, Anca Diaconu, Roxana Eichel, Oana Fotache, Xavier Galmiche, Constantin Geambașu, Gabriela Glăvan, Andreea Heller-Ivancenko, Ilinca Ilian, Alina Irimia, Kazimierz Jurczak, Melania Kaitor, Gabriel Kohn, Koronka Csilla, Cătălin Lazurca, Marius Lazurca, Jacques Le Rider, Mircea Martin, Mészáros Ildikó, Călin-Andrei Mihăiescu, Voichița Năchescu, Octavia Nedelcu, Alexandru Oravițan, Antonio Patraș, Radu Păiușan, Cristian Pătrășconiu, Ioana Pârvulescu, Tinu Pârvulescu, Ioan Radin Peianov, Dana Percec, Florin Corneliu Popovici, Vasile Popovici, Ana Pușcașu, Radu Pavel Gheo, Magda Răduță, Roxana Rogobete, Ion Simuț, Szekernyés János, Călin Teuțișan, Dumitru Tucan, Claudiu Turcuș, Mihaela Ursa, Vallasek Júlia, Libuše Valentová, Ciprian Vălcan, Smaranda Vultur. The name lists serve a useful purpose: apart from the 'big picture', they highlight the participants and the transcendence of local and national borders.

The Dictionary of the 20th Century Central-European Novel was conceived not only as a working tool for academics (literary historians and theoreticians, comparatists, anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, historians, geographers) or students. “First and foremost”, Babeți states,

it would be interesting to see how useful the Dictionary would be to those who study literature in its multiple relations to history. These were given precedence not because the theme of history (usually, a «bad» history) is one of the most popular in Central-European literatures, particularly in novels. But because the connection of a DCEN-like working tool with history-related subjects [...] is a strong, substantive one (p. 82).

Moreover, we believe that DCEN could constitute, by its scientific rigour and compelling style, a possible handbook for any student of literature.

Dana Nicoleta Popescu – 1992 alumna of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy – West University of Timișoara, Romania, majoring in Romanian and English language; PhD in Philology earned in 2003. Senior researcher (III) at the Institute for Banat Studies, Romanian Academy, Timișoara Branch. Works published: *Mateiu I. Caragiale – inițiere și estetism* (2005), *Sub semnul barocului* (2008), *Măștile timpului. Mit și spiritualitate în proza lui Paul Eugen Banciu* (2012).