

Regényszótár a 20. századi közép-európai irodalomból
[Dictionary of the 20th-Century Central-European Novel].
Edited by Adriana Babeți, Oana Fotache, Éva Karádi, Gábor
Csordás, introduction by Adriana Babeți, translated into
Hungarian by Gabriella Koszta, Annamária Codău, Koszta
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Zsuzsanna Nagy, Ilka Papp-Zakor, Ivett Szabó, Enikő Szenkovics,
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Budapest: Cser Kiadó, 2025. 800 pp.

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The publication of the Hungarian translation of *Dictionary of the 20th-Century Central-European Novel* in October 2025 represents a significant moment for Central-European literary scholarship. Originally published by Polirom in Romania in 2022, the monumental volume coordinated by Adriana Babeți is the result of a long and consistent research effort developed over several decades within the intellectual framework of the cultural project known as *The Third Europe*.

Published by Cser Publishing House, the Hungarian edition is a landmark step in the international circulation of this scholarly undertaking. By making the volume accessible to Hungarian readers, the translation expands the dialogue surrounding Central-European literary traditions and further integrates the project into the region's broader intellectual landscape. The Hungarian edition was produced by a team of literary scholars from Romania and Hungary. Not only did they translate the original text but also adapted the project to the Hungarian readership. In 2022, they also introduced the Dictionary in the Hungarian literary journal *Korunk*, where they presented the methodology and discussed the Hungarian materials included in the volume. Moreover, Imre József Balázs and Júlia Vallasek, scholars of Hungarian literature participated in

discussing and mediating the project in Hungarian academic circles. According to the Hungarian commentary on the book, the researchers collaborated with the team working around Adriana Babeți and contributed to the Hungarian literary corpus. They analysed the Hungarian novels included in the Dictionary and compiled scholarly commentaries and review essays about the project.

The Hungarian translation of the Dictionary is more than a linguistic adaptation; it represents a significant cultural and scholarly bridge between Romanian and Hungarian literary studies. As a core country in the Central-European region, Hungary shares deep historical, cultural, and linguistic ties with the territories explored in the Dictionary, including Transylvania. By providing access to works and critical analyses previously available primarily in Romanian or other languages, the Hungarian edition situates Hungarian readers within the broader Central-European literary network.

The edition also reflects a growing interest in comparative and transnational literary studies within Hungary. The translation team ensured that the contextual explanations, references, and bibliographic notes were adapted to meet the needs of Hungarian scholars and students. In doing so, the volume not only preserves the original intellectual rigour but also makes it a practical reference for local academia, including university courses in comparative literature, Central-European studies, and literary history.

Moreover, the Hungarian edition emphasizes the inclusion of Hungarian literature within the broader Central-European framework. While Hungarian novels already form one of the largest national groups in the original Dictionary, the translation draws explicit attention to canonical authors, such as Miklós Bánffy, Antal Szerb, Imre Kertész, László Krasznahorkai, and Péter Nádas, and places them within a comparative, transnational context. This approach strengthens the recognition of Hungarian literature as both historically and culturally central rather than peripheral to the region.

Finally, the Hungarian edition contributes to ongoing efforts to create a shared Central-European literary space where national literatures are understood in relation to each other. In this sense, the translation is both a scholarly instrument and a cultural statement, reflecting Hungary's role within the historical and contemporary dynamics of Central Europe.

Structurally, the Dictionary consists of two major parts. The first is an extensive introductory study of approximately one hundred pages written by Adriana Babeți. She outlines the concept of Central Europe, its intellectual history, and the methodological principles guiding the project. Written with both narrative clarity and theoretical depth, the introduction also explains the criteria used for selecting the novels and discusses the comparative perspective that informs the entire work.

The second part of the volume is the Dictionary itself, consisting of analytical entries dedicated to each selected novel. These entries are by prominent literary critics and scholars, including Jacques Le Rider, Mircea Martin, Liviu Ciocârlie, Corin Braga, Ioana Pârvulescu, Ion Simuț, Mihaela Ursa, Cosmin Ciotloș, Grațiana Benga, and Oana Fotache. Each entry follows a similar structure: a presentation of the plot, the historical context, a thematic analysis, and a discussion of genre characteristics. This systematic approach ensures that every novel is treated with equal critical attention and allows readers to understand the works even when they are not familiar with the original texts.

The Dictionary originated in the early 1990s as a scholarly initiative developed in Timișoara. The project is closely connected to the intellectual environment of the Banat region, a historical space characterized by shifting borders, imperial legacies, and long-standing traditions of multi-ethnic coexistence. It was within this context that Adriana Babeți, Mircea Mihăieș, and Cornel Ungureanu launched the interdisciplinary cultural project known as *The Third Europe*. Their aim was to explore Central Europe as a cultural and historical space shaped by shared experiences rather than strictly defined political borders. Over the decades the project has generated conferences, translations, and numerous scholarly studies dedicated to Central-European intellectual history and literature. The Dictionary is one of the most important outcomes of this long-term intellectual endeavour.

The theoretical foundation of the Dictionary is based on the intellectual concept of Central Europe developed by such authors as Milan Kundera, György Konrád, and Czesław Miłosz. In this perspective, Central Europe is not simply a geographical region but a cultural space shaped by common historical experiences: the legacy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the coexistence of multiple languages and ethnic groups, and the political transformations that marked the twentieth century. In this framework, the core Central-European region generally includes Austria, Hungary, the Czech lands, Slovakia, Poland, Slovenia, Croatia, and Romania. Ukraine, on the other hand, is usually associated with the Eastern-European or post-Soviet cultural sphere.

This conceptual approach allows the editors to emphasize cultural interactions and historical traditions rather than contemporary political borders. The Dictionary aims to map the evolution of the Central-European novel throughout the twentieth century and to examine how literature reflects the complex historical experiences of the region. All items included in the volume were published between 1900 and 2000, covering the entire twentieth century. In total, the Dictionary contains 256 novels by 197 authors in fourteen languages: Hebrew, French, English, Yiddish, Slovene, Slovak, Italian, Croatian, Serbian, Czech, Polish, German, Hungarian, and Romanian.

One of the fundamental methodological principles of the project is the combination of canonical and marginal works. The editors deliberately included both internationally recognized novels—often translated into widely circulated languages or adapted for film—and lesser-known texts that have remained marginalized within national literary histories. The goal was not to create a hierarchy of the “best novels” but to construct a thematic and cultural map of Central-European narrative traditions.

Many of the novels included in the Dictionary address the major historical experiences that shaped Central Europe in the twentieth century. Among the main themes are the decline of imperial structures, the First and Second World Wars, fascism and communism, political oppression and censorship, exile and displacement, cultural transformations under totalitarian regimes, and the post-1989 social and political changes. A significant number of the novels were banned or censored during the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century. Some were written in exile, others circulated clandestinely, and many remained unpublished for decades.

Therefore, the introduction offers a comprehensive reflection on how Central European literature constructs and organizes, stressing the relationship between major urban centres and the provinces situated on the peripheries of empires and modern states. It is a true “literary cartography” in which cities, villages, borders, and even abstract spaces become bearers of historical, political, and identity-related meaning.

The major capitals emerge as symbolic centres of modernity and cultural power. Vienna is presented as an essential nucleus of Central European imagination, a space of intellectual and artistic creativity, but also of imperial decline. However, the focus is not on Vienna, but rather on Prague, the city most intensely featured in the corpus. Prague appears as a multifaceted space: German, Jewish, and Czech. In parallel, the theme of “non-places,” as formulated by Marc Augé, emerges: Airports, train stations, or hotels become spaces of anonymity and alienation, where individual identity dissolves completely. These contemporary spaces are the logical continuation of the disintegration that began in the twilight literature of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Overall, the text describes a broad evolution: from the Habsburg Empire and its central cities, to unstable peripheries, to bureaucratic modernity, and, finally, to globalization, which produces non-places. Central European literature thus emerges as a kind of archive of the crisis of modernity, in which cities, characters, and objects become expressions of the same fundamental tension between order and chaos, memory and forgetting, centre and periphery. “Literary” Mitteleuropa is not merely a geographical space, but a complex cultural construct, in which identity is constantly negotiated among multiple languages, histories, and forms of representation.

Therefore, what unites these texts is not a stable territory, but precisely its instability—the continuous transformation of the world into a network of fragile meanings, always on the verge of disappearing. Furthermore, discussing borders and expansion, Josef Kroutvor “judges” the situation, saying that Munich is the westernmost border, whether this is a positive or negative fact. To the north, there is Dresden, giving us a second German city. The remainder of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire is represented by Vienna and also by Krakow. We should also remember that Jewish Lvov belongs to Central Europe. Within this area sit Bratislava, Brno, and finally Prague as the ideal centre of the Central European space. Even if we are not Central European expansionists, several essential sites fall by the wayside given these limitations. Among them there is Silesian Wrocław, Warsaw—in its varied associations: First Habsburg, then Prussian and finally Polish (and despite all this, until 1918, it was part of what Russia had annexed), then Trieste, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Novi Sad—all of which were at one time international centres, as well as Wilno/Vilnius—likewise a colourful amalgam of confessions and nationalities. It is also possible to put a big question mark over Dresden, and then a small one over Munich, which despite truly belonging to Bavaria, does embody the strongest ties with Central Europe in the whole of “imperial” Germany. Similarly, one can hardly exclude Austria from Central Europe; Thus, when you include Austria, you are also forced to consider nearby Bavaria. Therefore, we must look more to the south and the east to include the Austrians and the Bavarians, yet not view them as re-outfitted Germans. After all, the German language was a necessity, Russian—a burden.”

Although it is difficult to define Central Europe, it is possible to narrate it. The Czech literary critic and scholar Jiří Trávnický pertinently states in the introduction: “Central Europe is not contained in concepts, but in stories. And these stories do not represent its other form only; they actually represent its most characteristic form. The novel is thus a ‘soft’ version of Central Europe.”

The Dictionary includes some of the most influential writers of Central-European literature. Among them are Franz Kafka, Robert Musil, Thomas Bernhard, Gustav Meyrink, Jaroslav Hašek, Hermann Broch, Elias Canetti, Bruno Schulz, Ivo Andrić, Stefan Zweig, Primo Levi, Milan Kundera, Witold Gombrowicz, Günter Grass, Bohumil Hrabal, Péter Esterházy, and Imre Kertész.

Romanian literature is represented by such authors as Ioan Slavici, Ion Agârbiceanu, Mihail Sadoveanu, Liviu Rebreanu, Mihail Sebastian, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Max Blecher, Marin Preda, Nicolae Breban, Dumitru Radu Popescu, Gabriela Adameşteanu, Sorin Titel, Ştefan Agopian, Gheorghe Crăciun, Mircea Nedelciu, Norman Manea, and Mircea Cărtărescu.

Hungarian literature occupies a particularly prominent place in the Dictionary. Hungarian novels account for thirty-four entries, forming one of the largest national

groups in the volume alongside Romanian, German, and Polish literatures. This reflects the central role of Hungarian literature in the cultural history of the region. Many Hungarian novels address such themes as the decline of the Austro-Hungarian world, the crisis of modernity, and the transformations produced by war and totalitarian regimes.

Among the Hungarian works included in the Dictionary are *Journey by Moonlight* by Antal Szerb, *The Pendragon Legend* by Antal Szerb, *The Transylvanian Trilogy* by Miklós Bánffy, *Skylark* and *Anna Édes* by Dezső Kosztolányi, *Embers* and *Divorce in Buda* by Sándor Márai, *Relatives* and *Be Faithful Unto Death* by Zsigmond Móricz, *School at the Frontier* by Géza Ottlik, *Cold Days* by Tibor Cseres, *Fatelessness* and *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* by Imre Kertész, *A Book of Memories* and *Parallel Stories* by Péter Nádas, *Helping Verbs of the Heart* and *Celestian Harmonies* by Péter Esterházy, *Satantango* and *The Melancholy of Resistance* by László Krasznahorkai, *Sin* by László Németh, *The Lost Paradise* by Gyula Illyés.

The Dictionary is closely associated with the scholarly work of Adriana Babeți, a Romanian literary critic, essayist, novelist, translator, and professor of comparative literatures at the West University of Timișoara. Born in Oradea in 1949, she studied philology at the University of Timișoara, graduating in 1972. She obtained her doctorate in comparative literature in 1996. Combining literary criticism, cultural history, and comparative literary analysis, contributing significantly to the exploration of Central-European intellectual identity, Babeți is one of the most influential figures in the development of Central-European cultural studies in Romania. She has written numerous books both individually and in collaboration, and has coordinated several collective volumes devoted to literary criticism and cultural studies. Among her best-known works are *Dilemele Europei Centrale* (*Dilemmas of Central Europe*), *Arachne și pânza* (*Arachne and the Web*), *Dandismul. O istorie* (*Dandyism. A History*), and *Amazoanele. O poveste* (*The Amazon Women. A story*). Thereby, she has contributed substantially to the development of comparative literary research and to the reinterpretation of Central Europe as a cultural and intellectual space.

Her scholarly and cultural activity has been widely recognized through several prestigious distinctions. Adriana Babeți has received important awards from the Romanian Writers' Union and the Association of Literary Critics. In recognition of her contribution to Romanian culture, she was awarded the Order of Cultural Merit in the rank of Knight by the Presidency of Romania. These distinctions underline the authority of her scholarly work and reinforce the significance of the Dictionary as the culmination of decades of research dedicated to the study of Central-European literature.

Beyond her writing and research, Babeți has played an active role in shaping the intellectual environment of Romanian literary studies. She is a senior editor of

the literary journal *Orizont*, where she has promoted comparative and transnational approaches to literature, particularly emphasizing Central-European connections. Her international collaborations have included joint research projects, conferences, and publications with scholars across Europe, fostering dialogue between Romanian, Hungarian, Czech, Polish, Austrian, and German literary studies. This network of scholarly exchange further strengthens the Dictionary's role as a transnational reference work and emphasizes its critical importance for both regional and international literary scholarship.

The Hungarian translation of the *Dictionary of the 20th-Century Central-European Novel* is not merely a linguistic achievement; it is also a conceptual intervention that invites readers to reconsider the very notion of literary space in Central Europe. By situating the novels of multiple national traditions within a shared framework, the volume challenges the conventional, nation-centered approach to literary history. It demonstrates that the literary production of Central Europe cannot be fully understood in isolation, as the region's cultural and historical complexities demand a comparative, transnational perspective.

One of the most striking aspects of the Dictionary is its rigorous yet inclusive selection strategy. By combining canonical masterpieces with lesser-known or marginalized texts, the editors encourage readers to interrogate established hierarchies of literary value. This approach underscores the pluralism of Central-European narrative forms and illustrates the ways in which literature functions as both a mirror of historical experience and an instrument for negotiating collective identity. For instance, novels created in exile or those censored and clandestinely circulated offer unique insights into how political oppression shaped narrative strategies and thematic preoccupations across the region.

The emphasis on multilingualism and cross-cultural exchange is another key feature of the Dictionary. Several authors included in the volume, such as Franz Kafka, Milan Kundera, and Péter Nádas, operated within linguistically and culturally hybrid spaces. Their oeuvre reflects the tension between belonging and displacement, a tension that pervades much of Central-European literature. The Hungarian edition retains these nuances, ensuring that readers recognize both the local specificity and the transnational resonance of each text. This attention to linguistic and cultural intersections allows the volume to function as a platform for comparative analysis, supporting research in World Literature, memory studies, and postcolonial frameworks.

In addition, the Dictionary foregrounds the role of history in shaping literary expression. Central-European novels often grapple with the legacies of empire, war, and totalitarian regimes. The thematic continuity of historical trauma across multiple national literatures reinforces the notion that Central Europe constitutes a distinct

cultural configuration, as Adriana Babeți's introduction emphasizes. By contextualizing items within their historical and socio-political milieu, the volume provides readers with tools to interpret narrative strategies, thematic choices, and stylistic innovations in relation to lived experience, rather than abstract aesthetic criteria.

The Hungarian edition, in particular, makes a decisive contribution to regional scholarship. It foregrounds Hungarian literature while situating it in dialogue with Romanian, Austrian, Polish, Czech, and other Central-European literatures. This comparative perspective helps dismantle entrenched nationalist narratives and highlights the interconnectedness of cultural production across borders. For example, the inclusion of Miklós Bánffy's *The Transylvanian Trilogy* alongside Romanian and German novels enables readers to trace how shared historical circumstances—the decline of aristocracy, political upheavals, and social modernization—manifested in different national literatures while producing comparable narrative strategies and thematic concerns.

The Dictionary's attention to methodology and criteria for selection models best practices in literary research. Its balance between canonical and marginal works, its attention to historical and thematic significance, and its focus on transnational relevance make it an invaluable tool for scholars, students, and general readers alike. The analytical entries provide precise yet accessible interpretations, integrating historical context, thematic discussion, and literary analysis. This approach ensures that the Dictionary is not merely descriptive but actively contributes to the scholarly discourse on Central-European literature.

From a pedagogical perspective, the Hungarian edition offers unique possibilities. University instructors can use the volume to design courses that transcend national literary canons, introducing students to comparative approaches and transnational literary networks. Graduate students and researchers gain access to a meticulously curated corpus of texts, many of which had previously been difficult to locate or had limited accessibility due to language barriers. The volume thus fosters a broader understanding of Central-European literary modernity, while simultaneously reinforcing the intellectual connections between Hungary, Romania, and the larger Central-European region.

To sum up, the Hungarian translation of the Dictionary represents not only a milestone in the study of Central-European literature but also a methodological and critical exemplar. It affirms the vitality of comparative literary studies, highlights the historical and thematic continuities of the region, and strengthens the cultural connections that define Central Europe as a distinct intellectual space. The edition invites readers to approach novels not as isolated artefacts of national literatures but as interconnected products of a complex, historically contingent, and richly diverse cultural landscape.

Engaging with the vast number of ideas presented in the Dictionary reveals that the volume is not only a reference work but also a guide through the turbulent histories of Central Europe and through the opportunities and vulnerabilities that shaped the region. It offers readers a flexible comparative perspective while acknowledging the inevitable subjectivity involved in any process of literary selection. For students, teachers, researchers, and advanced readers interested in twentieth-century literature, the volume represents a valuable scholarly instrument. At the same time, it provides a critical database for readers who may not have access to the original texts because of linguistic barriers. The Hungarian translation therefore is an important step taken toward the wider international circulation of the project. If translated into additional languages, the *Dictionary of the 20th-Century Central-European Novel* could easily become a major reference work for the study of Central-European literature within the global field of comparative literary studies.

