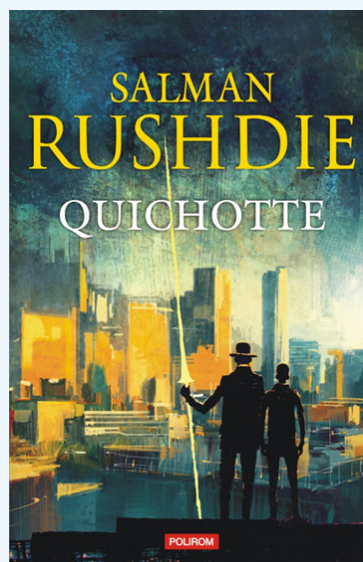


“The most difficult texts are those in which the author experiments with language and rhythm“

Dana Crăciun¹ interviewed by Carmen Neamțu²

Abstract: The translator is the person without whom no literary work can find its place in the global world of literature. Without translators, foreign writers remain unknown. The Portuguese writer Jose Saramago paid tribute to translators when he said: “*Writers make national literature, while translators make universal literature*”.

Giving this, we talked to Dana Crăciun about what constitutes a translator’s nightmare and about the difficulties of this very adventurous, exciting enterprise. Dana Crăciun translated several books of Salman Rushdie, including the novel, *Quichotte*, published by Polirom. We tried to understand what the “ingredients” of disaster in translation are: the laziness of using the dictionary in combination with a shallow editor.



Translation nightmare

CN - If you were to make an inventory of the unbearable in translation, what would this inventory include?

DC - I’d say any translator dreads having to translate a text that is badly-written, wordy, and obfuscating, the kind that tries to seem sophisticated by saying nothing but in big words. Fortunately, when it comes to my translations from English into Romanian, I’ve been lucky to work on very well-written books, so I have not had to deal with this nightmare. It would be hard to complain about having to translate writers such as Martin Amis, Jeffrey Eugenides, Salman Rushdie, Muriel Spark, etc. I’ve had a taste of it, though, when translating from Romanian into English.

Also in the category of ‘nightmarish visions’ is the anxiety that you’re missing something. The first books I worked on, I used to know them almost by heart. At night I would dream with the passages I was working on, I would go over them in my sleep, and every time I would overlook or mangle something. In reality it actually happened to me

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that the editor (or proof-reader, I'll never know...) messed up something I had researched and clarified, and this unfortunate experience morphed into an obsession to work only with editors I can communicate with directly. At Polirom, the publisher I mainly translate for, I am incredibly fortunate to be able to work with Radu Pavel Gheo, who also lives in Timișoara, and with whom I can be in constant conversation over the course of a translation project. Gheo is not only a very, very good prose writer (I hope I'll be able to translate him some day!) but also a very dedicated, thorough editor, the kind of editor any translator hopes for.

The worst nightmare, though, remains the deadline. No matter how generous this deadline might be, you always have the impression that you need more time. Paul Valéry said that a poem was never finished, only abandoned. I feel it's the same with translations as well. Sometimes the translator faces even more restrictive circumstances. One such situation was the translation of *Joseph Anton*, Salman Rushdie's memoirs, when the publisher had committed to releasing the translation simultaneously with the English edition. These are cases when you cannot afford to fail.

The reader's nightmare – a badly translated book

CN - What would be the reader's nightmare, in your view?

DC - I would say the reader's nightmare is, probably, a bad book, translated and edited equally badly. Such cases are extreme, and easy to spot; fortunately, one can simply abandon the reading. However, when the reader deals with a mediocre translation, it is not always easy to realise one is opening oneself up to an unfortunate scenario. Sadly, there are many such cases, some of them really difficult to identify because the text 'flows well' in the target language, although the 'flow' may not necessarily have much to do with the source text. I did have at some point the seed of an ambition or plan, namely to start a series of actual translation reviews. It was a seed that never grew, for several reasons, among them the fact that it would have been a fairly limited enterprise (I am only competent in English and, to a smaller extent, French) but also the warning received from several friends that I would end up upsetting too many people.

CN - What book do you remember that you would place in the nightmarish category and you would have liked to retranslate?

DC - Running the risk of being unfair, because a translation is not only the result of the translator's work but also that of an editor, proof-reader, etc., I confess I've always wanted to retranslate *Heart of Darkness*. I think there is a new translation now but what I saw when I was discovering the novel left a sad mark.

CN - What do you think are the most difficult texts to translate and why?

DC - To my mind, the most difficult texts are those in which the author experiments with language and rhythm. To give just some illustrations, plays on words, which are notoriously difficult to translate and more often than not, they lose their flavour in translation, new, made-up words, which always invite imaginative solutions, or freshening up, enriching already existing meaning. And when I mention rhythm, I am not necessarily referring to poetry, though the difficulty is the clearer there. Well-written prose has its own rhythm, which is part of the construction of the text just as much as the other elements. Because of the fairly significant lexical and syntactical differences between Romanian and English, this cadence is sometimes difficult to preserve. I often read entire passages out loud trying to internalise the rhythm, in the hope that it will eventually seep through the translation. There are situations when your choice of synonym will depend on the number of syllables or on the sound of the word. There are also times when the Romanian punctuation gets in the way and you have to try to convince your editor that there should, in fact, be no commas where they are usually placed.

CN - And in terms of content?

DC - In terms of content, there is the difficulty of conveying a space, a culture that is completely foreign to the Romanian one. I've recently written an article on the translation of postcolonial texts. Having worked with Salman Rushdie's texts has forced me to face this difficulty repeatedly.

CN - What should we do in such situations? Should we adapt and ease the reader's access through softening, or even erasing, the difference? Or should we, on the contrary, preserve alterity in its hard variant?

DC - Too thorough an adaptation can only be detrimental to the translation, I'd say. I've said it before, foreignness; a whiff of otherness does not necessarily mean a bad translation. On the contrary, too great a familiarity, acclimatisation, linguistic comfort – more often than not these are the signs of a problematic translation. Otherness must be preserved. However, it is such difficulty that makes translating so fascinating. So I'd rather call them challenges. And it is a great feeling when you feel you've managed to find solutions.

CN - When can we talk about a bad, or a failed, or a disastrous translation, whatever you wish to call it?

DC - When the translation moves too far away from the source text, without any justification whatsoever; when the meaning and atmosphere are sacrificed because of the translator's willingness to subject the text unconditionally to the target culture and reader. These Anglo-Indian, South African, American, etc. writers do **not** have to sound like Romanian writers. Sometimes the translation is affected by the translator's laziness,

frankly, or reluctance to take a few extra steps. A translator should never think she/he knows all the meanings of a word, should never rely on 'maybe's. The laziness or reluctance to look things up and do research in depth is one of the main causes of bad translations. When this combines with a not entirely professional and superficial editor/proof-reader, we have all the ingredients for a disaster.

Romanian writers in translation

CN - Do you think Romanians writers have good translators? Very often, in public debates, writers claim that our main problem is that we don't write in a language of wide circulation! And then texts written in Romanian cannot enter the Western market because we don't have quality translations.

DC - There are not many translations from Romanian, good or otherwise. It's true that we write in a language of limited circulation, but I don't think this is necessarily the issue. We are surrounded by literatures written in such languages, which are, however, somewhat better represented.

CN -Then what is our obstacle?

DC - I think the main obstacle is that we haven't had a consistent, powerful policy to promote Romanian literature. Such a policy would imply, among other things, a rigorous selection meant to create a pool of the really good writers at a given moment, and a stronger, more consistent connection to what happens abroad in terms of literature. When it was run by H.R. Patapievici and his team, the *Romanian Cultural Institute* managed to take some really important steps in this direction and some of the cultural centres abroad have continued this effort. Noteworthy is the success of the London team. But we need greater continuity and perseverance, and, unfortunately, I don't see any signs of that.

Degrees of treason in translation

CN - The *Romanian Cultural Institute*, which you just mentioned, had set out to find those segments on the international book market where Romanian writers could be of interest.

DC - Yes, but this should, as I said, be a consistent effort, coupled with projects meant to recruit good translators and thus ensure the production of good translations. It is not enough to have a translator with excellent command of English (I'm referring only to my area of interest), we also need a native speaker who is ideally familiar with our culture and, where possible, an author willing to join the teamwork. It is difficult, though.

Recently we have used extensively one main translator from Romanian into English and I'm not sure that is such a good idea (at least I started having doubts when I saw our 'zacusca' turned into chutney).

CN - You mentioned the need to have policy for a rigorous selection of contemporary Romanian writers. Who would you put on the list?

DC - I am very happy that Ioana Pârvulescu has been translated. She is a 'must' for me. I would also include Radu Pavel Gheo, Radu Paraschivescu, Dan Lungu, etc.

CN - "Do you have an explanation for this inability of Romanian literature to travel abroad?"

DC - As suggested above, there are many factors. I don't think we can have an exhaustive explanation. I really don't know how I could avoid a frustrated, self-pitying, typically-Miorița approach. Should we skip this question?

CN - Very well, I will abandon it in exchange for your view on the *traduttore-traditore* adage.

DC - Well, you can only be a translator if you accept from the very beginning that you're a traitor as well. There are, however, different degrees of treason. The ideal would be what I call "the short treason" by ironic opposition to "high treason". Something will always be lost, it's inevitable. Your duty, as a translator, is to minimise loss and to remain faithful to the translated author. As I've said, I am in the camp of those who deplore an excessive "Romanianisation" of translation. That element of foreignness is always beneficial – obviously, as long as it reflects the author's intentions, and not embarrassing translation glitches. I would add, though, that these inevitable losses are nevertheless made up for by the great gain of making that text available in another language, another culture. A reasonably good translation is an amazing thing and increases the fascination of literature by opening up worlds beyond our linguistic horizon. I have great admiration for translators from languages such as Japanese. Thing of their work! To get back to the question, yes, translators are traitors and they should be encouraged to persist in their reason.

CN - Tell me, is this perseverance encouraged financially?

DC - I'm sure you will be shocked to hear this: of course not. About two years ago I was invited to the *Directorate General for Translation of the European Commission*. That gave me the opportunity to investigate in more depth the financial aspect of this type of translation. Romanian translators are ridiculously badly-paid. I'm not sure we have a great reputation either. As you know, I'm also a university lecturer, so a few weeks ago I had to fill out an evaluation form. It would be amusing if not so tragic but a regular article published in a typical academic journal (and we're not talking high-profile

journals either) is worth the same number of points, two to be more precise, as the standard translation of a novel (not a critical edition, in other words). It is indeed to laugh but that is part of the reality of the Romanian context.

Caragiale verges on untranslatability

CN - Is it true that the word ‘dor’ does not have equivalents in other languages?

DC - Yes and no. Without a doubt, it is a very loaded word in Romanian. However, even if we cannot find a perfect equivalent (and can we ever, really?), we can get sufficiently close. In English, for example, we have *yearning*, which Andrei Codrescu used in his translation from Lucian Blaga.

CN - What do you think is the Romanian word or expression which could never find an appropriate equivalent in, for example, English?

DC - I’d have a hard time coming up with something to meet such categorical standards. I can’t think of a word or phrase but I do remember the very challenging experience of translating Caragiale³. It is very difficult to do him justice, from the so familiar *nene* to the way in which he constructs his sentences or dialogue. Caragiale always verges on the untranslatable. On the other hand, he really is one of our best writers and should really be translated but how to overcome the challenges of such local flavours? I know the French translation has been very well received.

CN - Is it possible for a professional translator to change a text, to add something by the mere choosing of one word instead of another?

DC - Yes, it is possible, but I’d nuance a little.

CN - Please...

DC - A true professional would have justification for this, it would be a decision taken consciously and she/he would take full responsibility for the consequences. What irritates me, though, is changes made for other reasons. First of all, laziness to investigate the semantic content or the intertextual references of certain words or passages. Second, the conviction some translators have that they are allowed to rewrite certain parts, sentences or even passages, thinking that they are doing the author a favour.

CN - You have, probably, heard things like: wow, it sounds better in Romanian than in English...

³ Editor Note: Ion Luca Caragiale (1852-1912) was Romanian playwright, short story writer and poet.

DC - Unfortunately, yes, I have heard such statements. I'm awfully distrustful of such claims because they're rooted in arrogance. If such arrogance could be overlooked in writers – though truly great writers don't suffer from it – it is extremely dangerous in a translator.

CN - **What was the word or phrase you found most difficult to translate from English into Romanian. From what text was it?**

DC - There's probably a lot of them but, without them, translation would lose its appeal. With translations from English into Romanian, one issue is that English is a more synthetic and more precise language, and sometimes you have to use explanatory paraphrases for a very specific word, for example, or more elaborate syntax for a simpler structure, which affects the flow and, again, rhythm of the text. Then, as I already mentioned, there's the way in which the writer use what she/he has at his/her disposal in the source language. Salman Rushdie's coinages and plays on words have always constituted a huge challenge. He's fabulous in this respect. His books are also full of elements (both lexical and syntactical) specific to the Indian culture he comes from, I have often been reproached the 'soft spot' I have for footnotes – however, I prefer such an approach to over-explicitness in the text, or over-simplification in the text, which would affect its specific flavour.

Slices of the Rushdie cake

CN - **I have to say, Salman Rushdie does not seem to have frightened you. You have “served several slices of the Rushdie cake”, translating several books for the Polirom publishing house. *The Moor's Last Sigh* (2002), *East, West* (2005), *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (2003), *The Jaguar Smile* (2013), *Luka and the Fire of Life* (2010), *Two Years, Eight Months and Twenty-eight Nights* (2015), etc. And, of course, *The Satanic Verses* (2007). I've read that the Japanese translator of the *Verses* was assassinated, while the Italian translator was luckier and got away with an injury only.**

DC - I translated the *Verses* about... twenty years later, as Dumas would say, in a period when the geopolitical tensions were of a different nature. But I would have done it earlier as well, at any point really. I've always argued that to perpetuate or facilitate such fears would, in fact, represent a confirmation that they were justified or that the reason why the book has such a troubled history was justified. Those who really read the novel can see that the so-called controversy is extremely exaggerated and that the destiny of the book and the way in which the writer's life has been hijacked amount to a mindboggling example of paranoid, or conspiracist even, thinking. But if we are to speak of “impertinence”, some of Rushdie's more recent texts, in particular *Two Years, Eight Months, and Twenty-Eight Nights* would seem much more daring. However, they do not

have controversial titles, so they don't appear on the radars of the preservers of "propriety" in terms of literary topics.

CN - Have you met Salman Rushdie personally? What would you have liked to ask him?

DC - I can't say I've met him, really. We exchanged a few words many years ago, at an Edinburgh Festival. Unfortunately I was not in Romania when he visited. When I translate his books I obviously have a lot of questions about the text itself. Beyond a specific text, though, I think I would have liked – or would like – to ask him about the way in which is relationship to history (as narrative) has changed since *Midnight's Children*.

You don't necessarily have to love the writers you translate

CN - I remember that when the Romanian translation of *The Satanic Verses* came out, in 2007, the publication was publicly condemned by the leader of the Muslim community in Romania and by the patriarch Daniel. My question is, do you have to love the authors you translate? Is a connection of affinity necessary?

DC - Oh, yes, what a strange reaction from the patriarch, an incredible outburst – not to say 'spluttering' – of hypocrisy. To answer the question, though, no, I don't think you have to love the writers you translate. Or maybe I associate the verb with a sentimentality that might become problematic. However, some kind of affinity is necessary. As long as there is no strong resentment to begin with, this affinity can develop, can be cultivated over the course of the translation. I had that experience with Eugenides⁴, for example, and with Burgess⁵ as well. They're both writers I admired to a certain extent but didn't think I resonated with them too much. All this changed while I was working on their books.

CN - Could you translate an author whose style you do not enjoy?

DC - Yes, I think so. My own stylistic preferences have changed over the years, so I like to believe that my not liking a certain style too much would not necessarily be an issue.

CN - What could you never translate? I challenge you to make an inventory of the unbearable in translation.

DC - Oh, I don't know. I'd probably find it difficult, if not downright impossible, to translate incredibly pompous texts, overflowing with abstraction. Our art criticism is sometimes like that. I try to avoid such texts, but I'm not always successful.

⁴ Editor's note: Jeffrey Kent Eugenides (1960 -) is an American writer.

⁵ Editor's note: John Anthony Burgess Wilson (1917-1993), is an English writer and composer.

CN - If you were to recommend a great foreign book that has benefited from an equally good translation, what would this be?

DC - I'm afraid I'll have to limit myself to translations from English again, the only ones where I would risk such judgments because I can read the texts in parallel. Also, I don't think I could choose one. I was impressed with Mircea Ivănescu's translation of *The White Hotel* by D.M.. Thomas, by Irina Horea's translation of *The Gospel According to the Son*, by Norman Mailer, and Liviu Bleoca's translation of Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, a very difficult text. I'm sure there are very good translations from other languages as well, I'm just not competent enough to articulate a meaningful opinion because I don't know them that well or at all. I am a great admirer of South-American literature, which I have read exclusively in translation. It is very interesting to compare translations of the same text into different languages. For example, I think Umberto Eco is better translated into English than Romanian. Somebody told me the fascinating story of a text by Kundera that sounded very different in French, English, and Romanian.

CN - What book would you like to see translated into Romanian and it hasn't happened yet?

DC - There's so much translating going on in Romania that I can't think of a specific title right now. As I suggested above, I'd like to see some retranslations.