Translating Cărtărescu's Dream-World in *Mentardy*: A Functionalist Model Of Translation Analysis

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Starting from the intricate dream-within-dream structure of Mircea Cărtărescu's short story *Mendebilul*, which "explores the territories of dream and childhood, the only ones that stir the author's interest" (Paul-Bădescu, 2013), this paper aims to assess the English version (in Julian Semilian's 2005 translation – *Mentardy*) from a functionalist perspective. The choice of the topic is justified by the dream-based content and structure of the short story, which are likely to turn into a touchstone for translation. Therefore, since "the dream worlds are a trap for the reader" (Codrescu, 2005: xi), we applied retrospectively Christiane Nord's functionalist model of translation criticism (1991) in order to analyse the target text against the original and the context of reception of both the source and the target texts. Our analysis has shown that despite the fact that the translation generally follows closely the original, it remains rather target culture oriented and adapted to the foreign readership.

Keywords: dream-within-dream pattern; translation criticism and evaluation; translation strategies; functionalist approach; target culture orientation.

This paper aims to assess, from a functionalist stance, the translation of the short story *Mentardy* by Mircea Cărtărescu. *Mentardy* is part of the novel *Nostalgia*, initially published in 1989 in a censored edition under the title *Visul* (The Dream). The choice of the case study is accounted for by the intricate structure of the short story, based on a dream-within-dream pattern, which is likely to turn into a real touchstone for the translator.

According to Cezar Paul-Bădescu (2003), *Nostalgia* "explores the territories of dream and childhood, the only ones that stir the author's interest". The novel is made up of five apparently unrelated stories but, as the author himself explains, "each with its own world" and composing:

> (…) a Book, in the old and precious sense of the word. The stories connect subterraneously, caught in the web of the same magical and symbolist thought, of the same stylistic calligraphy. This is a *fractalic* and holographic novel, in which each part reflects all the others. The first and the last story, linear texts of a parabolic simplicity, are merely a frame for the other ones that make up the book's marrow and contain the three principal themes: the prodigious child seen as a Jesus of his tiny world, the androgyne as a metaphor for total love, and finally, the nostalgic search for the creator, in his hypostasis as the book's author and God. (*apud* Semilian, 2005: 318)

As Andrei Codrescu argues in the *Introduction* to Semilian's translation of Nostalgia, "the story-teller(s) of his stories dream the world like Borges', always aware that one dream opens into an-

other, and that dream into another, and that they are all as real as any reality or the next dream. The dream worlds are a trap for the reader, but the writer is there always, asking the kind of questions about reality that only children and overwrought adolescents ask" (Codrescu, 2005: xi). As a matter of fact, the recurring theme of the dream is present in all the short stories included in the novel. As pointed out by the same critic, "there are times, inside one of Cărtărescu's self-sufficient but connected dream worlds, when one would like to come up for air, but it's nearly impossible to shake the visceral sensations of its descriptions or characters for very long. They stay with one through any number of 'real' rituals before the seduction resumes" (xi-xii).

Our analysis of the translation of Cărtărescu's dream world as painted in *Mentardy* will draw on Christiane Nord's functionalist model of translation analysis (1991), a model that can be used both prospectively (in the investigation of the source text, and the context of its production from a translation-oriented stance), as well as retrospectively (for assessing the target text by taking into consideration the original and the context of reception of the translation in the target culture). In our paper, Nord's model of translation criticism will be applied retrospectively, in order to see to what extent the effect was preserved in translation.

Translator Julian Semilian is an American poet and novelist of Romanian origin and, besides his very good knowledge of the Romanian language, he had the chance to work directly with the author, which must have facilitated the translation process: "Mircea turned out to be a terrific collaborator. Many times I would ask him questions about unrelated matters, and he always gave me far-reaching and enlightening answers that mysteriously advanced the project." (*apud* Cărtărescu, 2005: 319), the translator himself writes in the Afterword to *Nostalgia*.

While for the "ordinary" reader, translations are judged in terms of good or bad, depending on whether the text reads as an original in his/her native tongue, translation criticism and evaluation presupposes the assessment of both the source text (ST) and the target text (TT) in order to assess the quality of a translation and eliminate subjectivity as much as possible. To this purpose, translation scholars such as Juliane House (1977), Christiane Nord (1991), Katharina Reiss (2000), Hans Vermeer (1989), Basil Hatim and Ian Mason (1990), have tried to elaborate tools for translation assessment. In this paper we will rely on Christiane Nord's functionalist model of translation analysis in order to assess the translation of Mircea Cărtărescu's *Mendebilul* (*Mentardy*) carried out by Julian Semilian and published in 2005 by the New Directions Publishing House in the United States of America.

Christiane Nord's model comprises both extratextual factors (such as author, author's intention, place and time of elaboration of the source text, function of the text and the reader) and intratextual factors (subject matter, content, presupposition, lexis, sentence structure, and suprasegmental features), together with an overlapping category of effect produced upon the recipient.[1] However, we can argue that not only effect, but all the factors are strongly interconnected, so that they can actually explain one another. Our analysis will consider both extratextual and intratextual elements, with a view to pinpoint possible problems that might have occurred in the translation of *Mentardy*.

The first extratextual factor considered is *author*, which introduces the reader with "Romania's leading poet in a country teeming with great (and untranslated) poets, Mihai Eminescu, Tudor Arghezi, and Lucian Blaga, to mention only a few" (Codrescu, 2005: x), a sort of "structural wizard who builds his stories with the innate skill of a medieval puppeteer, with deft lingering in foreplay, in digression, in excuses to the reader for what's to follow, in delighted and perverse apologia (…)" (xii).

If we were to interpret this factor from the translator's stance, Codrescu's portrayal of writer Mircea Cărtărescu already pinpoints the translation difficulties: "Cărtărescu is a painter as well, displaying a range of impossible colours that must have driven his translator crazy", further arguing that "each of the five senses is pursued with a linguistic fury that must have been hell to

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[1] In this paper we discuss only the factors that seemed pertinent for the analysis of *Mentardy*.

bring into English" (xii). Nevertheless, the critic adds: "He is curative because he gives you dreams and restores your faith in literature" (xiii).

The extratextual factor – *author's intention* – is illustrated by the author himself, who confesses in one of his interventions within the narrative: "I am not thinking that I will write a story, but a kind of account, a short and honest narrative of the oddest (in fact, the only odd period of my life" (Cărtărescu, 2005: 31). However, as the story progresses, the author/narrator is overwhelmed by the very act of writing: "What I mean is that I am beginning to notice that the act of writing is beginning to change me as a person. When I am not writing, at school or during my free time, I feel and I behave like someone in a state of perpetual hallucination" (51).

The state of hallucination is actually preserved throughout the story, due to the dream – reality shifts that make it difficult for the reader to distinguish between the factual and the fictive. This allows Codrescu to conclude as regards the author's intention that "Cărtărescu's extraliterary ambition (…) is to induce the effects of a psychedelic in the reader" (2005: xii).

The *recipient* of the text is again announced by the writer himself: "I am, as you well know, an occasional writer of prose. I write only for you, my dear friends, and for myself" (Cărtărescu, 2005: 27), where "my dear friends" most likely refers to his fellow colleague writers from the literary group. It can be noticed how the writer addresses the readers directly, in a rather confessional tone that he will preserve throughout the narrative.

The factors *time* and *place* of production of the source text constitute a key element in the understanding and interpretation of *Mentardy*. The action of the short story is set in Bucharest during the last years of the communist regime in Romania, and it testifies to the realities of the time. While it would probably be impossible to recreate the Bucharest of the 1980-1990s by this account alone, the text could still be highly evocative to an "ideologically conscientious reader". The allusions to the Romanian lifestyle of the late 1980s recreate – like in a puzzle – the image of "a Bucharest transformed alchemically" (Semilian *apud* Cărtărescu, 2005: 319).

Describing in detail not only the "ashen buildings teeming with windows" (Cărtărescu 2005: 36), but also providing his readers "with the clearest approximation of the interior lives of those living in that city through the darkest days of the Ceauşescu regime" (McGonigle, 2005), the author launches "a timeless invitation to dream and embrace the comforting power of personal memory, the only sure bulwark against the effects of totalitarian control" (McGonigle, 2005).

Therefore, considering the fact that the function of the text – as explained by the author himself – is not necessary that of describing reality as such, but reality filtered through his mind, we could infer that *Mentardy* combines, to various extents, the four functions: expressive, referential, operative and phatic. The mixture of functions, together with the intricate composition and the dream-within-dream narrative pattern, constitute marks of Cărtărescu's literariness, which makes the process of transcoding and translation all the more difficult.

As far as the intratextual factors are concerned, Rodica Dimitriu shows that the *intratextual elements* involved in translation criticism and evaluation refer to "factors that bear semantic information" and "whose analysis ensures the preservation of meaning in translation, as well as factors with stylistic information, whose specific configuration assigns originality to the literary works" (1999: 216). Together with the extratextual elements described above, they are embedded in the text and account for the effect upon the recipient.

The intratextual factor *subject matter* points to the very general meaning of the ST, the very broad information that can be provided regarding the text. While titles and beginning paragraphs can usually be used to grasp the topic of the literary piece, this no longer stands true in case of modernist literary pieces, such as the prose of Mircea Cărtărescu. As such, given the intricacy of Cărtărescu's writing, most often than not it is difficult to anticipate and decipher the subject matter of the book by simply reading the title.

Thus, the title of the second story composing the novel, *Mendebilul (Mentardy)* somehow induces the idea of mental illness (partially associated with the word as such), failing to anticipate the essence of the narrative described by Andrei Codrescu as depicting a "hugely alive universe

of the children" within which "a prepubescent messiah loses his magic powers at the advent of sexuality, but not before he has created worlds and magical yearnings in all his followers" (2005: xi-xii). Furthermore, if the titles are rarely transparent in deciphering the subject matter in Cărtărescu's prose, the same is true for the opening paragraphs. The direct plunging into the dream and the numerous digressions made by the author do not provide much information about the topic of the narrative, which is in fact an oscillation between the account of the dream and the series of past events brought to light by it.

Christiane Nord describes the category of *content* as closely connected to "the reference of the text to objects and phenomena in an extralinguistic reality" (1991: 90). Moreover, as Rodica Dimitriu (1999: 218) shows, the analysis of content should necessarily take into consideration the analysis of coherence markers, such as the order in which the events are narrated (chronological or not), as well as binary oppositions of concrete/abstract, factual/fictional, real/unreal events.

After a brief (and rather apologetic) introduction – "I am, as you well know, an occasional writer of prose. I write only for you, my dear friends, and for myself" (Cărtărescu, 2005: 27) – on the use of dreams as a literary tool, the author plunges the reader into the narrative, not before resorting to digression and the account of past events: "I recall how a friend of mine began to go astray" (27). As a matter of fact, even after beginning to tell the story of the dream, a number of flashbacks and past memories occasionally disrupt the progression of the narrative, in order to translate the dream or explain present states or events: "About five or six years ago, around February, I was on a short recess and took a stroll through the city (…) when something like a violent flame sent a shock through my stomach like an unbearable nostalgia. I had been staring in the small window displaying an assortment of lighters and plastic military decorations (…). The color of this lighter, like a Proustian Madeleine, elicited a memory from the time of this tale" (2005: 49).

This journey into the narrative is also constantly disrupted by the author himself, in the attempt to bring the story back on track: "But to get to the point and begin the story of the dream I mentioned" (28); "I do not wish to spend more time with them. (…) I can't allow myself to bore you with a picturesque tale" (33), or "It is possible that some of you, my prose-writing friends, for whom I have been agonizing for the last few days to translate this history, are no longer paying any attention" (42).

The dichotomy real/unreal, or factual/fictive is perhaps best illustrated in the end of the story:

> This morning while trying to find my Scotch type to fix a book cover, I found these typewritten pages which, by the look of them, appear to be about two years old. I read them and couldn't prevent myself from adding these words about how surprised I was. There is no doubt they were written to my "Erika", and refer to a period of my childhood. Without fail I recognise certain coordinates […] but the whole Mentardy story seems absurd. […] Where in the world did this story come from? I would reread the text but I confess that I am afraid. (60)

The translator is the one who has to see to the preservation of the subject matter and the content of the source text as intended by the author.

The textual feature of *presupposition* is often regarded as likely to pose the most translation problems, as it comprises "all the information the sender/author expects to be part of the recipient's/reader's horizon" (Nord, 1991: 96). From a discourse analysis perspective, Stalneker defines presupposition as "what is taken by the speaker to be the common ground of the participants in the conversation" (*apud* Dimitriu, 1996: 220). While the horizon of expectations is likely to vary widely among the recipients of the source text, the danger of misinterpretation and misunderstanding is even higher among the recipients of the target text who are not held in view by the original author. Therefore, it is the translator's task to decide to what extent the text needs to be explicitated or adapted to the TT readers.

In the functionalist model developed by Christiane Nord, the factor *presupposition* also includes the categories inference and intertextuality. As previously discussed, *Mentardy* (and in fact the whole novel, *Nostalgia*) was written during and portrays the time of the communist regime in Romania and, consequently, the writer expects (at least from his "ideologically conscientious") readers to understand the allusions to the Romanian life in the late 1980s. These references, together with the style of the narrative could be a touchstone for any translator (especially foreign ones), as it challenges not so much the linguistic as the cultural competence and the ability to adapt to the cultural, aesthetic and ideological values embedded in the source text. However, given his background and origins, translator Julian Semilian managed to skilfully deal with presuppositions in Cărtărescu's *Mentardy*.

Source culture related terms such as names of places and streets in Bucharest, as well as proper names, are often translated by explicitation (Vinay and Darbelnet), in order to facilitate reading. Thus, "bloc(ului) meu de pe Ştefan cel Mare" becomes "my apartment building on Ştefan cel Mare *Boulevard*"; "magazinul de jucării care exista pe atunci la Obor, Oborul vechi, adevărat" is rendered by "the toy store at that time in the Obor *district*", while "Harieta, sora lui Eminescu" is explicitated by "Harieta, the sister of the *poet* Eminescu". However, we should mention the fact that the translator translates by exoticisation (Nord, 1991), preserving the diacritics (for proper nouns like Ştefan cel Mare Boulevard", but he also provides the reader with a short pronunciation guide for Romanian), in an attempt to keep the specificity of the Romanian language.

Cultural references to the Romanian lifestyle of the 80s are sometimes left unexplained, without running the risk of misinforming the reader, but rather of omitting information. Thus, "balcoanele cu murături" is rendered simply by "pickle-jar-filled balconies", while "steguleţe roşii şi tricolore de hârtie de la defilare" becomes "tiny red and tricolor paper flags from the parade", which does not convey the same meaning to the foreign reader, as it would to the "ideologically conscientious" one.

Under the same category of omission is included the description of the hero – Mentardy – which fails to preserve the intertextual allusions of the original:

> ST: Dar fundamental, cum sper să se vadă, el (Mendebilul) nu era nici pe departe vreun Cire   ar sau vreun Nemecek din strada Pal. (2009: 79)
>
> TT: But fundamentally, I hope that he will not be thought of as some sort of comic-book hero. (2005: 42).

These are instances where the translator paraphrases deleting the references altogether.

The category of *lexis* is closely connected to the content and subject matter of the source text, and is a mark of the author's intention.

The treatment of other cultural references – the Romanian currency divisions – can be discussed under this category. In this case, translator Julian Semilian chooses to preserve the Romanian words *lei* and *bani*, endowing thus the target text with a nice exotic touch: "pistoale cu apă, de doi lei" translated by "pistols we bought for two lei", or "cesuleţul meu de cincizeci de bani" rendered by "the little watch I bought for fifty bani".

The category of *sentence structure* is of particular importance in the analysis of both the source and the target texts, as it reflects the style of the author as a tool selected specifically in order to create a certain effect upon the reader. When dealing with literary texts, any deviations from the norm – although intended to increase the stylistic effects – may also pose additional problems.

In *Mentardy*, as well as in most of Cărtărescu's writing, syntax is characterised by long sentences to which are added the free indirect style, digressions, flashbacks and interruptions:

> ST: M-am trezit cu o senzaţie stupidă, care m-a sâcâit toată dimineaţa, dar nu mi-am amintit visul decât după prânz, mai întâi ca nişte fulgerări de emoţie pură în plex, apoi la şcoală, pe când îmi ascultam elevii, ca nişte secvenţe dureroase ininte-

ligibile. (…) Da, acum, când scriu, mă străfulgeră gândul că *am știut* ce gesturi a făcut și ce cuvinte a rostit fetiţa din vis, dar simt că nu mă pot concentra cu nici un chip asupra lor. Sper să-mi aduc aminte în cursul povestirii… (2009: 55)

TT: I woke up with an uncomfortable sensation which annoyed me all morning, but I didn't remember the dream until after lunch, at first as flashes of pure emotion in the plexus, then later at school while listening to my students, as unintelligible, painful events. (…) Yes, now as I write, the thought seizes me that *I knew* what gestures the little girl made in the dream and what words she spoke but feel that I can in no way concentrate on them. I hope to remember them in the course of this telling… (2005: 29)

Here the dream is abruptly interrupted by the author, who starts describing his physical reactions to it, all in a constant direct dialogue with his readers.

Moreover, the dream-within-dream structure of the short story is likely to complicate even more the translator's task. The description of the dream points to a number of sentence structure related issues:

ST: Am încercat ca de obicei, după ce mi-am notat visul, să-i fac o anamneză. (…) "*Când visez*, o fetiţă sare din patul ei, se duce la fereastră și, cu obrazul lipit de geam, privește cum soarele apune peste casele roz și galbui. Se întoarce cu faţa spre dormitorul roșu ca sângele și se ghemuiește din nou sub cearșaful ud. *Când visez*, ceva se apropie de corpul meu paralizat, îmi ia capul în palme și mușcă din el ca dintr-un fruct translucid. Deschid ochii, dar nu îndrăznesc să fac nici o mișcare. Sar brusc din pat și mă duc la fereastră. Privesc afară: tot cerul e numai stele". Și imediat, ca și cum aș fi rostit o formulă sacră, am început să recuperez câte ceva. (2009: 56)

TT: I tried, as usual, after I wrote the dream down, to prepare an anamnesis for it. (…) "*When I dream*, a little girl leaps over her bed, goes to the window and, with her cheek glued to the glass, gazes at the sun setting over the pink and yellowish houses. She turns to face the bedroom, red as blood, then cuddles again against the wet bedsheets. *When I dream*, something comes near my paralysed body, holds my head in its hands, and takes a bite from it, as though from a translucent fruit. I open my eyes but do not dare to make a move. I jump abruptly from my bed and go to the window. I gaze outside: the entire sky is nothing but stars." And instantly, as though having uttered a sacred formula, I began to recover a few bits. (2005: 30)

Most of the times, the translation preserves the sentence structure of the original, which facilitates reading. The description also relies on lexical and syntactic repetition which, together with the alternation of long and short sentences, assigns the tone of an incantation ("sacred formula"), skilfully rendered by the translator.

As far as the *suprasegmental features* are concerned, these elements pinpoint the specific 'tone' of the text or, in C. Nord's terms, "those features of text organization which overlap the boundaries of any lexical or syntactical segments" (1991: 20). Signalled by the use of punctuation, quotation marks, bold/italics or any other emphasis, suprasegmental features provide further information about the intention of the author, and are generally used to create a specific effect.

Italics are used to emphasize an idea: "Yes, now as I write, the thought seizes me that *I knew* what gestures the little girl made in the dream…" (Cărtărescu, 2005: 29), while brackets are sometimes used to signal digressions:

ST: (Întrerup aici, pentru un moment, povestirea. Din loc în loc am simţit și până acum nevoia de a ieși la suprafaţa ei, ca să iau o gură de aer. Dar niciodată ca acum. (…) Abia atunci m-am trezit cu adevărat, dar multă vreme, în noaptea ușor albăstrie, spre dimineaţă, nu am fost sigur că n-am trecut în alt vis.) (2009: 95-96);

> TT: (I would like to interrupt the telling of the story for a moment. From time to time I feel the need to come up for air. But never so much as right now. (…) It was only then that I woke up for real, but for a long time in the bluish night till early morning I was not sure I had not crossed into another dream.) (2005: 51-52).

A special use of suprasegmental features is given in the example below, where inverted commas are used for compensation in the description of the children's game Vrăjitroaca (Witchbitch):

> ST: La început *era* doar o vrăjitroacă, pe care o alegeam prin numărare. Era singura care purta mască şi avea pe deasupra şi un băţ cojit în mână. Număra cu faţa la perete şi apoi se repezea prin şanţuri în căutarea victimelor. (2009: 68-69);

> TT: At the start there was only one witchbitch, which we picked by counting. The witchbitch alone wore a mask; "*she*" also carried a stick from which the bark had been removed. She counted to ten with her face to the wall, then charged through the ditches, looking for victims. (2005: 36-37).

While the Romanian word for witchbitch is marked for feminine and often capitalised, the translator chooses to write it in small letters, and compensates for the more neutral term in English by using inverted commas with the feminine pronoun: "'she' also carried a stick".

The analysis of the extratextual and intratextual factors has shown that although following closely the source text, the translation is at times rather target oriented, adapted to the TT readership. This is testified to by the deletion of intertextual allusions, or the failure to explain allusions to the communist regime, which can only be transparent to "ideologically conscientious readers". Nevertheless, "gaining entry to Mircea's dream-brain", translator Julian Semilian succeeded in preserving the general tone of the story, as "the very words were trying to say themselves in English" (*apud* Cărtărescu, 2005: 317).

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