

## **An Interview with Dana Crăciun, the translator of Salman Rushdie's works into Romanian**

**by Carmen Neamțu**

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**Abstract:** This interview with translator Dana Crăciun explores the difficulties and promises of translating from English to Romanian. Dana Crăciun is a senior lecturer in the English Department of the Faculty of Letters, History, and Theology, at the West University Timișoara, Romania. Her most recent translations include Salman Rushdie's *Orașul Victoriei* [*Victory City*] (Polirom, 2023); John Steinbeck's *Autobuzul rătăcitor* [*The Wayward Bus*] (Polirom 2022); Salman Rushdie's *Quichotte* (Polirom, 2021); and most recently, Rushdie's *Cuțitul: Reflecții în urma unei tentative de asasinat* [*Knife: Meditations After An Attempted Murder*] (Polirom, 2024).

**Keywords:** interview, translation, Romanian, English, literature, Salman Rushdie

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## ***Introduction***

The Portuguese writer Jose Saramago paid tribute to translators when he said: "Writers make national literature, while translators make universal literature." Without translators, Romanian literature would not find a place among other world literatures, nor would these literatures become available to Romanian readers. It is my pleasure to talk to Dana Crăciun, the translator who brought Salman Rushdie closer to the Romanian public and who has also contributed to making Romanian writers known abroad. We are going to talk about what constitutes a translator's nightmare and about the difficulties of this very adventurous, exciting enterprise.

## ***The translator's nightmare: the deadline***

Carmen Nenamțu: If you were to make an inventory of the unbearable in translation, what would this inventory include?

Dana Crăciun: 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 uses 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 haven't 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 almost by heart. At night, I would dream the passages I was working on, I would go over them in my sleep, and every time I would overlook something or screw something up. In reality, it actually happened to me that the editor (or proofreader, 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 have been incredibly fortunate to be able to work with Radu Pavel Gheo, who also lives in Timișoara and with whom I could 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. Unfortunately for my translation projects, he has decided to change careers, so my editing anxieties will probably tick up again.

The worst nightmare, though, remains the deadline. No matter how generous a 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. Sometimes the translator faces even more restrictive circumstances. One such situation was the translation of *Joseph Anton*, Salman Rushdie's memoir, 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 is, probably, a bad book, translated and edited equally badly***

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, though, are extreme and easy to spot, so one can simply abandon the reading. However, when the reader deals with a mediocre translation, it is not always easy to realize 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 a notion that I would start writing a series of actual translation reviews. Nothing came out of it, 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 awareness that there was a significant chance that I might cause more harm than good. As vulnerable, overworked people, translators probably forget with difficulty and forgive even less.

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, proofreader, etc., I confess I've always wanted to retranslate *Heart of Darkness*. I think there is a new translation now, but the first one I read really wasn't doing this beautiful text justice.

***The most difficult texts: those in which the author experiments with language and rhythm***

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 flavor in translation, or new, made-up words, which always invite imaginative solutions. And when I mention rhythm, I'm not necessarily referring to poetry, though the difficulty is the more clear 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 internalize 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 prose 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 think. I've said it before, foreignness, a whiff of otherness does not necessarily mean a bad translation. On the contrary, too great a familiarity, acclimatization, linguistic comfort—more often than not these are the signs of a problematic translation. Otherness must be preserved.

However, it is such difficulties that make translating so fascinating. So I'd rather call them challenges. And it is a great feeling when you think you've managed to find solutions.

### ***Laziness—one of the main causes of bad translations***

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 s/he knows all the meanings of a word, should never rely on maybe. 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/proofreader, we have all the ingredients for a disaster.

CN: Can translation be taught in school, in universities? Can one become a translator by obtaining a degree in the field or does one need something else as well? And if yes, what would that be? I'm asking this because I'm thinking of the ongoing conversation in Romania around the idea that obtaining a degree in literature will not necessarily turn you into a writer. Such a degree can place you on a certain path but will not make you a brilliant writer or, in our case, a brilliant translator.

DC: That's a hard one, considering that I also teach in a translation program. I've come to see the value of a certain theoretical grounding, but I remain convinced that one can become a good translator without a degree in translation. I would risk saying that a degree in literature and languages, in other words, a more comprehensive approach to how languages work, is more beneficial.

### ***We haven't had a consistent, powerful policy to promote Romanian literature***

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 that 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 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 Horia Roman Patapievici and his team, the Romanian Cultural Institute managed to take some really important steps in this direction and some of the cultural centers abroad have continued this effort. We have writers who have won international prizes (I'm thinking of Ioana Pârvulescu here, for example, or Mircea Cărtărescu) and who have been translated into several languages. We are probably moving in the right direction but a lot more needs to be done. The fascinating discussions that have been happening recently regarding World

Literature and the redrawing of literary maps offer a great opening for a rethinking of how to get onto a bigger stage with a wider audience.

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 relied heavily on 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. The translation not only changes the taste of this delicious spread made of roasted aubergine and pepper but it also places the text on the wrong continent and culture).

CN: You mentioned the need to have a 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 or Dan Lungu. I would claim Tatiana Țibuleac as well, although she was born in the Republic of Moldova.

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 and I'm not sure how I could avoid a frustrated, self-pitying, Miorița-like approach [editor's note: Miorița is a Romanian epic poem, considered constitutive of the Romanian identity, fatalistic in tone and focusing on the inescapability of destiny.]. Should we skip this question?

### ***A translator is a traitor with different degrees of treason***

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. As an aside, Gregory Rabassa, Marquez' wonderful translator into English, has a great book titled *If This Be Treason*, where he talks about "translation and its discontents." The ideal would be a sort of "low treason" by ironic opposition to "high treason."

CN: Something will always be lost, it's inevitable.

DC: Yes and indeed if this be treason, let's make the most of it. Your duty, as a translator, is to minimize loss and to remain as faithful as possible to the translated author. As I've already pointed out, I am firmly in the camp of those who deplore an excessive "Romanianization" of translation. An element of foreignness can only be beneficial—obviously, as long as it reflects the author's intentions, and not embarrassing translation glitches. Any reasonable loss, though, is compensated 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, for example. Think of their work! To get back to the question, yes, translators are traitors and they should be encouraged to persist in their treason.

### ***You cannot make a living doing literary translation***

CN: Tell me, is this perseverance encouraged financially?

DC: I'm sure you will be shocked to hear this: of course not, at least not on the literary translation market in Romanian. If you think of the time you need to complete a translation and the money you are paid, you realize it is mainly a labour of love. It's a complicated issue, though. On a dwindling book market in a country where culture is not significantly supported by the state, publishers are essentially fighting for survival, so they are probably in no position to raise the pay of translators. I'm not sure we have a great reputation either. As you know, I'm also a university lecturer, so every year I have to fill out an evaluation form. It would be amusing if not profoundly sad 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 as the standard translation of a novel (not a critical edition, in other words). It is indeed laughable, but that is part of the reality of the Romanian context.

CN: I'm going to ask this more directly then: you have translated Salman Rushdie, George Orwell, Muriel Spark, Howard Jacobson, Mathew Sweeney or John Steinbeck—could you make a decent living translating alone? It seems a rhetorical question for us, Romanians, and I know the answer from the many interviews I have conducted with Romanian writers. They write because they cannot help it but they make a living from all kinds of other day jobs. I'd like to clarify this aspect for the American public reading this interview.

DC: No, you cannot make a living doing literary translation. That is clear. We all have another job or other jobs. It doesn't matter who the author is that you translate, the pay is the same. I would reiterate what I suggested above. Literary translation, at least in Romania, is an activity that one does out of passion for literature and for enabling literature to travel.

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 work or lexical structure has given you most headaches when translating? Could you give any examples? And 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 very specific examples, there have been many instances. I do remember the very challenging experience of translating our famous playwright Ion Luca Caragiale. 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 flavors? I know the French translation has been very well received.

### ***When used right English is about balance. Balance and precision***

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 this a little.

CN: Please.

DC: A true professional would have justification for this, it would be decision taken consciously and s/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 favor.

CN: You have, no doubt, heard things like: wow, it sounds better in Romanian than in English.

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 sounds better in English than in any other language? I’m asking you that because I’ve often found myself claiming that French is par excellence the language of romantic love songs, whereas Italian is more rhythmic and lithe, Danish is impossible to pronounce for



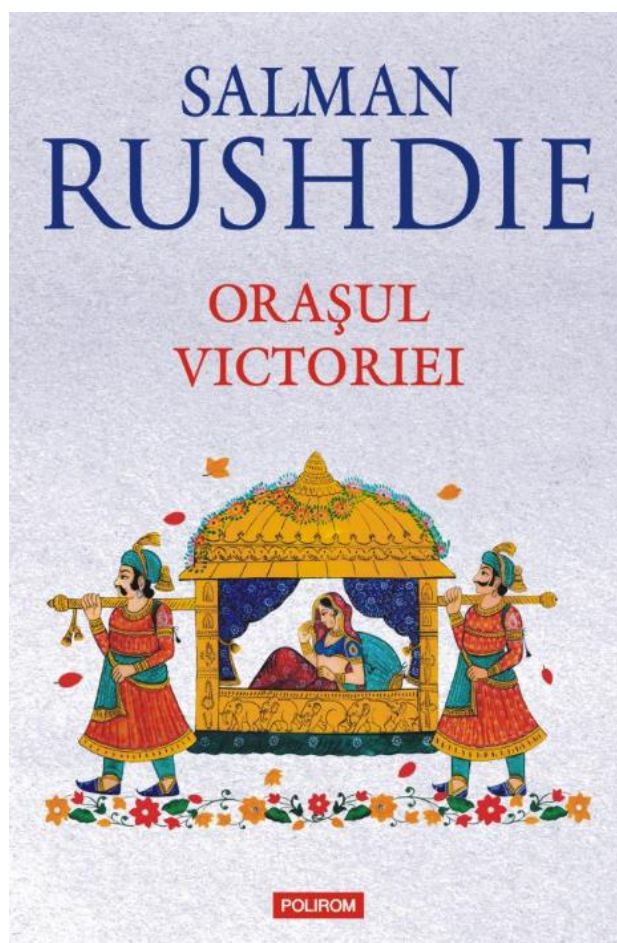
speakers of Romance languages, for German I would say eternity was invented, so you could capture all its nuances and be able to speak it, and so on.

DC: There is a beautiful conciseness to the English vocabulary but also to its syntax, a precision that can sometimes be tricky. When used right, English is about balance. Balance and precision. Achieving the most effect with the most economic and beautiful means.

CN: Going back to my initial curiosity, 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. The precision and synthetic nature I was mentioning above means that often 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 uses what s/he has at his/her disposal in the source language. Salman Rushdie's coinages and plays on words always pose 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 sometimes 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 flavor.

***A writer fighting for his life is never top story for too long***



Cover art for Rushdie's *Orașul Victoriei* [Victory City] Translated by Dana Crăciun

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), and so on. And, of course, *The Satanic Verses* (2007). We know that the Japanese translator of the *Verses* was assassinated, while the Italian translator and Rushdie's Norwegian publisher were luckier and survived.

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. 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.

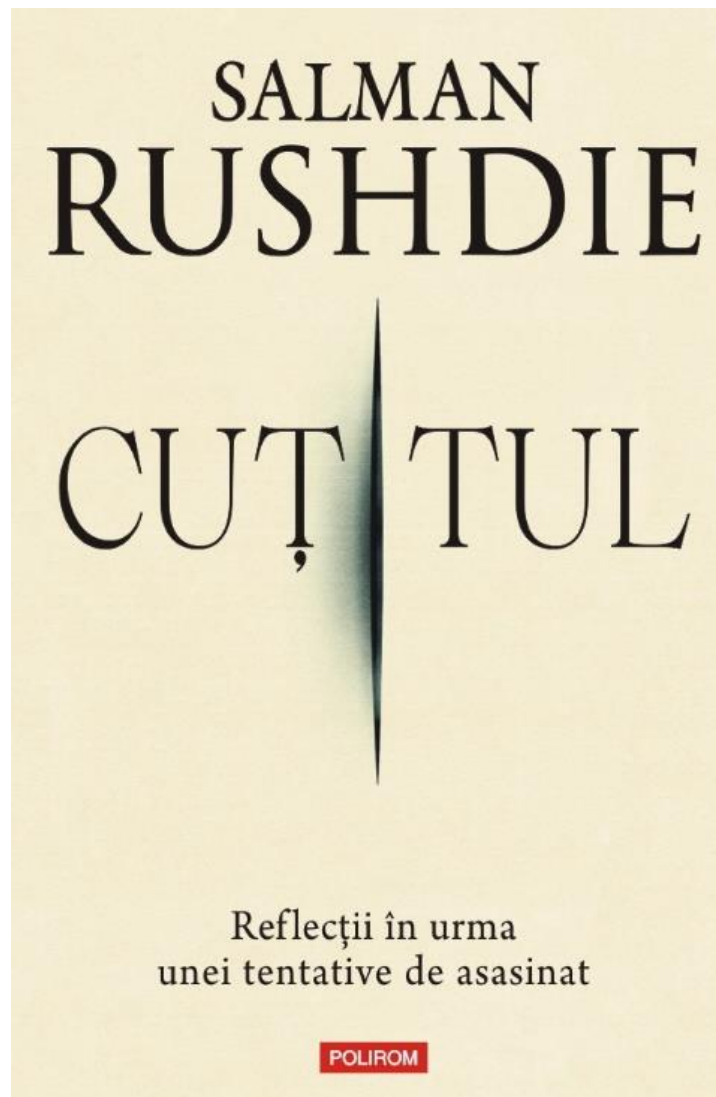
CN: I remember that when the Romanian translation of *The Satanic Verses* came out, in 2007, the publication was publicly condemned by the leader of the Muslim community in Romania and by the patriarch Daniel. The former, though, did have a more nuanced position while, strangely enough, the Orthodox leader took a more extremist position. What do you think prompted this?

DC: Oh, yes, what a strange reaction from the patriarch, an incredible outburst—not to say spluttering—of hypocrisy. I have no doubt that the patriarch had not actually read the book and was just trying to score some political points. Given that there has never been much love lost between the two religious institutions, what these points may have been is not entirely clear. I don't think Orthodoxy made a very good impression on this particular occasion.

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*.

CN: How did you react when you heard the terrible news of the attempt on Rushdie's life in 2022? (Let's remind readers that in August 2022 a young man attacked Salman Rushdie with a knife while the writer was preparing to speak at an event in Chautauqua, in New York State. As a result of the attack, Rushdie, who's an American citizen and has been living in New York for 20 years, has lost sight in one eye and had the nerves of one hand severed.)



Cover art for Rushdie's *Cuțitul: Reflecții în urma unei tentative de asasinat* [*Knife: Meditations After An Attempted Murder*] Translated by Dana Crăciun

DC: It was very shocking news and my first reaction was, I think, a weird mixture of disbelief and frustration. I'm sure it was a kind of frustration shared by many people: how could this happen after all this time? Why was it not prevented? I also had, and not for the first time, an uncanny feeling arising from Rushdie's own writing. I remembered *Shalimar the Clown* and the stabbing that happens there. One is bound, I suppose, to make such connections and I very much doubt the young man in question has read any of Rushdie's books. He admitted he only read a few pages of *The Satanic Verses* but decided to be offended anyway.

CN: Have there been other negative reactions regarding Rushdie's translators in the aftermath of the attack? Were you afraid, were you disappointed by people's meanness, by the way they read an important writer's work?

DC: I don't think translators have been targeted in any way in the aftermath of this horror but I may be living in a privileged bubble, I don't know. So no, I was not afraid, but of course I was disappointed by some people's reactions. Disappointing, though probably to be expected, was the reaction of some of the mass media. In the first days after the attack Rushdie was main headline and front page story but it didn't take long for him to return to oblivion. A writer fighting for his life is never top story for too long.

CN: Rushdie's latest book, *Victory City*, a novel about a 14<sup>th</sup> century woman building a city and an empire, was published after the attack, though it was apparently finished before it. Have you read the book or reviews of it? Would you like to translate it?

DC: Not only have I read it, I've actually translated it as well. It is currently being published by Polirom and it will be launched in November, at the Gaudeamus Book Fair (in 2023). It is a book that goes back to India and does what Rushdie does best, namely combine history and fiction with a great mixture of humor, seriousness, and tenderness.

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

CN: You have translated a variety of authors, with rather different styles. Do you only translate authors you love? Is a connection of affinity necessary?

DC: 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 Eugenides, for example, and with Burgess as well. They're both writers I admired to a certain extent but didn't think I resonated with them much. All this changed while I was working on their books. This is another thing translation does: it enables you to enter a text in ways that will tie you inextricably to it and you will never be able to sever that tie.

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 but meaning nothing. Texts that rely on verbosity to impress. Romanian art criticism sometimes reads that way. I try to avoid such texts, but I'm not always successful. I do value complexity in texts and I do like challenges posed by playing with language or using language in innovative ways. However,

stringing empty words together to fill pages or give the impression of sophistication has never been my thing.

CN: What English language writer fascinates you so much that you could translate him/her over and over? In a way like a conductor that keeps conducting the same music because s/he resonates with it?

DC: Salman Rushdie, definitely. I haven't translated her but I would have loved to—and would have loved to keep on translating—Virginia Woolf.

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 truly critical opinion because I don't have a truly competent access to the source text. It is very interesting to compare translations of the same text into different languages. For example, for what it's worth, I think Umberto Eco reads better in English than Romanian. Somebody told me the fascinating story of a text by Kundera that sounded very different in French, English, and Romanian. I have recently discovered and I greatly admire Luana Schidu's translations from Russian authors. I have to confess, though, I don't read many translations from English anymore, which is why my illustrations here are not very recent.

### ***It's only through reading you can develop a sense of language***

CN: Would you have any piece of advice for translators who are just starting out? For your translation students?

DC: My main advice would be to read a lot, an awful lot, in all the languages they have. It's only through reading you can develop a sense of language and a convincing life, as it were, in that language. I'm including here one's native language. Too often we tend to be smug about our native language. We think we know it. For a translator, that is the most dangerous trap.